Parenting and child adjustment after divorce: family relationship quality, parental stress, and child adjustment in post-divorce families

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Abstract
Divorced mothers and their school-aged children in 50 single-mother families and 37 stepfather families reported on mothers’ ex-partner relationships, children’s relationships with both parents, and children’s well-being. A 2 (family structure) x 2 (gender) MANOVA revealed a main effect of gender: Mothers with sons report higher levels of ex-partner relationship satisfaction. Also an interaction effect was found: Boys in single-mother families report more acceptance and fewer conflicts than boys in stepfather families. Multiple regression analysis revealed that mother–ex-partner relationships are associated with children’s problem behavior, while child–non-residential father relationships are associated with positive aspects of children’s well-being. The results indicate that family structure itself is not associated with child adjustment. What matters most is the quality of family relationships.
3.1 Introduction

The concept of "family" has changed considerably in recent decades. In most Western societies, divorce rates have risen. Consequently, the number of children who are growing up in single-parent or stepfather families has increased. In the Netherlands, where this study was carried out, 15.3% of all under-age children are living in single-mother families, and 6.1% in stepfamilies. Most of these families originate from parental divorces (E-Quality, 2008). The aims of this study were: (1) To compare these two family structures on post-divorce relationships (viz., mothers' relationships with ex-partners, children's relationships with mothers and non-residential fathers) and children's psychosocial adjustment; (2) to investigate whether these post-divorce relationships are associated with each other, and; (3) to investigate whether these post-divorce relationships are associated with children's psychosocial adjustment.

Theories that emphasize that the structure of a family is important for the development of children argue that the intact father–mother family offers the best environment for a child. Children in other family structures are more at risk of developing psychosocial problems. According to these theories, children raised in divorced single-mother families are more likely to develop psychosocial problems, because the absence of fathers has a negative effect on children as a result of, for example, reduced parental attention, lack of paternal role models, or reduced family income (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991). In this line of reasoning, if the presence of a second adult is important for the child's development, then a stepfather family should be less deviant than a single-mother family. Children in stepfather families are also raised in two-adult families, and this might have some benefits. For example, the presence of a second adult in the household will, in most cases, increase family income, increase emotional support, and reduce the mother's child-rearing strain (e.g., Brown, 2004; Thompson & Ensminger, 1989). However, several studies showed that children in stepfather families appear to be similar in some ways to children in single-mother families. Both children in stepfather families and those in single-mother families report higher levels of problem behavior, higher levels of mother–child disagreement, and lower levels of mother–child interaction than children in intact families (e.g., Demo & Acock, 1996; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, O'Connor, Golding, & the ALSPAC Study Team, 1998; Hoffmann, 2006). These findings suggest that a stepfather family structure is not the same as an intact father–mother family.

In contrast to theories that emphasize the importance of family structure as such, some theories stress that the psychosocial well-being of children is mainly influenced by the processes between the child and the parents, and by the quality of the relationship between the parents (e.g., Golombok, 2000). In the case of divorced families, conflicts between the ex-partners and the quality of children's relationships with their mothers and with their non-residential fathers can play important roles in children's psychological development (e.g., Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996; Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2004).
Furthermore, it is assumed that the quality of relationships between family members mutually influence each other (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the literature, two perspectives to understand the association between two or more family relationships are frequently described: the spillover perspective and the compensatory perspective (Erel & Burman, 1995). These perspectives might also be useful for investigating the associations between family relationships after a parental divorce. According to the spillover perspective, emotions and behavior in one family subsystem "spill over" to another subsystem. For example, when the relationship between the mother and her ex-partner is warm, the relationship of the child with the non-residential father is also positive. According to the compensatory perspective, emotions and behavior in one family subsystem compensate for the emotions and behaviors in another family subsystem. For instance, the child might develop a warm relationship with the non-residential father when the mother–child relationship is discordant, or vice versa.

3.1.1 Post-divorce family relationship quality

In this study, the focus was on three relationships in divorced families, namely mothers’ relationships with ex-partners, relationships between children and mothers, and relationships between children and non-residential fathers. The following section presents a brief summary of these relationships distilled from the results of previous studies.

Mothers’ relationships with ex-partners. Only a few studies have examined differences between single-mother families and stepfather families on the quality of mothers' relationships with ex-partners. Fisher, de Graaf, and Kalmijn (2005) reported that remarried mothers have less contact with their ex-partners than mothers who remain single after divorcing. Some authors assume that repartnered mothers feel less need to contact their ex-partners, because their new partners provide emotional support and help with child-rearing (e.g., Brown, 2004; Thompson & Ensminger, 1989). Remarried mothers also seem to have fewer conflicts with their ex-partners over child-rearing matters than mothers in single-mother families (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996). These findings could be spurious: Mothers who have less frequent contact with their ex-partners, have fewer opportunities to have conflicts with them.

Children’s relationships with mothers and non-residential fathers. Whether or not a mother has found a new partner might influence both the mother–child relationship and the non-residential father–child relationship.

When a mother’s new partner enters the household, the children’s hope that their parents will reunite decreases (e.g., Berger, 1998). This may affect the mother–child relationship in a negative way. King (2009), for instance, reported a decline in closeness between mother and child after a stepfather entered the house. On the other hand, because of loyalty toward the non-residential father, a child may develop a warmer relationship with the father (Bray & Harvey, 1995).

However, a stepfather can also bring some stability to the household by giving the mother emotional and practical support (e.g., Brown, 2004; Thomson & Esminger, 1989), consequently
reducing levels of maternal parenting stress. The association between maternal parental stress and the quality of the mother–child relationship is well known (e.g., Ang, 2008; Bornstein, 2002). Evidence for this has been found only for the negative aspects of the child’s relationship with the mother. O’Connor, Dunn, Jenkins, and Rasbash (2006), for example, reported less anger and hostility in the child toward the mother in stepfather families compared to those in single-mother families. No differences have been found between single-mother and stepfather families on the level of warmth and support in the relationships between the mothers and the children. For the child’s relationship with the non-residential father, it was found that single-mother families and stepfather families do not differ on the quality of the relationship regarding anger and hostility, or warmth and support (Dunn, et al., 2004). Additionally, in a recent study, King (2009) reported that the presence of stepfathers does not affect the closeness or the contact between children and their non-residential fathers.

Associations between post-divorce family relationships. Only a few studies have examined the associations between family relationships in divorced families. It seems that the quality of mothers’ relationships with their ex-partners is associated with the quality of the children’s relationships with their non-residential fathers: Children of mothers who have warm relationships with their ex-partners report warm relationships with their non-residential fathers. These associations are stronger for children raised in single-mother families than for children raised in stepfather families (Dunn et al., 2004). However, this study (Dunn et al., 2004) supports the spillover perspective in both family structures, while no support was found for the compensatory perspective.

3.1.2 Children’s psychosocial adjustment in divorced families and associations with post-divorce family relationship quality

Based on theories that emphasize that it is family structure that is important for children’s development, it could be assumed that children in single-mother families are more at risk of developing psychological problems than children in stepfather families. Nevertheless, some recent studies indicate that children raised in single-mother families do not differ on levels of internalizing and externalizing problem behavior compared with children raised in stepfather families (Brown, 2004; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001).

In line with more general results on the effect of gender on children’s psychosocial adjustment, boys show more externalizing problems and girls more internalizing problems after a divorce (e.g., Spruijt, Komos, Burggraaf, & Steenweg, 2002; Van der Valk, Spruijt, de Goede, Maas, & Meeus, 2005). The findings are very mixed concerning children’s adjustment in single-mother families and stepfather families. Some studies report that boys tend to show more adjustment problems after parental divorce, while girls tend to show more adjustment problems after their mothers have remarried (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). Other studies, however, report no significant gender differences on adjustment after divorce (e.g., Kline, Johnston & Tschann, 1991).

It seems that a mother’s relationship with her ex-partner is more, and more strongly, associated with the adjustment of children in single-mother families than in stepfather families.
Hanson, McLanahan, and Thomson (1996), for instance, found that in single-mother families, mothers who report fewer conflicts with ex-partners over child-rearing have children who show lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior, and higher levels of sociability, initiative, and overall quality of life. For children in stepfather families, only the association between the mothers’ conflict with their ex-partners and the children’s externalizing behavior was significant.

A few studies have assessed in single-mother families and stepfather families what it means for children’s psychological well-being to have good contact with non-residential fathers. Dunn and colleagues (2004), for example, found that children in single families (but not children in stepfather families) who reported positive relationships with their non-residential fathers also showed low levels of problem behavior. White and Gilbreth (2001), however, found a significant positive effect of the relationship between the child and the non-residential father on child outcomes of children in stepfather families.

3.1.3 Research aims

This study employed both mothers’ reports and children's reports: Mothers filled in a questionnaire about the quality of their relationships with their ex-partners, while children were interviewed about the quality of their relationships with their mothers and non-residential fathers, and about their psychosocial well-being. Children's self-reports were used rather than parental reports, on which this type of research usually relies. Several studies have investigated the concurrence of parents and children on reporting children's outcomes, and most of these studies show that children are reliable reporters (e.g., Herjanic, Herjanic, Brown, & Wheatt, 1975; Herjanic & Reich, 1997). Additionally, a recent study found that children's reports of indirect parental behavior are more consistently associated with children's adjustment than parent reports (Haines, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Robinson-O'Brien, 2008). Furthermore, all research questions were investigated separately for boys and for girls, because several studies have shown gender differences in how children deal with divorce and remarriage (e.g. Amato, 2001).

The first aim of this study was to assess differences between single-mother families and stepfather families, separately for boys and for girls, on the mothers’ relationships with ex-partners, the children’s relationships with their mothers and non-residential fathers, and the children’s psychosocial adjustment. We hypothesized that the quality of the relationship between mother and ex-partner is higher in stepfather families (higher evaluation of current relationship, less conflict over child-rearing) than in single-mother families (e.g, Fisher, de Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996). We also hypothesized that children in single-mother families have better mother–child relationships (higher levels of acceptance, fewer conflicts) than children in stepfather families (King, 2009). No differences were expected between children in single-mother families and stepfather families regarding their relationships with their nonresidential fathers (Dunn et al., 2004; King, 2009) or their psychosocial adjustment (Brown, 2004; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001).
Chapter 3

The second aim was to assess whether the quality of post-divorce family relationships are associated with each other, separately for single-mother families and stepfather families. Based on previous studies, we predicted more significant correlations between the post-divorce relationships in single-mother families than in stepfather families (Dunn et al., 2004). However, in both family structures we expected to find support for the spillover perspective, and no support for the compensatory perspective.

The third aim was to examine whether children’s psychosocial adjustment in divorced families is predicted by family structure or by post-divorce family relationship quality. We assumed that children’s adjustment is predicted not by family structure, but by the quality of post-divorce relationships. This aim was more explorative. It is possible that in different family structures (viz., single-mother families and stepfather families), different post-divorce relationships predict children’s adjustment.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Recruitment

Participation in the study was based on two criteria, namely the target child had to be between 8 and 12 years old, and the biological father could not be living at the same address as the target child. With help of the population register of several cities in the Netherlands, 1239 families that met these two criteria received an invitation to participate in the study. Of these families, 180 were willing to participate and received a short questionnaire about the social demographic characteristics of the family. Of these 180 families, 48% (N= 87) consented to participate in a more detailed part of the study that focused on post-divorce family relationships. Preliminary analyses showed that mothers who agreed to participate in the more detailed part of the study were significantly higher educated than the mothers who did not give their consent. However, no differences were found on any of the other social demographic variables (viz., mother’s age, children’s age, number of children, employment status, work hours/week, family income, time elapsed since divorce). The mothers who consented to participate in the study on post-divorce relationships also give permission to collect data from their offspring by means of child reports, which were administered during one-hour sessions with the target children in their family homes. During these sessions, the first author or one of her collaborators read the questionnaire items to the children and recorded their responses. The mothers were asked to complete a questionnaire and return it in a stamped addressed envelope.

3.2.2 Instruments

Data were collected by means of maternal reports (contact with ex-partner, social demographic characteristics) and child questionnaires (quality of child’s relationship with both parents, his/her psychological adjustment).
Family structure. Families were categorized as single-mother families or stepfather families based on a question that was put to the mothers, viz. “Do you have a new partner with whom you are living together at this moment?” (0 = No, 1 = Yes).

Quality of mothers’ relationships with ex-partners. Two aspects of the mothers’ contact with their ex-partners were measured: Mother’s current evaluation of this relationship, and conflicts between the mother and her ex-partner over their child/children. To assess the mothers’ evaluations of these relationships, we used one item of the Post Break-up Connectedness – Behavior Questionnaire (PBC–B; Harkless & Fowers, 2005). This item elicits more qualitative information about the relationship between ex-partners: “My current relationship with my ex-partner is …” (1 = We are not friends, 5 = We are very close friends).

The extent to which mothers reported conflicts over their children with their ex-partners was measured with a scale used by Amato and Rezac (1994). This scale consists of 6 items, each of which is about a possible conflict between a mother and her ex-partner (e.g., “How often do you have conflict with your ex-partner over how your child is raised?”). Each item was scored on a 3-point scale (1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often). Cronbach’s alpha was .67.

Quality of relationships between children and parents. The child version of the Parent–Child Interaction Questionnaire (PACHIQ-Ch; Lange, 2001) was used to measure the quality of the child’s relationship with the mother and with the non-residential father. Children who reported to have no contact with their non-residential fathers did not fill out the questionnaire regarding the quality of the non-residential father–child relationship. The items in the questionnaire refer to interpersonal behavior and interpersonal feelings toward the mother and the father separately. The PACHIQ-Ch consists of two scales: the Acceptance scale (8 items, e.g., “When I do something for my mother/father, I see that she/he appreciates it;” Cronbach’s alpha: mothers = .76, fathers = .84) and the Conflict scale (17 items, e.g., “No matter what my mother/father says, I still do what I want;” Cronbach’s alpha: mothers = .87, fathers = .86). Children were asked to indicate how often they display certain behavior or experience a certain feeling (1 = Never, 5 = Always).

Psychosocial adjustment of the children. Data regarding the psychosocial adjustment of each child were collected by means of a child report that included several aspects of children’s psychosocial adjustment, viz. problem behavior (measured by a subscale of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ); Goodman, 1997), general self-esteem, and social competence (measured by two subscales of the adapted Dutch version of the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC); Van den Bergh & Van Ranst, 1998).

The SDQ Total Difficulties Scale consists of 20 items or statements (e.g., “Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers”) (0 = Not true, 2 = Certainly true). The sum of the scores of all items produces a total score, providing an overall measure of problem behavior. Cronbach’s alpha was .65.

Both subscales of the PCSC consist of seven statements, for example: “I feel pretty sure of myself” (general self-esteem), and “I have a lot of friends” (social competence). In the original
PCSC as developed by Harter (1979), items are formulated as bipolar statements. The child first has to decide the kind of child he/she is and then report whether the description "Sort of true" or "Really true" applies to him/her. Van den Bergh and colleagues showed that the response format used in the original PCSC was too complex for younger children (Van den Bergh & De Rycke, 2003; Van den Bergh & Van Ranst, 1998). In the Dutch version of the PCSC, the response format was therefore made simpler: Children were asked to rate on a 4-point scale whether the labels or statements applied to them (1 = Not at all; 4 = Very much). Cronbach’s alpha was respectively .70 (general self-esteem) and .61 (social competence).

Family demographic characteristics. To collect information on the families’ demographic characteristics, each mother was asked to state her age, the number and ages of her children, her educational level, her employment status, how many hours she worked each week, the family income, and the time that had elapsed since her divorce. Information about the frequency of contact between the target child and the non-resident father was also collected.

### 3.2.3 Participating families

A total of 87 families participated in the study, viz. 50 single-mother families (23 boys, 27 girls) and 37 stepfather families (14 boys, 23 girls). The demographic characteristics of both family structures are presented in Table 3.1. Single-mother families and stepfather families differed significantly from each other on three aspects, namely (a) Age of mother: The mothers in the single-mother families were significantly older ($M = 42.62$ years; $SD = 4.27$) than the mothers in the stepfather families ($M = 38.94$ years; $SD = 5.44$); (b) Time since divorce: The time that had elapsed since the divorce was significantly shorter for the single mothers ($M = 4.89$ years; $SD = 2.00$) than for the remarried mothers ($M = 6.27$ years; $SD = 2.53$); (c) Annual family income: The single mothers had significantly lower incomes ($M = 1.98; SD = 1.60$) than the mothers in stepfather families ($M = 3.22; SD = 2.02$).

No significant differences were found concerning the mean age of the children in the single-mothers families and those in the stepfather families ($M = 10.86, SD = 1.46$). Nor did children in both family structures differ on having contact with their non-resident fathers: 92 % of the children still had contact with their fathers. Of these children, 10.3% were reported to have contact less than once a month, 16.1% once a month, 26.4% once a week, and 39.1% more than once a week.

There was also no significant difference between family structure on the mean number of children in the families ($M = 2.26, SD = 1.02$). Furthermore, no significant differences emerged between the mothers in single-mother families and in stepfather families on their educational level. The majority of the mothers in both groups were highly educated: 78 % had earned a diploma at vocational level or higher, which is in line with figures from Statistics Netherlands regarding the mean educational level of mothers with young children in the Netherlands (Sinkeldam, 1999). Over three quarters of the mothers had paid jobs; again there was no
significant difference between both family structures on this aspect, nor was there a difference in the mean number of hours worked per week between mothers in single-mother families and those in stepfather families.

Table 3.1 Demographic characteristics of single-mother families (n=50) and stepfather families (n=37).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single mother families</th>
<th>Stepfather families</th>
<th>Single vs. Step</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mothers’ characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>42.62 (4.27)</td>
<td>38.94 (5.44)</td>
<td>t = 3.51***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educationa</td>
<td>5.72 (1.95)</td>
<td>5.67 (1.90)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
<td>81.1%</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work hours/week</td>
<td>22.01 (13.08)</td>
<td>22.40 (12.98)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>10.90 (1.45)</td>
<td>10.81 (1.49)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with father</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No contact</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once/month</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week or more</td>
<td>68.0%</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>2.14 (0.93)</td>
<td>2.42 (1.13)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since divorce</td>
<td>4.89 (2.00)</td>
<td>6.27 (2.53)</td>
<td>t = -2.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual family incomeb</td>
<td>1.98 (1.60)</td>
<td>3.22 (2.02)</td>
<td>t = -3.07**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

a Mother’s educational level: 1 = elementary school; 2 = lower vocational education; 3 = lower general secondary education; 4 = higher general secondary education; 5 = pre-university education; 6 = intermediate vocational education; 7 = higher vocational education; 8 = university.
b Family annual income: 1 = less than €20,000; 2 = €20,000–€25,000; 3 = €25,000–€30,000; 4 = €30,000–€35,000; 5 = > €35,000

3.2.4 Analyses

Single-mother families and stepfather families significantly differed from each other on three demographic variables, namely age of mother, time since divorce, and annual family income (see Table 3.1). Because these variables are known to be associated with family relationship quality and children’s psychosocial well-being, a preliminary correlation analysis was conducted. No significant correlations between the demographic variables and the dependent variables were found; therefore, none of these variables was used as a covariate in subsequent analyses.
First, a 2 (family structure: 1 = Single-mother family, 2 = Stepfather family) by 2 (gender: 1 = Boys, 2 = Girls) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, with mother’s relationship with the ex-partner variables as the dependent variables. Similar MANOVAs were performed with the quality of the child’s relationship with the mother and with the non-residential father, respectively, as dependent variables, followed by a MANOVA with psychosocial adjustment as the dependent variables. If a significant multivariate effect was found, a 2 (family structure) x 2 (gender) ANOVA was used to determine the source of this difference.

Second, Pearson $r$ correlations were calculated to assess whether there are associations between the mother’s relationship with her ex-partner, and the child’s/children’s relationship with the mother and with the non-residential father. These analyses were carried out separately for single-mother families and for stepfather families.

Finally, multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether children’s psychosocial adjustment (total problem behavior, general self-esteem, social competence) is predicted by family structure (single-mother vs. stepfather family) or by the quality of family relationships (mother’s current relationship with the ex-partner, conflicts over their child/children, child’s/children’s acceptance of and conflict with the mother, and child’s/children’s acceptance of and conflict with the non-residential father).

### 3.3 Results

#### 3.3.1 Post-divorce family relationship quality and children’s psychosocial adjustment

**Quality of mothers’ relationships with their ex-partners.** Results using the Wilks’s criterion showed no significant main effect of family structure (Wilks’s $\lambda = .96$, $F(1, 84) = 1.58$, $p > .05$); also the interaction between family structure x gender of the child was not significant (Wilks’s $\lambda = .97$, $F(1, 84) = 1.22$, $p > .05$). However, as shown in Table 2, a significant main effect was found for gender of the child (Wilks’s $\lambda = .88$, $F(1, 84) = 5.37$, $p < .01$). Additional ANOVAs showed a significant difference between families in which the target child was male versus families in which the target child was female on the quality of the mother’s current relationship with the ex-partner ($F(1, 64) = 6.35$, $p < .05$): Mothers with sons reported significantly warmer relationships ($M = 3.47; SD = 1.16$) than did mothers with daughters ($M = 2.67; SD = 1.25$) (see Table 3.2).

**Quality of relationships between children and mothers.** Wilks’s criterion showed no significant main effects of family structure (Wilks’s $\lambda = .97$, $F(1, 80) = 1.10$, $p > .05$) or gender of the target child (Wilks’s $\lambda = 1.00$, $F(1, 80) = .16$, $p > .05$). However, it did show a significant effect for the interaction family structure x gender of the child (Wilks’s $\lambda = .92$, $F(1, 80) = 3.44$, $p < .05$). Additional ANOVAs showed that boys in single-mother families report significantly higher levels of acceptance by ($M = 4.38; SD = .53$) and lower levels of conflict with ($M = 1.73; SD = .49$) their mothers, compared to boys in stepfather families (acceptance: $M = 3.99; SD = .48$; conflict: $M = 2.06; SD = .45$) (acceptance:...
For girls, no significant differences were found between the two family structures (see Table 3.2).

Quality of relationships between children and non-residential fathers. Children who reported to have no contact with their non-residential fathers did not fill out the questionnaire, and were not included in the analyses. Wilks’s criterion showed no significant main effects of family structure (Wilks’s $\lambda = .99$, $F(1, 80) = .53$, $p > .05$), gender of child (Wilks’s $\lambda = .96$, $F(1, 80) = 1.81$, $p > .05$), or the interaction family structure x gender of the child (Wilks’s $\lambda = 1.00$, $F(1, 80) = .02$, $p > .05$) (see Table 3.2).

Children’s psychosocial adjustment. No significant main effects of family structure (Wilks’s $\lambda = .98$, $F(1, 86) = .62$, $p > .05$) were found. Nor were main effects found for gender of child (Wilks’s $\lambda = .97$, $F(1, 86) = .91$, $p > .05$) or for the interaction between family structure x gender of the child (Wilks’s $\lambda = .96$, $F(1, 86) = 1.04$, $p > .05$) (See Table 3.2).

3.3.2 Associations between post-divorce family relationships

Pearson $r$ correlations were carried out to determine whether mothers’ relationships with their ex-partners and children’s relationships with their mothers and non-residential fathers were associated with each other. Analyses were conducted separately for single-mother families and for stepfather families (see Table 3.3).

In single-mother families, the mothers’ evaluations of their current relationships with their ex-partners were significantly correlated with their children’s acceptance of their fathers ($r = .29$, $p < .05$). This association indicates that children in single-mother families whose mothers report warmer relationships with their ex-partners, experience higher levels of acceptance by their fathers. Furthermore, the child–mother relationship was found to be strongly associated with the child–father relationship: Children who reported high levels of acceptance in the relationship with their mothers also reported high levels of acceptance ($r = .54$, $p < .001$) and low levels of conflict ($r = -.48$, $p < .001$) in their relationships with their non-residential fathers. However, children who reported high levels of conflict in their relationships with their mothers showed lower levels of acceptance ($r = -.58$, $p < .001$) and higher levels of conflict ($r = .62$, $p < .01$) in their relationships with their fathers.
Table 3.2 Main effects of Family Structure (FS) and Gender (G) and the interaction between Family Structure and Gender (FS*G) on family relationship quality and child adjustment.

|                                      | Single mother families |                     | Stepfather families |                     | MANOVA  
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------  
|                                      | Boys (n=23)            | Girls (n=27)        | Total (n=50)        | Boys (n=14)         | Girls (n=23) | Total (n=37) | FS  | G  | FS * G |
| **Post-divorce family relationships**|                        |                     |                     |                     |                   |              |     |    |        |
| Mother – Ex-partner                  |                        |                     |                     |                     |                   |              |     |    |        |
| Current relationship                 | 3.22 (1.13)            | 2.58 (1.21)         | 2.88 (1.20)         | 3.92 (1.12)         | 2.78 (1.31)      | 3.19 (1.35) | 1.58 | 5.37**| 1.22   |
| Conflict over child                  | 1.30 (0.29)            | 1.26 (0.53)         | 1.28 (0.43)         | 1.19 (0.20)         | 1.41 (0.36)      | 1.33 (0.33) |     |    |        |
| Child – Mother                       |                        |                     |                     |                     |                   |              |     |    |        |
| Acceptance                           | 4.38 (0.53)            | 4.20 (0.50)         | 4.28 (0.52)         | 3.99 (0.48)         | 4.29 (0.42)      | 4.18 (0.46) |     |    |        |
| Conflict                             | 1.73 (0.49)            | 1.97 (0.50)         | 1.86 (0.51)         | 2.06 (0.45)         | 1.77 (0.43)      | 1.88 (0.45) |     |    |        |
| Child – Father  
| Children’s psychosocial adjustment  |                        |                     |                     |                     |                   |              |     |    |        |
| Total problem behavior               | 1.08 (0.20)            | 1.13 (0.25)         | 1.11 (0.23)         | 1.12 (0.24)         | 1.10 (0.17)      | 1.11 (0.20) | 0.53 | 1.81 | 0.02   |
| General self-esteem                  | 3.10 (0.40)            | 2.81 (0.47)         | 2.94 (0.46)         | 2.87 (0.50)         | 2.82 (0.54)      | 2.84 (0.51) |     |    |        |
| Social competence                    | 2.88 (0.40)            | 2.86 (0.41)         | 2.87 (0.40)         | 2.98 (0.33)         | 2.83 (0.43)      | 2.88 (0.40) |     |    |        |

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001  

a F-value Wilks’s lambda; b Children who had no contact with their fathers did not fill out the father-child relationship questionnaire. Single mother families: n<sub>boys</sub> = 21, n<sub>girl</sub> = 24; Stepfather families: n<sub>boys</sub> = 13, n<sub>girl</sub> = 23.
Table 3.3 Correlations between family relationship variables separately for single-mother families (lower diagonal) and stepfather families (upper diagonal).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-divorce family relationships</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother – ex-partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Current relationship</td>
<td>-.59**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conflicts over child</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child – mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Acceptance</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.70***</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conflict</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.70***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child – father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Acceptance</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>.54***</td>
<td>-.58***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.79***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Conflict</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.48***</td>
<td>.62***</td>
<td>-.82***</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01

Regarding the associations between family relationships in stepfather families, only the child–mother relationship and the child–father relationship were found to be significantly associated. Children who reported high levels of conflict with their mothers also reported high levels of conflict with their non-residential fathers ($r = .38, p < .05$).

3.3.3 Predictors of children’s psychosocial adjustment

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the unique contribution of family structure, gender of target child, and all family relationship variables to children’s psychosocial adjustment. Because previous analyses had revealed a significant main effect of gender on mothers’ relationships with their ex-partners and a significant interaction effect (family structure x gender) of children’s relationships with their mothers (see Table 3.2), family structure and gender were entered into the model as control variables. Analyses were carried out separately for children’s total problem behavior, general self-esteem, and social competence.

Total problem behavior. As shown in Table 3.4, multiple regressions revealed that the relationship between mother and ex-partner had a significant impact on the child’s total problem behavior. The children of mothers who reported higher levels of conflict with their ex-partners over the children, reported higher levels of problem behavior. It was found that the mother’s level of conflict with her ex-partner accounted for 19% of the variance ($\beta = .36, p < .01$).

General self-esteem. Children’s self-esteem was significantly correlated with the relationship with their non-residential fathers: Children who reported higher levels of acceptance in the relationship with their non-residential fathers also showed higher levels of general self-esteem. Acceptance within the child–father relationship significantly accounted for 41% of the variance ($\beta = .37, p < .01$) (see Table 3.4).
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**Social competence.** Children's social competence was significantly correlated with acceptance of their fathers: Children who show high levels of acceptance of their non-residential fathers also reported high scores on social competence. Multiple regression analyses revealed that acceptance of the fathers significantly accounted for 26% of the variance ($\beta = .54, p < .001$) (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.4 Summary of multiple regression analyses for variables predicting children's psychosocial adjustment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total problem behavior</th>
<th>General self-esteem</th>
<th>Social competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control variables</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender child</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family relationships</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother – ex-partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current relationship</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicts over child</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.36**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child – mother</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child – father</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>2.11*</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.03***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

3.4 Discussion

More and more children are growing up in divorced family structures, such as single-mother families and stepfather families. This study found no main effect of family structure on the quality of post-divorce family relationships or on children’s well-being. However, a significant main effect of the child's gender on the mother's relationship with her ex-partner was found: Mothers with sons are more satisfied with the relationship with their ex-partners, than mothers with daughters. Besides, also an interaction effect (family structure x gender) was found for the child–mother relationship: Boys in single-mother families have better relationships (higher acceptance, less conflicts) with their mothers, than boys living in stepfather families. Furthermore, the results revealed that for single-mother families, the three post-divorce family relationships are
intercorrelated with each other, while in stepfather families only the mother–child and the father–child relationship are associated with each other. Finally, we found that mothers’ conflict with their ex-partners and acceptance within the father–child relationship are important predictors of children’s psychosocial adjustment in single-mother families and in stepfather families.

Single mothers do not significantly differ from remarried mothers on their evaluation of their current relationships with their ex-partners or on conflicts regarding child-rearing matters with their ex-partners. It should be noted that in the Netherlands, since 1998 both parents have parental custody over their child following a divorce, and the frequency of contact between divorced fathers and their children has increased (Spruijt, 2007). As a consequence of this shared parental custody, ex-partners have more contact with each other and this might contribute to better relationships between ex-partners, even when one of the parents marries a new partner.

Rather surprisingly, a significant main effect of gender of the target child was found for the mothers’ evaluations of their current relationships with their ex-partners: Mothers with sons reported warmer relationships with their ex-partners than did mothers with daughters. The association between gender of the target child and the mother’s relationship with her ex-partner is scarcely examined within samples of divorced families. Some studies of intact families, however, have reported an association between children’s gender and the quality of the marital relationship. Katzev, Warner, and Acoc (1994), for instance, reported a significant association between children’s gender and marital stability: Mothers in families with sons scored significantly higher on marital stability than mothers in families with daughters. The same study also found that fathers tend to be more engaged with sons than with daughters. It might be that fathers who are more involved with their children also have better relationships with their ex-partners, or vice versa.

It was also found in our study that children in single-mother families do not significantly differ from children in stepfather families regarding their relationships with their non-residential fathers. However, a significant interaction effect between family structure and gender was found for the relationship between child and mother: Boys in single-mother families reported significantly warmer relationships with their mothers than did boys in stepfather families. It appears that boys cope better with divorce when their mothers remain single. For girls, no significant differences between the two family structures were found. As mentioned, Katzev, Warner, and Acoc (1994) reported that fathers with sons are more engaged with their children than fathers with girls are. It might also be possible that sons of remarried mothers perceive their mothers’ new partners as intruders and try to be loyal to their non-residential fathers by showing lower levels of acceptance and more conflict within the mother–child relationship.

The quality of a mother’s relationship with her ex-partner was found to be associated with the mother–child relationship in single-mother families, but not in stepfather families. In previous studies, however (e.g., Dunn et al., 2004), a positive association between these family relationships was reported in both family structures. It is possible that we did not find a significant
association in stepfather families because of the rather small sample size. Future research with more stepfather families is therefore suggested. The quality of the child–mother relationship in both family structures was associated with the relationship between the child and the non-residential father. These results show that associations between family relationships in divorced families, just like in intact families, support the spillover perspective, which means that emotions and behavior in one family relationship spill over to another family relationship. No support was found for the compensatory perspective.

We did not find significant differences on psychosocial adjustment between children in single-mother families and those in stepfather families. This result is in line with previous findings (e.g., Brown, 2004; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). However, the influence of family relationships on children’s adjustment in single-mother families and those in stepfather families was also investigated. The results revealed that the psychosocial adjustment of children in these two family structures is especially related to conflict between the mothers and the ex-partners and to acceptance within the father–child relationship. The results support the assumption that what is important for children’s psychosocial development, is not family structure but family processes (e.g., the quality of the relationship between the parents and the relationship between the child and the parents). This result stresses the importance of the relationship of the child with the non-residential father.

However, certain aspects of children’s well-being are related to specific family relationships. It appears that the more negative aspect of psychosocial adjustment (i.e., total problem behavior) is associated with conflict in the relationship between mother and ex-partner, while the more positive aspects (i.e., general self-esteem and social competence) are significantly associated with the child’s acceptance of the non-residential father.

This study had a number of limitations. First, it was based on a sample of families that voluntarily participated in the study. It is possible that the families that did not respond to our invitation to participate are having more difficulties regarding living in a divorced family structure. One should therefore be careful about generalizing the results to the population. However, of the 180 families that initially responded to our invitation, 87 agreed to participate in the more detailed part of our study. Preliminary analyses on social demographic variables showed that only the mothers’ educational level was higher in the group that participated in the more detailed part of the study compared to those in the group that did not. No differences were found on the other social demographic variables. Furthermore, the response rates in this study were relatively low; however, these rates are comparable with the response rates in other family studies carried out in the Netherlands (Brinkman, 2000; De Leeuw & De Heer, 2002). Several studies showed that the response rate in family surveys in the Netherlands is relatively low compared to other Western countries (De Heer, 1999). Additionally, because the sample sizes of the two groups were rather small, the study lacked power. The findings need to be interpreted with caution, and a replication of this study using a larger sample is necessary. Second, the data on family
relationships were collected by means of maternal reports and interviews with children. The mothers reported about their relationships with their ex-partners, and the children were asked about their relationships with their parents. It might be more reliable to collect information from two perspectives, for example by means of a maternal report and a child report about the mother–child relationship. Third, several family relationship quality variables were used as predictors of children's psychosocial adjustment. However, it can be assumed that these variables also function as a consequence of children's psychosocial adjustment. For instance, conflicts within the relationship between mother and ex-partner can negatively influence a child's psychosocial adjustment. Nevertheless, it can also be assumed that children who show much problem behavior negatively affect the relationship between their parents.

The present study was one of the first in which three family relationships in two divorced family structures were explored, and were associated with each other and with the psychosocial adjustment of boys and girls. Overall, the results of this study indicate that living in a single-mother or a stepfather family is not itself associated with a child's psychosocial adjustment: What appears to matter is the mother's relationship with her ex-partner and the quality of the relationship of the child with the non-residential father.
References


