The process of marital deterioration, adjustment is long (5-6 years on the average), and physical health often change during separation, divorce, and subsequent school life as well as individual mental and emotional, social, academic, and health-related problems (Emery, Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; White & Mika, 1983).

Relationships, including spousal, parent-child, peer, and kin, family economics, employment, housing, and school life as well as individual mental and physical health often change during the divorce process. Scholars who have studied the divorce transition have concluded that, in general, the separation period is the most stressful period for parents and their children, followed by the first year post-divorce (Albrecht, 1980; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; White & Mika, 1983).

Because of the stressful nature of parental separation and divorce, children are vulnerable to psychological, social, academic, and health-related problems (Emery, Hetherington, & DiLalla, 1984; Furstenberg & Seltzer, 1986; Guidubaldi, Clemshaw, Perry, & McGoughin, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Wallerstein (1983) reported that many of the children in her study manifested problems during the separation period and that 25% of the children were still experiencing divorce-related problems 5 years after divorce. However, severe short and long-term adjustment problems are not inevitable. Research on the divorce transition has identified several important factors that influence children's well-being following the separation and divorce, including child age and sex, the quality of the former spouse relationship and of parenting, involvement by the nonresidential parent, parents' psychological well-being, and financial stability (see Emery et al., 1984, and Kurdek, 1987, for excellent reviews of these factors). This identification of important individual, familial, and environmental factors has provided a valuable theoretical and empirical foundation for the development of intervention programs aimed at reducing adjustment problems and increasing children's social competence post-divorce.

Recently, there has been increased interest in the development of effective community- and school-based prevention programs for divorcing parents and their children (Bloom, Hodges, & Caldwell, 1982; Kessler, 1978; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985; Roseby & Deutsch, 1985; Rugel & Sieracki, 1981; Salts & Zongker, 1983; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985; Warren & Amara, 1984). Prevention programs are receiving increased attention because (a) early prevention seems to help reduce the future need for more costly remedial therapeutic intervention, (b) divorcing parents currently seem to be better able/willing to recognize their needs and to attend community-based programs than in the past, and (c) communities are beginning to recognize the usefulness of family life programs and are willing to support organizations that provide prevention services.

The purposes of this study are (a) to examine the relationships among three specific dimensions of the former spouse relationship and children's social competence (CSC) post-separation using data collected from nonresidential and residential separated parents, and (b) to examine the impact of a community-based, educational prevention program for divorcing parents on the quality of the former spouse relationship and children's social competence (CSC) post-separation using data from nonresidential and residential parents, and (c) to examine the impact of a community-based, educational prevention program for divorcing parents on these dimensions of the former spouse relationship. The quality of the relationship between former spouses has been identified as a very important predictor of CSC post-divorce (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Demo & Acoc, 1988; Emery, 1982; Hess & Camera, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1982; Jacobson, 1978; Kurdek & Blisk, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; White & Mika, 1983).

Demographers estimate that about 60% of the children born in the 1980s will live in a single-parent family before they are 18 years old (Glick, 1984). Many of these will experience the divorce of their parents. The process of marital deterioration, separation, divorce, and subsequent adjustment is long (5-6 years on the average), and includes every facet of life. Relationships, including spousal, parent-child, peer, and kin, family economics, employment, housing, and school life as well as individual mental and physical health often change during the divorce process. Scholars who have studied the divorce transition have concluded that, in general, the separation period is the most stressful period for parents and their children, followed by the first year post-divorce (Albrecht, 1980; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; White & Mika, 1983).

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FAMILY RELATIONS

Key Words: children's social competence post-divorce, coparental competition, coparental conflict, former spouse relationship.

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(Family Relations, 1990, 39, 395-404.)
& Kelly, 1980). Thus, there is abundant evidence that helping separated and divorced spouses build relationships that will increase their ability to function effectively as coparents may be a useful prevention goal (Koch & Lowery, 1984).

However, given the nature of most community-based family life programs, several general questions concerning program development and evaluation need attention. Can community-based, educational programs that include only parents be effective in reducing children's divorce adjustment problems? How effective is a program that focuses primarily on providing information and emotional support when program goals target changes in behavior and social-emotional well-being? Can short-term, community-based prevention programs facilitate improvements in dyadic relationships (i.e., former spouse and parent-child relationships)? These are important programmatic questions because of the increasing interest in offering community-based programs for divorcing families.

**Literature Review**

**Former Spouse Relationship and CSC**

Empirical and clinical evidence indicate that CSC post-separation is influenced by coparental conflict. However, the conceptual definition of parental conflict has been ambiguous, and as a result, conflict, discord, and hostility have been treated as synonyms in the divorce literature. This confusion has clouded the understanding of the effects of the former spouse relationship on CSC post-divorce.

A careful examination of social conflict theory shows that there are very important conceptual differences between the level of conflict (or disagreements) and how people choose to address these disagreements (Deutsch, 1973; Horowitz, 1987; Sprey, 1979). Conflict theorists assume that disagreements between spouses/parents are common and inevitable (Sprey, 1979; Strauss, 1979). Parental conflict is defined as direct confrontation over scarce resources, controversial means, incompatible goals, family rules, status privileges, the legitimacy of social norms, or combinations of these (Sprey, 1979).

Although both nuclear and bi-nuclear families are viewed as systems in conflict, they also are considered purposive systems that have as a major goal the well-being of individual family members. The central question becomes one of how the binuclear family system can continue to function effectively as an alliance of common purpose in the presence of repeated, if not perpetual, conflict over discordant individual interests (Sprey, 1979).

The key to answering this question is the assumption that, although primarily self-oriented, former spouses are not purely hedonistic or exploitive. They have the capacity to collaborate and cooperate within the context of their "contradictory yet interrelated needs and designs" (Horowitz, 1967, p. 268). Cooperation is defined as "the settlement of problems in terms which make possible the continuation of differences and even fundamental disagreements" (p. 268). It implies that former spouses are willing to place their children's needs above their own individual interests (e.g., revenge, dominance).

According to conflict theory, without cooperation the management of conflict (disagreements) will remain primarily competitive. Competition is defined as a state of negative interdependence between family members such that gains for one member mean losses for others (Sprey, 1979). Thus, conflict is viewed as a neutral phenomenon that is inherently neither constructive nor destructive. It is the behaviors that parents (and children) use to manage conflict that facilitate or impede family members' adjustment to the separation. This distinction between coparental conflict, competition, and cooperation will be used to examine in more detail the relationship between "coparental discord" and CSC post-separation.

Importantly, when coparental conflict is defined as the level of disagreement between divorcing parents, the convergence of evidence indicates that conflict is not related to children's social competence following marital separation. Of the 13 studies reviewed, only 2 consistently had significant negative relationships across multiple measures of CSC (Kurdek & Berg, 1983; Kurdek & Blisk, 1983).

In contrast, regardless of how coparental conflict is measured (i.e., hostility, overt aggression, or passive-aggressive attempts to triangulate children), there is consistent evidence that competitive behaviors between coparents have negative effects on CSC. Perhaps the most poignant evidence of the negative impact of competition on CSC comes from the self-reports of children of divorce. Major stressors reported by children of all ages include parents' denigration of one another, parents' attempts to recruit the children as spies and allies, and the escalation of coparental hostility (Oppawsky, 1988/89; Rosen, 1977, 1979; Sandler, Wolchik, Braver, & Fogas, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

In addition to children's self-reports, researchers have reported positive relationships between parents' self-reports of coparental competition and antisocial dimensions of CSC (Emery, 1982; Hetherington et al., 1982; Jacobson, 1978; Luepnitz, 1986; Stolberg & Bush, 1985; Tschamp, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1989; Walsh & Stolberg, 1988/89). These findings seem to hold for competition before and after the divorce. There also is some evidence that competition is related more consistently to antisocial, externalized than to internalized symptomatology in children (Emery, 1982; Rutter, 1971; Walsh & Stolberg, 1988/89). Although addressed less frequently, investigators also have found inverse relationships between competition and prosocial dimensions of CSC (Hetherington et al., 1982; Luepnitz, 1986; Stolberg & Bush, 1985; Stolberg, Camplair, Currier, & Wells, 1987). The aggregation of these studies results in the observation that coparental competition accounts for somewhere between 10 and 25% of the variance in child outcome measures post-separation, controlling for child sex, age, time from separation, and family socioeconomic status (SES).

In comparison to coparental conflict and competition, there is a dearth of research on coparental cooperation. This relative lack of attention on cooperation reflects both the unidimensional approach and the emphasis on negative interaction and pathology that are typical of the extant research on the former spouse relationship. Using qualitative research methods, a few scholars have suggested that cooperation is associated with positive divorce adjustment in children (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Kressel, Jaffe, Tuckman, Watson, & Deutsch, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). To the authors' knowledge, there are only three quantitative studies that have examined the relationship between coparental cooperation and CSC. Camara and Resnick (1988) and Kurdek (1987) found a significant relationship, whereas McCombs, Forehand, and Brody (1987) did not. Both of these studies surveyed residential parents only (which also is true for much of the literature on coparental discord and CSC).
Although the effects of moderating variables are beyond the scope of this article, it is important to mention that the relationship between coparental discord and CSC seems to vary somewhat for boys and girls and by children's age. The effect seems to be stronger for boys than girls (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981; Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Rutter, 1971), and for latency-age children than for preschoolers or adolescents (Guilubaldi, Clemminshaw, Perry, Natasi, & Lightel, 1986; Jacobson, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However, because several other researchers have found null or inconsistent patterns, the moderating effects of the child's gender and age are inconclusive and deserve more empirical attention (Emery, 1982). Also, although few studies have included appropriate comparisons, there is some evidence that nonresidential fathers' reports of coparental conflict are related more strongly to CSC than are residential mothers' reports (Tierney, 1983), and that the relationship between conflict and CSC is stronger in clinical families than nonclinical (Emery, 1982).

A major developmental task for divorcing parents, as forwarded by Ahrons (1980), is to terminate their marital roles and to redefine their parenting roles. This has been conceptualized as clarifying the coparental relationship. Ideally, the result of this process is divorced parents who cooperate with one another by refraining from behaving in a competitive manner. Over time, this type of coparental relationship results in mutual parental respect, low levels of hostility and coparental derision, and enhanced well-being for children post-separation. Thus, part of the focus of a community-based prevention program should be on helping separated and divorced parents effectively redefine their coparenting relationship. Specific programs goals should include the reduction of competitive behaviors and the encouragement of coparental cooperation. Because of the inherent neutral and pervasive nature of coparental conflict (disagreements) post-separation, the focus of prevention programs should be on teaching parents how to manage their conflict constructively rather than on eliminating the conflict itself. Tierney's findings that the relationship between former spouse relations and CSC differs for nonresidential and residential parents is intriguing because Ahrons (1983) has posited that the residential parent serves as a "gatekeeper" between the nonresidential parent and the children. Therefore, the hypothesis that the relationship between former spouses might be more salient for nonresidential than for residential parents will be examined in this study.

### Prevention Programs for Divorcing Parents

Although most communities offer workshops and programs for divorcing parents, few of these programs have been described in the divorce literature. Even fewer have included a systematic evaluation of program effectiveness. A major exception is the Preventive Intervention for Newly Separated Persons program developed and evaluated by Bloom, Hodges, and Caldwell (1982). This program provided emotional support, crisis intervention, and information related to five specific problem areas: career planning and employment problems, legal and financial issues, child rearing and single parenting, housing and homemaking, and socialization and personal self-esteem. The subjects had been separated recently (the average number of days was 55) and the sample included both parents and nonparents. Subjects were randomly assigned to the treatment and control groups. Out of 18 problem areas identified at the beginning of the program, the subjects rated the relationship with their former spouse as the most severe problem (X = 3.29 on a scale of 1-5) (Bloom & Hodges, 1981). Unfortunately, the follow-up evaluations of the program at 30 months and 4 years did not assess the quality of the former spouse relationship (Bloom, Hodges, Kern, & McFaddin, 1985). Thus, redefining the coparental relationship was not one of the five specific program areas and long-term changes in the former spouse relationship were not evaluated.

The major focus of other prevention programs for divorced parents has been to improve parenting skills (Rugel & Sieracki, 1981; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985) or parents' psychosocial well-being (Kessler, 1978). (Prevention programs for children only were excluded from this review, as were programs for divorced parents that did not include an evaluation component.) These programs have focused primarily on the residential parent. In sum, although the clinical and research literatures on CSC post-divorce have highlighted the importance of the quality of the former spouse relationship, none of the documented prevention programs have included the coparental relationship as a central programmatic component.

### Focus of This Study

The literature reviewed to this point was used to formulate one major theoretical proposition and one prevention proposition.

**Theoretical proposition:** Coparental conflict will be related positively to antisocial dimensions of CSC and negatively to prosocial dimensions, whereas coparental cooperation will be related negatively to antisocial dimensions and positively to prosocial dimensions. Coparental conflict will be unrelated to CSC and the effects of competition will be stronger than those of either conflict or cooperation.

**Prevention proposition:** The participating parents will report greater decreases (from pre to post) in conflict and competition and greater increases in cooperation than will the nonparticipating parents.

A research question related to the prevention proposition was whether treatment group effects vary by several factors that might influence participants' readiness or acceptance of program material. Factors that were examined in this study were sex and age of parent, level of education, and legal contesting status.

### Methods

#### Program Description

The Orientation for Divorcing Parents (ODP) is a community-based, educational prevention program offered by Child and Family Services, a nonprofit community service agency in Knoxville, Tennessee. The program includes five weekly, 2-hour sessions. Concurrent sessions are offered on Monday and Tuesday evenings because of the large demand (35 participants per evening) and because of the program requirement that divorcing spouses attend separate sessions. The first three sessions address parents' well-being, children's responses to divorce, and legal issues, respectively. Although the relationship between divorcing spouses is mentioned when relevant, the major focus of the first three sessions is on other aspects of the divorce experience. The last two sessions specifically address the former spouse relationship by focusing on communication and conflict management skills. During the fourth and fifth sessions the material is introduced by a short lecture and several handouts. Role play often is used during the two lectures to demonstrate the specific skill being...
discussed. Each of these didactic sections is followed by an hour of small group activities that provide participants with the opportunity to practice the targeted skills. The sessions are concluded by coming back together in the large group to discuss issues generated in the small groups.

The foci of the fourth session include the use of "I"-statements, good listener skills, and methods to keep communication going. The foci of the fifth session include the healthy aspects of conflict, rules for arguing, and negotiation techniques. At this last session, 10 different problem situations (developed by program leaders Phyllis Betz and the late Mary Evans) are used to help participants practice their problem-solving skills using the "I think" (describe, state facts, don't blame or argue), "I feel" (state feelings, don't accuse), and "I want" (propose a solution, ask for a change in behavior, point out advantages) method of conflict management. In groups of three or four, each participant selects a problem, practices solving it, and receives feedback from group members. Three situations are reproduced here to illustrate the focus and relevance of these problems.

1. When your child(ren) come back from their visits, they seem upset, over-sensitive, and cry or get angry easily. Sometimes they stay in their room for several hours and won't talk. Sometimes they talk very disrespectfully to you. It has occurred to you that your divorcing spouse or in-laws have been saying things to the children to turn them against you. Although your relationship with your former spouse isn't cordial, you do converse about the children. Bring up this problem and discuss it with your spouse.

2. Your parents are coming to visit from the West Coast for just 3 days on their way to England. Their schedule isn't very flexible. Their visit lands on a weekend when your spouse is scheduled to have the children all except ½ day of the grandparents' visit. Decide what you would like to have happen and raise the issue with your divorcing spouse. Seek an agreement acceptable to both of you.

3. Your divorcing spouse has been refusing to talk to you about anything having to do with money. He/She is 2 months behind on support payments, at least partly due to a large, unexpected car repair bill. You are right up to the deadline on an overdue utility bill. Try to get him/her to talk to you about this problem. If he/she cuts you off, try another approach.

In summary, ODP is a general educational program that focuses on several aspects of the divorce experience. The sessions related directly to the former spouse relationship combine didactic and skill-building components in a relatively structured format.

**Sampling and Data Collection**

Every parent involved in a divorce petition in the Fourth Circuit Court of Knox County received a letter from the Judge describing the ODP program and strongly encouraging their participation. Those who contacted Child and Family Services with an interest in attending ODP were mailed a registration form and letter explaining the program. Ten days before the first session of the program, each registrant also was mailed a cover letter and 12-page, self-administered questionnaire to complete and bring with them the first night of class. Although participation in the research project was encouraged, it was not mandatory in order to comply with the human subjects requirement of voluntary participation and to meet the needs of those parents who would not attend the program if required to complete the survey. Questionnaires were given to 245 participants and were returned to the research team by 148. This yielded a 60% response rate.

The 633 parents who were sent a letter from the Judge but chose not to attend ODP also were asked to participate in the research project. (An analysis of letters to the Judge revealed that parents chose not to participate in ODP for a wide variety of reasons.) A cover letter and the questionnaire were mailed to these parents using Dillman's Total Design methodology (1978). This included mailing the questionnaire to nonrespondents at designated intervals. About 530 questionnaires potentially reached the divorcing parents and 99 were returned completed. This yielded a 19% response rate. Unfortunately, some of the ODP nonparticipants only received one mailing because of a shortage of funds. This markedly reduced the return. (Past research by the Project Director using this methodology yielded 18% responses from mailing number 1, 18% from number 2, and 6% from number 3.)

When the ODP participants and nonparticipants are combined, a total of 878 questionnaires were distributed with 775 potentially reaching divorcing parents. A total of 247 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 32%. Of these, 193 parents met the following criteria: very little missing data, physically separated spouses, a target child between the ages of 3 and 18 years, and a target child living primarily with one parent or the other. (The target child was randomly selected.)

The questionnaire was readministered 1 month following the end of the ODP program. For the program nonparticipants, the Time 2 assessment was sent 10 weeks after the Time 1 assessment. Three mailings were used when necessary. Seventy-seven questionnaires were received from the subjects in the sample for this study, yielding a 39% return rate for Time 2.

**Sample Characteristics**

At Time 1, the total sample for this study included 125 mothers and 68 fathers. The residential subsample included 107 mothers (88%) and 18 fathers (14%). The nonresidential subsample included 18 mothers (26%) and 50 fathers (74%). Although court records were used to identify the sample, only 6 (3%) of the respondents were black, whereas 187 (97%) were white. An analysis of court records indicated that only 10 blacks (five couples) had filed for divorce in the Fourth Circuit Court of Knox County in 1986. In terms of educational level, 23% of the residential parents had a college degree, 26% had some college or noncollege training, 32% had graduated from high school, and 7% had ended their formal education before completing high school. Comparable figures for nonresidential parents were 35%, 37%, 16%, and 12%, respectively. Most residential parents (81%) and nonresidential parents (90%) were employed and worked a median of 40 hours per week. The modal occupational status for residential parents was clerical/sales and for nonresidential parents was professional. Median current net monthly income was $1,000 for residential parents and $1,100 for nonresidential parents. Most of the parents (80%) defined their economic situations as...
“struggling” or “doing okay” (rather than “poor,” “up and coming,” or “comfortably affluent”).

The mean age was 32 for residential parents and 33 for nonresidential parents. It was the first marriage for about 78% of the sample. Residential parents had been separated a median of 6 months and nonresidential parents a median of 5 months. About 85% of these parents had either one or two children, with the remainder having three or four. A target child was randomly selected for those parents with more than one child. In this study, there were 102 sons and 91 daughters. There were 70 children between the ages of 3 and 5, 89 children between ages 6 and 12, and 54 between ages 13 and 18.

Three different procedures were used to evaluate the representativeness of this sample. Because ODP participants were overrepresented, the first procedure was to compare empirically workshop participants and nonparticipants on the control, independent, and dependent variables of the study. There were no group differences for child’s sex or age; parent’s sex or education; coparental cooperation or conflict; or children’s dependency, aggression, anxiety/depression, or productivity. Group differences existed for income, length of separation, and coparental competition. ODP participants had a higher mean income ($1,153 versus $1,400) and were more recently separated ($11,153 versus $1,400), and reported higher coparental competition ($11,230, p = .02) than ODP nonparticipants.

The second procedure was to compare empirically the survey respondents and nonrespondents using data available from court records. There were no differences between the two groups on husband’s age, wife’s age, length of marriage, number of children, amount of child support awarded in the final decree, or whether the grounds for divorce were irreconcilable differences (i.e., no-fault) or fault categories.

The third procedure used to assess sample representativeness was to compare the sample survey data for residential parents with data from the 1986 Census for white, separated family householders (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987a, 1987b). The sample of residential parents used for this study seemed to have a lower percentage of fathers (14% versus 20%) and mean monthly income ($1,153 versus $1,400) and were younger (32.1 versus 37.8 years) than the U.S. census sample.

The two groups were comparable on number of children and educational attainment. Thus, the three procedures used to examine the representativeness of this sample indicated that it was fairly comparable to the U.S. white, separated family household population and that it was not irreparably compromised by the overrepresentation of ODP participants or by nonrespondents’ lack of participation.

Measures

Dependent variables. Children’s social competence was measured by a revised version of the Child and Adolescent Adjustment Profile (CAAP) scale (Ellsworth, 1978, 1979; Pett, 1979, 1982). The CAAP was chosen because (a) it was developed for use by children’s significant others, (b) it has been validated for children between the ages of 3 and 18, (c) it includes measures of both anti- and prosocial dimensions of CSC, (d) it underwent a rigorous development process to establish validity, and (e) it was relatively short. The anxiety/depression items of the PARS II version of the CAAP were included in the measure of CSC for this study because of their importance for a population of children from divorcing families. Parents were asked to rate specific child behaviors during the past month using a 1 (never) to 4 (often) response scale. Based on a factor analysis of responses from the parents in this study, the following four subscales were used: dependency, anxiety/depression, aggression, and productivity. Alpha coefficients for residential and nonresidential parents were .84 and .79 for dependency, .72 and .70 for anxiety/depression, .83 and .80 for aggression, and .78 and .82 for productivity, respectively.

Independent variables. The measure of current coparental conflict was adapted from items developed by Ahrons (1981, 1983). The revised scale asked about the frequency of disagreements or arguments over 10 child rearing activities, such as daily decisions regarding the children, children’s personal problems, and children’s adjustment to the separation. Scale responses ranged from never (1) to always (5). Cronbach alphas were .95 for residential parents and .94 for nonresidential.

Current coparental competition was measured with six Likert-type items adapted from Kurdek’s (1987) Cooperative Parenting Scale. Examples of items used are “I encourage the children to side with me” and “My husband/wife says bad things about my character to the children.” Scale responses ranged from never (1) to always (5), and alphas were .70 for residential parents and .63 for nonresidential.

Current coparental cooperation was measured with seven Likert-type items adapted from the Coparental Support subscale of Ahrons’ Quality of Coparental Communication scale (1981). Examples of items include “I encourage my children to maintain an active involvement with their other parent” and “My husband/wife tries to help out if I need to change plans for taking care of the children.” Scale responses ranged from never (1) to always (5). Alphas were .82 for residential parents and .83 for nonresidential.

Control variables. Six variables that seem to influence parents’ perceptions of children’s well-being post-separation were included as control variables in the analysis of the relationship between the coparental variables and CSC. Control variables included the child’s age and sex, parent’s education, income and sex, and length of time since the separation (measured in number of months). In addition, parents’ sex, age, and educational level and legal contesting status were used to examine the effects of group status on changes in the coparental variables. Contesting status was measured by classification into one of two categories: contesting or not contesting the divorce settlement.

Results

The responses from residential and nonresidential parents were analyzed separately because their environmental and parenting contexts differed dramatically. A probability criterion of p < .05 was used for most analyses.

As expected, parents reported higher levels of coparental cooperation than conflict or competition (see Table 1). They also reported slightly lower levels of competition than conflict.

The zero-order correlations reported in Table 2 reveal positive correlations between conflict and competition for nonresidential parents but not for residential ones. For all parents, there was a negative correlation between cooperation and competition. In general, the correlations were stronger for nonresidential parents than residential and for the Time 2 sample than the Time 1.
The first hypothesis tested in this study was that coparental competition is related positively to antisocial dimensions of CSC and negatively to prosocial dimensions, whereas coparental cooperation is related negatively to antisocial dimensions and positively to prosocial dimensions. It also was hypothesized that conflict and OSC are unrelated, and that the effects of competition are stronger than those of cooperation. This hypothesis was tested using stepwise multiple regression with a specific dimension of CSC as the dependent variable, the three former spouse measures as independent variables, and the six background factors as control variables. In addition, second-order partial correlations were used to assess the relative importance of coparental conflict, competition, and cooperation.

Generally, this hypothesis was supported for nonresidential parents, but not for residential ones (see Table 3). At least one coparental variable was related uniquely to each CSC variable. Competition was related positively to nonresidential parents' perceptions of children's dependency (partial \( r = .31 \)), anxiety/depression (partial \( r = .47 \)), and aggression (partial \( r = .36 \)) as antisocial dimensions of CSC. Coparental cooperation was related only to children's productivity (partial \( r = .36 \)) as the prosocial dimension of CSC. The coparental variables accounted for 7-18% of the variance in dimensions of CSC. Finally, the hypothesis of no relat-

The results were very different for the nonresidential parents (see Table 3). At least one coparental variable was related uniquely to each CSC variable. Competition was related positively to nonresidential parents' perceptions of children's dependency (partial \( r = .31 \)), anxiety/depression (partial \( r = .47 \)), and aggression (partial \( r = .36 \)) as antisocial dimensions of CSC. Coparental cooperation was related only to children's productivity (partial \( r = .36 \)) as the prosocial dimension of CSC. The coparental variables accounted for 7-18% of the variance in dimensions of CSC. Finally, the hypothesis of no relat-

As hypothesized, the effects of competition were stronger than those of conflict. In terms of the magnitude of the coefficients, the effects of competition and cooperation were similar. However, competition was related to four dimensions of CSC, whereas cooperation was related to only one. Therefore, the hypothesis that the effects of competition are stronger than those of conflict or cooperation was supported, as was the hypothesis that the results would be stronger for nonresidential parents than for residential ones.

The prevention hypothesis of this study was that the participating parents would report greater decreases (from pre to post) in conflict and cooperation and greater increases in cooperation than would the nonparticipating parents. This hypothesis was tested by a procedure designed for use with repeated measures (O'Brien & Kaiser, 1985). For each former spouse dimension, a change score was created by subtracting the prescore from the postscore. MANOVA then was used to compare mean change scores for the participants and nonparticipants. The test of the constant in this technique provided information on whether or not the entire sample changed from Time 1 to Time 2, regardless of group status.

On the whole, there were no differences in the amount of change between participants and nonparticipants on the former spouse measures (see Table 4). The only exception was residential parents' reports of coparental cooperation, in which the participants decreased their amount of perceived cooperativeness more than nonparticipants. This was contrary to the hypothesis. Thus, the hypothesis was not supported for this sample of separated parents. (Please note the downward trend in the competition scores for the residential parents.)

However, an examination of the constant indicates that for the total sample of residential parents, perceptions of coparental conflict and competition decreased from Time 1 to Time 2 (see Table 4). Nonresidential parents' perceptions of the three dimensions did not change over time.

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### Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Former Spouse Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former Spouse Variables</th>
<th>Residential Pre (n = 125)</th>
<th>Residential Post (n = 52)</th>
<th>Nonresidential Pre (n = 68)</th>
<th>Nonresidential Post (n = 27)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \bar{X} )</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>( \bar{X} )</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Zero Order Correlations Among Former Spouse Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Conflict</th>
<th>(2) Competition</th>
<th>(3) Cooperation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prescores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Conflict</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>- .16*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Competition</td>
<td>- .33*</td>
<td></td>
<td>- .27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Cooperation</td>
<td>- .43*</td>
<td></td>
<td>- .23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postscores</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>- .27*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Residential parents are in the upper triangle and nonresidential are in the lower. There were 125 residents and 68 nonresidential parents at T1 and 51 residential and 27 nonresidential at T2.

\( * p < .05. \)

---

### Table 3. Stepwise Regression Analysis of Former Spouse Variables and Children's Social Competence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Partial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety-depression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>- .22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonresidential</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>- .33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.31*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety-depression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>- .24</td>
<td>- .23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity Cooper.</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.36*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All reported Beta coefficients are significant at the \( p < .05 \) level. The partial correlations reported are second-order ones, controlling for the other two former spouse variables. There were 125 residential and 68 nonresidential parents.

\( * p < .05. \)
Table 4. ANOVA of Change Scores on Former Spouse Variables by Group Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former Spouse Variables</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Nonparticipants</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Group F</th>
<th>Constant F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residential Parents' Mean Change Scores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>-.37</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonresidential Parents' Mean Change Scores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>-.61</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>-.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. There were 51 residential parents (34 participants and 17 nonparticipants) and 26 nonresidential parents (14 participants and 12 nonparticipants).

*p < .06.

Additional research questions concerned the effects of sex and age of parent, level of education, and contesting status on the mean change from Time 1 to Time 2. Two-way ANOVA was used to examine this question, with a former spouse variable serving as the dependent variable, group status as one of the factors, and one of the background variables as the other factor. For residential parents, there were no direct effects nor interaction effects for age and contesting status. The interaction effect between education and group status was significant for cooperation. Nonparticipating parents with at least some college increased their levels of cooperation (.26), whereas more educated parents in the participating group decreased cooperation (-.37). There was little change in the parents with high school educations or less. There were no other interacting or direct effects related to educational level of the residential parents. Sex of parent could not be analyzed because there were no residential fathers in the nonparticipating group.

For nonresidential parents, the analyses for sex and educational level could not be conducted because of too few nonresidential women and because all of the participants had more than a high school education, respectively. There were no significant interaction or direct effects for age and contesting status.

In sum, there was strong support for the hypothesis relating the former spouse relationship and CSC for nonresidential parents, but not for residential ones. There was little support for the hypothesis that participating parents would show more improvements in their relationship with their former spouse than nonparticipating parents. However, residential parents' perceptions of conflict and competition decreased from Time 1 to Time 2 for the total sample of separated parents. In the cases where analyses were possible, parents' sex, age, educational level, and contesting status were not related to the amount of change that occurred (or did not occur).

### Discussion

This study was based on the premise that the quality of the former spouse relationship affects children's social-emotional well-being post-separation. This was supported for the nonresidential parents in this sample, a finding which corresponded with Tierney's (1983) report that conflict and CSC were more correlated for fathers' (usually nonresidential) reports than for mothers'. When significant, the former spouse variables accounted for 7-18% of the variance in CSC. Thus, children's well-being following divorce is influenced by many factors, and it is clear from past and current research that certain aspects of the former spouse relationship are included in this set of important predictors.

Before discussing the results of this study, it is important to identify limitations of this research. This study would have been strengthened by multimethod assessment of its major variables. Although parents' perceptions are important and based on interactions and observations over a long period of time and in a variety of contexts, the addition of a second rater of CSC (e.g., teachers, children) and of former spouse relations (e.g., children) would have improved the study. However, the evidence for the reliability and validity of the measures used provide support for the study's validity as an investigation of the relationships among self-reported aspects of the quality of former spouse relations and parents' perceptions of CSC, a question worthy of address in its own right.

A second methodological concern is that the low response rate may have limited severely the representativeness of the sample. It is important to note that the response rates for most studies of divorce range from 30% to 40%; although the fact that this study falls within this normative range does not negate the saliency of this concern. Because of concerns regarding representativeness, several tests were conducted to determine biases. It was clear from these tests that the findings from this study cannot be generalized to minority families or to families in which the divorcing parents are older (over age 55 or so). It also was clear from the three tests for representativeness that this sample was adequately heterogeneous on income, education, occupational status, and length of marriage.

Turning to the major findings, it is important to ask why the relationship between the former spouse relationship and CSC was stronger for nonresidential than residential parents. One explanation is that the residential parent serves as a link-buffer-gatekeeper between the nonresidential parent and his/her children. Therefore, the quality of the former spouse relationship may be more salient to the nonresidential spouse than the residential one, particularly in cases where the nonresidential parent wishes to remain actively involved with the children. The residential parent also often has sole temporary legal custody of the children (until the final decree, in which it usually is changed to permanent custody). Thus, the residential parent often has more power over the children and controls the nonresidential parents' access. The implication of this is that residential spouse structurally mediates the relationship between the nonresidential parent and the children, whereas the opposite is not the case. The residential parent is involved directly with the children, without structural regulation by the nonresidential parent. This structural inequality sets the stage for competitive behavior and for the possible triangulation of children.

As hypothesized, competition was related more strongly to CSC than coparental conflict. Several important points are related to this finding. First, an examination of the divorce literature and of the findings from this study indicate that there are at least two major patterns of coparental competition.
One is passive-aggressive parental behaviors that triangulate children. The clinical literature and reports from children (Sandler et al., 1986) indicate that these types of coparental behaviors are very stressful for children. The measure of competition in this study attempted to assess this type of coparental behavior by examining parents' efforts to get the children to side with them, to use the children to get information about their former spouse, and to denigrate the other parent. The second major type of coparental competition is direct, overt competition that includes face-to-face yelling, screaming, and verbal and physical attacks. This type of coparental competition (usually mislabeled conflict) has been a predominant focus in the current empirical literature on children's divorce adjustment, but was not measured in this study. Therefore, future research needs to include measures of passive-aggressive and direct, overt competition so that the effects of the two patterns on CSC can be assessed and compared.

The second important point concerning the relationship between coparental competition and CSC is that competition seems to be related to internalized as well as externalized antisocial dimensions of CSC. In this study, the strongest partial correlation for coparental competition was with anxiety/depression (.47), followed by aggression (.36) and dependency (.31). Thus, some children may internalize the stress they feel when they are put in the middle of their parents' relationship. Others may act out. Factors that differ from children's response need further study. For example, the literature indicates that girls tend to exhibit internalized responses, whereas boys tend to act out. Future research should address the moderating effects of children's sex and age on the relationship between competition and different dimensions of social competence (not only the direct effects of sex and age on CSC). Children's personality factors also should be examined.

As suggested by Tierney (1983) and Ahrons (1983), the relationship between coparental competition and CSC was stronger for nonresidential parents than for residential ones. Nonresidential parents' perceptions of disagreements about parenting issues and the anger generated by the disagreements are related to passive-aggressive parental behaviors. Perhaps the lack of control inherent in the nonresidential parents' situation influences their perceptions of the triangulation of the children in parental conflicts. In addition, there is existing evidence that residential mothers tend to engage in behaviors that triangulate children more frequently than nonresidential fathers and that their hostile behaviors are more intense (Hetherington et al., 1982; Sandler et al., 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Thus, a plausible interpretation is that nonresidential parents are more sensitive to these relationships because the former spouse affects their relationships with the children and because the residential parents are more likely to engage in intense passive-aggressive competitive behaviors.

A final point that needs attention, but was not addressed in this study, is the recent evidence regarding the enduring quality of coparental competition (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990; Nelson, 1989). This recent evidence suggests that levels of coparental competition soon after marital separation endure for at least a few years for many couples. This information, combined with the deleterious affects of competition on CSC rated in this study, document the critical and urgent need for intervention with competitive divorcing parents.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings from this study, intervention with recently separated parents should focus on (a) allowing conflict to emerge so that family restructuring can proceed, (b) teaching fair-fighting skills and constructive conflict management techniques, and (c) helping parents to compartmentalize spouse and parental conflicts, encapsulate their conflicts, and avoid specific competitive behaviors such as denigration and the use of their children as messengers, spies, allies, or hostages. Because empirically coparental competition and cooperation are related negatively, a serendipitous result of this approach might be that cooperation is increased as competition is decreased. By focusing initially on competition, (a) children's anxiety/depression, dependency, and aggression might be reduced, (b) coparental cooperation might be increased, and eventually, (c) children's productivity might be improved, all without placing unrealistic demands on recently separated spouses to be supportive of one another.

Contrary to popular belief, cooperation during this early phase of separation and divorce did not substantially enhance CSC. Although there is some evidence that cooperation is related to lower levels of child aggression (Camara & Resnick, 1988) and to school achievement (McCombs et al., 1987), the pattern of findings has been neither substantial nor consistent. This observation has important preventative implications. It seems that trying to get recently separated parents to avoid disagreement and to act supportively towards one another when they are struggling with the intense emotional and psychic aspects of divorce "goes against the grain" of normal behavior. Furthermore, expectations for "friendly" interaction with high levels of flexibility and support appear to be not only unrealistic for many couples, but unwarranted given the growing evidence that neither conflict (disagreement) nor cooperation have substantial effects on CSC post-separation. In fact, programmatic effort to reduce conflict and increase cooperation may actually cause harm if they induce guilt in parents unable to achieve the goals, interfere with the family redefinition process, or alienate the nonresidential parent.

Now focusing on the effects of the intervention, it is important to discuss the nonsignificant findings between program participants and nonparticipants. Why were there no differences? One of the methodological limitations of this study was that random assignment to the two groups was not possible. This often is the case in evaluation research of community-based programs. In addition, because of the Judge's strong support of the ODP program, parents having settlement problems are more likely to attend so that they look like involved parents when their case is heard by the Judge. One of the consequences of this bias is that the participating parents have higher rates of contested divorces and that they report more settlement problems than nonparticipating parents. Thus, as with many divorce groups in communities, the participating parents make up a very challenging group in terms of improving the former spouse relationship. In addition, the Time 2 sample size was small which indicates that the analysis of change rates need to be interpreted cautiously.

Even taking into consideration these limitations, there is some evidence that the program itself could be refined to help ensure greater change rates. First, it needs to be lengthened. It is difficult to change...
This format would permit participants to strengthen the intervention effects that first uses developed vignettes to help them learn skills with their former spouses and children. Recent prevention effects may not emerge for the newly separated: Final evaluations. American Orthopsychiatry, 35(4), 351-366.


The University of Manitoba encourages applications from qualified women and women, including members of visible minorities, aboriginal people and persons with disabilities. The University provides a smoke-free work environment. Priority consideration will be given to Canadian citizens and permanent residents.

**APPLIED CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

The Department of Family Studies at University of Manitoba has a full-time tenure track position available at the Assistant or Associate Professor level in the area of Applied Child Development with emphasis on early child development. The successful candidate will teach undergraduate and graduate courses in child development, child care models, policy, and program evaluation. Applicants should have experience in day care and be able to combine practicum supervision with an active program of research in child development. Additional interests in the theory of play and parent education would be an asset.

The successful applicant will hold a Ph.D. or be nearing completion of a Ph.D. programme and will be able to demonstrate competence with qualifications and experience.

Enquiries and applications, including complete curriculum vitae and names of three referees should be sent by November 10, 1990 or until filled to: Carol D. H. Harvey, Ph.D., Chair of Selection Committee, Department of Family Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3T 2N2. Appointment date open, but January 1, 1991 is preferred.

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