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

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Spillover between divorced mothers’ family relationships: Parental stress as a mediator

Abstract
This study examined the differences and associations between divorced mothers’ relationships with their ex-partners and with their children, and investigated whether this association is mediated by mothers’ experience of parenting stress. A questionnaire was completed by 117 divorced single mothers and 64 remarried mothers. Results show that the single mothers and the remarried mothers did not differ on post-divorce family relationship quality, or on their experience of parenting stress. Furthermore, divorced mothers’ relationship with their ex-partners was found to be associated with the quality of the mother–child relationship, but not when controlling for mothers’ experience of parenting stress. The results show that maternal parenting stress mediates the association between conflicts between ex-partners and the quality of the mother–child relationship.

6.1 Introduction

Divorce rates have risen in most Western societies. Increasing numbers of parents and children are consequently living in such family structures as single-parent or stepfather families. In The Netherlands, 15.3% of all under-age children live in single-mother families, whereas 6.1% live in stepfamilies. The majority of these families originate from parental divorces (E-Quality, 2008). When under-age children are involved, most parents maintain contact after their divorce, because of joint legal custody of their children. Several studies have shown that divorce and parental conflict increase mothers’ experience of parenting stress, and negatively affect the quality of post-divorce family relationships (e.g., Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

Because of the influence of parent–child relationships on children's well-being, it is important to study the effects of parental conflict and parenting stress on mother–child relationships. We therefore made a comparison between divorced single mothers and remarried mothers on post-divorce relationship quality and parenting stress, and examined the links between these relationships and the mediating role of parenting stress.

6.1.1 Family relationships

When a family is considered from the family systems perspective, the family is viewed as “a system in which member components are organized into a group, forming a whole that transcends the sum of its separate elements” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1985, p.30). These separate elements are often called subsystems, and can consist of individual persons, but also of relationships between two or more family members (Schultz, 1984). It is widely assumed that family relationships mutually influence each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the functioning of children (Golombok, 2000). Contrary to most of the studies on family relationships that focused on intact families, family relationships in two post-divorce family types, namely single-mother families and stepfather families, are investigated in this study.

A limited number of studies have examined differences on family relationship quality in divorced families. Divorced single mothers seem to have more contact and more conflicts with their ex-partners than remarried mothers (Fisher, de Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005). Some authors assume that remarried mothers feel less need to contact their ex-partners, because their new partners provide emotional support and help with the child-rearing (e.g., Brown, 2004). Remarriage may also affect the mother–child relationship. King (2009) reported a decline in closeness between mothers and children after a stepfather had joined the household. Several explanations for this decline in closeness can be found; for example a mother’s new partner decreases her children’s hope of parental reunion (Berger, 1998), and this has a negative affect on the mother–child relationship. A decline in closeness can also be caused by children having to compete with the new stepparent for their mother’s attention (McLanahan & Sanderfur, 1994).
6.1.2 Parenting stress

Parenting stress generally refers to the feelings experienced by a parent when he or she is unable to cope with the demands associated with parenting, and is frequently associated with less adaptive parenting behavior and more child adjustment problems (e.g., Ang, 2008). Several studies have shown that parenting stress is related to a mother’s marital status. The majority of these studies compared divorced single and/or remarried mothers with mothers in intact families, with more distress shown in the divorced mothers group (e.g., Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005). Some authors postulate that remarried mothers experience less parenting stress than mothers who remained single after the divorce, for example because stepfathers usually increase the family income, help with child-rearing tasks, and give mothers social support (e.g., Brown, 2004). However, according to the incomplete institutionalization theory (Cherlin, 1978), members of stepfamilies have to deal with more complex family relationships, and this causes higher levels of parental stress. It is still unclear whether divorced single mothers and remarried mothers differ regarding their experience of parenting stress.

6.1.3 Associations between post-divorce family relationships and parenting stress

The interrelatedness between the parental relationship and the mother–child relationship has been extensively studied, and the majority of these studies support the spillover perspective by reporting a positive correlation between these two family relationships (e.g., Erel & Burman, 1995). Most of these studies used a sample of intact two-parent families. However, some recent studies showed that also in divorced families, conflict between ex-partners is associated with conflict in the mother–child relationship (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). It is possible that the spillover between these relationships is mediated by mothers’ experience of parenting stress. Associations between parental conflict and parenting stress in post-divorce families have barely been examined. It might be that mothers who report high levels of conflict with their ex-partners over child-rearing issues, experience higher levels of parenting stress than mothers who have better relationships with their ex-partners. Maternal parenting stress, in turn, is associated with the quality of the mother–child relationship. Mothers who experience higher levels of stress in their parenting role are more likely to be more harsh and more authoritarian in their parenting behavior (e.g., Deater-Deckard, 2004), which in turn can influence the quality of the relationship with their children.

6.1.4 The current research

Although much attention has been paid to family relationships and parenting stress, most studies focused on intact families. Currently, a substantial number of parents and children live in divorced family structures, such as single mother families and stepfather families. These families were the subject of our research. Because the parent–child relationship undergoes a major transition when children enter adolescence (e.g., Berger, 2006), we focused on children aged
between 8 and 12 years old.

The aims of this study were (a) to examine differences between divorced single and remarried mothers on post-divorce family relationship quality and parenting stress; (b) to explore the associations between mothers’ relationships with their ex-partners and the mother–child relationship; and (c) to investigate whether this association is mediated by mothers’ experience of parenting stress.

### 6.2 Method

#### 6.2.1 Procedure

A random sample of 1239 mothers with at least one child between 8 and 12 years whose father was not registered at the same address as the mother and her child(ren) was drawn from population registers of four cities in The Netherlands. The selected mothers received an invitation to participate in the study; 181 (response rate: 14.6%) were willing to participate. These mothers completed a written questionnaire and returned it to us in the stamped addressed envelope that we had provided.

#### 6.2.2 Participants

The sample comprised 181 divorced mothers. One hundred and seventeen (64.6%) had remained single after their divorce (these mothers were not cohabiting or otherwise re-partnered) and 64 had remarried. This distribution is in line with figures from Statistics Netherlands that show that around 40% of all divorced mothers with under-age children in the Netherlands remarry or start cohabiting with a man within five years (de Graaf, 2007). Single mothers were significantly older and had lower annual incomes than mothers who had remarried (Table 1). The mean age of the children about whom the mothers reported were 10.83 years old ($SD = 1.32$). Seventy-nine percent of the mothers had a paid job and on average worked around 21 hr a week.

#### 6.2.3 Measures

Data were collected by means of maternal reports on post-divorce family relationship quality, parenting stress, and demographic characteristics.

**Mother’s conflict with her ex-partner.** Conflicts between the mother and her ex-partner over their children were measured with a six-item summary index previously used by Amato and Rezac (1994) and by MacDonald and DeMaris (2002), for example, “How much conflict do you and the child’s father have over how the child is raised”. Each item was scored on a 3-point scale (1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often). Cronbach’s alpha was .78.

**Quality of relationship between mother and child.** The parent version of the Parent–Child Interaction Questionnaire (PACHIQ; Lange, 2001) was used to measure the quality of each mother’s relationship with her child. Mothers were asked to indicate how often they display a
certain behavior or experience a certain feeling (1 = never; 5 = always). The PACHIQ consists of two scales: the acceptance scale (9 items), e.g., "I am very proud of my child" and the conflict scale (12 items), e.g., "There are many conflicts between my child and me that we cannot resolve". Cronbach’s alphas: acceptance = .71; conflict = .63.

*Maternal parenting stress.* Parental burden was measured with a subscale (7 items, e.g. "My child is difficult to raise") of a Dutch questionnaire for measuring parental stress (NVOS; Robbroeckx & Wels, 1989). The mothers were asked to indicate their agreement with the items on a 5-point scale (1 = fully disagree; 5 = fully agree). Cronbach’s alpha was .87.

### 6.3 Results

#### 6.3.1 Preliminary analyses

A significant correlation was found between the time that had elapsed since the divorce and parental conflict (Table 1): the greater the amount of time since the divorce, the lower the level of conflict between parents. Therefore, time since divorce was used as a control variable in the analyses.
Table 6.1 Intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations between social demographic variables, mothers’ family relationships variables, and mothers’ parenting stress.

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<th>Single M(SD)/%</th>
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<td>.08</td>
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<td>-.51***</td>
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<td>-.11</td>
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<td>.61***</td>
<td>-.39***</td>
<td>2.00 (0.92)</td>
<td>1.80 (0.81)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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

1. Marital status: % of mothers who remained single after divorce vs. % of mothers who remarried after divorce; 2. Years since divorce; 3. Age mother; 4. Age child; 5. No. of children; 6. Employment status: % of mothers working; 7. Work hours / week; 8. Family annual 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; 9. 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; 10. Parental conflict; 11. Mother-child conflict; 12. Mother-child acceptance; 13. Parental burden
6.3.2 Differences between divorced single mothers and remarried mothers

Separate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted to establish whether divorced single mothers differ from remarried mothers on post-divorce relationships and parental burden. The number of years since the divorce was used as a covariate in these analyses. Results show no differences between divorced single mothers and remarried mothers on parental conflict ($F(179) = .08; p = .775; \text{Cohen's } d = .04$), mother-child acceptance ($F(179) = .46; p = .500; \text{Cohen's } d = .00$), mother-child conflict ($F(179) = 1.14; p = .287; \text{Cohen's } d = .00$), and parental burden ($F(179) = 1.82; p = .180; \text{Cohen's } d = .23$).

6.3.3 Associations between mothers' post-divorce relationships

Pearson's r correlations between mothers' post-divorce relationship variables were calculated for the total group, because no differences were found on the major study variables (Table 6.1). Conflicts with the ex-partner are associated with acceptance and conflict between mothers and children. Divorced mothers who reported high levels of conflict with their ex-partners, also reported high levels of conflict and low levels of acceptance in the mother–child relationship. A partial correlation analysis with time since divorce as a control variable showed the same results (respectively, $r(178) = -.22; p = .009$; and $r(178) = .18; p = .034$).

6.3.4 Mediation Model

To test the hypothesis that the association between a mother's relationship with her ex-partner and the mother–child relationship is mediated by the mother’s parenting stress, we followed the criteria for mediation analysis suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). The first criterion concerns the association between the independent variable (conflict with ex-partner) and the dependent variables (mother–child acceptance; mother–child conflict). We have already demonstrated that this criterion is met (Table 6.1). The second criterion for a mediation analysis of the association between the independent and the mediating variable is also met (Table 6.1): conflicts with the ex-partner are significantly correlated with parental burden. When controlling for time since divorce, this association remains significant ($r(178) = .20; p = .014$). Also the third criterion (the association between the mediating and the dependent variable should be significant) was met: maternal parenting stress is significantly correlated with mother–child acceptance and mother–child conflict. Again, when controlled for time since divorce, parental burden remains significantly associated with mother–child acceptance ($r(178) = -.43, p < .001$) and mother–child conflict ($r(178) = .59, p < .001$).

To test the mediation model, we conducted two hierarchical regression analyses with time since divorce (Step 1), parental conflict (Step 2), and parenting stress (Step 3) regressed on the mother–child relationship variables. In these analyses, the $\beta$ coefficient for parental conflict on both mother–child relationship variables dropped from -.22 to -.14 for mother–child acceptance.
and from .18 to .06 for mother–child conflict, and was no longer significant after controlling for mothers’ parental burden (see Table 6.2). These results suggest that maternal parenting stress mediates the association between divorced mothers’ relationships with their ex-partners and their relationships with their children. Results of the Sobel test confirm the mediation of parental burden for both dependent variables (Mother–child acceptance: Sobel z-value = -2.64; p = .008, Mother–child conflict: Sobel z-value = 2.89; p = .004).

We also conducted the same regression analyses without controlling for time since divorce. Results showed that the mediation also holds without this variable. The β coefficients for parental conflict dropped from -.20 to -.12 (mother–child acceptance) and from .20 to .07 (mother–child conflict), and were no longer significant.

Table 6.2. Results of the hierarchical regression for predicting mother–child acceptance and mother–child conflict (N= 181).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother-child relationship</th>
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<td>Parental conflict</td>
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<td>Parental burden</td>
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* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

6.4 Discussion

First, no differences were found between divorced single mothers and remarried mothers on post-divorce relationships and parental burden. These results are partially in contrast to previous studies (e.g., Fisher, de Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005). A possible reason for this is that we focused on parental conflicts over the child, while other studies used a broader definition of parental conflict (e.g., unwelcome contact, aggressive behavior). Furthermore, we used parental rather than child
reports on the quality of the mother–child relationship. It is possible that remarried mothers over-report acceptance and under-report conflicts in the mother–child relationship because they have high expectations of the new marriage. Second, mother's relationship with her ex-partner was found to be associated with the mother–child relationship. These results show that associations between family relationships in divorced families, just like in intact families, can be understood from the spillover perspective. Our results are in line with previous studies (e.g., Amato & Sobolewski, 2001) that also reported a positive association between the parental and the mother–child relationship. Third, it was found that divorced mothers, who reported higher levels of conflict with their ex-partners over child-rearing issues, also reported more stress related to the upbringing of their children. This association has barely been studied. It might be that mothers who have not accepted their divorce, are more inclined to argue about their children. It might, of course, be the other way around: divorced mothers who are more worried about their children, might be more inclined to argue about them with their ex-partners. Fourth, it was found that parental burden was associated with the mother–child relationship. This result is in line with previous studies of intact families: parents who reported higher levels of parenting stress were often more authoritarian and harsh in their parenting (Deater-Deckard, 2004), and this negatively affects the quality of the parent-child relationship. Finally, it was found that the association between mothers’ relationships with their ex-partners and their children is mediated by maternal parenting stress. The pathway from parental conflict to a disrupted mother–child relationship seems to be indirect, rather than direct.

However, our study had a number of limitations. First, its cross-sectional design gave no indication of the sequence of events. Although we investigated whether parenting stress functions as a mediator within the association between two post-divorce relationships, we did not establish the direction of this association. Therefore, it is also possible that the mother–child relationship affects the level of maternal parenting stress. Second, the response rate was relatively low, perhaps because we did not offer a financial reward for participation and/or approach non-respondents a second time. Nevertheless, the response rate is still comparable with the response rates in other family studies in The Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2006). Several studies showed that the response rate in family surveys in The Netherlands is relatively low compared to other Western countries (Statistics Netherlands, 1998). To check whether the sample in our study was biased, and that only families with low levels of conflict participated, we compared the level of parental conflict with that reported in a recent study on stepfather families (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). Divorced mothers in our study reported levels of conflict with their ex-partners similar to those reported in the above-mentioned study. Third, the data on family relationships were only collected by means of maternal reports. It might be interesting and more reliable to duplicate this study with multiple informants (e.g., mothers and children reporting on the mother–child relationship) in order to see whether parenting stress also mediates when the child informs on the quality of the mother–child relationship. Finally, reliability of the mother-child
conflict questionnaire was low (α = .63). Associations between mother-child conflict and the other variables might be stronger if mother-child conflict was assessed with less measurement error.

Overall, our study shows that conflicts between ex-partners, indirectly – through maternal parenting stress – spill over into the mother–child relationship. It seems to be very difficult for divorced parents to shield their children from the negative effects of their conflicts. It is therefore important for divorcing parents to focus on resolving parental conflict. Several studies have shown that mediation can be beneficial in this process. Mediation seems to increase not only the quality of the relationship between ex-partners, but also parents’ understanding of their children’s needs (Shaw, 2010).
References


