The Long Shadow of Marital Conflict: A Model of Children’s Postdivorce Adjustment

This longitudinal study examines direct and indirect influences of marital discord on the behavioral and emotional adjustment of 154 children two years after parental filing for divorce. Indirect effects investigated include parent-child relationships, parental conflict, and child access to the less-seen parent. Marital conflict contributes to problematic emotional and behavioral child adjustment, largely indirectly through poorer mother-child relationships. Disputing spouses also have higher postseparation conflict and children with more behavioral problems. These findings, consistent with those of previous studies of intact families, identify family processes that influence child development regardless of parents’ marital status.

Longitudinal studies of child and family development have consistently found that marital conflict impinges on parent-child relationships in ways that place children at greater risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (Caspì and Elder, 1988; Cowan, Cowan, and Heming, 1989; Easterbrooks, 1987). In these studies, marital distress preceded the development of problematic parent-child relationships. Interactional difficulties were manifested in the adults by less warm, structuring parenting styles and more rejecting parental behaviors, and in the children by less adaptive emotional and behavioral adjustment. Individual characteristics of children were also important: the link between dissonance in the marital relationship and poor parent-child relationships was stronger for girls than boys (Caspì and Elder, 1988; Cowan et al., 1989).

In a prior cross-sectional study, we found that, at the time of filing for divorce, pathways of influence between marital discord and child adjustment that have been delineated in studies of intact families are similar for divorcing families (Tschann, Johnston, Kline, and Wallerstein, 1989a.) A central finding, consistent with results of the longitudinal studies cited above, was that marital conflict was only indirectly related to child functioning. Greater marital conflict was associated with poorer parent-child relationships, which in turn were related to impaired child functioning at the time of filing for divorce. This study extends our model of family adaptation by examining the same relationships longitudinally, over a two-year period after parental filing for divorce.

In addition to the longitudinal research that undergirds the present study, cross-sectional
studies of family functioning show support for both direct and indirect links between child adjustment and aspects of parental and parent-child interactions. A number of cross-sectional studies report direct links between spousal conflict and poor behavioral and emotional adaptation in children, within both intact and divorcing families. Aggression, conduct disorders, and delinquency (externalizing problems) are among the problems most frequently associated with parental discord (Block, Block, and Gjerde, 1981; Emery and O'Leary, 1984; Hershorn and Rosenbaum, 1985; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1982). One of the most common explanations offered for these findings is that children observe and model the aggressive tactics of their parents (Bandura, 1977; Kalter, 1987). However, some studies have shown that disputing parents are also likely to have depressed and withdrawn children (Block, Block, and Morrison, 1981; Johnston, Gonzales, and Campbell, 1987; Shaw and Emery, 1987; Whitehead, 1979). Disputing parents may also model avoidant strategies of conflict resolution, by which children learn to withdraw from angry situations and turn their anger inward.

In addition, marital conflict may contribute to ongoing parental hostilities after divorce. Although some parents from conflictual marriages are able to negotiate amicable postdivorce coparenting situations (Steinman, Zemmelman, and Knoblauch, 1985), for many parents, conflict about marital and childrearing issues continues after divorce (Nelson, 1989). Such protracted discord appears to be a key factor in children's negative adjustment to divorce (Camara and Resnick, 1988; Johnston et al., 1987; Peterson and Zill, 1986).

Marital conflict may also indirectly affect children's adjustment through the parent-child relationship, which may be particularly vulnerable at the time of divorce, when parents' energies are exhausted by preoccupation with their own emotional responses and numerous social and environmental changes (Cherlin, 1981; Coletta, 1979; Weitzman, 1985). Self-absorption and depletion can result in a temporary "diminished capacity to parent" (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Parents may burden their children during this time with requests for emotional support and practical assistance (Wallerstein, 1985). "Diminished" parenting is also manifested in a more rejecting parenting style, characterized by less consistent discipline and affection (Hetherington et al., 1982). In both intact and divorcing families, mutually coercive and rejecting parent-child relationships have been linked repeatedly to child behavioral and emotional problems (Orvaschel, Weissman, and Kidd, 1980; Patterson, 1982). On the other hand, parents who are warm and emotionally available to their children, and who exercise consistent discipline, tend to have children with fewer behavior problems (Baumrind, 1967; Hetherington and Camara, 1984).

Another significant factor in the adjustment of children in divorced families is the amount of access the child has to the nonresident parent, usually the father. Developmental researchers have proposed that children, especially boys, need a consistent, positive relationship with their father in order to develop optimally (Biller, 1981). Although some studies have found no connection between having less access to the father and children's poorer adjustment (Furstenberg, Morgan, and Allison, 1987; Hodges, 1986), a number of studies suggest that father absence may have a negative effect on boys' and girls' development (Hetherington et al., 1982; Kalter, Riemer, Brickman, and Chen, 1985; Radin, 1981; Wallerstein, 1985). Continuing access to both parents is generally viewed as a desirable postdivorce outcome, with researchers focusing on the negative effects of decreased contact, except where parents remain in chronic conflict with each other (Johnston, Kline, and Tschann, 1989). There has been little research investigating how marital conflict inhibits the extent to which a nonresident parent visits a child (Ahrons, 1983; Koch and Lowery, 1984). Marital issues that are associated with or projected onto the child may well decrease the frequency of visitation.

Child characteristics may directly or indirectly affect a child's postdivorce adjustment. Previous studies have consistently reported more difficult postdivorce adjustment, at least in the short term, for boys and for younger children (e.g., Hetherington et al., 1982; Tschann et al., 1989a; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Furthermore, gender and age of the child may affect the amount of contact with the nonresident parent or the quality of the relationship established with either parent. For example, divorced parents have greater difficulty disciplining boys than girls (Hetherington et al., 1982; Patterson, 1982). Custodial mothers of young boys, in particular, often assert their authority in restrictive and punitive ways (Hetherington and Camara, 1984). Moreover, boys are
more likely than girls to engage in reciprocally coercive relationships with their mothers (Block et al., 1988).

**HYPOTHESES**

On the basis of these findings from prior studies of child development and divorce in conjunction with longitudinal family research, we constructed a process model of factors influencing child adjustment across the divorce transition. Figure 1 illustrates the model. Direct pathways between preseparation factors and child adjustment are implied but not shown, to facilitate legibility.

We expected to find that marital conflict has both direct and indirect effects on children's postdivorce adjustment. To the extent that children model the tactics and problem-solving efforts of their parents, greater marital conflict will be directly related to more behavioral and emotional problems.

Several indirect paths from marital conflict were also hypothesized: First, discord during the marriage leads to continuing parental conflict after the divorce, and chronically hostile parents have children who exhibit more behavioral and emotional difficulties. Second, marital conflict is likely to reduce parental warmth, empathy, and capacity to set appropriate limits and controls on children. Child emotional and behavioral adjustment will, in turn, be predicted by the quality of parent-child relationships. Third, when parents have had a highly conflictual marriage, the nonresident parent will spend less time with the children after the divorce. This decreased access to the nonresident parent (usually the father) will result in poorer child adjustment.

Finally, since the influences of family

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**Figure 1. Hypothetical Path Model Predicting Child Postdivorce Adjustment**

![Diagram of the model showing relationships between family social structure, access to nonresident parent, child characteristics, parent-child relationship, marital conflict, and parental conflict, leading to child adjustment.]
dynamics are transactional rather than unidirectional, child characteristics (age and gender) and family social structure (number of children in family and SES) will influence child adjustment directly. Additionally, characteristics of the child and family structure will indirectly influence the frequency of contact with the nonresident parent and the quality of parent-child relationships after divorce.

**METHOD**

**Sample**

Participants in this longitudinal study were members of 184 divorcing families living in a suburban county in the San Francisco Bay Area. Parents were mostly white (93%) and well educated (88% had at least some college education), with median yearly family incomes of $35,000. At the beginning of the study, parents had been separated an average of 7.69 months (SD = 13.22; median = 4.90 months). Although none had remarried at the beginning of the study, two years later 33% of the mothers and 45% of the fathers were remarried or living with a new partner.

Children between the ages of 2 and 18 who were the oldest child in each family (n = 178) were used as the sample at baseline. Two-year follow-up information was available for 154 (87%) of these children. Of these 154 children, at baseline 16% (n = 24) were preschoolers, ages 2 to 5; 42% (n = 65) were latency age, 6 to 11; and 42% (n = 65) were adolescents, ages 12 to 16. Fifty-one percent were boys.

**Procedure**

From 1980 through 1983, divorcing families were recruited through letters sent to all parents who had recently filed for dissolution and by community outreach to professionals and institutions that serve divorcing families. Families were eligible to participate in the research if a parent had filed for divorce within the previous 12 months and if all members of the family agreed to take part in the study, in exchange for brief preventive counseling. Family members were assessed at three points in time: when first seen at the counseling service (baseline), one year later, and two years later.

At the baseline assessment, participants completed a battery of measures, including self-report questionnaires, standardized instruments, projective tests such as the Divorce Apperception Test, and psychological assessments such as direct observation of parent-child interactive drawings and child play sessions (see Huntington, 1985, for a complete description). Additionally, families participated in at least six extensive clinical and diagnostic interviews. At the one- and two-year follow-ups, participants again completed many of the baseline measures and were reinterviewed. Clinicians kept thorough process notes on all interviews and compiled a structured summary on every family member following each assessment period.

**Development of Variables**

Variables for this study were derived from one of three sources: questionnaires completed by parents at baseline, standard measures completed by parents at the one- and two-year follow-ups, or clinical ratings completed at all three assessment periods.

Clinical ratings were conducted on three variables: items for marital conflict, parent-child relationships, and child functioning. Baseline ratings (marital conflict) were conducted by two senior clinicians, and follow-up ratings (parent-child relationship and child functioning) by three experienced clinicians who were blind to the previous ratings. None of the raters had conducted clinical interviews. Ratings were based on notes from clinical interviews, summaries, and psychological assessments. Interrater reliabilities were computed for parent-child relationships and child functioning on 24 randomly selected cases by using intraclass correlation (ICC), a conservative measure of interrater reliability (Bartko and Carpenter, 1976). (Parent-child relationship ICC = .64; child functioning ICC = .71.)

Most variables consisted of a number of items and were obtained by means of factor analysis of conceptually similar items. Principal-component analysis with varimax rotation was utilized; factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained. Items loading together on a factor were evaluated for internal consistency by using Cronbach's alpha. Items with item-scale correlations of less than .35 were dropped. Variables were created by standardizing retained items (if they were
measured on different scales) and combining them with equal weighting.

**Predictors**

*Family social structure and child characteristic* variables were obtained from questionnaires developed for this study, which were completed separately by each parent. Variables from the Parent History Questionnaire (PHQ) included number of siblings and family socioeconomic status (SES). Hollingshead’s formula for combining education and occupation was used to calculate SES (Hollingshead, 1975; Hollingshead and Redlich, 1958). Higher scores indicated higher SES. Child age and gender were obtained from the Child History Questionnaire (CHQ).

*Marital conflict* was composed of three PHQ items and two baseline clinical ratings: self-reported history of dissatisfaction, with verbal abuse, physical abuse, and nagging/ bossiness, all rated on a 5-point scale; and clinical ratings of the presence or absence of a history of verbal and physical abuse by each parent toward the other (alpha = .76).

*Postseparation parental conflict* was measured by the Hostility/Conflict Checklist, developed by Jacobson (1978) and expanded for this research. It contains 24 self-report items on 8-point scales measuring verbal, physical, and general conflict with one’s former spouse at the one-year follow-up. The checklist was completed by both parents (r between mothers and fathers = .43). Factor analysis before combining mother and father scores produced three highly correlated, but conceptually distinct scales pertaining to (1) general hostility, (2) conflicts about childrearing, and (3) verbal and physical aggression (r among scales = .56 to .73). The verbal and physical aggression scale, which contained four items (e.g., “your ex-spouse physically attacked you’”), was chosen as the one most similar to marital conflict and also as the best measure of conflict observable by the child. The scale was named Postseparation Parental Conflict (alpha = .60).

*Access to the nonresident parent* was measured by the average number of days per month the parent with less access saw the child during the one-year follow-up. For 134 (87%) of the children, the father was the less-seen parent. Information was obtained by research staff from records of clinical interviews with children, mothers, and fathers. Access was measured on the basis of both parents’ reports of the custody and visitation schedule. If one parent gave more specific information, that report was used. In the few cases of disagreement between parents, the child report and clinician’s opinion were used to ascertain which parental report was most accurate.

*Parent-child relationships* at one-year follow-up were determined separately for mothers and fathers. Representing the warmth of the relationship and the ego control modeled and expected by the parent, this variable consisted of 14 clinical observations that were rated on 5-point scales (alpha = .92, ICC = .64). Items included quality of warmth and love in relationship, parent attempts to enrich child’s life, and firmness in enforcing limits.

**Outcome Variables**

Child *emotional adjustment* at two years comprised nine *clinical* ratings of emotional distress (e.g., anger, sense of powerlessness, depression) and coping skills (e.g., self-esteem, ability to cope with daily living) rated on a 5-point scale (alpha = .87, ICC = .71). A higher score indicated poorer emotional adjustment.

Child *behavior problems* at two years was the t score derived from the total score on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach and Edelbrock, 1983). The CBCL is an 118-item scale designed to measure parents’ perceptions of the behavioral problems and symptoms of children aged 4 to 16. Items included expressions of distress such as depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, and aggression.

One advantage of the CBCL is that the total scores can be converted to t scores, which are controlled for gender and age differences in behavior problems found in the population. Use of t scores allowed any age or gender effects found in this study to be more clearly interpreted as relating to the divorce experience. For this study, the CBCL was completed by the custodial parent (generally the mother), since fewer noncustodial parents completed the checklist. Comparison of available mother and father reports indicated no statistically significant differences (t = 1.29, p < .20; r = .23).
Attrition Analyses

For analyses predicting emotional adjustment, 154 of the original 178 children had complete data. The remaining children (13%) had insufficient information for clinical judgments to be made at the two-year follow-up. Parents of 97 (54%) children completed the CBCL.

Analyses were conducted comparing the baseline characteristics of children for whom emotional-adjustment or behavior-problems data were obtained to those of children for whom such data were not obtained. Results indicated that children with behavior-problems data were younger than those for whom there were no data ($t = -2.43$, $df = 176$, $p < .05$). This difference is attributable to a subsample of children who were older than 18 years at the follow-up and/or no longer living at home. The parents of these older children did not complete the CBCL.

Effects of Treatment

All children received one of three kinds of brief preventive interventions at baseline: individual counseling (2.06 mean sessions), group counseling (4.8 mean sessions), or consultation (.91 mean sessions). There were no differential effects of these treatments on the children's emotional or behavioral adjustment at the two-year follow-up. Hence this variable was omitted from the analyses.

Analysis Plan

Plan analysis was utilized to test the hypothesized model shown in Figure 1. A separate path model was constructed for each outcome measure. A series of simultaneous multiple-regression equations were calculated, regressing the dependent variable on all predictors, then each endogenous predictor on all antecedent predictors. Reduced path models were obtained by regressing endogenous variables only on predictors that were significant at the .10 level. This liberal significance level allows the inclusion of potentially important predictors that may be insignificant because of chance variation (Schumm, Southerly, and Figley, 1980).

Results

Correlations, means, and standard deviations for the variables used in the path models are shown in Table 1. The direct effects of the original and final set of predictors for each of the two path models are shown in Table 2.

Emotional Adjustment

Variables with direct effects account for 21% of the variance of emotional adjustment, only 1% less than that accounted for by the initial set of predictors. The values of most path coefficients changed only slightly from the initial to the final model. The direct paths indicate that children with more emotional difficulties were younger, male, exposed to more marital conflict, and had more problematic relationships with their mothers (characterized by less warmth and less modeling of ego control). The direct, indirect, and total effects for each predictor are displayed in Table 3, while Figure 2 illustrates the final path models delineating the indirect and direct paths leading to emotional adjustment.

As predicted, marital conflict has both a direct and indirect impact on child emotional adjustment two years after divorce. The direct effect, although only marginally significant, indicates that more conflictual spouses tend to have children with with poorer adjustment. The indirect effect of marital conflict shows that mothers who were involved in greater conflict during the marriage are less warm and less modeling of ego control one year after filing for divorce, which leads to more problematic emotional adjustment for their children two years after divorce.

There are two other indirect effects. Boys are more likely than girls to have difficult relationships with their mothers, and the negative mother-son relationship contributes to the emotional difficulties of boys. Also, in families of lower socioeconomic status, mothers have less positive relationships with their children at the one-year follow-up, and their children have more emotional problems two years after divorce.

Several hypotheses were not supported. The father-child relationship, postseparation parental conflict, and contact with the nonresident parent do not predict child emotional adjustment.
### Table 1. Correlation Matrix, Means, and Standard Deviations for Variables Used in the Path Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
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<td>3. Number of siblings</td>
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<td>4. Family SES</td>
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<td>5. Marital conflict</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Access to less-seen parent</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>.18*</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Mother warm and models/*expects ego control</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>.19*</td>
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<td>8. Father warm and models/*expects ego control</td>
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<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>.39*</td>
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<td>9. Postseparation parental conflict</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td>.30*</td>
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<td>-.21*</td>
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<td>10. Poor emotional adjustment</td>
<td>-.31*</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.30*</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.03</td>
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<td>11. Behavior problems</td>
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<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.44*</td>
<td>-.08</td>
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<td>.98</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>11.71</td>
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</table>

Note: Values are based on n = 154, except for those with behavior problems, which are based on n = 97. *p < .05.
Table 2. Predictors’ Direct Effects on Children’s Emotional Adjustment and Behavior Problems at Two-Year Follow-up (shown by standardized path coefficients)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Poor Emotional Adjustment</th>
<th>Behavior Problems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial Model</td>
<td>Final Model</td>
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<td>1. Preseparation factors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.26***</td>
<td>-.26***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.15+</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of siblings</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family SES</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital conflict</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.14+</td>
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<td>2. Postseparation Factors</td>
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<td>Access to less-seen parent</td>
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<td>Parent warm and models/expected ego</td>
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<td>-.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father warm and models/expected ego</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Postseparation parental conflict</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 )</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>.21***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( F )</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>9.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( df )</td>
<td>9, 144</td>
<td>4, 149</td>
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</table>

\( *p < .10. \ast p < .05. \ast\ast p < .01. \ast\ast\ast p < .001. \)

Behavior Problems

In the second set of analyses, direct effects explain 32% of the variance in child behavior problems, 3% less than that explained by the initial set of predictors. Again, the values of the path coefficients did not change greatly from the initial to the final model. Effects for each predictor in the final model are displayed in Table 3 and pathways are illustrated in Figure 3.

Parents who exhibit higher conflict during the marriage are more conflictual one year after divorce, and the postseparation parental conflict contributes to children’s behavior problems at the two-year follow-up. Also, mothers from maritally disputing couples are less warm and have lower expectations for their children’s ego control, and the children, in turn, manifest more behavior problems. Thus, marital conflict precedes difficulties in postdivorce and interparental and parent-child relationships that are related to children’s behavioral expressions of distress. Direct effects show that a more negative mother-child relationship is the strongest contributor to child behavior problems. Finally, children with fewer or no siblings have more behavioral problems than children from larger families.

Less access to the nonresident parent and the father-child relationship are not significant predictors of children’s behavior problems at the two-year follow-up. Also, SES, age, and gender do not predict children’s behavioral difficulties.

Table 3. Decomposition of Significant Predictors of Children’s Emotional Adjustment and Behavior Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>( r )</th>
<th>Direct Effect</th>
<th>Indirect Effect</th>
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<td>Marital conflict</td>
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<td>Mother warm and models/expected ego control</td>
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<td>Behavior problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of siblings</td>
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<td>Marital conflict</td>
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<td>Mother warm and models/expected ego control</td>
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DISCUSSION

This longitudinal study utilized a process model to examine how family relationships both before and after divorce are linked to children’s subsequent emotional and behavioral adjustment. This research is an extension of a previous study in which we examined child adjustment in a sample of divorcing families at the time of filing for divorce (Tschann et al., 1989a). The families were reassessed in this study two years later. Both clinicians’ views (emotional adjustment) and parents’ views (behavioral problems) of the child were included.

Path analyses indicated that marital conflict was directly related to poorer child emotional adjustment and was indirectly related, one year after divorce, through mother-child relationships, which were characterized by less warmth, less empathy, and lower expectations of ego control. Marital conflict was indirectly related to child behavior problems through poorer mother-child relationships and interparental conflict one year after divorce. For both models, characteristics of the child and of the family social structure contributed to the child’s postdivorce outcome.

Before we discuss these results, several methodological limitations to this study should be addressed. Families participated in the research in return for divorce-specific counseling, so that the sample may not be a representative one. There are potential measurement biases as well. First, marital conflict was derived from retrospective accounts of marital history and aggression. While the variable is strengthened because it was also

Note: Values shown are standardized path coefficients from reanalysis with only significant predictors included in the regression. Heavier paths denote $p < .01$. Coefficients in parentheses indicate nonsignificant paths ($p < .10$).
assessed by clinicians who drew upon extensive, multiple data sources, the accounts should ideally be obtained from spouses before, rather than after, their separation.

It should also be noted that in this study both marital conflict and postseparation parental conflict variables pertain largely to verbal and physical aggressions between partners. Other forms of conflict, such as arguments over childrearing, were too highly correlated with the more aggression-focused variables to be assessed separately in this sample of families. Extricating the potentially different influences of various kinds of conflictual tactics and content on children's postdivorce adjustment remains a task for future research.

Another potential bias is found in the measurement of child behavior problems. Behavior problems were based primarily on mother's reports, since fathers' reports were less often available. Although mothers and fathers showed no systematic differences in their reports of their children's adjustment, obtaining a more complete picture would necessitate inclusion of both parents' observations of their children.

The most important limitation to the study is the absence of data on parental functioning prior to the divorce. Marital discord and dysfunction may be symptomatic of parents' psychological adjustment, and marital discord may affect parental functioning. Parents from highly conflictual marriages tend to have poorer psychological adjustment after divorce, as manifested in anger, depression, emotional distress, and difficulties in coping (Bloom, Asher, and White, 1979; Tschann, Johnston, and Wallerstein, 1989b). Where these psychological difficulties overlap with parental conflict, children are at greater risk for the development of behavioral and emotional problems. Future research should attempt to evaluate the relative contributions of parental psychological functioning and interparental functioning to child adaptation.

The results suggest that marital conflict—particularly conflict expressed through verbal and physical aggression—is related to child adaptation via several pathways. Children may directly observe and model their parents' tendencies to express emotional distress through aggressive behaviors and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Bandura, 1977; Kalter, 1987). However, for the most part, marital conflict contributes indirectly to poorer emotional adjustment and behavior problems, through less warm and empathic mother-child relationships in which less ego control is expected. These findings strongly corroborate longitudinal research on nondonorced families that found the spousal relationship to have a predominantly indirect influence on child functioning, through its strong effect on parent-child relationships (Caspi and Elder, 1988; Cowan et al., 1989; Easterbrooks, 1987). The strong

**Figure 3. Model Predicting Postdivorce Behavior Problems**
mediating effects of the parent-child relationship provide support for the notion that conflictual parents are less able to provide consistent discipline and nurturance during the divorcing process, and hence their children are at greater risk (Hetherington et al., 1982). Conversely, the parent-child relationship may serve as an important buffer for the child against the debilitating effects of marital discord or a poorer relationship with one parent after divorce (Hess and Camara, 1979.)

Another pathway through which the couple relationship affects child development is in its foreshadowing of protracted parental conflict after the separation and divorce. Marital distress and disputes set the stage for ongoing parental aggression that contributes to children's behavioral problems. It is possible that coparenting tasks, complicated and painful enough after divorce, are made more difficult by a spousal history of unresolved hostility that can easily "spill over" into parents' ability to work together for the benefit of their children.

Results from this study, considered in juxtaposition to our previous one, illustrate some of the dynamics of the divorcing family over time. As discussed above, marital conflict influences children's emotional and behavioral adjustment both at the time of filing for divorce and two years later. This influence is largely indirect, through the parent-child relationship (Tschann et al., 1989a). At both periods of time, the mother-child relationship is an important buffer between marital conflict and child functioning. However, by the two-year mark, father's parenting has become less salient. Neither the quality of the father-child relationship nor the amount of access the child has to the father was related to child adjustment, although both of these aspects were significant for the children two years earlier, at the time the parents filed for divorce. Although children may strongly desire contact with both parents after divorce (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980), the connections between access and child adjustment have been inconsistent across studies (Furstenberg et al., 1987; Hodges, 1986; Johnston et al., 1989; Kline, Tschann, Johnston, and Wallerstein, 1989). A more differentiated understanding of the dimensions of paternal access and postdivorce relationship with the child that may influence child outcomes is necessary in order to sort out contradictory findings.

Several other results of the present study are noteworthy. Contrary to our hypothesis, child characteristics explain little about their postdivorce adjustment. Boys have a more difficult emotional adjustment than girls, as found in other research (Zaslow, 1988, 1989). Also, younger children show poorer emotional adjustment. However, neither age nor gender were related to behavior problems, possibly because t scores were adjusted for age and gender. Children with fewer siblings were perceived by their parents as having more behavior problems. These children may have been more frequently triangulated in their parents' conflict (Johnston and Campbell, 1987). They may also have had more direct access to the conflict, having fewer or no siblings to help deflect the hostilities. Also, only children may be subject to a more concentrated parental focus that leads to quicker labeling of behaviors as problematic. This latter interpretation is supported by the fact that the number of children in the family was related to the parent-rated, but not to the clinician-rated, measure of child adjustment.

Placed in the context of other longitudinal research, findings from this study allow us to begin focusing on family processes that influence child development, whether the children live in intact or divorced families. Parental conflict and father involvement are two aspects of family process whose primary importance to children is shared across different types of family structures. What matters to children is what happens in these aspects of the family over time.

Divorce represents a transitional process like many other family life transitions. It is characterized by conflict and disequilibrium that, when the dust settles, is recognizable by changes in family membership, dynamics, and roles. Longitudinal models such as the one delineated in this study need to be applied across transitional events, if we are to develop a broader theoretical and clinical understanding of transitions and their impact on families.

NOTE

This research was supported by grants from the San Francisco Foundation. An earlier version of this article presented at the Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Kansas City, Missouri, April 1989.
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Children's Postdivorce Adjustment

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