Parenting and child adjustment after divorce: family relationship quality, parental stress, and child adjustment in post-divorce families
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General conclusions and discussion
The main goal of this thesis is to investigate processes within various family constellations: intact families, single mother families, and stepfather families. It addresses two family processes that are frequently associated with the psychosocial adjustment of children: the quality of various family relationships and parents’ experience of parenting stress. The following paragraphs present a discussion of the results of our studies on family subsystems (§ 7.1), maternal parenting stress (§ 7.2), and child adjustment (§ 7.3). A final paragraph provides an overview of concluding remarks, limitations, and suggestions for future research (§ 7.4).

### 7.1 Family subsystems within various family constellations

We examine differences and associations between several family subsystems within a variety of family constellations. To explain associations between two or more family subsystems, the literature frequently describes two perspectives: the spillover perspective and the compensatory perspective (Erel & Burman, 1995). According to the spillover perspective, emotions and behavior in one subsystem are transferred to another subsystem. The compensatory perspective stresses that emotions and behavior in one subsystem compensate for negative emotions and behavior in another family subsystem.

#### 7.1.1 Intact families

Our study of family subsystems in intact families provides evidence to support the existence of spillover processes between various family subsystems. Positive associations were found between marital and parent-child subsystems, as well as between parent-child and sibling subsystems. A warm relationship between the parents apparently increases the likelihood that these parents will also have warm relationships with their children. Further, when parents have warm relationships with their children, the children are more likely to maintain warm sibling relationships.

No association was found between the marital subsystem and the sibling subsystem, which means that no support was found for the existence of either spillover or compensation processes between these family subsystems. Previous studies (e.g., Yu & Gamble, 2008) have confirmed positive associations between marital and sibling subsystems. This lack of agreement might be related to the conceptualization of marital relationship quality. We used a more general conceptualization of marital quality: mothers were asked how satisfied they were with their spouses as partners and as co-parents. Other studies focus more on negative aspects, including hostility and conflict within the marital relationship (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991). Moreover, all of the mothers who participated in our study were very satisfied about their marital relationships. It is possible that negative behavior within the marital relationship has a greater influence on relationships between siblings than does the general satisfaction of the mother with her partner. This explanation is analogous to the threshold theory of Roberts and Strayer (1987), which proposes that, beyond a certain threshold, higher levels of quality in the marital relationship do not result in increasing levels of quality in sibling relationships.
7.1.2 Post-divorce families

No significant differences were found between divorced single mothers and remarried mothers with regard to their evaluations of their current relationships with their ex-partners. The new relationships of mothers apparently have no influence on their relationships with their ex-partners.

We did find a main effect of the child’s gender. Mothers with sons evaluated their relationships with their ex-partners more positively than did mothers with daughters. In their study of intact families, Katzev, Warner, and Acock (1994) report a similar result: mothers of sons reported significantly higher levels of marital stability than did mothers of daughters. The same study also reports that fathers tend to be more involved with sons than they do with daughters. It is possible that divorced non-resident fathers are more involved with their sons, thus maintaining better relationships with their ex-partners as well.

No differences were found between children in divorced single-mother families and in stepfather families with regard to their relationships with their mothers and non-resident fathers. We did find an interaction effect between family structure and the child’s gender on the mother-child relationship: boys in single-mother families reported warmer relationships with their mothers than did boys in stepfather families. It is possible that sons of remarried mothers perceive their mothers’ new partners as “intruders” and try to remain loyal to their non-resident fathers (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986) by reporting lower levels of acceptance and higher levels of conflict within the mother-child relationship. Our study of child relationships within stepfather families also showed that children report better relationships with their non-resident fathers than they do with their stepfathers.

As was the case with intact families, intercorrelations were identified between all family subsystems in divorced single-mother families. Children of divorced single mothers whose relationships with their ex-partners were characterized by low levels of conflict reported better relationships with their mothers and non-resident fathers. These results support the assumption that spillover processes also take place in divorced single-mother families. In stepfather families, we did find evidence to support the existence of spillover processes between the co-parenting subsystem and the mother-child subsystem, but not for the co-parenting subsystem and the non-resident father-child subsystem. It is possible our failure to find a significant association between the mothers’ relationships with their ex-partners and the children’s relationships with their non-resident fathers is due to the relatively small sample size and consequent lack of statistical power. Despite the relatively small sample of stepfather families, however, we did find a significant association between the relationships of children with their non-resident fathers and their resident stepfathers. Children who reported higher levels of warmth and lower levels of conflict within the non-resident father-child relationship also reported fewer conflicts with their stepfathers. Feelings and emotions related to relationships with members outside the family household (non-resident fathers) can also spill over into relationships with family members inside the family household (stepfathers), or vice versa.
7.2 Maternal parenting stress

Differences between various family constellations with regard to maternal parenting stress were studied, as well as the mediating role of parenting stress within spillover processes. Links between maternal parenting stress and child adjustment are be discussed in § 7.3.

7.2.1 Parenting stress in various family constellations

Maternal parenting stress was examined in various family constellations, and the mediating role of parenting stress within spillover processes was investigated. Preliminary analyses showed a strong association between family income and parenting stress. This result is not surprising (e.g., Bouman, 2004). The divorced single mothers in our sample had significantly lower incomes than did either married or remarried mothers. Family income was therefore included as a control variable in subsequent analyses. Nevertheless, our results show that mothers in divorced single-mother families experience the highest levels of parenting stress. No differences were found between mothers in intact families and remarried mothers. Having a second adult (i.e., the biological father or stepfather) in the household apparently contributes to lower levels of maternal parenting stress, through the availability of help with child-rearing, emotional support, or other forms of assistance (Thomson & Esminger, 1989).

7.2.2 Parenting stress as a mediator within spillover processes

As mentioned before, positive associations were found between several subsystems within the family system. We investigated whether maternal parenting stress mediates spillover processes between the parental subsystem and the mother-child subsystem. Results showed that the link between parental conflict and the mother-child relationship is partially mediated by the weight of the parental burden experienced by the mother. In addition to their direct effects on the mother-child relationship, conflicts between parents thus have indirect effects by increasing maternal parental stress.

7.3 Child adjustment in intact and post-divorce families

The psychosocial adjustment of children in various family constellations was also examined. Children in intact families reported significantly less problem behavior than did children in divorced single-mother families. Children growing up in stepfather families did not differ from children in intact families or from children in divorced single-mother families. This result, however, could have been caused by a lack of statistical power due to the small sample of stepfather families in our study.

7.3.1 Intact families

Overall, children in intact families reported the highest levels of psychosocial adjustment, in contrast to children in post-divorce family constellations. This result is not surprising. Similar
results have been reported in previous studies (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001). We therefore also investigated links between child adjustment and family subsystems, as well as between child adjustment and maternal parenting stress.

**Links with family subsystems.** Within intact families, three different subsystems were investigated: the marital subsystem, the parent-child subsystems, and sibling subsystems. Results showed that the father-child relationship had particularly strong influence on the wellbeing of children. Conflicts between children and their fathers predicted problem behavior on the part of children, while warmth within the father-child relationship predicted higher levels of self-esteem on the part of children. The sibling relationship was also linked to child adjustment: children who reported affectionate sibling relationships also reported higher levels of self-esteem. The marital subsystem, however, was not associated with child adjustment. This result is surprising, as several studies have reported associations between this family subsystem and the wellbeing of children (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994; Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash, & O'Connor, 2005). It is possible that we failed to find a link because we asked mothers about their marital satisfaction instead of focusing on conflicts within the marital relationship. Negative behavior within the marital relationship could have a greater influence on child adjustment than does the mother’s general satisfaction with her partner. This explanation is analogous to the threshold theory of Roberts and Strayer (1987), which proposes that, beyond a certain threshold, higher levels of warmth within the marital relationship do not result in increasing levels of psychosocial adjustment.

**Links with parenting stress.** We also investigated whether parenting stress on the part of mothers in intact families was associated with child adjustment. Results showed a significant correlation between parental burden and the self-reported problem behavior of children. Mothers who experience high levels of parental burden are more likely to have children that report higher levels of problem behavior. No associations were found between parental stress variables and the self-esteem and social competence of children. It appears that high levels of stress account for problems, although lower levels of parenting stress do not account for positive aspects of child adjustment.

### 7.3.2 Post-divorce families

No differences were found between the adjustment of children living in divorced single-mother families and the adjustment of those being raised in stepfather families. The structure of the family is thus less likely to determine child adjustment within these family constellations than are the processes that take place within the family.

**Links with family subsystems.** Within divorced families, we found that the co-parenting subsystem and the non-resident father-child subsystem are associated with child adjustment. First, higher levels of conflict between divorced parents predict problem behavior on the part of children. Second, acceptance within the non-resident father-child relationship predicts higher levels of self-esteem and social competence. Gender differences were found only for
children in stepfather families. For girls, the relationship with the stepfather was associated with higher self-esteem, while acceptance by the non-resident father was correlated with the social competencies of boys.

**Links with parenting stress.** Maternal parenting stress was found to be associated with the post-divorce relationships of mothers. Mediation analyses showed that the spillover process between the relationships of mothers with their ex-partners and with their children is partially mediated by parental burden. Additional associations were found between the parenting stress experienced divorced single mothers and child adjustment. The parenting stress experienced by remarried mothers was not associated with the wellbeing of their children. This result shows that, in addition to reducing the parental stress experienced by mothers, the presence of a second adult in the household apparently functions as a buffer between parenting stress and poor child outcomes.

### 7.4 Concluding remarks

In the last four decades, families have become more diverse and complex. During this time, the number of marriages each year has decreased by almost one third, while the number of divorces each year has tripled. These demographic trends are noticeable in the Netherlands, as well as in most Western societies (E-Quality, 2008). Many children are thus growing up in post-divorce family constellations (e.g., single-mother families, stepfather families, and patchwork families). Previous studies have demonstrated that the psychosocial adjustment of children is related to the family constellations in which they live (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991). Studies that have been conducted more recently (e.g., Golombok, 2000) emphasize that it is not the structure of a family, but the processes that take place within a family that are most important to the wellbeing of children. From this perspective, divorce and remarriage can be considered as stressors that may affect other family processes. For example, divorce often changes the parental subsystem into a subsystem that is no longer based on romantic feelings, but on shared responsibility for a child. This thesis therefore addresses several family subsystems in post-divorce family constellations (i.e., divorced single-mother families and stepfather families), in addition to examining links with maternal parenting stress and child adjustment.

In our study, married mothers reported lower levels of parenting stress than did divorced mothers. Compared to mothers in intact and stepfather families, single mothers experienced the highest levels of parenting stress, and their children reported the highest levels of problem behavior. Furthermore, a particularly strong association was found between the level of parenting stress experienced by single mothers and child adjustment. These results suggest that, in addition to reducing maternal parenting stress, the presence of a second adult (i.e., father or stepfather) shields the children from the negative effects of parenting stress on child adjustment.

Our results also show that in post-divorce families, relationships with the non-resident father
remains of great importance to the psychosocial adjustment of children. Conflicts between
the mother and the nonresident father contribute to problem behavior on the part of children.
Furthermore, a good relationship between children and their non-resident fathers contributes to
their self-esteem and social competence.

Within stepfather families, spillover processes were confirmed with regard to the relationships
of children with their non-resident fathers and resident stepfathers. Children in stepfather families
reported better relationships with their non-resident fathers than they did with their stepfathers.
Stepfathers apparently cannot replace non-resident fathers, although the role of stepfathers
should not be neglected. Girls are particularly likely to benefit from a warm relationship with
their stepfathers by developing higher levels of self-esteem.

Even though it examines a wide variety of family subsystems within various family
constellations, this study does have several limitations. First, the number of stepfather families
that participated in the study was quite low. It is possible that the low statistical power of this
small sample prevented us from finding differences between this type of family and other family
constellations with regard to parenting stress and child adjustment. Second, we did not examine
the sibling subsystem within post-divorce family constellations, as some children had biological
siblings, while others had only half-siblings or stepsiblings. These samples were too small for
statistical analyses. Third, only children and their mothers participated in this study. It would also
be interesting to examine the perspectives of fathers, stepfathers, and siblings with regard to
their family relationships. For future research on this topic, we therefore suggest including more
post-divorce families (particularly stepfather families) and examining all family subsystems by
acquiring data from all family members.

Overall, our results indicate that the effects of parental divorce and remarriage on child
adjustment are determined by processes taking place within the family. Harmonious relationships
between various family members can contribute positively to the psychosocial adjustment of
children. This applies to children growing up in intact families, as well as – and especially – to
children who are living in post-divorce families and who are at risk for developing psychosocial
problems. Although gaining control over emotions in the midst of a divorce can obviously be
difficult, several studies have shown that mediation can be beneficial in this process (Emery,
Matthews, & Wyer, 1991; Jones & Bodtker, 1999). Mediation seems to increase both the quality
of the relationship between ex-partners and the understanding that parents have regarding the
needs of their children (Shaw, 2010). If divorced parents can set aside their conflicts, emotions,
and behavior within the parental relationship, this might spill over into other family relationships,
thus having an indirect positive effect on the wellbeing of children in these families.
Chapter 7

References


