Parenting and child adjustment after divorce: family relationship quality, parental stress, and child adjustment in post-divorce families
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Citation for published version (APA):

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Mothers’ parenting stress and children’s psychosocial adjustment: A comparison of three family structures

Abstract

Assuming that family structure is associated with maternal parenting stress and children’s well-being, mothers and children (8-12 years) in 82 intact families, 53 divorced single-mother families, and 36 stepfather families were assessed using standardized instruments. Two 3 (Family structure) x 2 (Gender) MANCOVAs were carried out, and a correlation analysis was conducted. Results show that divorced single mothers experience higher levels of parenting stress than married mothers, and children in single-mother families reported higher levels of total problems than children in intact families. Furthermore, parenting stress of divorced single mothers in particular was associated with child adjustment. The presence of a second adult in the household seems not only to decrease mothers’ parenting stress, but also seems to function as a buffer in the association between parenting stress and children’s well-being.

5.1 Introduction

In the Netherlands, where this study was carried out, around 18% of all families with under-aged children are single-mother families, and 7% are stepfamilies. Most of these families result from marital divorce (E-Quality, 2008). Growing up in a divorced family structure may be considered a context that has a negative influence on children's well-being, because this is associated with specific risk factors that are supposed to contribute to maternal parenting stress and children's problem behavior (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). The influence of family structure on mothers' parental experience and children's psychosocial adjustment are widely studied. Several studies focused on comparisons of two-parent families and single-mother families, disregarding important differences within the group single-mother families (Demo & Acock, 1996). However, it is well-known that the circumstances of single mothers who are divorced from the child's father, differ from that of single mothers who were never married or cohabited with the child's father (Segal-Engelchin & Wozner, 2005; Weinraub, Horvath, & Gringlas, 2002), and from widowed single mothers (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). In this study, maternal parenting stress and children's well-being were assessed in intact father-mother families, and in divorced single-mother families and stepfather families.

5.1.1 Family structure as a context for risk factors

Parenting can be considered a self-regulative and adaptive process (Hermanns, 1998). However, characteristics of children, parents and the social context sometimes interfere with parenting by disrupting this self-regulative and adaptive process. These situations and processes are often referred to as risk factors. In the literature, parental divorce or separation and growing up in a divorced family structure (i.e., a single-mother family or a stepfather family) are associated with risk factors that can disturb adaptive parenting, and subsequently contribute to parenting stress and negatively affect children's developmental outcomes (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; Brown, 2006; Sameroff, 1994).

Parenting stress generally refers to the feelings experienced by a parent when he/she is unable to cope with the demands associated with parenting. Both divorce and remarriage (or re-partnering) is associated with higher levels of maternal parenting stress (e.g., Amato, 2000). Divorced single mothers experience higher levels of distress, perceive their children as more difficult (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005), and report higher levels of family hassles (Compas & Williams, 1990) than married mothers. Compared with mothers in intact families, both single and remarried mothers more often experience parenthood as hard and as more work than pleasure, and more often feel tired as a result of raising their families (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Furthermore, parenting stress is frequently associated with less adaptive parenting behavior, lower quality of the parent–child relationship, and child adjustment problems (e.g., Ang, 2008; Bornstein, 2002).

The relation between family structure and children's well-being has been extensively
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studied. A well-known result of these studies is that children in divorced family structures (e.g., in single-mother or stepfather families) do less well than children who live with two married biological parents. For example, children in divorced families experience a lower level of well-being (e.g., academic achievement, conduct problems, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social competence) than children in intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001; Brown, 2006). Furthermore, children who spent some time in single-parent families show lower levels of behavioral and cognitive outcomes (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001), have more adjustment problems (Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, O'Connor, Golding, & the ALSPAC Study Team, 1998), and have less extensive contacts with friends (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001). Last, it should be mentioned that several studies have shown that a parental divorce influences boys and girls psychosocial adjustment in different ways (Golombok, 2000; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). However, this might also be a consequence of differences in how boys and girls in general show their distress: Boys tend to show their distress with more externalizing problem behavior, whereas girls tend to internalize problem behavior (e.g., Leadbeater, Blatt, & Quinlan, 1995).

5.1.2 Specific characteristics of divorced families

This study investigated mothers and children in three distinct family structures: intact families, divorced single-mother families, and stepfather families. Several theories on family structure emphasize that a family headed by two married biological parents is the best or most complete structure (e.g., White & Klein, 2008). Other family structures, such as single-mother families and stepfather families, are considered incomplete or deviant versions of the intact father-mother family structure, and are assumed to have a negative influence on parenting processes and child development. A divorced family structure is associated with several risk factors, such as lack of social support, decrease in family income, and social stigma.

Social support. Divorced single mothers lack the support of a partner. The presence or absence of a second adult in the household (viz. the biological father or stepfather) may influence a mother’s child-rearing tasks and experiences. A second adult in the household can provide child-rearing assistance and emotional support, and ease financial pressure (Thompson & Esminger, 1989). The absence of a father often leaves the mother with no-one else with whom to share the day-to-day tasks associated with raising a child (Golombok, 2000). This may affect not only maternal parenting stress, but also children's psychosocial adjustment.

Family income. After a divorce, the economic resources of single-mother families will in most cases decline sharply (e.g., Bouman, 2004). Studies in various parts of the world have shown that family income is an important predictor of child adjustment: The lower the family income, the higher the chance that a child will develop problem behavior, such as aggressive, withdrawn, or anxious behavior problems (e.g., Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009). In the Netherlands, a substantial proportion of all single-mother families have a post-divorce income that is around welfare level (Bouman, 2004). However, when a mother remarries or cohabits with a new partner,
family income increases. On average, the family income of stepfather families is only slightly lower than that of intact families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Social stigma. Society also perceives divorced families as more negative than intact families. Results from the World Value Survey, for example, showed that 20.4% of the Dutch respondents and 47.8% of the U.S. respondents disapprove of a woman becoming a single parent (World Value Survey, 2006). Furthermore, in the media stepfamilies are often portrayed in a negative way (Leon & Angst, 2005), and in a recent study among college students it was found that stepfathers are more often stereotyped as hated and insensitive than any other father type (Troilo & Coleman, 2008). It is possible that divorced single and remarried (or re-partnered) mothers feel that they have to justify their parenthood to the environment as a consequence of these attitudes toward divorced families.

5.1.3 Research aims and hypotheses

In the present study differences in maternal parenting stress and children’s psychosocial adjustment in three family structures are examined. To avoid the problem of same-source bias, we collected information on parenting from the mothers and information on child adjustment from the children. Furthermore, the majority of studies on family structures and family relationship quality were carried out in the U.S. (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2000; Amato, 2001; Brown, 2006). However, several studies have shown that circumstances for divorced single mothers in the U.S. and in European countries (such as the Netherlands) are quite different. For example, single mothers in the U.S. experience higher levels of economic hardship compared with their Dutch counterparts (Christopher, 2002). Besides, the number of people in the US that disapprove of single parenthood is more than twice as high as in the Netherlands (World Value Survey, 2006). To see whether differences between family structures also appear in a country where divorced single mothers are confronted with less economic hardship and disapproval of society, this study was conducted in the Netherlands. Last, because several studies on family structure and child adjustment reported gender differences (e.g., Golombok, 2000; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999), analyses were done for boys and girls separately.

The first aim was to examine differences on mothers’ parenting stress (i.e., parental incompetence, parental burden, and parental justification) in intact, single-mother, and stepfather families. Because single mothers lack the support of a second adult in the household, we expected single mothers to report lower levels of parental competence and higher levels of parental burden compared to mothers in intact or stepfather families. However, because both single mothers and remarried mothers differ from the normative intact family structure, we expected mothers in these divorced family structures to report higher levels of parental justification than mothers in intact families.

The second aim was to examine differences on psychosocial adjustment between children in intact families, single-mother families, and stepfather families, separately for boys and
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girls. We focused on three aspects of children’s psychosocial adjustment – namely total problem behavior, general self-esteem, and social competence – because these aspects are important predictors of adult psychopathology and later life satisfaction (e.g., Heinonen, Räikkönen, & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2005; McGue & Iacono, 2005). Based on previous studies, we expected children in divorced families (single-mother families and stepfather families) to show higher levels of total problem behavior, and lower levels of general self-esteem and social competence.

The third aim was to assess whether there are associations between mothers’ parenting stress and children’s psychosocial adjustment (separately for boys and girls) in intact families, single-mother families, and stepfather families. Because in two-adult families (intact families and stepfather families), the second adult in the household can give child-rearing assistance and emotional support to the mother, we expected to find more significant associations between mothers’ parenting stress variables and child adjustment variables in single-mother families than in intact families and stepfather families.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Recruitment

To participate in the study, the target children must have been between 8 and 12 years old. The participating families were recruited by means of (1) the population register, (2) elementary schools, and (3) personal networks.

First, two random samples of 300 intact families and 1239 divorced families were drawn from the population register of four cities in the Netherlands. The intact families received an invitation to participate in the study; 38 of these families were willing to participate (response rate: 12.7%). The divorced families first received an invitation to complete a short questionnaire about their socio-demographic characteristics. One hundred and eighty divorced families were willing to participate (response rate: 14.5%) and thus received the questionnaire. Of these 180 divorced families, 53 single-mother families and 36 stepfather families (49.4%) gave their consent to participate in a more detailed part of the study that focused on maternal parenting stress and child adjustment. The mothers in these families also give permission to collect data from their offspring by means of child reports. Second, families were recruited through six elementary schools. The parents of 579 children aged between 8 and 12 received an invitation letter; of these families, 24 intact families matched the above-mentioned criteria and were willing to participate. Third, research assistants approached families in their personal network that met the above-mentioned criterion. Twenty intact families were recruited this way.

A total of 171 families participated in the study: 82 intact families, 53 single-mother families, and 36 stepfather families. No significant differences were found on social demographic variables between the participating families and the three recruitment methods.
5.2.2 Procedure

The families that had agreed to participate were contacted by phone to make an appointment for a home visit. The child questionnaires were administered during a one-hour interview with each target child in his/her home. During these sessions, the first author or one of her collaborators read the questionnaire items to the child and recorded the child’s answers. Each mother was asked to complete a questionnaire and return it to us in the stamped addressed envelope that we provided.

5.2.3 Measures

Data were collected by means of maternal reports (family structure, parenting stress, demographic characteristics) and child questionnaires (psychosocial adjustment).

Family structure. In order to allocate each family to one of the three family structures, we first asked the mother “Do all your children have the same father?” and “Are you currently cohabiting with the father of the child who is participating in the study?” If the mother answered “Yes” to both questions, the family was categorized as an intact father–mother family. If the mother answered “No” to the second question, we asked “Do you have a new partner with whom you are living at this moment?” If the mother answered “No,” the family was categorized as a single-mother family; if the mother answered “Yes,” the family was categorized as a stepfather family.

Maternal parenting stress. Information about the mothers’ parenting stress was collected by maternal reports. Three aspects covering maternal parenting stress were measured, namely parental competence, parental burden, and parental justification. To measure parental competence and parental burden, we used the NVOS (Robbroeckx & Wels, 1989), which is a Dutch questionnaire for measuring parental stress. The parental competence sub-scale (being able to handle the child) consists of 8 items (e.g., “I feel I’m slowly losing grip on my child”), while the parental burden sub-scale (feeling burdened by the child) consists of 7 items (e.g., “Others (my partner) get too little attention because of my child”). Mothers were asked to indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = fully disagree; 5 = fully agree). Cronbach’s alpha was .67 (Competence) and .79 (Burden), respectively. The Parental Justification Scale (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2004) was used to measure the degree to which the mothers feel pressured to justify the quality of their parenthood toward other people in their social environment. This scale consists of four items (e.g., “In anticipation of negative reactions from others, I give my children more attention than other parents do”). Each item was scored on a 6-point scale (1 = fully disagree; 6 = fully agree). Cronbach’s alpha was good (α = .82).

Psychosocial adjustment of the child. Data regarding the psychosocial adjustment of the children were collected by means of child reports that included several aspects of their psychosocial adjustment.

Problem behavior was measured with the Total Difficulties Scale of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire Self-Report Version (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). Although this instrument is
intended for children aged 11 and older, it has also been used in a nonclinical sample of children as young as 8 years old (Muris, Meesters, Eijkelenboom, & Vincken, 2004). This scale consists of 20 items or statements: for example, “I am restless; I cannot stay still for long” or “I get very angry and often lose my temper.” Each statement has a 3-item Likert-type response category ranging from 0 (not true) to 2 (certainly true). The sum of the scores of all items produces a total score that reflects the overall measure of problem behavior. Cronbach’s alpha was .71.

General self-esteem and social competence were measured with the adapted Dutch version of the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC; van den Bergh & van Ranst, 1998). Each sub-scale of the PCSC consists of seven statements. Examples of statements are “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 is “sort of true” or “really true” for him/her. However, Van den Bergh and Van Ranst (1998) showed that the response format used in the original PCSC was too complex for younger children. In the Dutch version of the PCSC (van den Bergh & van Ranst, 1998), the response format was therefore made simpler: Children were asked to rate on a 4-point scale whether the labels or statements were true for them (1 = not true at all; 4 = very true). Cronbach’s alpha was respectively .74 (general self-esteem) and .73 (social competence).

Demographic characteristics. Each mother was asked her age, education level, employment status, the number of hours she worked each week, and the annual family income. Furthermore, mothers were asked about the number of children in the family, the children’s ages and gender, how often the children see their non-resident father (if applicable), and how many years elapsed since the divorce (if applicable).

5.2.4 Participants

A total of 171 families participated in the study: 82 intact families (boys represented 37.8% of the children), 53 single-mother families (boys represented 45.3% of the children), and 36 stepfather families (boys represented 36.1% of the children). The socio-demographic characteristics of the three family structures are presented in Table 5.1. Significant differences were found on four aspects: (a) Mothers’ in stepfather families were significantly younger than those in intact and single-mother families; (b) target children in intact families were significantly younger than those in single-mother and stepfather families; (c) the annual family income of single-mother families was significantly lower than that of intact and stepfather families; and (d) divorced remarried mothers were significantly longer divorced than divorced mothers who remained single.

No significant differences were obtained on mother’s employment status: Seventy-seven percent of all mothers (n = 135) was employed and these mothers worked on average 22.53 hours a week (SD = 10.93). No significant differences also emerged between mothers in intact
families, single-mother families, and stepfather families on their educational level. The majority of the mothers (75.4%) were educated to intermediate vocational level or higher, which is in line with figures from Statistics Netherlands regarding the educational level of mothers with young children in the Netherlands (Latten & van Dijk, 2007). Finally, no differences were found on contact between the child and the non-resident father in single mother families and stepfather families. Most of the children in divorced family structures see their father more than once a week (single-mother families: 64.8%; stepfather families: 66.7%) or every month (resp., 16.7% and 16.7%). Only few children see their father only several times a year (resp., 11.1% and 10.0%) or did not have contact with their father at all (resp., 7.4% and 6.7%).

Table 5.1 Means (SD) of social demographic variables, separately for intact families (n= 82), divorced single-mother families (n= 53), and stepfather families (n=36).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family structure</th>
<th>Intact families (I)</th>
<th>Single-mother families (II)</th>
<th>Stepfather families (III)</th>
<th>Post-hoc</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age mother</td>
<td>41.01 (4.40)</td>
<td>42.33 (4.30)</td>
<td>39.09 (5.50)</td>
<td>F = 5.15* I, II &gt; III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age child</td>
<td>10.18 (1.36)</td>
<td>10.70 (1.44)</td>
<td>11.00 (1.59)</td>
<td>F = 4.69* I &lt; II, III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of target child</td>
<td>37.8 % boys</td>
<td>45.3 % boys</td>
<td>36.1 % boys</td>
<td>X² = 1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>2.57 (1.12)</td>
<td>2.15 (.92)</td>
<td>2.43 (1.15)</td>
<td>F = 2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers’ employment status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed (%)</td>
<td>76.9 %</td>
<td>76.4 %</td>
<td>83.9 %</td>
<td>X² = 0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work hours/week</td>
<td>23.09 (7.99)</td>
<td>27.07 (7.33)</td>
<td>25.83 (10.43)</td>
<td>F = 2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers Education¹</td>
<td>6.21 (1.58)</td>
<td>5.73 (1.97)</td>
<td>5.63 (1.90)</td>
<td>F = 1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual family income²</td>
<td>3.62 (1.98)</td>
<td>2.09 (1.65)</td>
<td>3.02 (2.06)</td>
<td>F = 9.85*** I, III &gt; II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanization</td>
<td>2.55 (.50)</td>
<td>2.74 (.45)</td>
<td>2.64 (.49)</td>
<td>F = 2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since divorce</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.82 (1.85)</td>
<td>6.71 (2.77)</td>
<td>F = 11.43*** II &lt; III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

¹ Education: 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.
² Annual family income: 1 = less than €20,000; 2 = €20,000–€25,000; 3 = €25,000–€30,000; 4 = €30,000–€35,000; 5 = more than €35,000

5.3 Results

5.3.1 Preliminary analyses

A preliminary correlation analysis was conducted to test whether the demographic variables on which the family structures differed (Table 5.1) were significantly associated with any of the major study variables (Table 5.2). Pearson r correlations were calculated for the total group for three demographic variables (viz., age mother; age child; annual family income) and the major study variables (parental stress and child adjustment). Correlations between years elapsed since
divorce and the major study variables were computed only for divorced family structures (viz., single-mother families and stepfather families).

Table 5.2 Correlations between social demographic variables on which families significantly differed and the major study variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic variables</th>
<th>Maternal Parenting Stress</th>
<th>Children’s Psychosocial Adjustment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Burden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age mother</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age child</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual income</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years since divorce</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

1 Only computed for the group divorced mothers (single mothers and remarried mothers).

Two demographic variables were significantly correlated with maternal parenting stress (Table 5.2). Family annual income was associated with parental competence ($r(171) = .25; p = .002$) and parental burden ($r(171) = -.20; p = .011$). The lower the family income, the less mothers feel themselves competent as parents and the more they feel burdened by their children. Furthermore, time since divorce was negatively related with parental justification ($r(89) = -.18; p = .026$). The longer the time elapsed since the divorce, the lower the level mothers feel they have to justify their parenthood.

Only one demographic variable was significantly associated with children’s psychosocial adjustment (Table 5.2). Maternal age was negatively related with children’s total problems ($r(171) = -.16; p = .034$). Older mothers have children that report lower levels of problem behavior than children of younger mothers.

5.3.2 Maternal parenting stress

A 3 (Family structure: 0 = intact families, 1 = single-mother families, 2 = stepfather families) x 2 (Gender: 0 = boys, 1 = girls) multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed with mother’s parenting stress (viz., parental competence, parental burden, and parental justification) as the dependent variables. Based on the results of the preliminary correlation analyses (see Table 5.2), family annual income was used as a covariate. If a multivariate statistically significant difference was found, separate ANCOVAs were conducted to test which parental stress variables accounted for this difference. Post-hoc tests were performed to test which family structures differed from each other. When comparing single-mother families with stepfather families, time since the divorce was added as an extra covariate because this variable was also significantly correlated with parental justification.
Results of the MANCOVA with mother’s parenting stress as the dependent variables are shown in Table 5.3. The results obtained using Wilks’s criterion showed a significant main effect for family structure \( (F(6,308) = 3.46; p = .003) \). No significant effect was found for gender \( (F(3,154) = 0.59; p = .621) \) or for the interaction between family structure and gender \( (F(6,308) = 1.23; p = .690) \).

Subsequent ANCOVAs revealed significant differences between mothers in intact families, single-mother families and stepfather families on parental competence \( (F(2,156) = 3.42; p = .042) \), parental burden \( (F(2,156) = 3.82; p = .024) \) and parental justification \( (F(2,156) = 9.03; p = .000) \). Post-hoc tests showed that single mothers report significantly lower levels of parental competence \( (F(1,125) = 5.72; p = .018) \) and higher levels of parental burden \( (F(1,125) = 7.75; p = .006) \) than mothers in intact families. Furthermore, mothers in intact families reported significantly lower levels of parental justification than single mothers \( (F(1,125) = 18.54; p = .000) \) and remarried mothers \( (F(1,108) = 7.96; p = .006) \).

5.3.3 Children’s psychosocial adjustment

Again, a 3 x 2 MANCOVA was performed with children’s adjustment (viz., total problem behavior, general self-esteem, and social competence) as the dependent variables. Maternal age was used as covariate, because preliminary analyses (see Table 5.2) showed that this background variable was significantly associated with children’s total problem behavior. If significant differences emerged, separate ANCOVAs and post-hoc tests were conducted.

Table 5.3 shows the results of the MANCOVA with children’s adjustment as the dependent variables. The results obtained using Wilks’s criterion showed a significant main effect for family structure \( (F(6,304) = 2.52; p = .021) \). No significant effect was found for gender \( (F(3,152) = 1.19; p = .318) \) or for the interaction between family structure and gender \( (F(6,304) = 0.53; p = .788) \).

A subsequent ANCOVA revealed a significant difference between children in intact families, divorced single-mother families, and stepfather families on children’s total problem behavior \( (F(2,154) = 3.10; p = .048) \). Post-hoc tests showed that children growing up in a divorced single-mother family report higher levels of total problem behavior than children growing up in an intact family \( (F(1,123) = 6.88; p = .010) \).

5.3.4 Associations between maternal parenting stress and children’s psychosocial adjustment

Pearson \( r \) correlations were computed between the parenting stress variables and the psychosocial adjustment variables in order to examine the associations between maternal parenting stress and children’s psychosocial adjustment (see Table 5.4). Analyses were carried out separately for the three family structures.

In intact families, mothers’ parental burden was found significantly correlated with children’s problem behavior \( (r(76) = .23; p = .044) \). Mothers in intact families that report high levels of parental burden, have children that report high levels of total problem behavior.
Table 5.3 Means (SD) of maternal parenting stress variables and children’s psychosocial adjustment variables in intact families (n = 82), single mother families (n = 53), and stepfather families (n = 36).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Family structure (FS)</th>
<th>Gender of child (G)</th>
<th>F-values ANCOVAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intact families (I)</td>
<td>Single-mother families (II)</td>
<td>Stepfather families (III)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maternal parenting stress</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental competence</td>
<td>4.53 (0.33)</td>
<td>4.32 (0.63)</td>
<td>4.56 (0.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental burden</td>
<td>1.65 (0.58)</td>
<td>2.01 (0.93)</td>
<td>1.66 (0.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental justification</td>
<td>1.68 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.42 (1.22)</td>
<td>2.13 (0.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children’s psychosocial adjustment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total problems</td>
<td>0.67 (0.22)</td>
<td>0.77 (0.28)</td>
<td>0.74 (0.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General self-esteem</td>
<td>3.00 (0.50)</td>
<td>2.94 (0.46)</td>
<td>2.85 (0.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>2.73 (0.53)</td>
<td>2.87 (0.41)</td>
<td>2.88 (0.40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01
1 Covariate: Annual family income
2 Covariate: Age mother
Chapter 5

Table 5.4 Bivariate correlations between maternal parenting stress and children’s psychosocial adjustment separately for intact families ($n = 82$), single-mother families ($n = 53$), and stepfather families ($n = 36$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intact families</th>
<th>Single-mother families</th>
<th>Stepfather families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total problems</td>
<td>General self-esteem</td>
<td>Social competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental competence</td>
<td>$-0.08$</td>
<td>$0.13$</td>
<td>$0.03$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental burden</td>
<td>$0.23^*$</td>
<td>$-0.22$</td>
<td>$-0.02$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental justification</td>
<td>$0.06$</td>
<td>$-0.17$</td>
<td>$-0.22$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All aspects of divorced single mothers’ parenting stress were correlated with children’s well-being. First, single mothers’ parental competence was significantly correlated with children’s total problem behavior ($r(50) = -0.38; p = 0.007$). The lower the single mothers evaluate their parental competences, the more their children report problem behaviors. Second, single mothers’ parental burden was found to be significantly correlated with children’s total problems ($r(50) = 0.45; p = 0.001$), general self-esteem ($r(50) = -0.35; p = 0.012$), and social competence ($r(50) = -0.31; p = 0.031$). Single mothers who reported high levels of parental burden have children who show higher levels of problem behavior, and lower levels of general self-esteem and social competence. Third, single mothers’ parental justification was found to be significantly correlated with children’s total problems ($r(50) = 0.41; p < 0.003$) and social competence ($r(50) = -0.32; p = 0.023$). The more single mothers feel they have to justify their parenthood, the higher their children rate their problem behavior and the lower they rate their social competences.

No significant correlations were found between remarried mothers’ parenting stress variables and child adjustment variables.

5.4 Discussion

In this study mothers and children in intact families, divorced single-mother families, and stepfather families in the Netherlands were compared with each other on mothers’ parenting stress and children’s psychosocial adjustment. Results show that mothers in these family structures
differ from each other on their experience of parental stress. Furthermore, also differences were found on children's psychosocial adjustment in these three family structures. Finally, it appears that maternal parenting stress of divorced single mothers in particular is associated with children's well-being.

First, support was found for our expectation that family structure is related to maternal parenting stress. Divorced single mothers experience lower levels of parental competence and higher levels of parental burden than mothers in intact father–mother families. No differences were found between single mothers and remarried mothers, or between between first time married mothers and remarried mothers on these variables. It should be mentioned that mean scores on parental competence and parental burden of mothers in intact families and in stepfather families are rather equal. It may be possible that we did not find any significant differences between divorced single mothers and remarried mothers due to the low statistical power of the separate post-hoc tests (Competence: 1-β = .62; Burden: 1-β = .71). However, both divorced single and remarried mothers do differ on parental justification from mothers in intact families. Divorced single and remarried mothers feel they have to justify their parenthood more towards other people in the social environment than mothers in intact families. A possible explanation for this is that both single-mother families and stepfather families are different from the standard intact father–mother family, which is assumed to be the ideal environment for children to be raised in (World Value Survey, 2006), and this causes stress for mothers. In response, divorced single and remarried mothers want to demonstrate in their social environment that they are good parents.

Second, confirmation was found for our assumption that family structure is associated with children's psychosocial adjustment. Children that live in single-mother families reported higher levels of total problem behavior compared with children growing up in an intact two-parent family. This result is in line with previous studies that focused on children's well-being in various family structures (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991). However, children did not differ on the other psychosocial variables; general self-esteem and social competence. An explanation for this finding might be that in the Netherlands economic circumstances for divorced mothers and their children are better than those in the U.S. (Christopher, 2002), where most of the studies on family structure and child adjustment were done. Furthermore, a majority of the children in divorced families that participated in our sample did see their non-resident fathers on a regular basis. Several studies support an association between involvement of the non-resident father in child-rearing and children's psychosocial adjustment (e.g., King & Sobolewski, 2005).

Finally, associations between maternal parenting stress and child adjustment were investigated. The results showed that maternal parenting stress and children's wellbeing are associated with each other, in particular in single-mother families. Divorced single mothers who feel less competent as a parent and report higher levels of parental burden and parental justification have children who score higher on total problem behavior and report lower levels of general self-esteem and social competence. These results support our hypothesis that a second
adult in the household can shield children for the negative effects of maternal parenting stress. However, no previous studies have examined associations between parental stress and child adjustment in various family structures. Further research is therefore suggested.

This study had a number of limitations. First, its cross-sectional design gives no indication of the sequence of events. To infer causality, a longitudinal design is recommended for future research. Second, the study was based on a sample of families that voluntarily participated. It is possible that the families that did not respond to our invitation to participate have more difficulties regarding parenting and child adjustment. Furthermore, the response rates of the intact and the divorced families were relatively low. However, the rates are comparable with the response rates in other family studies in the Netherlands (Brinkman, 2000). Several studies showed that the response rate in family surveys in the Netherlands is relatively low compared to other Western countries (Statistics Netherlands, 1998; De Heer, 1999).

In sum, our study supports the assumption that family structure is related to mothers’ experience of parenting stress and children’s self-reported total problem behavior. Finally, parenting stress of single mothers in particular is associated with children’s psychosocial adjustment, contrary to the situation in intact families and stepfamilies. The presence of a second adult in the household not only positively affects mothers’ experience of parenthood, but also seems to function as a buffer in the association between mothers’ parenting stress and children’s well-being.
Mothers’ parenting stress and children’s psychosocial adjustment: A comparison of three family structures

References


