Parenting and child adjustment after divorce: family relationship quality, parental stress, and child adjustment in post-divorce families
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SUMMARY
Processes of relationship formation and dissolution have become more dynamic in the last four decades. Families have therefore become more complex and diverse. Children are now being raised within intact families, as well as in several types of post-divorce family constellations.

Several theories and studies support the assumption that the actual structure of a family has less of an impact on the wellbeing of children than do processes that take place within these family constellations (e.g., Golombok, 2000). Nevertheless, parental divorce and growing up in a post-divorce family structure are associated with risk factors that can have a negative influence on the developmental outcomes of children (Sameroff, 2010). The main goal of this thesis was to investigate two processes that are frequently associated with the adjustment of children: the quality of family relationships and the experience of parenting stress. This study assesses these processes in intact families, divorced single-mother families, and stepfather families.

To participate in the study, children in the target children were required to be between 8 and 12 years old. The participating families were recruited by means of (1) the population register, (2) elementary schools, and (3) the personal networks of research assistants. No significant differences on social demographic characteristics were found amongst the participating families recruited through each of the three recruitment methods. Each family that agreed to participate was contacted by telephone in order to make an appointment for a home visit. The child questionnaires were administered during a one-hour in-home interview with each target child. During these sessions, the author or one of the author’s collaborators read the questionnaire items to the child and recorded the child’s answers. Each mother was asked to complete a written questionnaire. Data collection took place between 2007 and 2009.

Chapter 1 presents the theoretical background of the studies. It describes how divorce and remarriage might influence the quality of family relationships and the experience of parenting stress, and how this might subsequently affect the psychosocial adjustment of the children. The chapter concludes with an overview of the subsequent chapters.

Associations between various family subsystems and links with child adjustment in intact families are investigated in Chapter 2. The existence of spillover processes (i.e., emotions and behavior within a certain family subsystem that transfer to another subsystem) is confirmed between the marital subsystem and the parent-child subsystem, as well as between the parent-child subsystem and the sibling subsystem. The quality of family relationships is also linked to child adjustment. Conflicts within the father-child relationship contribute to problem behavior on the part of children, while acceptance within the father-child relationship and affection between siblings significantly contribute to general self-esteem on the part of children.

Chapter 3 examines family subsystems and their associations with child adjustment in two types of post-divorce family constellations (i.e., single/mother families and stepfather families). This study is partially comparable to the study described in the previous chapter, although the divorced mothers in this study were questioned about both their current relationships with
their ex-partners and their co-parenting relationships with their ex-partners. This distinction is particularly applicable to divorced couples, as most divorced parents in the Netherlands maintain contact with each other after divorce because they share parental custody. Results show that spillover processes also occur between various subsystems in post-divorce family constellations. These processes are apparently stronger in single-mother families than they are in stepfather families. In both types of post-divorce families, the existence of spillover processes is confirmed for the relationships of children with their mother and with their non-resident fathers. Nonetheless, single-mother families were the only constellation in which we also found evidence of spillover processes between the relationships of mothers with their ex-partners and the relationships of their children with their non-resident fathers. With regard to links between family subsystems in post-divorce families and child adjustment, conflicts between ex-partners were found to contribute to problem behavior on the part of children. Furthermore, a positive evaluation of a child’s relationship with the non-resident father contributes to positive aspects of psychosocial adjustment (i.e., general self-esteem and social competence). These results show that, just like in intact families, the relationships of children with their fathers remain important for the wellbeing of children, even after a parental divorce.

A child who grows up in a stepfather family is generally confronted with both a non-resident father and a stepfather. Chapter 4 describes a small study on the relationships of children with these two father figures, examining links with child adjustment. Boys are more positive about their relationships with their non-resident fathers than they are about their relationships with their stepfathers. For girls, there is no significant difference between the quality of the two relationships. This study also shows that the spillover perspective can be used to explain associations between children’s relationships with their fathers and stepfathers. The two relationships are positively associated with each other. Finally, neither relationship is associated with problem behavior on the part of children, although both are significantly associated with positive aspects of child adjustment. The relationships of boys with their non-resident fathers are correlated with social competence, and the relationships of girls with their stepfathers are linked to general self-esteem. It seems that the relationships of boys with non-resident fathers influence their wellbeing, while relationships with stepfathers are more important for girls.

Chapter 5 examines differences and associations between the level of parenting stress experienced by mothers and child adjustment in three different family constellations: intact families, single-mother families and stepfather families. Results show that divorced single mothers experience significantly more parenting stress than do either married or remarried mothers. Furthermore, a particularly strong association was found between the parenting stress experienced divorced single mothers and the psychosocial adjustment of their children. These results support the assumption that divorce can be considered as a risk factor for the developmental outcomes of children, although this risk can apparently be eliminated (at least in part) when the mother finds and cohabitates with a new partner. In addition to decreasing
maternal parenting stress, the presence of a second adult in the household seems to function as a buffer in the link between maternal parenting stress and the wellbeing of children.

Chapter 6 examines the relationships of divorced mothers with their ex-partners and children, as well as the mediating role of parenting stress. The results support the existence of spillover processes between the relationships of mothers with their ex-partners and their relationships with their children. Furthermore, the positive association between the two subsystems is partially mediated by maternal parenting stress. The pathway from parental conflict to disrupted mother-child relationships is apparently indirect rather than direct.

Finally, Chapter 7 presents a general conclusion and discussion.

Overall, this thesis provides additional insight into the influence of parental divorce and remarriage on relational processes within post-divorce family constellations. It also shows how these relational processes are associated with child adjustment and maternal parenting stress. The existence of spillover processes is confirmed in both intact families and post-divorce families. Furthermore, warm and harmonious relationships within families contribute positively to child adjustment. 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.

When parents decide to divorce, it might be extremely difficult for them to gain control over their emotions. In such situations, relationships that were once based on feelings of love and affection must be transformed into relationships based on the shared custody of children. If divorced parents can set aside their conflicts, emotions, and behavior within the co-parenting subsystem, this might spill over to other family subsystems, thus having an indirect positive influence on the wellbeing of children in post-divorce families.