Selected Aspects of Parenting and Children's Social Competence Post-Separation:
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Online Publication Date: 15 March 1993

To cite this Article Buehler, Cheryl and Legg, Bobbie(1993)'Selected Aspects of Parenting and Children's Social Competence Post-Separation:', Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 18:3, 177 — 195

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1300/J087v18n03_11

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J087v18n03_11
Selected Aspects of Parenting and Children's Social Competence Post-Separation: The Moderating Effects of Child's Sex, Age, and Family Economic Hardship

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SUMMARY. The purpose of this study was to assess the moderating effects of child's sex, age, and family economic hardship on the relationship between (a) residential mother's parenting and frequency of nonresidential father's visitation, and (b) child social competence following marital separation. Dimensions of mother's parenting included loss of time spent with the child since separation, mother's current levels of companionship and coercion, and daily involvement in meaningful activities with the child. Dimensions of children's social competence included dependency, aggression, anxiety/withdrawal, and productivity. The results indicated that the relationships among mother's parenting, father's visitation, and children's social competence are fairly consistent, regardless of child's age, sex, or...
level of family economic hardship. The few exceptions are noted and intervention implications are discussed.

Between now and the end of the twentieth century, 33% of this generation of children will experience parental divorce before they are 18 (Glick, 1984). Although divorce does not invariably result in enduring adverse outcomes for children, the process does entail a series of stressful experiences (Hetherington & Camara, 1984). Children are particularly vulnerable to adjustment problems when parent-child relationships are seriously disrupted or are of generally poor quality (Hetherington, 1989; Kurdek, 1987; Peterson & Zi, 1986; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1989; Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1988). There also is some evidence that children’s vulnerability postseparation varies with their age (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Kurdek & Berg, 1983; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1990; Wallerstein et al., 1988), by sex (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Tschann et al., 1990), and with family economic hardship (Ambert, 1984; Colletta, 1983; Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985).

It is unclear, however, whether children’s age, sex, and family economic well-being moderate the relationship between parent-child relationships and children’s social competence following marital separation or effect competence only directly. The examination of moderating effects is very different from that of direct effects. A variable exhibiting direct effects influences the level of a dependent variable, whereas a moderating variable changes either the strength or direction of a relationship between variables (James & Brett, 1984). For example, the question of whether or not boys are more aggressive than girls postseparation involves testing the direct effect of sex of child on aggressive behavior. Very differently, the question of whether or not the relationship between mother’s coercive parenting and child aggression is different for boys and girls involves testing the moderating effect of sex of child on the relationship between mother’s coercion and child aggression. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the moderating effects of child sex, age, and family economic hardship on the relationships between (a) several indicators of mothers’ reports of her parenting and children’s social competence (CSC) post-separation, and (b) moth-
ers’ reports of frequency of father visitation and CSC post-separation. The focus was on residential mothers and nonresidential fathers because mothers continue to receive custody of children in 90% of divorced families (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985).

This study makes several contributions to the research on children’s adjustment to parental separation. First, both parenting and CSC are conceptualized as multidimensional constructs. Kurdek (1987) has illustrated the importance of examining multidimensional conceptualizations. Second, the moderating effects of the child’s age, sex, and economic well-being are assessed. The moderating effects of these variables on the relationship between parental involvement and CSC have not been examined systematically in previous research on children’s adjustment postseparation. Addressing potential moderators is important because researchers have begun to acknowledge “that the influence of parent-child relations on child development” is not the same across all children (Belsky, 1990, p. 889). The significance or nonsignificance of key moderators will influence the specifics of parenting information integrated into various divorce prevention and intervention programs. Finally, a nonclinical sample drawn from court records is used to generate results that can be used validly to develop community-based programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sex of Child

Several researchers have examined the direct effects of child’s sex on CSC postseparation. Three general conclusions can be drawn from these tests. First, sons have more short-term adjustment problems postdivorce (1-2 years) than do daughters (Demo & Acock, 1988; Hetherington & Camara, 1984; Wallerstein et al., 1988). Second, this pattern is strongest when undercontrolled, externalized child behaviors are examined (e.g., aggression, conduct disorders) rather than overcontrolled, internalized behaviors (e.g., withdrawal)(Dadds, 1987; Demo & Acock, 1988; Patterson, DeBarryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Third, although these conclusions have
been supported using data from various and numerous samples of children, some scholars using national data have not found sex differences (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Zaslow, 1987).

Although scholars have suggested that poor and differential maternal parenting, and disrupted father involvement are two of the reasons sons may have a more difficult time adjusting to marital separation than do daughters (Emery, Hetherington, & DiLalla, 1984), the interaction analyses that would support these explanations have not been conducted. It has been suggested in discussions of the research conducted by Hetherington and her colleagues (Emery et al., 1984; Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington & Camara, 1981; Hetherington et al., 1982) that the relationship between mother’s parenting and CSC is stronger for boys than girls. However, it is not clear from these discussions how the interaction terms between sex of child and mother’s parenting variables were tested. Description of the statistical tests used states that “multivariate analyses, followed by univariate analysis of significant multivariate effects, with sex of child and family types as the independent measures were performed on the composite indices of parent and child behaviors” (Hetherington, 1987, p. 191). Thus, although their research may suggest moderating effects (particularly for younger children), it is not clear that these effects were tested explicitly.

Other scholars have suggested moderating effects for sex of child by analyzing the relationship between parenting variables and dimensions of CSC separately for sons and daughters. Using this type of analysis, Peterson and Zill (1986) reported differences in patterns and magnitudes of correlations that may suggest possible moderating effects.

Thus, although moderating effects of sex of child on the relationship between parenting and CSC postseparation have not been tested directly, indirect evidence suggests that the relationship may be stronger for sons than daughters, particularly when externalized indices of CSC are examined. This hypothesis was tested in the present study.

**Age of Child**

The direct effects of child’s age on social competence post-separation are unclear, inconsistent, and poorly researched (Emery,
Some researchers have found that younger children have more difficulties than older ones (Allison & Fursttenberg, 1989; Kurdek & Berg, 1983; Wallerstein et al., 1988), whereas others have found the opposite (Tschann et al., 1990). Rather than conceptualize the effects of child age as linear, some scholars have suggested that children ages six to eleven (middle school-age) have a more difficult time adjusting than either younger children or adolescents (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, & Kehle, 1983; Jacobson, 1978; Kalter & Rembar, 1981).

However, because none of these researchers reported calculating age by parenting interaction terms, the moderating effects of age of child are unknown. Thus, one of the purposes of this study was to examine the moderating effects of age on the relationship between parenting and CSC postseparation. Using suggestions from extant findings and Erikson’s (1968) development of the major social-emotional tasks during the middle years of childhood, it was hypothesized, that the relationship between parenting and CSC would be stronger for children ages six to eleven than for children of other ages.

**Family Economic Hardship**

Research conducted by Guidubaldi and associates indicates that many of the differences in social competence between children from divorced and nondivorced families disappear when family income is controlled (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1984, 1985). However, the moderating effect of economic hardship on the relationship between parenting and CSC has not been examined empirically. Although few scholars have discussed possible moderating effects, for this study it was hypothesized that the relationship between mothers’ parenting and CSC would be stronger for those children whose mothers perceived themselves as struggling economically than for those children whose mothers perceived themselves as economically stable. The rationale for this hypothesis was based on the idea that effective and nondisruptive parenting would be more salient under conditions of economic hardship than economic stability. This rationale is similar to that used by Shaw and Emery.
When they argued that factors such as concurrent poor parenting and economic hardships pile-up, increasing children's vulnerability.

Control Variables

Recent reviews of literature on children's social competence following marital separation suggest several important control variables: parent's age, education, months from separation, and parental conflict (Demo & Acock, 1988; Hetherington & Camara, 1984). These variables were included in the present study as controls. Perhaps more importantly, researchers have shown that mothers' psychosocial well-being (e.g., depression) is correlated moderately with their reports of CSC (Belsky, 1990; Brody & Forehand, 1988; Forgatch, Patterson, & Skinner, 1988; Furstenberg & Seltzer, 1986; Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Shaw & Emery, 1988) and with child reports of CSC (Furstenberg & Seltzer, 1986; Kurdek & Berg, 1983). These correlations seem to be due to shared systematic variance (about two-thirds) and shared agent variance (about one-third). Thus, mother's well-being must be controlled for when examining the relationship between mother's reports of parenting and CSC.

METHODS

Research Design and Sampling

A sample of 108 divorcing mothers was obtained from court records in a fairly large southeastern community. Couples who had filed for divorce in 1986 were sampled. Because this study was part of a larger project, a rather lengthy questionnaire was mailed to all potential participants. Up to three mail contacts were attempted with most subjects in the sampling frame. Questionnaires were sent to 422 separated mothers. Of these 422, 79 (19%) of the questionnaires were nondeliverable and 148 of the mothers completed and returned questionnaires (41% of those who received the invitation). Of these 148 mothers, 108 had a child who was between the ages of
3 and 18 and who was living with them at least half of the time. This restriction on age of child was made because the measure of children’s social competence has been validated for children between 3 and 18 (Ellsworth, 1979; Pett, 1979). Although 41% is a low response rate and requires additional information to help evaluate the representativeness of the sample, the rate is comparable to other published research on divorce, as noted by Furstenberg and Spanier (1984).

Sample characteristics. Although court records were used to identify the sample, most of the respondents were Caucasian. An analysis of the 1986 court records indicated that only 10 blacks (5 couples) had filed for divorce in the county. About 42% of the mothers stopped their formal education after high school, 38% completed non-college training or some college, and 20% completed college. Seventy-nine percent were currently employed and the median number of hours worked per week was 40. The modal occupation status was clerical and sales. Current median net monthly income was $915 (range $0-$5,000), and most of the mothers defined their economic situation as “struggling” (37%) or “doing okay” (45%).

The mean age for mothers was 32 (range 21-45; SD = 5.3). The median length of marriage was 10 years (SD = 5.2) and the median length of separation was 6 months (SD = 10.5). About 85% had either one or two children. The target children in multiple-child families were selected randomly so that mother’s responses were unique to a particular child.

Two different procedures were used to evaluate the representativeness of this sample. The first procedure was to compare empirically the survey respondents and nonrespondents using the background data available from court records. Responding and nonresponding mothers were compared on the following variables: age, education, occupational status, income, employment status, length of marriage, and number of children. There were no group differences on level of education, occupational status, income, and number of children. Group differences existed for age, length of marriage, and employment status. Nonresponding mothers were older (t (139) = -3.48, p < .01), had been married longer (t (135) = -5.15, p = .04) and were
more likely to be employed \((X^2 = 4.28, p = .04)\) than the responding mothers.

The second procedure used to assess sample representativeness was to compare the sample survey data with data from the 1986 Census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). Using nonstatistical visual inspection, the sample of mothers used for this study seemed to be a little more educated and to have higher employment rates than the U.S. average of divorced mothers. The groups seemed comparable on age and income. Thus, the comparison between respondents and nonrespondents coupled with the examination of relevant census data indicated that this sample of responding mothers was fairly representative of the Caucasian divorcing population (with the exception of a slight bias in education).

**Measures**

*Dependent variables.* Children's social competence (CSC) was measured by a revised version of the Child and Adolescent Profile (CAAP) scale (Ellsworth, 1979; Pett, 1979, 1982). The CAAP was chosen because it has been validated for children between the ages of 3 and 18 and because it includes measures of both anti and prosocial dimensions of CSC. Mothers 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 mothers in this study, the following subscales were developed by averaging individual subscale items: dependency, aggression, anxiety/withdrawal, and productivity. Alpha coefficients for the scales were .86 for dependency, .84 for aggression, .82 for anxiety/withdrawal, and .80 for productivity (see Table 1).

*Parenting variables.* Four indicators of mother's parenting were used. *Loss of time spent with child* since the separation was measured by the statement, "I have had less time to spend with my children." Responses were dichotomized as yes (coded 1 for the dummy; \(n = 59\)) or no (coded 0 for the dummy; \(n = 49\)). *Companionship* was measured by the following question: "How often do you and your child have a good time together?" (Berg & Kurdek, 1983). The scale ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always). *Coercion* was measured as the sum of mother's self-reported control behaviors
used frequently in the past week, including yelling, threatening, hitting or spanking their child. Evidence of content validity for this measure of coercion can be found in Dadds (1987) who states that yelling and threatening are the most common forms of parental aggressive behavior toward children. Cronbach’s alpha is not an appropriate indicator of reliability for this composite because aggregation rather than covariation is the relevant characteristic measured. Daily involvement was measured using Ahrons’ (1983) parental involvement scale. Mothers were asked to record the amount of involvement with their child in 11 activities such as running errands, discipline, dress and grooming, planning and preparing meals. The scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) and Cronbach’s alpha was .88. Mother’s reports of the frequency of paternal visitation was measured by asking, “How often does the nonresidential parent see the child?” Responses of the seven-point scale ranged from never (1) to daily (7).

Moderating variables. The three variables hypothesized to moderate the relationship between mothers’ parenting and CSC post-separation were child’s sex, age, and family economic hardship. Of the 107 cases studied, 51 included girls (coded 0 in the sex dummy variable) and 57 included boys (coded 1 in the sex dummy); 40 included pre-schoolers (coded 0 in the age dummy #1), 42 children ages 6 to 11 (coded 1 in age dummies #1 and #2), and 26 adolescents (coded 0 in the age dummy #2). There were 40 mothers who reported they were struggling economically (coded 1 in the dummy) and 67 who reported that they were “doing okay” or better (coded 0 in the dummy).

Control variables. Time from separation was measured in months. Maternal education was measured by an eight-point ordinal scale that ranged from “grade school or less” (1) to “graduate degree” (8). Parental conflict was measured using 16 items from Berg and Kurdek’s Separation Inventory (1983) that address parenting-related disagreements. Ahrons (1983) has provided evidence of construct validity for this scale and inter-item consistency reliability for the present sample was .93. Mother’s psychosocial well-being was measured using an averaged composite of four measures: self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), emotional affect (Bradburn & Caplovitz, 1965), psychosomatic symptomatology (Spanier & Thomp-
### Table 1

**Means, Standard Deviations, Alphas, and Correlations of Variables**

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<td>4) productivity</td>
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<td>13) mother psychosocial well-being</td>
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Mean: 2.04 2.53 2.07 3.12 .55 4.53 4.13 1.23 4.41 4.30 9.32 1.92 3.38

Standard Deviation: .78 .75 .63 .61 .50 .53 .64 1.05 1.65 1.59 10.48 .72 .68

Alpha: .84 .86 .82 .80 --- .88 --- ---- ---- ---- .93 ---- ----

Note: Analyses are based on 108 mothers. Correlations above .18 are significant at \( p < .05 \).
son, 1984), and life satisfaction (Spanier & Thompson, 1984). Validity evidence of these measures can be found in Buehler (1989). Mother's age was not included as a control variable because it correlated .67 with child's age.

**Analytic Procedures**

The hypotheses were tested using a hierarchial multiple regression technique that included interaction terms to test for significant moderating effects. Thus, for each measure of CSC there were four regression equations calculated: one that included the direct and moderating effects of child sex, two that included the direct and moderating effects of child age (two different dummy variables), and one that included the direct and moderating effects of family economic hardship. To avoid potential statistical problems associated with the use of interaction terms in multiple regression analyses, the moderator variables were centered using the mean before interaction terms were created (James & Brett, 1984; Smith & Sasaki, 1979.1)

The probability criterion used in the analysis of direct effects was $p < .05$ and of interaction effects was $p < .07$ (because the tests for interactions were exploratory). Significant interaction terms should be interpreted as partial terms, i.e., the term is significant controlling for the parenting variables, the control variables, and the other four interaction terms. For each analytic equation, the regression assumptions were assessed by examining the residual plots for each dependent variable. The normality, linearity, and constant variance assumptions seemed valid for each equation.

**RESULTS**

Most importantly, with a few exceptions that will be discussed, sex of child, age of child, and family economic hardship did not moderate the relationship between various parenting variables and CSC postseparation. Of 20 possible interaction terms based on sex of child (five parenting variables times four dependent variables), only two were significant and both related to maternal coercion.
First, the relationship between coercion and child dependency differed for sons and daughters (Beta = .24, p = .02). The relationship was positive for both groups (more coercion related to more dependency and vice versa), but the relationship was stronger for sons than daughters. Thus, mother’s coercive control attempts affected son’s dependency behaviors more than daughter’s. Second, the relationship between coercion and child productivity also differed for sons and daughters (Beta = -.23, p = .02). The relationship was negative for both groups, but, again, the relationship was stronger for sons than daughters. Both of these interactions were in the hypothesized direction, but it is important to place them in context. Only one parenting variable out of five, coercion, and only two aspects of CSC out of four, dependency and productivity, resulted in differential patterns for sons and daughters.

In comparing children ages 6 through 11 with preschoolers, again only 2 of 20 interaction terms were significant. The relationship between loss of time with mother and child aggression differed for school-aged children and preschoolers (Beta = .21, p = .06). There was almost no correlation between the two for preschoolers, but the association was strong for school-aged children. A loss in time with mother since the separation was associated with much higher levels of child aggression. The relationship between mother’s daily involvement and aggression also differed for the two age groups (Beta = -.21, p = .07), and evidenced the same patterns as loss of time. Although limited in scope, direction of these patterns supported the hypothesis that the effects of parenting on CSC are stronger for school-aged children than preschoolers.

In comparing children ages 6 through 11 with adolescents, two of the interaction terms were significant. First, the relationship between mother’s coercion and anxiety/withdrawal differed for the two age groups (Beta = -.26, p = .05). The relationship was positive for adolescents and negative for school-aged children. This pattern did not support the hypothesis. Second, the relationship between having less time with mother and child aggression was much stronger for school-aged children than it was for adolescents (Beta = .35, p = .01). This effect was hypothesized.

Finally, only one interaction term was significant when family economic hardship was the moderating variable. As hypothesized,
the negative relationship between companionship with mother and child anxiety was much stronger in families who were struggling financially than in those families who had adequate finances (Beta = -0.31, p = .002).

As would be expected based on the zero-order correlations, controlling for mother's education, time from separation, and coparental conflict did not change any of these results. Although mother's psychosocial well-being was related to her reports of child anxiety and productivity, controlling for this shared variance did not change the patterns of statistical interaction.

In sum, these results indicated that generally the effects of mother's parenting and father's visitation on CSC postseparation were rather uniform, unaffected by variation in child sex, age, and family economic hardship. The few significant interactions were in hypothesized directions, with the exception of comparisons between school-aged children and adolescents. Focusing on the direct effects of the parenting variables, maternal coercion was the strongest variable of the five. It was related to higher levels of child aggression, dependency, anxiety/withdrawal, and to lower levels of productivity.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS**

Some of the findings from this study replicated those from past research by confirming that mother's coercive control attempts are associated with higher levels of antisocial behavior problems in children. To a more limited extent, a positive, warm relationship with mother also predicted higher levels of children's social competence. With a few exceptions, these findings described children/youth of both sexes between ages 3 and 18 in families of varying levels of financial adequacy. The exceptions indicated two patterns: (a) when compared with daughters, some externalized aspects of son's social competence (i.e., dependency and productivity) were affected more strongly by mother's coercive control attempts, and (b) school-aged children were upset by the reduced time spent with their mothers since the separation. This upsettedness manifested primarily in aggressive behavior.
Before discussing the implications of these findings, it is important to recognize and evaluate the limitations of this research. Although the sample seems fairly representative of the U. S. Caucasian, recently separated population and there were few differences between respondents and nonrespondents on biographical data, the findings must be interpreted cautiously until replicated using a national sample. A second major concern stems from the sole use of mother reports to obtain the data. The validity threat created by this method of data collection is that the obtained correlation between the independent and dependent variable may be due to shared agent variance as well as true systematic variance. As noted in the literature review, researchers have found that mother’s reports of child outcomes are overly influenced by their own well-being. Thus, in this study, mother’s psychosocial well-being was used as a control variable to help reduce the inflating effects of systematic error variance. Although it is certain that this control did not entirely solve the problems created by shared agent variance, the effects were reduced.

There are at least two major implications of these findings for practitioners. Most importantly, practitioners need a thorough understanding of the definition and interpretation of statistical interaction terms. They need to understand how these effects differ from direct effects, and to learn how to sort through evidence supporting one or the other. Without this understanding, it is difficult to identify generalizations or profiles about potential client vulnerabilities in various contexts. For example, most practitioners are aware of the research suggesting that sons exhibit more aggressive behaviors postseparation than do daughters. Most also are aware that mothers who use a characteristically coercive parenting style are more likely to have overly aggressive children than mothers who use other parenting styles. However, given the current state of research knowledge, it would be inaccurate to conclude that the effects of maternal coercion on child aggression are stronger for sons than for daughters. This sex interaction was not found in this study and has not been found in other studies (e.g., Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990), with the possible exception of Hetherington’s work. Thus, an understanding of the differences between direct and interactive effects will enhance the practitioner’s ability to make wise choices con-
cerning intervention goals and potential areas of client vulnerability.

The second implication of this study focuses on specific content that needs to be included in programs for divorcing parents or in therapeutic work with divorcing clients. The findings from this study suggest that mother's control/discipline behaviors need to be addressed regardless of child sex, age, and family economic well-being. In addition, however, these findings also indicate that mother's who have sons are particularly vulnerable and may require extra attention in terms of parent education. Improving/maintaining the companionate aspects of the mother-child relationship also is important to include as an intervention goal for all parents, regardless of child sex or age.

Finally, these findings suggest tentatively that children ages 6 to 11 have a difficult time adjusting to spending less time with their mothers postseparation. (This loss of time resulted primarily from increased employment activity.) Thus, it seems important to have children talk about their feelings with regards to this loss. Also, it would be helpful to develop a few easy, “special” activities that mother’s can incorporate into their schedules that may help counteract their increased time away from home. Although doing these activities occasionally may not take extra time or be costly, their conception and planning take attention and foresight. Practitioners can help families cope with some the changes brought on by the marital separation by facilitating this process of conceptualizing and planning.

REFERENCES


