

“Couple Relationship Quality and Children’s Behavior in Married and Cohabiting Families”

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An extensive literature over the past several decades has examined how family structure and instability are linked to children’s wellbeing and development (Fomby & Osborne, 2010; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Less well understood is how relationships and dynamics *within* families are related to child outcomes. Family systems theory suggests that children’s development cannot be understood independent from the characteristics and interactions of other actors within the family, and that the parental relationship is central to family functioning (Cummings & O’Reilly, 1997). In this paper we use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine how couple supportiveness—i.e., the level of emotional and social support each partner provides to the other—is related to behavioral outcomes for children in married and cohabiting families.

We draw on several theoretical perspectives to guide our expectations about how couple supportiveness might be related to children’s behavioral outcomes. First, social learning theory (Bandura, 1978) suggests that children model their behavior and interactions based on what they observe from significant others, particularly their parents. It follows that parents’ supportiveness may have a direct effect on their children’s behavior, with positive and constructive interactions between parents producing similar behavior styles in children. Second, family systems theory proposes that the quality of parents’ couple relationship might affect children’s behavior indirectly via parenting and co-parenting (Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988); parenting refers to the separate mother-child and father-child interactions, whereas co-parenting reflects parents’ ability to work together to care for their common child. A high level of couple supportiveness may ‘spillover’ to the parent-child relationship and lead to more effective parenting (Erel & Burman, 1995); likewise, it may enhance parents’ ability to co-parent effectively. Finally, the association between couple supportiveness and child wellbeing might be spurious and simply result from social selection: Certain factors, such as parents’ temperament or material resources, may affect both the level of supportiveness in the couple relationship as well as children’s behavioral outcomes.

The extant empirical research provides evidence that there is a significant association between couple relationship quality and children’s behavior. A number of studies, primarily using small samples, have found that children’s behavior problems are higher in the context of high levels of parental conflict (Cummings et al., 2006; Miller et al., 1993). Also, some studies suggest that negative child outcomes following parents’ union dissolution stem more from the decreased relationship quality that accompanies dissolution than from the dissolution itself (Booth & Amato, 2001; Fomby & Osborne, 2010). Prior research also shows that the quality of the couple relationship affects both the parent-child relationship (Carlson et al., 2011) and the co-parental relationship (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995), suggesting that the association between couple supportiveness and child wellbeing may be mediated by these two factors. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that the association between parents’ relationship quality and children’s behavior is spurious, driven by the demographic or mental health characteristics of mothers and fathers (Fincham, 1998).

It is also possible that the relationship between couple supportiveness and children’s behavior in two-parent families is moderated by parents’ marital status or by the gender of the child. Research suggests that there are fundamental differences between cohabiting and marital relationships which matter for children’s outcomes (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006). Cohabiting relationships tend to be less stable than

marriage (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007), and as a result, children's behavior in cohabiting unions may be more contingent on parents' having a highly-supportive couple relationship (if children fear that a lack of supportiveness will result in the relationship's dissolution). The association between couple supportiveness and child wellbeing may also be moderated by the gender of the child. Boys may be more 'difficult' than girls, or they may respond in more noticeable and aggressive ways to shifts in their parents' relationship quality (Furstenberg, 1990). As far as we know, there have been no empirical comparisons of the association between couple relationship quality and child wellbeing in married versus cohabiting unions. With regard to child gender, prior research has found that boys tend to experience a greater increase in behavior problems—particularly externalizing behavior problems—than girls when faced with parental conflict (Furstenberg, 1990). Whether or not boys' behavior is also more sensitive than girls' to variations in parental supportiveness remains to be seen.

Our paper extends the existing literature in several ways. First, past research has overwhelmingly focused on how negative dimensions of the parental relationship—such as conflict or abuse—harm children's development (Fincham, 1998). In contrast, we aim to understand how positive features of the parental relationship, rather than just the absence of negative features, benefit children. Although this may seem like merely a semantic shift, empirical evidence strongly suggests that a healthy relationship is not the opposite of a distressed one (Fincham & Rogge, 1998). It follows that healthy features of the parental relationship may matter for child wellbeing over and above the absence of unhealthy features. A second contribution of this study is that whereas much prior research on the association between parents' relationship quality and child wellbeing has relied on observational or survey data from small, cross-sectional samples (Fincham, 1998), we use data from a large, longitudinal survey of parents and their children. Although the level of detail contained in observational data has its advantages, our study is generalizable to a larger proportion of the American population and is better-suited to provide (albeit suggestive) evidence about the causal relationship between our variables of interest. Finally, our study is the first to explicitly compare the association between parents' relationship quality and children's behavior problems in marital versus cohabiting unions, thus contributing to the small but growing literature on the similarities and differences between these two family structures. Specifically, our paper addresses the following three research questions: 1) Is parents' supportiveness associated with greater social competence and/or fewer behavior problems in children? 2) Does this association operate via mothers' and fathers' parenting and/or co-parenting? 3) Does this association differ for married versus cohabiting couples, or for male versus female children?

We use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal study of 4,897 births (1,187 married and 3,710 unmarried) that occurred between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large U.S. cities. The weighted sample is representative of births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. Both mothers and fathers were interviewed just after the focal child's birth, and follow-up interviews were conducted when the child was approximately 1, 3, 5 and 9 years old. This dataset is ideal for our use because it includes extensive information on couples' relationship quality, family structure, parenting, and co-parenting at all 4 follow-up waves of the study, as well as measures of children's behavioral outcomes at 3, 5 and 9 years.

Our main independent variable of interest is a measure of couple supportiveness, which we construct from mothers' and fathers' reports of six items reflecting their partner's supportiveness (e.g., "listens when you need someone to talk to" and "understands your hurts and joys"). Each parent also provides reports about time spent with the child and the frequency of engaging in activities with the child (such as reading and playing). Mothers' reports about the nature of co-parenting between the parents are

based on six items (such as whether she can talk to the father about the child, trusts him to take good care of the child, etc.). Finally, our dependent variables include children's social competence, measured by mothers' responses to the Adaptive Social Behavioral Inventory (Hogan, Scott, & Bauer, 1992), and their internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, measured by mothers' responses to portions of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1992; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000).

We utilize random and fixed effects models to analyze the nature of the association between parents' supportiveness and children's behavior. These techniques allow us to take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the data by using repeated observations pooled over time. They also allow us to control for both time-invariant and time-varying characteristics of parents, children, and their environment that may account for the association between supportiveness and children's behavior. The random effects models allow us to examine this association for the full sample, accounting for variation both within and between families. The fixed effects models examine only within-family variation and reflect how changes in couple's supportiveness are associated with changes in children's behavior over time. These models allow us to control for unobserved, time-invariant characteristics of individuals and families that may be driving the association between couple supportiveness and child behavior, thus providing more conservative estimates.

Preliminary results using the baseline through 5-year data suggest that higher levels of supportiveness are associated with lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems in children when controlling for a large number of mothers' and fathers' demographic, economic and social-psychological characteristics, as well as children's gender and temperament. The association between supportiveness and internalizing behavior does not appear to be mediated by mothers' or fathers' parenting, nor their co-parenting. In contrast, the results suggest that the association between supportiveness and children's externalizing behavior is almost entirely mediated by co-parenting. In other words, greater supportiveness between parents facilitates their ability to co-parent effectively, which promotes better behavior in their children. Finally, we find evidence that the association between supportiveness and externalizing behavior is stronger in cohabiting than in married-parent families and is stronger for male than for female children. Our next step is to extend our analyses to include the 9-year data and to examine children's social competence as an additional dependent variable.

This paper makes an important contribution to the literature on parental relationship quality and child wellbeing by examining how positive features of the couple relationship, rather than the mere absence of negative features, enhances the behavior and social competence of children. It also adds to our limited knowledge of the similarities and differences between married and cohabiting families. This latter point is especially critical for designing interventions and couple therapies targeted to specific family forms. To promote healthy functioning in both married and cohabiting families, we must first deepen our understanding of the complex processes and relationships that occur among mothers, fathers, and children in these two distinct types of families.

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