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Expanding the Relationship between Parental Alienating Behaviors and Children's Contact Refusal Following Divorce: Testing Additional Factors and Long-Term Outcomes

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Expanding the Relationship between Parental Alienating Behaviors and Children's Contact Refusal Following Divorce: Testing Additional Factors and Long-Term Outcomes

Scott C Huff, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2015

Contact refusal by children following parental divorce or separation is a difficult experience for families. Although theorists have written much about contributions and effects of contact refusal, empirical exploration of the topic is under developed. The three papers included in this dissertation seek to expand the empirical literature on contact refusal and the long-term effects of the behaviors that relate to it. The first paper presents two studies designed to develop a measure of contact refusal. Study 1 used responses from 96 participants to narrow an initial pool of 25 question to 12 questions using an exploratory factor analysis. Study 2 used responses from 332 participants to confirm the fit of the Contact Refusal Scale developed in Study 1. The fit was found to be adequate. The Contact Refusal Scale also correlated appropriately with related measures. The second paper presents an expansion of a model proposed by Friedlander and Walters (2010) that suggested that multiple causes predict any given case of contact refusal. Models predicting contact refusal were tested based on retrospective data from 292 young adults. Forming a coalition with one parent was a strong predictor of refusing contact with the other parent. Alienating behaviors were mediated by the coalition that was formed. Parental warmth was also a protective factor against a child refusing contact. Parental violence was also a significant predictor. Adolescents were marginally more likely to refuse contact. The third paper explores the long-term consequences of contact refusal and the behaviors that were related to it in the second paper. Using self-report data from 292 participants, circumstances following divorce were used to predict current relationships with parents and personal mental health. Coalitions with mother and father's warmth and violence were predictive of relationships with

fathers in young adulthood. No significant predictors of relationships with mothers were found. Coalitions with mothers and parental warmth were predictors of current mental health. The research demonstrates the importance of exploring children's responses to divorce from a complex framework, rather than attributing outcomes to single causes.

Expanding the Relationship between Parental Alienating Behaviors and Children's Contact
Refusal Following Divorce: Testing Additional Factors and Long-Term Outcomes

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APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Expanding the Relationship between Parental Alienating Behaviors and Children's Contact
Refusal Following Divorce: Testing Additional Factors and Long-Term Outcomes

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Introduction

Parental divorce brings a variety of complex changes and influences on child development. Simply being raised within a divorced family is a status that is associated with physical, emotional, and relational risks for adults and children (Amato, 2000, 2010; Greif, 1979; Jacobs, 1982; Wood, Goesling, & Avellar, 2007). Moreover, focusing on additional concerns and topics related to divorce is likely to reveal additional complexity. The way that conflict between co-parents is managed, for example, plays a key role in determining child outcomes following divorce (Camara & Resnick, 1989). The phenomenon of children refusing contact with their parents following separation or divorce is another topic wherein a multiplicity of factors contribute to create the situation itself and mediate its lasting impact (Baker & Darnell, 2007; Gardner, 2002; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976; Johnston, 2003; Vassilou & Cartwright, 2001). Unfortunately, much of the literature on children refusing contact with their parents has not sufficiently accounted for the complexity of the situation.

Gardner (1991, 2002, 2004), provides an example of focusing on one element of the contact refusal process, without significant consideration of additional contributing factors. Gardner conceptualized extreme contact refusal as resulting from one parent's attempts to alienate the child from the other parent through a pattern of badmouthing and otherwise denigrating the other parent. He synthesized his findings and experiences by developing and advocating for such children to be diagnosed with *Parental Alienation Syndrome*. Although Gardner acknowledged that abuse might play a role in a parent being rejected by a child, these two behaviors are the extent of the complexity in Gardner's conceptualization. Studies by others using Gardner's conceptualization have similarly focused tightly on alienating behaviors as the

primary cause of contact refusal and later difficulties (Baker & Chambers, 2011; Baker & Verrochio, 2012; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012).

Kelly and Johnston (2001) and Friedlander and Walters (2010) provide an alternative framework for understanding contact refusal that accounts for greater complexity in comparison to Gardner's conceptualization. In their model, contact refusal stems from a complex interaction of multiple factors. A test of such a complex system of influence indeed demonstrated that parenting deficits in the refused parent and separation anxiety from the preferred parent could encourage contact refusal, in addition to parental alienating behaviors and abuse (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005). Kelly and Johnston (2001), however, included a much wider variety of potential contributing factors than Johnston and colleagues tested. Moreover, they noted that the child's response will in turn influence the wider system that is affecting the child. Unfortunately, this even more complex model has not received any significant empirical attention.

Additional family characteristics may play an important role in contact refusal, such as coparental conflict (Kelly & Johnston, 2001, Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993) and the age of the child at the time of separation (Kelly & Johnston, 2001, Johnston & Goldman, 2010). Further, the child's response to parental behaviors, such as forming a coalition with a parent, has not been included in previous research. Finally, many questions remain about the long term effects of alienation and these related behaviors.

This dissertation addresses several of the gaps outlined above with the aim of expanding what is known to contribute to contact refusal and the long-term outcomes of such behaviors. Structurally, it is divided into three self-contained, journal article length papers. The first paper focuses on the development of a self-report measure of contact refusal to be used in the

remaining papers. The need for such an instrument is indicative of the fact that much of the previous work on contact refusal has been qualitative or one-dimensional, wherein the measure for contact refusal has been conflated with the reasons behind the refusal. Moné and Biringer (2006), for example, developed a measure that connects contact refusal and parental alienating behaviors together. This connection in measures makes it difficult to test additional contributions to contact refusal. Much of the empirical work that has been done has used observational measures in clinical contexts that makes replication and expansion of the findings difficult (Johnston, et. al 2005). The measure that was developed in this paper – the Contact Refusal Scale – demonstrated adequate model fit. Compared to qualitative descriptions of participant's relationships with their parents it showed good validity. The participants' responses also serve as a valuable reminder that a lack of contact between parents and children can stem from the child's refusal, but also from the parent's disengagement from parenting.

The second paper follows the model of Johnston and colleagues (2005), who validated Kelly and Johnston's (2001) model, but expands it to include additional contributing factors, including coparenting conflict and adolescence. Most importantly, it includes a measure of the child's response (i.e. forming a coalition with one parent) first as a predictor and then as a mediator of contact refusal. The primary conclusion of the analysis is that this coalition between parent and child has the most significant effect on children refusing contact with their parents. The effect of alienating behaviors was largely mediated by the extent to which children entered into a coalition with that parent. Further, parental warmth served as a protective factor against a child refusing contact. Together, the findings support a view of contact refusal being the result of a complex interplay between both parent's behaviors and the child's response to those behaviors.

The final paper explores the long-term impact of the processes involved in contact refusal. Specifically, it tests whether contact refusal following parental separation continues to impact parent-child relationships in adulthood and whether the many factors that impact contact refusal have a lasting impact on children's mental health. As in the second paper, coalitions and parental warmth stand out in this analysis. Specifically, coalitions with mothers were a significant predictor of conflict with fathers and more negative mental health outcomes in young adulthood. The amount of parental warmth that children experienced at the time of separation, meanwhile, predicted better relationships with fathers and was a protective factor for mental health outcomes in young adulthood.

Together, these papers provide additional insight into the complex interactions connecting parental behaviors, children's acceptance of that behavior, and children's subsequent contact refusal following divorce and separation. They further connect the immediate behaviors following divorce with subsequent outcomes in young adulthood. Perhaps the greatest contribution of these papers is the emphasis they provide on the role of coalitions in the processes connected to contact refusal. The analyses show that the coalition, more than any given parental behavior, plays a critical role in the immediate and long-term aftermath of divorce and separation. This finding confirms that complex, systemic models must be used in subsequent research, as initially suggested by Kelly and Johnston (2001). On a practical level, it also suggests that there are multiple pathways to resolving contact refusal issues. Though additional studies will be required to demonstrate causal pathways, an outgrowth of this study is that a parent experiencing contact refusal may be able to focus on his or her own warmth towards the child and thus alleviate the coalition and contact refusal. Such an effort can spare the parents and child from additional court proceedings or blaming in therapeutic settings.

The analyses from these papers, especially the third paper, also emphasizes that the effects of coalition making and other parental behaviors are not limited to the immediate aftermath of divorce or separation. Coalitions with mothers were shown to have lasting effects on relationships and individual mental health. Although parents engaging in alienating behaviors likely have motivations unconnected with the health and well-being of their child (Johnston & Campbell, 1988), such a finding may be useful in encouraging parents to avoid coalition formation. Further, parental warmth comes through in the analyses as a primary influence on later well-being. Assuming this work is validated and confirmed in future studies, separating parents can be helped to recognize that to act in their child's best interest they should avoid coalitions with the child and maximize the amount of warmth the child experiences from each parent.

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Development and Validation of the Contact Refusal Scale

Doctoral Dissertation: Paper A

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Abstract

Contact refusal by children following parental divorce or separation is a difficult experience for families. Although theorists have written much about contributions and effects of contact refusal, empirical exploration of the topic is under developed. The work that has been done thus far has often relied on observational and qualitative methods, making new research and replication studies difficult. This paper describes the development of a self-report measure of contact refusal that is not connected with specific contributions, as previous self-report measures have been. Study 1 used responses from 96 participants to narrow an initial pool of 25 question to 12 questions using an exploratory factor analysis. Comparison to qualitative descriptions of participants' families indicated good validity. Study 2 used responses from 332 participants to confirm the fit of the Contact Refusal Scale developed in Study 1. The fit was found to be adequate to good. The Contact Refusal Scale also correlated appropriately with related measures. The two studies together lend support to using the Contact Refusal Scale in future studies of contact refusal. The Contact Refusal Scale can be considered both reliable and valid for characterizing the degree to which children refuse contact with a parent following divorce or separation.

Development and Validation of the Contact Refusal Scale

Parental divorce brings a variety of difficulties for both parents and children (Greif, 1979; Jacobs, 1982; Weaver & Schofield, 2015; Wood, Goesling, & Avellar, 2007). Parents, in addition to losing a spouse through divorce, may experience a significant loss of time with their children. This may be for a variety of reasons, such as a parent moving or having an unfavorable custody arrangement, but may also stem from the child refusing contact with the parent (Baker & Darnell, 2007; Gardner, 2002; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Children's contact refusal creates significant pain and distress for parents (Baker, 2006; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976) and has generated significant debate among researchers regarding its origin and treatment (Gardner, 1999; Meier, 2009; Kelly & Johnston 2001).

A central part of the discussion of contact refusal centers on the source of contact refusal. Gardner (1991, 1999) popularized the concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome, suggesting that extreme forms of contact refusal stem from a campaign by one parent to turn the child against the other parent. Unfortunately, Gardner's conclusions are largely supported by his own clinical data and personal observations, without stringent empirical work backing up his findings. Commentaries on Gardner's conceptualization have often relied on qualitative methods (Baker, 2006; Vassilou & Cartwright, 2001) or have been theoretical, without significant empirical evidence (Drozd & Olesen, 2004).

The quantitative empirical literature building on Gardner's conceptualization has often confounded the child's behavior (contact refusal) and the parent's behavior (alienating). Baker and Chambers (2011), for example, developed a self-report measure of parental alienating behaviors that were then used to assess the effects of such behaviors into young adulthood (Baker & Eichler, 2014; Baker & Verrocchio, 2013). Although the development of this scale is a

valuable contribution to the literature and future efforts to categorize families, the Baker Strategies Questionnaire does not assess for contact refusal, limiting its usefulness in determining the sources of contact refusal. Laughrea's (2002) developed scale also focused on alienating behavior over the child's response. Similarly, Moné and Biringen (2006; 2012) developed a self-report scale of feeling alienated that assessed contact refusal, but connected it closely with Gardner's description of parental alienation. Items may ask, for example, if the respondent avoided their father *because* of their mother's badmouthing. Thus, the scale is of limited use in more general studies of contact refusal.

An alternative framework for understanding contact refusal was proposed by Kelly and Johnston (2001) with modifications by Friedlander and Walters (2010). Their framework focuses on contact refusal as the problem, with a variety of possible sources influencing a child to refuse contact. In Friedlander and Walter's modification, these influences include parental alienating behaviors, abuse, parental deficits, and parent-child enmeshment. Empirical work based on the model indeed shows that rejection of a parent may stem from a number of different behaviors, not simply alienating behaviors (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005). This confirms that efforts to understand contact refusal only by considering alienating behaviors are inherently limited.

Johnston and colleagues' efforts to measure contact refusal separate from the behaviors that cause it relied on observational clinical rating scales. Although standardized and validated, the transportability of these scales is limited. Other measures that have been used to assess aligned relationships in divorced families have similarly been highly cumbersome to administer (Lampel, 1996). This creates difficulty for future studies attempting to use Kelly and Johnston's (2001) framework, in that there are not any available, easily administered measures of contact refusal – separate from the events that may be causing the contact refusal. The development of

such a scale would allow for validation of Johnston and colleagues' (2005) findings and further exploration of the topic of contact refusal in additional contexts.

The Current Studies

The current studies describe the development and validation of a quantitative measure of contact refusal in children following their parents' divorce. Our goal was for the measure to categorize behaviors that are commonly associated with parental rejection, but to not connect the measure to a specific reason for parental rejection, such as parental alienating behaviors. The measure is thus conceived as a way to test the impact of different parental behaviors and other personal and contextual factors. The first study describes an initial effort to develop items and to then pare them down to those that are most related to contact refusal. The second study follows up by readministering the measure developed in the first study to verify its reliability and compare it to other, related measures.

Study 1

Sample

Data come from 96 individuals. The average age of the sample was 24.9 (sd = 5.67). Participants were, on average, 12.2 years old (SD = 2.94) when their parents separated. The sample was predominantly female (79%) and identified racially as white (85%). The majority of participants identified as students (61%) with only 36% reporting being employed full time. Over half of the participants reported completing at least a Bachelor's degree and only 6% reported not having any college experience. A majority of participants spent 80% or more of their time with their mother (53%), whereas 35% reported being with one parent 70% of the time or less. The remainder (7%) were with their fathers 80% of the time or more.

Measures

Contact Refusal Scale. The purpose of this study was to initially test the Contact Refusal Scale. Items for the scale were developed based on previous descriptions of children who refused contact and the observational scales described by Johnston, Walters, and Olesen (2005). Prior to testing, the proposed questions were reviewed by several experts in post-divorce coparenting and in therapy with divorced couples. Each item was duplicated to ask about each parent separately. The initial questions, with prompts for fathers, were: "Told your father that you do not like him," "Insulted or yelled at your father," "Told friends or others that you do not like your father," "Avoided activities with your father's extended family," "Looked forward to seeing your father after being away from him," "Refused to spend time with your father," "Refused to go your father's house," "Complained about spending time with your father," "Ignored your father's attempts to contact you (by phone, email, etc.)," "Gave no answer or a trivial answer to your father's questions," "Told someone that you do not want to spend time with your father," "Made up an excuse to not do something with your father," "Physically attacked or hit your father," "Found reasons to be away (like friends, school activities, etc.) when you were at your father's house," "Behaved worse (like acting out, breaking things, etc.) at your father's house than other places," "Did something physical (like hiding, screaming, refusing to move, etc.) to avoid spending time with your father," "Avoided your father when you were in the same place," "Preferred to spend more time with your father than your mother," "Enjoyed your time with father," "Told your father you love him," "Wished you wouldn't have to see or talk to your father," "Tried to support or comfort your mother because you thought your father was not being fair," "Took your mother's side when your parents disagreed," "Thought of yourself as your mother's ally or teammate against your father," and "Told your mother things you didn't like about your father." An error when setting up the online survey resulted in the item ""Took your

mother's side when your parents disagreed" appearing both in the father and mother surveys, without changing the wording. Respondents answered on a 7 point Likert scale with the first point anchored as "Never" and the last anchored as "Always", without specific anchors for the remaining points.

Additional Questions. Participants were asked to use a slider to indicate their overall closeness with their separate parents. The two endpoints were labeled "Father" and "Mother" and the center point was labeled "Equally Close to Both". Participants were also asked to qualitatively describe their relationships with each of their parents.

Procedures

Participants were recruited to complete the survey through online advertisements and a posting to a university listserv. The survey was completed online. Only participants that completed all items for both parents were included in the final sample. All analyses were conducted with R 3.0.2 (R Core Team, 2013). Factor analyses were completed using the *Psych* package for R (Revell, 2014).

Results

The primary analyses were three separate exploratory factor analyses: one using responses about both parents simultaneously and then a separate analysis for responses about each parent separately. In preparation for the analyses, Velicer's minimum average partial (MAP) criterion (Velicer, 1976) was used to estimate the required number of factors. In the combined analysis, six factors were recommended. Three factors were recommended for the father-oriented questions and five for the mother-oriented questions. These numbers were supported by the scree plots. These recommendations were used in conducting our exploratory factor analyses. Each analysis was conducted as a principal axis analysis with Oblimin rotation.

The results of the combined analysis are presented in Table 1. Using loadings of over .5 as a criteria, three of the factors had more than two items with high loadings. The first factor included items relating to contact refusal and positive relationship with fathers. The second factor included items focused on contact refusal of and coalitions against mothers, without the positive relationship items. The third factor included items related to coalitions against fathers.

We next conducted separate factor analyses for the father items and mother items (Table 2). The results of the father items analysis were similar to the results of the combined analysis. The first factor included items related to connection with and contact refusal of fathers and the second factor related to coalitions against fathers. The analysis of the mother oriented items was more varied. The first and fifth factors both included elements of contact refusal. The second factor included items regarding coalitions against mother. The third and fourth factors only contained a few items each about positive connection and behavioral defiance, respectively.

We focused on factors one and two from the combined analysis, factor one from the father's analysis, and factors one and five from the mother's analysis. A guiding goal for retaining and removing items was to have the same items for both mothers and fathers. We decided to combine factors one and five from the mother's analysis because it was unclear how the items from each factor were conceptually different and because the constituent items typically loaded together in the combined analysis. Our basic criteria for items to be retained from these factors was that they loaded well (at least over .4-.5) for both parents on the combined and individual analyses and had a strong loading (over .6) for at least one parent. Twelve items were retained. Most of the retained items matched these criteria simply. This included the items *Told others do not like* (Combined Factor (CF) 1: .73; CF 2: .55; Father Factor (FF) 1: .79; Mother Factor (MF) 1: .00; MF 5: .44), *Avoided extended family* (CF 1: .63; CF 2: .64; FF 1: .75; MF 1: .18; MF 5:

.49), *Complained about time* (CF 1: .81; CF 2: .60; FF 1: .79; MF 1: .49; MF 5: .22), *Ignored contact* (CF 1: .90; CF 2: .61; FF 1: .97; MF 1: .79; MF 5: .17), *Trivial answers* (CF 1: .77; CF 2: .79; FF 1: .73; MF 1: .08; MF 5: .55), *Told don't want to spend time* (CF 1: .67; CF 2: .67; FF 1: .75; MF 1: .17; MF 5: .41), *Excuse to not do something* (CF 1: .94; CF 2: .72; FF 1: .86; MF 1: .53; MF 5: .25), *Found reasons to be away* (CF 1: .75; CF 2: .75; FF 1: .64; MF 1: .06; MF 5: .42), *Avoided in same place* (CF 1: .80; CF 2: .78; FF 1: .75; MF 1: .36; MF 5: .44), and *Wished not to see* (CF 1: .69; CF 2: .80; FF 1: .74; MF 1: .27; MF 5: .43). A few items marginally matched the criteria, but were still retained. *Refused to spend time* (CF 1: .85; CF 2: .51; FF 1: .91; MF 1: .69; MF 5: .10), was marginal because of the lower loading on combined factor 2, but was retained because of its strong loading on mother factor 1. *Refused to go to house* (CF 1: .86; CF 2: .36; FF 1: .84; MF 1: .88; MF 5: -.12) was similarly given an exception to a low loading on combined factor 2 because of a strong loading on mother factor 1.

We averaged these twelve items to create a scale score for each participant. Cronbach's alpha for the father items was .96 and for the mother items was .95. The mean for fathers was 2.88 (SD = 1.71) and for mothers was 2.40 (SD = 1.49). A paired sample t-test revealed a marginal difference between each parent's contact refusal score ($t = 1.90, p = .06$). The two parents' scores were not significantly correlated ($r = -.09, p = .41$).

We used the slider question that was asked as a check on the validity of the scores. Participants moving the slider to the left indicated being closer to their father and to the right indicated being closer to their mother. The position of the slider resulted in a number between 0 and 100. The slider score correlated significantly with both contact refusal scores ($p < .001$). The correlation to the father score was $-.60$ and to the mother score was $.62$. The contact refusal scores were also compared to the qualitative descriptions that participants gave of their

relationships. Qualitative descriptions were consistent with expectations. For mother scores, low scores (< 3) spoke positively or ambivalently of their mother. Sample comments (with scores following) include "I lived with my mother. It was a standard mother-son teenage relationship. Probably better after the divorce than before" (1.17), "We were very close. We did way more activities after the divorce" (2.33), and "The relationship was my mom was find on my end. It was clear she took the divorce hard and was somewhat of a crazy person" (2.67). There were a few responses in the 2-3 range that suggested anger against mothers including "I was already becoming less close with my mom before the divorce and afterwards things became increasingly worse, I yelled at her a lot and told her I hated her occasionally" (2.42). Mid-range scores (3 - 5) described increasingly distant relationships. Sample comments include "I was devastated by their separation but did not blame my mother. I did, however, think she was immature and she was not someone I wanted to spend much time with" (3.67) and "Tried to avoid contact and didn't enjoy spending time with her because I know she would try to say negative things about my father," (4.5). The only contrary example in this range only wrote "GOOD" (4) for a description. High scores (> 5) were consistently negative in their relationship. Examples include "It was horrible. I rarely talked to her, wouldn't even be in the same room as her" (5.17) and "Oh geez. I hated my mom honestly," (6.42).

Qualitative descriptions of fathers followed a similar pattern. However, throughout the descriptions there were many comments where fathers refused contact or contact was not allowed. Low score examples include "My dad and I were close, I remember missing him a lot when I wasn't with him," (1.42), " He stopped talking to my siblings and I. They contacted him on and off a few times, but he never seemed very interested in any of us," (1), and "I had no relationship with my father and still do not. I was allowed to see him once with supervision of

another adult," (1.5). Midrange scores were again associated with negative descriptions, such as "I could not help but blame him for the demise of my family structure. I abhorred going to see him on weekends and was at a point in my life where all I wanted to do was hang out with my friends. I still maintained a level of respect for him as my father, but I definitely held some resentment," (3.67) and "I would spend time with my father and his new family, and while I didn't really dislike them, I would bring stories to my friends to make fun of behind their backs (emotional distancing, right?). I spent as little time with them as possible", (4.17). High scores were consistently negative, with additional descriptions of how fathers isolated themselves. Sample comments include "Didn't like spending time or talking to him. I don't think this was directly caused by the divorce but more so I just thought he was mean and didn't want to get yelled at all the time," (5.33), "Difficult because I blamed him for everything because he left the house. I felt abandoned" (5.58), and " I hate the dude.....he was the best father growing up and had a life crisis one day and bam things changed.. ," (7).

Study 2

Sample

Our sample for Study 2 included 332 participants. On average, participants were 11.8 years old at the time of separation ($SD = 2.91$) and were 25.1 years old at the time of the survey ($SD = 6.3$). Seventy-three percent of the sample was female. A majority of the participants were white (66%) with 13% reporting their race as "Other" or a combination of races, 11% reporting Hispanic, 6% as African American, and 4% as Asian. Half of the sample reported being students (51%) and 30% reported being employed full-time. Twenty percent of the sample had not attended any college and 35% had completed a four year degree or more. The sample was

skewed towards spending most of their time with mom; 72% of the sample reported spending 70% or more of their time under their mother's care in the average week.

Measures

Contact Refusal Scale. The Contact Refusal Scale was developed in Study 1. In this study, only the twelve items that were retained in the previous study were administered to participants. The responses were still on a seven point scale anchored on each end with *Never* and *Always*. Participants completed the scale for each parent. Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .96 for questions rating fathers and .96 for mothers.

Baker Strategies Questionnaire. A portion of the sample completed the Baker Strategy Questionnaire (Baker & Chambers, 2011). The Baker Strategy Questionnaire is modeled around theoretical and qualitative descriptions of Parental Alienation Syndrome. The 20 item measure asks participants to rate their parents as a measure of the degree to which that parent tried to turn the respondent against the other parent. Participants completed the scale for both parents. Cronbach's alpha for responses about fathers was .95 and was .95 for responses about mothers.

Coparenting Behaviors Questionnaire – Warmth Subscale. The Coparenting Behaviors Questionnaire includes 86 items, spread across 12 subscales (Schum & Stolberg, 2007). It is focused on measuring children's perceptions of their divorced parents parenting and coparenting. Only the *Warmth* subscale was used in this study. It includes 7 items for each parent, such as "I felt that my mom cared about me." Participants responded to the warmth questions for both parents. Cronbach's alpha for fathers was .95 and for mothers was .94.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through several online advertising platforms and a university listserv. All surveys were completed online. Participants completed the study measures as part of

a broader study. Participants were offered a chance to win a \$20 gift card for participation. To be eligible for the study, participants had to confirm that they were between 8 and 17 years old at the time of their parents' separation and that they were currently between 18 and 35 years old. The broader study used a planned missing data design (Graham, 2009). Because of this, only a randomized subset of the participants completed the Baker Strategy Questionnaire (N = 102) and the warmth scale (N = 151), reducing the sample size for correlations between them and the Contact Refusal Scale. Analyses were conducted with R 3.0.2 (R Core Team, 2013) and the *Lavaan* package for R (Rosseel, 2012), the *psych* package for R (Revelle, 2014), and the *Hmisc* package for R (Harrell, 2014).

Results

The primary focus of Study 2 was to conduct confirmatory factor analyses for the Contact Refusal scales for mothers and fathers. Separate analyses were conducted for each parent. In both cases the 12 items were loaded as factors of a common latent variable. Standardized and unstandardized loadings for both models are displayed in Table 3. All loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$). The fit indices for the model of contact refusal of fathers the model suggested adequate to mediocre fit ($\chi^2(54) = 212.24, p < .001$; cmin/df = 3.93; CFI = .96; TLI = .95; RMSEA = .09, 90% CI = (.08, .11). The fit indices for the model of contact refusal of mothers were similar ($\chi^2(54) = 182.65, p < .001$; cmin/df = 3.38; CFI = .97; TLI = .96; RMSEA = .09, 90% CI = (.07, .10).

Using the modification indices provided by the *lavaan* package for R, a few modifications were made to improve the model fit. For each model, several modification indices indicated that correlating certain error terms would provide a better fit. The three modifications with the largest predicted impact were added to the model and the model was reanalyzed. For

both mothers and fathers, the error terms for questions 1 (Told others do not like) and 8 (Told others don't want to spend time) were correlated and the error terms for questions 3 (Refused to spend time) and 4 (Refused to go to house) were correlated. For fathers, the error terms for questions 5 (Complained about spending time) and 11 (Avoided when in same place) were correlated. For mothers, the error terms for questions 4 (Refused to go to house) and 8 (Told others don't want to spend time) were correlated. These changes resulted in improvements in fit for fathers ($\chi^2(51) = 130.96, p < .001$; $cmin/df = 2.57$; $CFI = .98$; $TLI = .97$; $RMSEA = .07$, 90% $CI = (.05, .08)$) and mothers ($\chi^2(51) = 117.70, p < .001$; $cmin/df = 2.31$; $CFI = .98$; $TLI = .98$; $RMSEA = .06$, 90% $CI = (.05, .08)$). The resultant fit indices were adequate for both models.

As a test of convergent validity, we computed correlations between the Contact Refusal Scale, Baker Strategy Questionnaire, and the Warmth Subscale from the Coparenting Behaviors Questionnaire (Table 4). Mother and father contact refusal was weakly correlated ($r = .11, p = .05$). Contact refusal of fathers was positively and moderately correlated to father's alienating behaviors ($r = .34, p < .001$) and negatively and strongly related to father's warmth ($r = -.55, p < .001$). Contact refusal of mothers had a positive and moderate-strong correlation with mother's alienating behavior ($r = .46, p < .001$) and a negative and moderate-strong correlation with mother's warmth ($r = -.49, p < .001$).

Discussion

This project described the development of the Contact Refusal Scale, a self-report measure of children refusing to be with a parent following divorce. The measure shows good reliability and adequate fit. The measure, based on qualitative descriptions of relationships, also shows good validity in describing participants' attitudes towards their parents at the time of divorce. The availability of this measure can help expand understanding of the causes and

experience of contact refusal. By developing these topics, parents and children experiencing contact refusal – as well as clinicians, court personnel, and others working with them – can be aided in improving their relationships and avoid any potential lasting effects of disrupted parent-child relationships.

The analysis of the results also provides important insights into gender differences in contact refusal and suggests further need for refinement in its measurement. Although the measures were designed to be identical for mothers and fathers, two factors were combined to support the given scale for mothers. Additionally, five factors were recommended for mothers, whereas only three were adequate for fathers. This suggests that although there are basic similarities in contact refusal of mothers and fathers (confirmed by high alpha coefficients for both parents), there are also likely nuanced and important gender differences. The qualitative accounts of fathers also suggest that there are additional gender and general factors to be considered in fully understanding post-divorce parent-child dynamics. In those accounts a common theme at all levels of refusal was that the child's refusal was not the sole determinant of the amount of time spent with fathers. On the contrary, custody arrangements, father disengagement, and other factors similarly played a role. This is consistent with previous research that finds that many divorced couples – especially those marked by conflict – become disengaged over time, with one parent exiting the child's life entirely (Ambert, 1988; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990). It is hoped that the future use and refinement of the Contact Refusal Scale will help to explore these gender dynamics and other areas of complexity in post-divorce parent-child relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

The greatest limitation and the most important next step in the validation of the Contact Refusal Scale revolve around the samples used in the studies described in this paper. In both studies, convenience samples of young adults were used. The convenience sampling brings questions of how well the measure will generalize to other populations. An effort should be made to collect a representative sample to ensure the validity and reliability of the measure. Because the methods focused on young adults' retrospective accounts of their parents' divorce or separation, there remain questions about the viability of administering the measure to children and adolescents. Reading levels and the appropriateness of questions for these questions are central questions to address as well as whether the measure retains its psychometric properties with younger participants. When the measure is better validated for children and adolescents it may also prove useful as a measure of therapeutic outcomes. Characteristics including sensitivity to change and community norms will need to be explored to maximize its usefulness in clinical settings.

A primary direction for the future is for the Contact Refusal Scale to be used to answer research and clinical questions. With significant questions remaining about the family and personal processes associated with parent divorce and separation, additional, more rigorous research is needed to better understand the dynamics that follow divorce. Understanding the process better will enable parents and practitioners to better make changes to improve the situation of both parents and children. The development of the Contact Refusal Scale provides researchers and clinicians a tool to better understand the complex dynamics of children's responses to their parents' divorce and separation.

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Table 1.

Exploratory Factor Analysis with Oblimin Rotation of Items for both Fathers and Mothers.

Item	Father						Mother					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
Told do not like	.48	-.04	.26	.10	.08	.41	.05	.17	-.21	.72	-.11	-.04
Insulted or yelled	.34	-.15	.26	.33	.19	.25	-.04	.12	-.26	.64	-.02	.09
Told others do not like	.73	-.17	.11	.21	.04	.09	-.15	.55	-.01	.46	-.09	.02
Avoided extended family	.63	.17	.08	.04	-.01	.06	.07	.64	.02	.18	.14	-.04
Looked forward to seeing	-.50	.14	-.27	.08	.39	.05	.27	-.40	-.05	-.12	.50	-.20
Refused to spend time	.85	-.09	-.04	.05	-.01	.04	.06	.51	-.04	.15	-.09	.38
Refused to go to house	.86	-.01	.00	-.06	.06	.06	.05	.36	-.16	.03	.01	.55
Complained about time	.81	-.01	.00	.16	.06	-.08	.09	.60	-.14	.14	-.12	.25
Ignored contact	.90	-.03	-.03	-.10	-.08	.12	.10	.61	-.11	-.10	.02	.44
Trivial answers	.77	.21	.10	-.03	-.04	-.13	.02	.79	.07	.15	-.09	-.10
Told don't want to spend time	.67	-.10	.28	.13	-.06	.04	-.11	.67	.01	.31	-.06	.06
Excuse to not do something	.94	.10	-.09	.01	.08	-.12	.07	.72	-.15	.00	.03	.22
Attacked or hit	-.06	-.14	-.02	-.05	-.08	.45	-.13	.00	.05	-.02	-.13	.53
Found reasons to be away	.75	.12	.05	-.22	.10	-.07	.08	.75	-.08	-.05	-.08	-.09
Behaved worse	.38	-.03	.24	.03	.24	.23	.01	.20	-.18	.45	.19	.20

Hid, screamed, etc.	.47	.01	.14	.10	.23	.10	-.11	.27	.02	.29	-.03	.33
Avoided in same place	.80	.05	.07	-.10	.04	.04	.09	.78	.00	.10	-.11	.10
Preferred over other parent	-.32	.52	-.14	.05	.14	.06	.35	-.24	.46	.07	.05	-.11
Enjoyed time	-.54	.17	-.28	-.01	.37	.01	.10	-.46	.05	-.14	.56	-.06
Told you love them	-.53	.18	-.03	.13	.47	-.04	-.03	-.23	.25	-.19	.57	.02
Wished not to see	.69	-.06	.14	.05	-.22	.01	.05	.80	-.02	.14	-.15	.05
Comforted other parent	.18	.26	.70	-.11	.09	-.14	-.12	.63	-.28	-.24	.17	.14
Took other parent's side ^a	.00	-.01	.87	-.06	-.09	-.05	-.05	-.12	.89	-.08	-.03	.02
Other parent's team mate	.04	.04	.74	-.10	.12	.09	-.23	.68	-.04	-.07	.11	.04
Complained to other parent	.38	.05	.46	.22	.30	.06	-.16	.55	-.01	.18	.20	.10

Notes. Bolded item descriptions were ultimately retained. Bolded loadings are greater than .5. Although mother and father loadings are presented side by side in this table, both were run simultaneously. ^aThis item was asked in reference to taking mother's side in both surveys due to an error in setting up the survey.

Table 2.

Exploratory Factor Analyses with Oblimin Rotation of Items for Fathers and Mothers conducted separately.

	Fathers			Mothers				
	F1	F2	F3	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Told do not like	.58	.12	.39	-.01	-.07	-.13	.85	.07
Insulted or yelled	.43	.17	.42	.09	.11	.02	.77	.01
Told others do not like	.79	.07	.10	.00	.10	-.20	.45	.44
Avoided extended family	.75	-.16	.10	.18	.05	.12	.24	.49
Looked forward to seeing	-.60	-.24	.34	-.17	-.09	.74	.05	.00
Refused to spend time	.91	-.09	-.01	.69	-.06	-.15	.13	.10
Refused to go to house	.84	.02	.03	.88	.05	.03	.10	-.12
Complained about time	.79	.00	.12	.49	.04	-.25	.13	.22
Ignored contact	.97	-.11	-.03	.79	.09	-.02	-.10	.17
Trivial answers	.73	.04	.04	.08	.03	-.25	.14	.55
Told don't want to spend time	.75	.21	-.02	.17	.11	-.21	.29	.41
Excuse to not do something	.86	-.05	.03	.53	.18	-.14	.00	.25
Attacked or hit	.04	-.06	.10	.54	.00	-.06	.01	-.26
Found reasons to be away	.64	.12	.03	.06	.24	-.20	.03	.42
Behaved worse	.40	.16	.41	.33	.17	.15	.55	-.08
Hid, screamed, etc.	.45	.11	.32	.47	-.06	-.18	.26	-.05

Avoided in same place	.75	.11	.07	.36	.02	-.24	.07	.44
Preferred over other parent	-.24	-.43	.33	.04	-.79	.25	-.02	.17
Enjoyed time	-.63	-.27	.33	-.05	-.05	.84	-.02	-.05
Told you love them	-.63	-.03	.35	.09	-.03	.73	-.15	.02
Wished not to see	.74	.12	-.21	.27	.10	-.30	.11	.43
Comforted other parent	.03	.76	.06	.19	.79	.09	-.13	.19
Took other parent's side ^a	.00	.85	-.10	.09	-.74	.07	-.25	.10
Other parent's team mate	-.05	.81	.12	.10	.58	.02	.01	.29
Complained to other parent	.36	.39	.36	.11	.33	.14	.24	.40

Notes. Bolded item descriptions were ultimately retained. Bolded loadings are greater than .5. ^aThis item was asked in reference to taking mother's side in both surveys due to an error in setting up the survey.

Table 3.

Standardized and unstandardized loadings for Confirmatory Factor Analyses

	Fathers			Mothers		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Told others do not like	1.00		.81	1.00		.85
Avoided extended family	.79	.06	.65	.68	.06	.61
Refused to spend time	1.08	.05	.92	.90	.04	.87
Refused to go to house	1.05	.05	.88	.78	.05	.77
Complained about time	1.01	.06	.82	.98	.05	.85
Ignored contact	1.00	.05	.86	.91	.05	.84
Trivial answers	.84	.06	.73	.80	.05	.71
Told don't want to spend time	1.09	.05	.90	1.06	.05	.91
Excuse to not do something	1.02	.05	.88	.96	.05	.87
Found reasons to be away	.97	.06	.79	.89	.06	.72
Avoided in same place	1.02	.05	.87	1.02	.05	.89
Wished not to see	1.15	.06	.90	1.01	.05	.88

Note. Father and Mother analyses were run separately. All loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Table 4.

Correlation matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Contact Refusal of Father						
2. Contact Refusal of Mother	.11†					
3. Father's Alienating Behavior	.34***	.52***				
4. Mother's Alienating Behavior	.19†	.46***	.44***			
5. Father Warmth	-.55***	.03	-.19	.15		
6. Mother Warmth	.13	-.49***	.05	-.26	.10	

Note: † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Predictors of contact refusal following divorce: Testing and expanding Friedlander and Walters'

(2010) model.

Doctoral Dissertation: Paper B

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Abstract

Children refusing contact with a parent following divorce or separation can create significant distress. Previous theoretical and empirical exploration of contact refusal has focused on a number of possible causes for children to refuse contact, especially abuse by the rejected parent and efforts to alienate the child by the non-rejected parent. Friedlander and Walters (2010) provided a framework emphasizing multiple causes for any given case of contact refusal, including abuse, alienation, parental deficits, and enmeshment. Further researcher has presented parental conflict and normative developmental needs as possible factors that may encourage contact refusal. Models predicting contact refusal was tested based on retrospective data from 292 young adults. Forming a coalition with one parent was a strong predictor of refusing contact with the other parent. Alienating behaviors were mediated by the coalition that was formed. Parental warmth was also a protective factor against a child refusing contact. Parental violence was also a significant predictor. Adolescents were marginally more likely to refuse contact. The research confirms Friedlander and Walters (2010) assumption that multiple factors influence a child's contact refusal. It adds to the model by emphasizing the role of coalitions and the ways that children receive a parent's alienating behaviors.

Predictors of contact refusal following divorce: Testing and expanding Friedlander and Walters' (2010) model.

Divorce is a complex process for parents, children, and extended family members. The separation process brings risks for adults' physical, emotional, and relational health (Greif, 1979; Jacobs, 1982; Wood, Goesling, & Avellar, 2007). Among the most significant difficulties that separating and divorcing parents may face is the loss of contact with their children (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976). This may be especially difficult for parents with whom the child refuses to speak or visit (Baker & Darnell, 2007; Gardner, 2002; Vassilou & Cartwright, 2001). Johnston (2003) found that significant parental alignment occurred in 15% of children studied in the community. In highly conflicted custody cases, the rates of contact refusal reach 63-71% percent (Johnston, 1993).

Although it is well established that some children refuse contact with a parent following divorce, significant debate and disagreement remain over the etiology of contact refusal. Gardner (1991, 2002, 2004a) initiated much of the recent discussion about contact refusal when he suggested that it predominantly stemmed from the other parent's encouragement to refuse contact. Using the label *Parental Alienation Syndrome* (PAS) for extreme cases, Gardner outlined eight behaviors in children as criteria for diagnosis, including a campaign of denigration against the targeted parent, an absence of guilt about rejecting behaviors, and the spread of animosity to extended family (Gardner, 2004a). Gardner then suggested that these child behaviors emerge from parental alienating behaviors, such as making negative statements about the other parent to the child, maneuvering to keep the child from the other parent, and engaging in significant litigation. Gardner's relatively invariant connection of contact refusal to alienating

behaviors brought with it specific recommendations, including at times awarding sole custody to the rejected parent.

In response to Gardner's (1991, 2002, 2004a) description of the Parental Alienation Syndrome, Kelly and Johnston (2001) and Friedlander and Walters (2010) provided an alternate theoretical framework from which to approach questions about alliances, rejection, and alienation in children following their parents' divorce. Specifically, Kelly and Johnston (2001) suggested that following separation, children will fall somewhere on a continuum with the following anchors: positive relationship with both parents, affinity with one parent, alliance with one parent, estranged from one parent, and alienated from one parent. Friedlander and Walters's (2010) later work refined the continuum into a typology where children may demonstrate alignment (which included the affinity and alliance anchors of the previous continuum); alienation, enmeshment, or estrangement; or, most commonly, a hybrid case combining alienation, enmeshment, and estrangement. Central to Friedlander and Walters's framework – and in contrast to much of Gardner's writing – is the belief that there are multiple causes for children rejecting a parent following divorce.

Friedlander and Walters's (2010) conceptualization provides a useful framework from which to assess children who refuse contact with a parent following divorce. However, it is unclear if the possible reasons for contact refusal included in the conceptualization included all relevant possible causes of rejection. In a commentary on Friedlander and Walter's conceptualization, Johnston and Goldman (2010) noted that rejecting behaviors were common for teenagers involved in high-conflict divorce, even in the absence of the alienating behaviors or deficits in parental effectiveness that are typically associated with alienation and estrangement. They also noted that high conflict between co-parents, a common risk factor for

negative child outcomes (Amato, 2000), played a role in rejection behaviors. Unfortunately, neither developmental nor coparental causes are included in Friedlander and Walters's framework.

Potential Contributions to Contact Refusal

Abuse. It is well established that child abuse is associated with a variety of negative outcomes for children (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Smailes, 1999; Johnson et al., 2002; McCord, 1983). Child abuse has played a key role in discussions of contact refusal and parental alienation, with debates around the role of false accusations being an alienating tactic and the role of real abuse prompting contact refusal (Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Gardner, 1999). Johnston, Lee, Olesen, and Walters (2005) provide data suggesting that allegations of abuse were more frequent in their sample of highly conflicted custody-disputing families than in typical divorce/custody cases. The relationship between abuse, alienating behaviors, and contact refusal has seen significant discussion in the literature. Gardner (1999) emphasized that allegations of abuse can be used as part of a program of alienation and provided guidelines for differentiating between authentic abuse and alienation fueled allegations. Others, such as Meier (2010), acknowledged that alienation may occur, but warned that over-emphasis of alienation has led to victims of authentic abuse being ignored. Others have attempted to produce a more nuanced model of the relationship between alienation and abuse (Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Fidler & Bala, 2010), often founding their discussion on Kelly and Johnston's (2001) aforementioned model. Evidence that a more than half of accusations of child abuse made by divorcing parents are not substantiated speaks to the complex relationship between abuse and alienation (Johnston, Lee, Olesen, & Walters, 2005). Unfortunately – as confirmed by Saini, Johnston, Fidler and Bala's (2012) comprehensive review of the literature on alienation – there has been little empirical exploration

of the relationships between abuse, alienating behaviors, and contact refusal. A notable exception to this scarcity of literature confirmed that substantiated accounts of abuse significantly predicted parental rejection in highly conflicted divorce cases when controlling for a variety of other factors, including alienating behaviors by the other parent (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005).

Alienating Behaviors. Alienating behaviors are defined as attempts by one parent to influence a child to reject the other parent. Although not unique to divorced couples (Meier, 2009), alienating behaviors following divorce receive special attention due to the possibility that they may result in a parent completely losing contact with their child (Gardner, 1999). A variety of specific behaviors have been identified as alienating in divorced parents. Gardner (2004a), for example, included programming verbalizations, litigiousness, complaints to police and child protective services, and exclusionary maneuvers as primary alienating behaviors by parents. Johnston, Walters, and Oleson's (2005) scale for parental alienation included behaviors like being angry if child shows positive feelings about the other parent, ridiculing the other parent to the child, telling stories about the other parent's failures as a parent, and blaming the divorce or separation on the other parent.

Parental Behaviors. Friedlander and Walter (2010) describe cases of planned, significant alienation to be rare in their work, reporting that alienating behaviors that happen without complete awareness are more frequent. Such behaviors may stem from immaturity and anger and include subtle cues of disapproval, such as eye-rolling and negative voice tones. They note that such cases of subtle alienating behaviors can still have major impacts on children's development and their relationships with the target parent. Empirical research bears out the contention that alienating behaviors play a significant role in contact refusal (Johnston, 1993; Johnston, 2003). Johnston, Walters, and Olesen (2005) notably found a significant effect, even when controlling

for other factors like target parent warmth and abuse, as did Johnston (2003). Alienating behaviors have also been implicated in other negative psychological outcomes (Carey, 2003; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005b).

Child Response. Based on systems theory, it is not simply enough to examine how one parent's behavior affects the child's relationship with the other parent (von Bertalanffy, 1968). The way in which the child contributes to the system will be of critical importance as well. As a basic example, it is critical to consider how a child receives and reacts to alienating behavior, before considering the effect of the behavior itself. This problem may explain why connections between alienating behaviors and subsequent dysfunction have been difficult to detect (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). Unfortunately, the empirical data on child responses, specifically accepting the alienating behavior and forming a coalition with the alienating parent, is generally lacking in the discussion of alienating behaviors and contact refusal. Johnston (1993) and Johnston (2003) both found alignment with one parent to be present and distinct from rejection of the other parent. Unfortunately, little was done to explore the relationship between coalitions and contact refusal, leaving additional questions about its role unanswered.

Estrangement. Estrangement in this paper is defined as contact refusal that stems from a child not wanting to spend time with a parent because of that parent's authentic deficits as a parent. Kelly and Johnston (2001) suggested that parents who are abusive or violent may experience "realistic estrangement" following divorce or separation. Friedlander and Walters' model separates abuse into a separate category, reserving the word estrangement for contact refusal precipitated by ineffective parenting or other parental deficits. Findings connecting contact refusal to parental behavior are limited, though they do suggest that parent behavior is connected to rejection of parents (Johnson, Walters, & Oleson, 2005). Studies not related to

contact refusal provide related evidence that parental satisfaction, a likely correlate of parent-child relationships, is adversely affected by disconnected parenting styles following divorce (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005). Moreover, parental effectiveness is likely to be impaired during the immediate aftermath of a divorce (Forgatch, Patterson, & Skinner, 1988; Hetherington, 1991; Hines, 1997), perhaps indicating that estrangement stemming from ineffective parenting is a particularly important, though understudied element of contact refusal. A final note relative to estrangement is that a child's attributed blame for the divorce may adversely affect their relationship with a parent, even when alienating behaviors are not contributing to that blame (Jennings & Howe, 2001).

Co-parental relationship. Johnston and Goldman's (2010) follow-up to Friedlander and Walters's (2010) conceptualization includes a number of observations that are not addressed by Friedlander and Walters's model. One suggestion they make is that a hostile co-parental relationship may underlie alienating behaviors and maltreatment – a mediation relationship where alienating behaviors and maltreatment are more likely in the presence of significant conflict. Alternatively, conflict between coparents may have a direct impact on children and encourage contact refusal, even when it does not lead to increased alienating behaviors or impaired parenting. In support of the direct effect, Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) found that adolescents often feel caught between their parents in high conflict divorced families. The adolescents in their sample reported that exposure to conflict made it difficult to maintain a relationship with both parents (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993; see also Afifi & Schrodt, 2003 and Wallerstein and Kelly, 1974)). Thus conflict behaviors between coparents may make a unique contribution to parental rejection that will also have specific treatment goals (Godbout & Parent, 2012; Moné & Biringen, 2006). Indeed, efforts to improve

the co-parenting relationship, rather than the individual behaviors of the parents, have been found to help resolve contact refusal problems (Kumar, 2003).

Adolescence. Johnston and Goldman (2010) also suggested that many adolescents in their sample rejected a parent even though there was no evidence of significant alienation or estrangement. This is notable in that contact refusal and alienated stances in younger children tend to be clearly associated with parental behaviors (Racusin, Copans, & Mills, 1994; Wallerstein & Kelly 1976). Wallerstein and Kelly (1974) corroborate Johnston and Goldman's findings, noting that the teenagers in their sample often showed a precipitous drop in parental relationships following divorce. These behaviors do not fit in any of Friedlander and Walter's categories, as the parental rejection stems from developmental needs in the presence of high conflict.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1974) grounded their findings and conclusions in the developmental writings of Freud (1958), Erikson (1959), Blos (1963), and Laufner (1966). Each of these theorists described adolescence as a time of "storm and stress" as the child individuates from their parents. Wallerstein and Kelly concluded that parental divorce during adolescence can force an adolescent to individuate and lose respect for his/her parents faster than normal, leading to parental rejection. More recent research and theory, however, have not supported this view of adolescence. As summarized by Steinberg (2001), recent research suggests that conflict between adolescents and their parents is not endemic and that negative interactions are often more distressing to parents than to children. This leaves a basic gap in understanding the response of adolescents to parental divorce. Because the studies showing spontaneous rejection by adolescents (Bala, Hunt, & McCarney, 2010; Johnston and Goldman, 2010; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1974, 1976) have not controlled well for parental behaviors that may affect rejection, an

initial task to address this gap is to determine if adolescents are prone to reject a parent without reason. If they are, additional efforts will be needed to understand the processes behind that rejection. For example, adolescent egocentrism (Frankenberger, 2000), shame (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974), stress (Steinberg, 2001), or some other cause might explain adolescent specific rejection.

The Current Study

The aim of this study is to contribute to the literature on contact refusal and parental alienation by testing and expanding Friedlander and Walters' (2010) model of contact refusal. Using a community sample, the study will include tests of the effects of several of the factors that Friedlander and Walters proposed could contribute to contact refusal including abuse, alienation, and estrangement. The study will also test the additional potential contribution of parent-child coalitions, co-parental functioning, age at time of divorce, and parental responsibility for the divorce to contact refusal. Specifically, the study tests the hypothesis that contact refusal is simultaneously predicted by parental alienating behaviors, parental warmth (modeling estrangement), parental abuse (measured by exposure to violence), coparental conflict, children's responses to divorce (modeled as coalitions and ascribing parental responsibility), and the child being an adolescent.

Method

Sample

The sample for this study included 292 participants recruited from around the United States. Twenty-seven percent of the sample was male. To be eligible for the study, participants must have been between 8 and 17 at the time of separation and between 18 and 35 currently. The average age of the sample was 25.1 years ($SD = 6.45$). The majority of participants reported their

race as White (65%) with smaller portions reporting Hispanic (11%), Mixed/Other (13%), Black (6%), Asian (4%), or American Indian (.4%). Fifty-one percent of the sample identified as students. Thirty percent reported working full-time and 25% work part-time. Seventeen percent completed only high school, 45% had some college experience, and 34% had completed a Bachelor's degree or more. The average age of at separation was 11.8 (SD = 2.91) and it had been 13 years since the separation on average (SD = 7.12). Custody arrangements during the first year of separation varied with 34% reporting their parents had joint custody, 26% reported mother custody, 7% father custody, 17% had no custody arrangement, and 16% reported that they did not know the custody arrangement.

Measures

Contact Refusal Scale. Participants' contact refusal was measured using the 12 item Contact Refusal Scale (Huff, Paper A). This scale measures behaviors associated with rejecting a parent after divorce. Sample items include "Refused to spend time with your [father/mother]" and "Made up an excuse to not do something with your [father/mother]". Participants completed the measure for both their father and mother, with a prompt to answer for their behavior in the first year following their parents' separation. Cronbach's alpha for reporting on fathers was .96 and on mothers was .96. The development of the Contact Refusal Scale showed it to match closely with qualitative descriptions of participants' relationships with their parents and to have moderate correlations with related measures.

Coparenting Behaviors Questionnaire. The Coparenting Behaviors questionnaire is an 86 item measure designed for children of divorced parents to report on their parents' parenting and coparenting (Schum & Stolberg, 2007). The items are divided across 12 subscales. In this study, only a subset of scales were administered and analyzed. The *Warmth* subscale was given

to participants to answer about both parents. It includes 7 items, such as "I felt that my mom cared about me." Cronbach's alpha in this sample for fathers was .95 and for mothers was .94. The *Coparenting Conflict* scale was also completed by participants. It includes 10 items about the coparenting dyad, rather than about an individual parent. A sample item is "When my parents talked to each other, they got angry." Cronbach's alpha for the sample was .93.

Baker Strategy Questionnaire. Baker and Chambers (2011) developed the Baker Strategy Questionnaire based on Gardner's description of Parental Alienation Syndrome and her own interviews with parents who reported being alienated. The 20 item measure asks children of divorced parents to report their parent's behaviors. Sample items include "Said or implied that my [dad/mom] did not really love me" and, "Withheld or blocked phone messages, letters, cards, or gifts from my [dad/mom] meant for me." Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire for both parents about the first year after their parents separated. Cronbach's alpha for fathers was .94 and for mothers was .95.

Parental Coalition Scale. A Parental Coalition Scale was developed for this study based on Johnston, Walters, and Oleson's (2005) scale for parental alignment. The four items were included in the development of the Contact Refusal Scale, but rejected from it because they loaded on a separate factor. The four items together measure coalitions between the participant and each parent against the other parent. The four items – listed here to indicate a coalition with the participant's father – were "Tried to support or comfort your father because you thought your mother was not being fair," "Took your father's side when your parents disagreed," "Thought of yourself as your father's ally or teammate against your mother," and, "Told your father things you didn't like about your mother." Participants were asked to complete the measure for each

parent based on the first year following separation. Cronbach's alpha for fathers in the sample was .86 and for mothers was .88.

Violence. Violence was assessed with two questions for each parent: "Before your parent's separation, how often was your [father/mother] violent or physically abusive towards you?" and "During the first year of separation, how often was your [father/mother] violent or physically abusive towards you?" Participants responded for both parents on a five point Likert Scale from "Never" to "Always".

Parental Responsibility. A single question asked participants, "Looking back now, how responsible for the divorce was your [father/mother]?" Participants answered for each parent on a four point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Completely Responsible."

Demographics. Participants provided their current age and the age at which their parents separated as part of the validation questions on the consent form. They provided their sex and additional demographic information at the end of the survey. Age at separation was recoded into a binary variable indicating whether the child was an adolescent (aged 13-17) at the time of separation or not.

Procedure

Participants were recruited to complete an online survey. Advertisements for the survey were placed on online classified advertisement sites throughout the country, on sites designed to recruit research participants, and a University listserv for students, faculty and staff. Participants were offered a chance to win one of five \$20 gift cards for completing the survey. Participants confirmed eligibility for the survey by indicating their current age and their age at their parent's separation and indicating that they consented to the study. Participants must have been between 8 and 17 at the time of separation and between 18 and 35 currently. The survey included four

validation questions to ensure participant engagement (e.g. "Please click circle 2 for this statement"). Participants who missed any validation questions were excluded from the study. The study used a planned missing data design (Graham, 2009; described below), meaning that each participant responded to only a subset of the possible measures. Participants who completed only the first instrument – indicating that they exited the survey after the first page – were also excluded for this analysis. The final sample included 292 participants. All scales were scored as averages of the responses with items reverse coded appropriately. All analyses were conducted with R 3.0.2 (R Core Team, 2013). Path analyses were modeled and fit using the *Lavaan* package for R (Rosseel, 2012).

Planned Missing Data. To reduce the overall length of the questionnaire for participants a split questionnaire survey design (SQSD; Raghunathan & Grizzle, 1995) was used. The questionnaire was divided into six sets of measures. One set, called the X-set included the contact refusal measure, the violence measures, and demographics measures. All participants completed the X-set. The remaining measures were divided between the remaining five sets. Mother and father versions of each measure were included in the same sets. As participant took the questionnaire, they were randomly assigned to take two of these five sets in addition to the X-set. This format reduces the question load for participants by approximately 50%.

Planned missing data designs, such as the SQSD, introduce missing data randomly to limit the amount of missing data that is introduced non-randomly (e.g. from participant fatigue, boredom, dropout, etc.) (Graham, 2009; Graham, Taylor, Olchowski, & Cumsille, 2006). Because the missing data is missing at random, it can be augmented using statistical procedures including multiple imputation or full-information-maximum-likelihood (FIML) to make statistically valid conclusions (Acock, 2005; Palmer and Royal, 2010). The *mi* package for R

(Su, Gelman, Hill, Yajima, 2011) was used to impute 50 data sets, which showed good convergence ($R\text{-hat} < 1.1$). Regression results from each imputed data set were pooled to create the final, reported results for each analysis. Coefficients and standard errors were pooled automatically by the mi package. These were used to calculate p-values. R^2 and Adjusted R^2 statistics for each model and partial R^2 statistics for each predictor were calculated manually and then pooled using Fisher's r to z transformation (Harel, 2009). Path analyses were conducted with FIML in Lavaan.

Results

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for all study variables as well as paired t-tests comparing mothers and fathers where applicable. Information on the amount of data missing before imputation is also presented. Participants in our sample were more likely to report that they refused contact with their fathers and formed a coalition with their mothers against their fathers. They also reported that fathers were more violent, more often considered responsible for the divorce, and were less warm than mothers. Table 2 presents correlation coefficients between the study variables.

Following the model tested by Johnston, Walters, and Olesen (2005), our first analysis used a linear regression analysis to measure the effect of the independent variables on contact refusal. Refusal of fathers and mothers were analyzed separately. Table 3 includes coefficients, standard errors, p-values, and partial R-Squared statistics for each regressor. The partial R-Squared is the decrease in R-Squared when the model is re-fit without that variable and can be seen as an effect size for individual predictors. For fathers, the only significant predictors of contact refusal were the father's warmth ($\beta = -.37$, $SE = .13$, $p = .002$), the father's violence ($\beta = .43$, $SE = .107$, $p < .001$), and the child's coalition with his/her mother ($\beta = .46$, $SE = .07$, $p <$

.001). The coalition variable had the greatest partial R-Squared, indicating its significant association with contact refusal. When controlling for the other variables, coparenting conflict, mother's alienation behaviors, father's perceived responsibility, adolescence, and child sex did not predict refusing contact with fathers.

In predicting refusing contact with mothers, mother's warmth ($\beta = -.30$, $SE = .12$, $p = .005$), her violence ($\beta = .35$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$), and the child's coalition with his/her father ($\beta = .42$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$) were similarly significant predictors. Additionally, father's alienating behaviors ($\beta = .34$, $SE = .16$, $p = .01$), mother's perceived responsibility ($\beta = .15$, $SE = .08$, $p = .03$), and the separation occurring when the child was an adolescent ($\beta = .32$, $SE = .15$, $p = .02$) also predicted contact refusal. Partial R-Squared statistics suggest that coalition with dad (.23) had the strongest association while mother's responsibility (.02) and adolescence (.02) had relatively minor associations with contact refusal.

Seeing that the coalition variable was a significant predictor in both models and that alienating behaviors had a relatively minor contribution to contact refusal, especially compared to the correlation coefficient, I decided to conduct a follow-up mediation path analysis. This model is also consonant with the idea that alienating behaviors are only impactful to the extent that the child accepts them. Additional factors, such as coparental conflict, could also thus be tested for their theoretically derived mediating relationship. For both fathers and mothers, I tested a model where the warmth and responsibility of the refused parent, the alienation of the other parent, and the coparental conflict predicted coalition (indirect effects) as well as contact refusal (direct effects). For the model predicting contact refusal of fathers, model fit was good ($\chi^2(3) = 2.53$, $p = .47$; CFI = 1.000, RMSEA 90% CI = (.00, .09)). Path coefficients are presented in Table 4. The direct effects remained similar to the previous regression analysis. There were

significant paths from both mother's alienation ($B = .62$, $SE = .21$, $p = .004$) and from father's responsibility ($B = .595$, $SE = .15$, $p < .001$) to coalition with mother. Coparental conflict and father's warmth did not significantly predict coalition with mother. The significance of the indirect effects were tested by computing Monte Carlo confidence intervals (Preacher & Selig, 2012) for the four variables tested for mediation through coalition with mother. Mother's alienation (.10, .56) and father's responsibility (.14, .49) were confirmed to have significant indirect effects. Coparental conflict (-.12, .23) and father's warmth (-.27, .10) did not have significant effects.

The model testing direct and indirect predictors of contact refusal of mothers also showed good fit ($\chi^2(3) = 1.87$, $p = .60$; CFI = 1.000, RMSEA 90% CI = (.00, .08)). Path coefficients are presented in Table 5. Again, the patterns of significant direct effects matched the previous regression analysis, though mother's responsibility was only marginally significant ($p = .07$). Father's alienating behaviors ($B = .77$, $SE = .18$, $p < .001$) and mother's warmth ($B = -.56$, $SE = .17$, $p = .001$) significantly predicted coalition with father. Coparenting conflict and mother's perceived responsibility were not significant predictors of coalition with father. Monte Carlo confidence intervals confirmed the indirect effects of father's alienating behaviors (.15, .54) and mother's warmth (-.42, -.09), but not coparental conflict (-.21, .02) or mother's responsibility (-.04, .18).

Discussion

The results from this study provide additional insights and understanding into the origins of contact refusal following parental separation. Perhaps of most significance was the finding that parents' alienating behaviors had little to no direct contribution to contact refusal after controlling for the other variables in the model. Mother's alienating behaviors did not

significantly predict children refusing to contact their fathers. Father's alienating behaviors were a significant predictor of children refusing to contact their mothers, but had a small effect size, suggesting a relatively minor contribution compared to other predictors. For both parents, the largest effect size for predicting contact refusal was for the degree to which participants reported being in a coalition with the other parent. A follow up mediation path analysis revealed the coalition variable to have multiple causes. Both father's and mother's alienating behaviors contributed to a child forming a coalition with that parent. In addition, mother's warmth was inversely associated with a coalition with father, suggesting that when mothers form close relationships with their children they may be protected from their former husband's alienating behaviors. Father's perceived responsibility was also associated with forming a coalition with mothers, suggesting that children, based on their understanding of the divorce or separation, may form a coalition with their mother without her direct contribution.

In support of Kelly and Johnston's (2001) and Friedlander and Walters's (2010) postulation that contact refusal is based on multiple simultaneous factors, this analysis found several other significant predictors of contact refusal. In support of Friedlander and Walters's (2010) specific model, violence was a significant predictor of contact refusal for both parents. Warmth, used as an analog of Friedlander and Walters's estrangement, was also inverse predictive of contact refusal with both parents, in addition to the indirect effect above mentioned. There were some indications that adolescence was independently related to contact refusal, in support of Johnston and Goldman (2010). The effect of the adolescence variable was significant in predicting refusing contact with mothers, but was only marginally significant in predicting contact refusal of fathers. In both cases, the effect sizes were small, suggesting that the practical importance of adolescence in the model is limited. Finally, coparental conflict had no significant

effect in any of the models. This suggests that the finding that conflict leads children to feel forced to choose sides in parental conflict (Maccoby, et al. 1993) does not necessarily lead to children actively trying support or reject one parent. It may also be the case that children and Maccoby and colleague's sample were experiencing the alienating behaviors that were not measured and thus not accounted for.

Together the findings largely support those of Kelly and Johnston (2001) and Friedlander and Walters (2010). In particular, the findings support the contention that contact refusal is related to more than just abuse and alienating behaviors. In fact, alienation was shown to have a more complex role in the model than it is typically given. Though there was evidence of a direct effect from father's alienating behaviors to children refusing contact with their mothers, for both parents there was a stronger indirect effect mediated by children's coalition with the alienating parent. This suggests that previous efforts to explore the implications of parental alienating behaviors were severely limited by only exploring the relationship from parent to child without treating the dynamic systemically. The child's coalition was also impacted by other characteristics of the parents. Beyond this, additional factors, including parental warmth and violence and child age, played a significant role in children's contact refusal. Overall, the findings support the belief that contact refusal is a complex phenomenon that cannot be described by simple explanations. Systems theory and the interaction of variables should be a guiding factor in future investigations of this subject.

Limitations and Additional Considerations

The findings of this study come with several limitations. Perhaps most importantly is that the study is retrospective of events that happened years prior to sampling. It is not possible to separate participants' current feelings about their parents' separation from their memory of their

feelings at the time of separation. To properly establish the validity of these findings, future studies must sample families in which the parents have recently separated. This will likely require an adaptation in methods, since the measures used in this study may not be appropriate or understandable for children.

Another limitation is that mothers in our sample were also the parent that participants spent most of their time with during the first year of separation. Thus, the different effects between mothers and fathers may be confounded by different effects between which parent has the child for most of the time. In addition, the study relied on a self-selected convenience sample. It may be the case that there was a bias in who decided to complete the survey, affecting our results and masking effects that are more common in the general population. Future studies should employ more stringent sampling methods to ensure the generalizability of results to the wider population.

This work is connected to and will likely be compared with Gardner's work on Parental Alienation Syndrome (1999, 2004a). Although there are relevant connections, it should also be noted that his work and the current study are looking at separate issues using different methods. Gardner's work focuses on the most extreme cases of children rejecting their parents. His contention is that in the majority of these cases, parental alienating behaviors are the sole or primary driving force. He did not typically look at cases of less severe contact refusal. Gardner has also not examined cases where severe alienating behaviors are present, but the children are not affected – to use the language of my study: the children do not enter a coalition with that parent. Gardner (2004b) similarly acknowledges the possibility of alternative influences and points to his focus on extreme cases of alienation. The findings from this study will hopefully guide future investigations of extreme cases of contact refusal and rejection.

Clinical Implications

The literature on contact refusal, parental alienation, and similar topics is clinically focused. The divorce process in general and the loss or reduction of contact with a child can stress individuals and families, leading them to therapy. Similarly, court professionals may rely on mental health professionals to alleviate ongoing problems in families following divorce. This study provides additional insights into potential treatment options and where clinicians may focus their efforts. Whereas a charge of parental alienation often brings with it the logical response focusing on the parent accused of alienating behaviors, the findings from this study emphasize the effects of the behaviors of the parent experiencing contact refusal. For both fathers and mothers, warmth served as a protective factor against having a child refuse contact. Conversely, violence was a risk factor for having a child refuse contact. The implication of these findings is that a parent may be counseled to improve their own parenting style when a child is refusing contact, rather than focusing so much on the behaviors of the other parent.

The study also emphasizes the role of coalitions in contact refusal. For the contact refusal to be resolved, the coalition must naturally be diminished. Whereas a perspective that views coalitions as the result of alienating behaviors will naturally focus on blocking or disrupting those behaviors (Ellis & Boyan, 2010), our model serves as a reminder that other factors, such as the ascribed blame for the divorce, may contribute to a child aligning with one parent over the other. Thus, the aligned parent may indeed need to be directed or blocked in reducing alienating behaviors, but they may also simply need to be more supportive of the other parent (to what extent the parent is not engaging in violence or other harmful activities). Clinicians can make the coalition, seen from a systemic perspective of all participants contributing, a focus of therapy.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics and t-tests for study variables (N = 292).

	Mothers		Fathers		Missing	t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Contact Refusal	2.57	1.59	3.28	1.87	0%	5.19***
Coalition	3.65	1.59	2.72	1.57	61%	-3.71***
Alienating Behaviors	2.00	.92	1.88	.87	64%	-1.30
Violence	1.46	.86	1.60	.94	3%	2.12*
Warmth	3.81	1.12	3.15	1.26	48%	-4.96***
Perceived Responsibility	2.71	1.18	3.47	1.07	5%	-6.44***
Whole Sample						
	Mean	SD	Missing			
Coparenting Conflict	3.36	1.08	61%			
Male	27%		6%			
Adolescence	40%		0%			

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2.

Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. M Contact Refusal	1														
2. F Contact Refusal	.10	1													
3. M Coalition	-.18	.67**	1												
4. F Coalition	.71**	-.19*	-.28**	1											
5. M Alienating	.46**	.19	.06	.31	1										
6. F Alienating	.48**	.30**	-.11	.47*	.44**	1									
7. M Violence	.47**	.08	-.05	.32**	.57**	.36**	1								
8. F Violence	.16**	.49**	.26**	.09	.27**	.44**	.34**	1							
9. M Warmth	-.49**	.13	.27	-.47**	-.26	.05	-.26**	.11	1						
10. F Warmth	.04	-.54**	-.38*	.17	.15	-.19	.02	-.36	.10	1					
11. M Responsibility	.41**	-.29**	-.39**	.31**	.10	.16	.25**	-.07	-.43**	.23**	1				
12. F Responsibility	-.27**	.42**	.41**	-.34**	-.09	.12	-.15*	.24	.31**	-.42**	-.52**	1			
13. Coparental Conflict	.22*	.30**	.26**	.10	.31	.41	.22*	.22	-.18	-.39*	.19	.03	1		
14. Male	.05	.00	-.01	-.06	-.01	.05	.12*	.12	-.04	.07	.13*	-.04	-.31**	1	
15. Adolescence	.09	.11	.04	.07	.02	-.03	-.14*	.07	-.01	-.03	.10	-.04	-.07	.12	1

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; M = Mother, F = Father

Table 3.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Mother's and Father's Contact Refusal (N= 292)

	B	SE	p	Partial R ²
Predictors of Refusing Contact with Father				
Intercept	.78	.93	.20	
Coalition with Mother	.46	.07	<.001	.28
Mother Alienating Behavior	.15	.18	.20	.02
Father Violence	.43	.11	<.001	.09
Father Warmth	-.37	.13	.003	.10
Father's Responsibility for Divorce	.18	.13	.06	.02
Coparental Conflict	.07	.14	.30	.01
Male	.002	.21	.50	.00
Adolescence	.23	.19	.11	.01
Predictors of Refusing Contact with Mother				
Intercept	.72	.75	.17	
Coalition with Father	.42	.08	<.001	.23
Father Alienating Behavior	.34	.16	.01	.06
Mother Violence	.35	.10	<.001	.06
Mother Warmth	-.30	.12	.005	.08
Mother's Responsibility for Divorce	.15	.08	.03	.02
Coparental Conflict	.06	.12	.32	.01
Male	-.03	.19	.45	.001
Adolescence	.32	.15	.02	.02

Note. For model predicting contact refusal of father: R-Squared = .63, Adjusted R-Squared = .62.

For model predicting contact refusal of mother: R-Squared = .63, Adjusted R-Squared = .62.

Table 4.

Mediation Model Path Analysis Coefficients For Contact Refusal of Father

Regressand	Regressor	B	SE	p
Coalition With Mother				
	Mother Alienating Behavior	.62	.21	.004
	Father Warmth	-.16	.18	.38
	Father's Responsibility	.60	.15	<.001
	Coparenting Conflict	.10	.18	.59
Contact Refusal of Father				
	Coalition with Mother	.51	.08	<.001
	Mother Alienating Behavior	.06	.21	.79
	Father Violence	.44	.13	<.001
	Father Warmth	-.44	.14	.001
	Father Responsibility	.11	.12	.36
	Coparenting Conflict	.03	.15	.85
	Male	.02	.20	.94
	Adolescence	.31	.16	.06

Notes. Model Fit: $\chi^2(3) = 2.53$, $p = .47$; CFI = 1.000, RMSEA 90% CI = (.00, .09)

Table 5.

Mediation Model Path Analysis Coefficients For Contact Refusal of Mother

Regressand	Regressor	B	SE	p
Coalition With Father				
	Father Alienating Behavior	.77	.18	<.001
	Mother Warmth	-.56	.17	.001
	Mother's Responsibility	.14	.13	.28
	Coparenting Conflict	-.21	.13	.10
Contact Refusal of Mother				
	Coalition with Father	.42	.08	<.001
	Father Alienating Behavior	.39	.16	.02
	Mother Violence	.34	.10	<.001
	Mother Warmth	-.28	.12	.02
	Mother Responsibility	.13	.08	.08
	Coparenting Conflict	.04	.10	.71
	Male	-.11	.17	.54
	Adolescence	.38	.14	.007

Notes. Model Fit: $\chi^2(3) = 1.87, p = .60$; CFI = 1.000, RMSEA 90% CI = (.00, .08)

Long-Term Effects of Parental Alienation and Related Post-Divorce Behaviors

Doctoral Dissertation: Paper C

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Abstract

Parental alienating behaviors have received significant attention for the ways in which they affect children and families following divorce. However, focus on the long-term effects of these behaviors has been limited. Moreover, related behaviors, like parental warmth, parental abuse, and children's coalitions with their parents have not been part of studies of future effects. This study aims to improve our understanding of the effects of alienating behaviors and related circumstances on mental health and relationships in young adulthood. Using self-report data from 292 participants, circumstances following divorce were used to predict current relationships with parents and personal mental health. Coalitions with mother and father's warmth and violence were predictive of relationships with fathers in young adulthood. No significant predictors of relationships with mothers were found. Coalitions with mothers and parental warmth were predictors of current mental health. The research demonstrates the importance of exploring children's responses to divorce from a complex framework, rather than attributing outcomes to single causes. The research also emphasizes the importance of avoiding coalitions and focusing on warmth as parents for clinicians and families.

The past several decades have brought an abundance of research and writing on divorce and child outcomes (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010). One topic that has garnered significant interest and controversy relates to parents drawing children into their ongoing conflict through alienating behaviors (Gardner 2004, Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Studies have found such alienating behaviors, in concert with a variety of other factors, to have negative effects on children and on parent-child relationships (Johnston, Walters, & Oleson, 2005; Macie & Stolberg, 2003). Unfortunately, empirical studies of the long term consequences for these parental behaviors and child reactions are limited. Although it has been established that divorce in general is associated with a number of risk factors into adulthood (Amato, 2010), including decreased psychological functioning and poorer relationships (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Wolfinger, Kowaleski-Jones, & Smith, 2003), little is known about how alienating behaviors as well as the complex array of factors connected to parental alienating behaviors are connected to these negative outcomes.

Much of the literature on alienating behaviors treats those behaviors as the sole cause for whatever behaviors are being explained. Gardner (1999, 2004), for example, uses child behaviors of contact refusal to diagnose the presence of severe alienating behavior by the parent. Alienating behaviors have similarly been explored as a singular cause of negative adult outcomes, without controlling for other potential contributors (Baker & Verrochio, 2012; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). As a reaction to such attempts to oversimplify the process of a child refusing contact with a parent, Friedlander and Walters (2010) proposed an alternative framework where contact refusal may result from a combination of overlapping causes. This more complex framework shows good empirical support for describing contact refusal after divorce or separation (Huff, Paper B; Johnston, Oleson, & Walters, 2005). Unfortunately, this

added complexity has not been applied to studies of the future impacts of parental alienating behaviors.

This paper presents an initial exploration of a more complex model predicting young adult outcomes following parental separation or divorce, using Friedlander and Walters (2010) model and Huff's (Paper B) refinements as a starting point. Friedlander and Walters proposed that parental alienating behaviors combine with abuse, parental deficits, and the parent-child relationship in leading a child to refuse contact with a parent. Huff refined this model by testing additional factors of coparental conflict and child age. Most importantly, Huff found that the degree to which the child entered into a coalition with the alienating parent mediated the effect of that parent's alienating behaviors. These factors – specifically abuse, alienating behaviors, parental functioning, coalitions, and coparental conflict – are tested as having simultaneous, combined effects on young adult outcomes following parental divorce and separation during childhood.

Parental Alienating Behaviors

More than two decades ago, Cartwright (1993) noted that the long-term effects of parental alienating behaviors and children joining coalitions with the parents were unclear. Since that time several studies have provided additional information. Moné and Biringen (2006) found relationships between alienating behaviors and current relationships with parents in college students. Notably, they found consistent evidence for a "backfire effect", wherein a parents' badmouthing of the other parent in years past was a negative predictor of their current relationship. Experiencing alienating behaviors as a child may also have a negative impact on relationships with one's own children (Baker, 2005).

Parental alienating behaviors may impair the child's individual mental health, as well. Low self-esteem, depression, and substance abuse have been qualitatively connected with being alienated (Baker, 2005). Quantitative studies have found significant connections between current functioning, as well as notable non-significant relationships. Baker and Ben-Ami (2011) found correlations between alienating behaviors and several indicators of mental health, though they did not control for other possible influences. When regression was used, significant effects were found for reduced likelihood of working or being in school and decreased self-esteem, though in both cases the effect size was very small. This finding is representative of Baker's other work where significant effects with small to moderate effects sizes have been found for depression, self-esteem, cooperation, and alcohol abuse (Baker & Verrochio, 2012; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012), as well as non-significant results for depression and self-esteem (Baker & Chambers, 2011), adult attachment (Baker & Verrochio, 2012). Notable in Baker and colleague's work is that it directly connects alienating behaviors with outcomes, without consideration of how children responded to the alienating behaviors (i.e. entered into a coalition with the alienating parent).

Abuse

Abuse has been consistently connected to negative outcomes for children (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Smailes, 1999; Johnson et al., 2002; McCord, 1983). Focusing on young adults who experienced abuse as children, negative effects from child abuse may persist for years. Individuals who experienced child abuse are more vulnerable to depression in young adulthood (Wells, Vanderlind, Selby, & Beevers, 2014). Maltreatment is also associated with adult attachment styles, leading to increases in both anxious and avoidant attachment scores (Oshri, Sutton, Clay-Warner, & Miller, 2014). Abuse also predicts more risk behaviors, physical health

problems, and decreased income in young adults (Franzese, Covey, Tucker, McCoy, & Menard, 2014; Oshri, Sutton, Clay-Warner, & Miller, 2014; Taha, Galea, Hien, & Goodwin, 2014; Tanaka, Jamieson, Georgiades, Duku, Boyle, & MacMillan, 2011).

The effects of child abuse has played a key role in discussions of parental alienation. Whereas Gardner (1999) acknowledged that abuse can result in contact refusal but still focused on parental alienating behaviors (see also Kopetski, 1998), others have contended that it must play a greater role in conceptualizations of the post-separation parenting dynamic (Kelly & Johnston, 2001, Meier, 2010). Empirical studies show that both abuse and alienating behaviors play a role in the immediate outcomes of divorce or separation (Huff, Paper B; Johnston, et al., 2005). In spite of this ongoing discussion, the few studies of long-term outcomes of parental alienating behaviors have not controlled for abuse (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Baker & Verrochio, 2012; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Baker & Chambers, 2011).

Coparenting Conflict

In the time closely following divorce, interparental conflict has been implicated in greater somatic complaints, sleep problems, internalizing behaviors and destructive behaviors (Amato, 2010; Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella 2004). Camara and Resnick (1989) provide an important note in this discussion in that they found that the strategies employed to manage conflict, as opposed to the amount of conflict or disagreement, were significant predictors of child outcomes. In their study, father's verbal attacks were associated with lower self-esteem, more behavioral problems, and less cooperative play. Mother's avoidance and father's physical anger both predicted more solitary play in children. Likewise, conflict itself was not predictive of parent-child relationships, but the strategies to resolve conflict were. Verbal attacks between parents were associated with

worse relationships between the attacking parent and the child. Mother's verbal attacks also predicted worse relationships between the father and the child.

These effects tend to extend into young adulthood. Dixon, Charles, and Craddock (1998), for example, found that coparental conflict was the only significant predictor of externalizing behaviors in a sample of young adults whose parents divorced at least two years previously. Gasper, Stolberg, Macie, and Williams (2008) likewise found coparental conflict during childhood, even when controlling for other parental behaviors, to significantly predict overall mental health scores in young adulthood. Conflict is also predictive of parent-child relationships in young adulthood (Riggio & Valenzuela, 2011). Richardson and McCabe (2001) offer contrasting evidence wherein conflict during adolescence was not predictive of current adjustment. This may be due to the inclusion of more proximal variables, such as current intimacy with parents, which are related to conflict but more impactful in the present. Hannum and Dvorak (2004) indeed found conflict – in their study representing current conflict rather than conflict at separation – to have an indirect effect, mediated through participants' relationships with their mothers.

Parental Warmth

In many studies of the above discussed potential contributions to adult outcomes, parental warmth, when included, also plays a significant role. In Gasper and colleagues' (2008) study, mothering and fathering, which included measures of parental warmth and related subscales, at the time of divorce significantly predicted problems with intimacy, work ethic, self-esteem, and delinquency in young adulthood whereas parental conflict only predicted self-esteem and overall mental health. Richardson and McCabe (2001) found that current relationship with parents was significantly associated with decreases in depression and stress and increases in life satisfaction.

Hannum and Dvorak (2004) found that only attachment with mother significantly predicted psychological distress in their model that included family conflict and only attachment with father predicted social adjustment. Carroll and colleagues (2013) connected parental warmth with young adult's health outcome. They found that parental warmth moderated the relationship between abuse and health outcomes, with low parental warmth being associated with more deleterious effects from abuse. Although these several studies do not show direct connections between warmth and long-term divorce outcomes, they suggest that parenting quality will continue to play a role in health and relationships alongside the other factors described above (see also Huff, Paper B).

Child's Immediate Response to Divorce

A final consideration is the lasting influence of the circumstances immediately following divorce or separation. A child's contact refusal, as previously mentioned, can be a significant and difficult process in the immediate aftermath of a divorce. Unfortunately, the literature on how contact refusal continues or subsides in young adulthood is scant. Gardner (2001) suggests that cases of severe contact refusal backed by significant alienating behaviors are unlikely to change without strong interventions. Johnston and Goldman (2010), using a sample that was not as severely alienated as Gardner's sample but that were also in treatment, suggested that contact refusal is not likely to continue unless it is rooted in authentic parental deficits. This is similar to Wallerstein and Kelly's (1974) finding that adolescents are not likely to continue refusing a relationship with their parents when there are not significant deficits. Further exploration, with more diverse samples is needed to better understand the prognosis for children refusing contact. In connection with this, Huff (Paper B) found that the child forming a coalition with a parent was

a significant predictor of contact refusal. It is unclear whether such coalitions continue to affect children into young adulthood.

Current Study

The aim of this study is to explore the complex relationship between parental and child behaviors at the time of parental separation and the child's mental health and relationship outcomes in adulthood. The present literature connects some parent behaviors – such as alienating behaviors and abuse – to adult child outcomes, but has not always controlled for other behaviors. Moreover, the child's immediate reaction to parental behaviors has rarely been considered as a direct contribution to adult child outcomes or as a mediator to the parental behaviors. Specifically, this paper tests the hypotheses that current relationship with parents will be predicted by the warmth, history of abuse, and initial contact refusal of that parent and the alienating behaviors of and coalition formed with the other parent. Additionally, it tests the hypothesis that current mental health will be predicted by parental coalitions and exposure to alienating behaviors, conflict, warmth, and abuse.

Method

Sample

Two-hundred ninety-two participants were recruited from around the United States to participate in this study. The sample was predominantly female (73%) and in young adulthood (average age = 25.1, SD = 6.45). When asked to identify their race, 65% of participants reported White, 13% reported mixed or other, 11% Hispanic, 6% Black, 4% Asian and 4% Native American. Many of the participants identified as students (51%), 35% reported working full-time and 25% work part-time. Forty five percent reported some college experience whereas only 17% reported only completing high school and 34% had completed an undergraduate degree or more.

Participants reported an average age at divorce of 11.8 ($SD = 2.91$) and that it had been 13 years since the divorce ($SD = 7.12$). Thirty-four percent reported that they were in a joint custody arrangement during the first year of separation, 26% reported that their mother had sole custody, 7% father custody, 17% had no custody arrangement, and 16% reported that they did not know the custody arrangement.

Measures

Quality of Relationships Inventory. The Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI) is a 25-item measure of the quality of respondent's relationship with a target individual (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991). The scale includes *Conflict*, *Depth*, and *Support* subscales, though the support subscale was not used in our analyses. A sample question for conflict is "How upset does this person sometimes make you feel?" and for depth is "How significant is this person in your life?" Items are averaged to create subscale scores. For the conflict subscale, Cronbach's alpha was .86 for fathers and .84 for mothers. For the depth subscale Cronbach's alpha was .91 for fathers and .85 for mothers.

Major Depression Inventory. The Major Depression Inventory (MDI) is a 12-item measure of depressive symptoms (Bech, Rasmussen, Olsen, Noerholm, & Abildgaard, 2001) modeled after the diagnostic criteria for a Major Depressive Episode (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Responses are summed to create a combined score representing the overall severity of the respondent's depression with two sets of items contributing the higher score of the pair. Sample items include "How much of the time have you felt low in spirits or sad?" and "How much of the time have you felt less self-confident?" Cronbach's alpha for our sample was .92.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder Assessment. The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7) is a seven-item measure of anxiety (Spitzer, Kroenke, & Williams, 2006), modeled after the diagnostic criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Sample items include "Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge" and "Not being able to stop or control worrying" with responses indicating the frequency over the last two weeks ranging from *not at all* to *nearly every day*. Cronbach's alpha for our sample was .93.

Experiences in Close Relationships – Short Form. The Experiences in Close Relationships – Short Form (ECR-S) is a 12 item measure of adult attachment (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). The measure models adult attachment as a combination of *avoidance* and *anxiety* subscales, with both being measured as continuous variables. Sample items include "I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them" for anxiety and "I am nervous when partners get too close to me" for avoidance. In our sample, Cronbach's alpha for avoidance was .87 and for anxiety was .84.

Contact Refusal Scale. Participants' contact refusal immediately in the immediate aftermath of their parents' separation was measured using the 12 item Contact Refusal Scale (Huff, Paper A). This self-report scale asks participants to rate the extent to which they participated in several contact refusal behaviors. Items include "Refused to spend time with your [father/mother]" and "Made up an excuse to not do something with your [father/mother]". Participants were asked to complete the measure for each parent. Cronbach's alpha for reporting on fathers was .96 and on mothers was .96.

Coparenting Behaviors Questionnaire. The Coparenting Behaviors questionnaire measures parental and coparental behaviors following divorce from the perspective of their children (Schum & Stolberg, 2007). The entire 86-item measure includes 12 subscales. Only 3

subscales were administered in this study. The *Warmth* subscale for each parent includes 7 items, such as "I felt that my mom cared about me." Cronbach's alpha for fathers was .95 and for mothers was .94. The two parents' individual scores were summed to create a total warmth score used in some analyses. The 10-item *Coparenting Conflict* scale was also completed by participants. This scale has the coparenting dyad as a unit of analysis. A sample item is "When my parents talked to each other, they got angry." Cronbach's alpha for the sample was .93.

Baker Strategy Questionnaire. Baker and Chambers's (2011) Baker Strategy Questionnaire was developed to match Gardner's (1999) description of Parental Alienation Syndrome and to match previous qualitative interviews with alienated parents (Baker, 2007; Baker & Darnall, 2006). The 20 item measure focuses on parental alienating behavior from the perspective of children of divorced parents. Sample items include "Said or implied that my [dad/mom] did not really love me" and "Withheld or blocked phone messages, letters, cards, or gifts from my [dad/mom] meant for me." Participants completed the questionnaire for both parents about the first year after their parents separated. Cronbach's alpha for fathers was .94 and for mothers was .95. For some analyses a total score was used that was computed by summing the mother's and father's scores for each participant. This total score represents the total amount of alienating behavior the child was exposed to.

Parental Coalition Scale. The Parental Coalition Scale is a four item measure that assesses coalitions between the participant and each parent against the other parent (Huff, Paper B). The four items are "Tried to support or comfort your [mother/father] because you thought your [father/mother] was not being fair," "Took your [mother's/father's] side when your parents disagreed," "Thought of yourself as your [mother's/father's] ally or teammate against your [father/mother]," and "Told your [mother/father] things you didn't like about your

[father/mother]." Participants were asked to complete the measure for each parent based on the first year following separation. Cronbach's alpha for fathers was .86 and for mothers was .88.

Violence. Two questions assessed the degree the violence of each parent: "Before your parent's separation, how often was your [father/mother] violent or physically abusive towards you?" and "During the first year of separation, how often was your [father/mother] violent or physically abusive towards you?" Participants responded to each question on a five point Likert Scale from "Never" to "Always". A combined violence score, representing the total amount of violence the child experienced from both parents, was calculated by summing each parent's individual violence score.

Demographics. The consent form required participants to provide their current age and the age at which their parents separated. Additional demographic information was collected at the end of the survey.

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey. Invitations to participate were posted on a university listserv, online classified advertising pages, and various study invitation services. For completing the survey participants were offered the chance to enter a drawing for one of five \$20 gift cards. Participants were required to be between 8 and 17 at the time of separation and between 18 and 35 currently. Four validation questions were included throughout the survey to test participant engagement (e.g. "Please click circle 2 for this statement"). Participants who missed any validation questions were excluded from the study. The final sample included 292 participants. All scales were scored as averages of the responses with items reverse coded appropriately. All analyses were conducted with R 3.0.2 (R Core Team, 2013).

Planned Missing Data. The study used a planned missing data design (Graham, 2009), meaning that each participant responded to only portion of the available measures. Specifically, a split questionnaire survey design (SQSD; Raghunathan & Grizzle, 1995) was used. The questionnaire was divided into six sets of measures. One set, called the X-set included the contact refusal measure, the violence measures, and demographics measures. All participants completed the X-set. The remaining measures were divided between the remaining five sets. Mother and father versions of each measure were included in the same sets. As participant took the questionnaire, they were randomly assigned to take two of these five sets in addition to the X-set. Participants only respond to approximately 50% of the available questions in this system.

Planned missing data designs, such as the SQSD, introduce missing data randomly to limit that amount of missing data that is introduced non-randomly (e.g. from participant fatigue, boredom, dropout, etc.) (Graham, 2009; Graham, Taylor, Olchowski, & Cumsille, 2006). Because the missing data is missing at random, it can be augmented using statistical procedures including multiple imputation or full-information-maximum-likelihood (FIML) to make statistically valid conclusions (Acock, 2005; Palmer and Royal, 2010). The *mi* package for R (Su, Gelman, Hill, Yajima, 2011) was used to for imputation. We computed four imputed data sets, each with 50 imputations. The sets divided the outcome variables with one set including both father relationship variables (QRI Conflict and QRI Depth), one including both mother relationship variables, one including mood variables (MDI and GAD-7) and one including attachment variables (ECR Attachment and Anxiety). Each dataset showed good convergence ($R\text{-hat} \approx 1.1$). Regression results from each imputed data set were pooled to create the final, reported results or each analysis. Coefficients and standard errors were pooled automatically by the *mi* package. These were used to calculate p-values. R^2 and Adjusted R^2 statistics for each

model and partial R^2 statistics for each predictor were calculated manually and then pooled using Fisher's r to z transformation (Harel, 2009).

Results

Descriptive statistics for study variables, including t -tests between fathers and mothers where appropriate, are presented in Table 1. Significant differences between mothers and fathers were present for current depth of relationship ($t = -4.86, p < .001$), contact refusal ($t = 5.19, p < .001$), coalition ($t = -3.71, p < .001$), violence ($t = 2.12, p = .03$), and warmth ($t = -4.96, p < .001$). There were not significant differences between mothers and fathers on current conflict or alienating behaviors. Table 2 presents correlation coefficients for study variables.

Our first analysis was to predict current conflict with parents and depth of current parental relationships based on parental and child behaviors at the time of separation. Specifically, contact refusal, warmth, and violence of the target parent, and alienating behaviors and coalition with the other parent were included as predictors. Child sex was also included as a control. Separate analyses were conducted for fathers and mothers. As a measure of effect size, Partial R^2 statistics were calculated for each variable in each model. Partial R^2 estimates the contribution of each predictor to the overall fit of the model.

Conflict with fathers was significantly predicted by a coalition with mother at the time of separation ($B = .16, SE = .08, p = .03, \text{Partial } R^2 = .19$) and father's violence ($B = .14, SE = .08, p = .046, \text{Partial } R^2 = .06$), with the coalition having a greater effect size (Table 3). Mother's alienating behavior, father's warmth, child sex, and contact refusal were not significant predictors of conflict with father. There were no significant predictors of current conflict with mother, though mother's warmth at separation was a marginal predictor ($B = -.17, SE = .12, p = .08, \text{Partial } R^2 = .10$). Depth of relationship with father's was only predicted by father's warmth at

separation ($B = .43$, $SE = .15$, $p = .002$, $\text{Partial } R^2 = .28$). None of the other predictors were significant. None of the study variables significantly predicted mother's depth of relationship.

Next we tested models with the divorce variables predicting current participant functioning. Coalitions with each parent, coparental conflict, and combined alienating behaviors, warmth, and violence were used as predictors of each outcome (Depressive Symptoms, Anxiety, Attachment Anxiety, and Attachment Avoidance). The only significant predictor of depressive symptoms was coalition with mother ($B = .27$, $SE = .10$, $p = .004$, $\text{Partial } R^2 = .16$). Anxious symptoms were predicted by coalition with mother ($B = .17$, $SE = .08$, $p = .02$, $\text{Partial } R^2 = .11$) as well as the parent's combined warmth ($B = -.16$, $SE = .06$, $p = .003$, $\text{Partial } R^2 = .09$). Attachment anxiety was similarly predicted by coalition with mother ($B = .18$, $SE = .09$, $p = .02$, $\text{Partial } R^2 = .04$) and combined warmth ($B = -.27$, $SE = .13$, $p = .02$, $\text{Partial } R^2 = .10$). Finally, attachment avoidance was only predicted by combined warmth ($B = -.30$, $SE = .17$, $p = .04$, $\text{Partial } R^2 = .14$). Coalition with father, alienating behaviors, coparenting conflict, and parental violence were not significant predictors of any of the outcomes.

Discussion

The results of this research add important information to the literature on children following divorce in general and the literature on alienation and contract refusal. Over several analyses, coalition with mother and parental warmth stood out as primary predictors of current functioning in young adults. Higher scores on the measure of coalition with mother in the year following separation predicted greater attachment anxiety, more symptoms of anxiety, more depressive symptoms, and more current conflict with father. Coalitions with fathers were not predictive of any negative or positive outcomes. These findings are notable in that alienating behaviors were not predictive of outcomes in any of the analyses, contrary to previous work on

parental alienating behaviors (Baker & Verrochio, 2012; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). This suggests that the way that children accept or adopt the message of alienating behaviors is of more importance than the simple presence of alienating behaviors for long-term outcomes (Huff, Paper B).

The measure of parental warmth played another key role in many of the analyses. Father's warmth after separation predicted current relationship with fathers and the total warmth experienced by participants following divorce predicted decreased anxious symptoms, decreased anxious attachment, and decreased attachment avoidance. In each case the effect size for the warmth variable was sizable. This study joins the aforementioned literature that has found parental warmth to have a significant effect on multiple outcomes following divorce (Carroll et al., 2013; Gasper et al., 2008; Hannum & Dvorak, 2004; Richardson & McCabe, 2001).

In addition to significant predictors found, the non-significant predictors provide valuable information. For each measure of current relationship with parents, contact refusal in the year following separation did not have a significant effect. This would suggest that the long-term outlook for a parent with a child that is refusing contact is variable. Additionally, coparenting conflict did not play a significant role in any of the analyses. This is especially interesting given that negative outcomes from parental conflict are consistently found in the literature (Amato, 2010; Dixon et al., 1998; Gasper et al., 2008; Pruett, et al., 2004).

Limitations and Additional Considerations

There are several important limitations to be considered with this research. Of primary consideration is that this study explores a longitudinal effect using cross-sectional data. The measures rating past behavior of participants and their parents were collected at the same time as the measures rating current functioning and relationships. The potential for biased memories is

therefore high. Thus, the results may represent higher associations between study variables than would have been found in a longitudinal study. It will be essential for future studies to make this effort to follow participants from childhood and adolescence into young adulthood and beyond to establish the relationship of parental warmth, coalitions, alienating behaviors, and other post-divorce behaviors and current functioning and relationships with parents.

Another key limitation stems from the visitation makeup of our sample. The majority of our sample lived primarily with their mothers. Thus there is some confounding between the effects of gender and the effects of visitation. It may be that a coalition with the primary parent, rather than mothers specifically, has a deleterious effect on young adult mental health outcomes. Finally, the study relied on a self-selected convenience sample. It may be the case that there was a bias in who decided to complete the survey, affecting our results and masking effects that are representative of the general population. Future studies should employ more stringent sampling methods to ensure the generalizability of results to the wider population.

Clinical Implications

The findings in this study have important implications for clinicians working with recently divorced families. Although the results in this paper should be considered tentative, pending confirmation by more rigorous longitudinal studies, they would suggest that parental warmth is a key component of improving children's outcomes following divorce. This is a hopeful finding, since each parent is equally able to contribute to the amount of warmth that the child experiences. Whereas decreasing alienating behaviors and co-parenting conflict may require coordination between both parents (and thus allows blaming the other parent when things do not improve), increasing one's own parental warmth is predicted to have an important impact from this research.

The other major implication for clinicians and parents is that coalitions have a significant negative effect on young adult outcomes. Parents may attempt to alienate a child from the other parent for a variety of reasons (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). However, this research suggests that if they are successful and the child joins them in a coalition it will negatively affect the child's own mental health outcomes. Clinicians should work closely with parents to ensure that they are not working towards forming coalitions with their children. Although a parent may feel justified in alienating a child from the other parent because of the other parents' behavior, clinicians should ensure that the alienating parent is aware that successfully "protecting" the child from the other parent may come at a cost of the child's well-being.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics and t-tests for study variables (N = 292).

	Mothers		Fathers		Missing	t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Relationship Conflict	2.12	.57	1.98	.65	72%	-1.80
Relationship Depth	2.92	.81	2.19	.96	72%	-4.86***
Contact Refusal	2.57	1.59	3.28	1.87	0%	5.19***
Coalition	3.65	1.59	2.72	1.57	61%	-3.71***
Alienating Behaviors	2.00	.92	1.88	.87	64%	-1.30
Violence	1.46	.86	1.60	.94	3%	2.12*
Warmth	3.81	1.12	3.15	1.26	48%	-4.96 ***
Whole Sample						
	Mean	SD	Missing			
Depression	2.84	1.19	65%			
Anxiety	2.43	.93	48%			
Attachment Avoidance	3.17	1.56	59%			
Attachment Anxiety	4.37	1.56	64%			
Coparenting Conflict	3.36	1.08	61%			
Male	27%		6%			

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Scale scores were computed as means of scale items.

Table 2.

Correlation matrix of study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
1. D Conflict																			
2. M Conflict	.22*																		
3. D Depth	-.22*	-.05																	
4. M Depth	.30**	-.28*	-.12																
5. Depression	.58**	.34	.21	-.25															
6. Anxiety	.16	.13	-.22	.04	.77***														
7. Att Anxiety	.64**	.11	.04	-.12	.42*	.60***													
8. Att Avoidance	-.02	-.29	.67**	-.02	.65***	.33*	.05												
9. M Refusal	.17	.33**	.26*	-.46***	.26**	.35***	.10	.16											
10. D Refusal	.45***	.14	-.46***	.29**	.18	.27***	.22*	.13	.10										
11. M Coalition	.65**	.32	-.51*	.31	.42*	.33*	.26**	-.20	-.18	.67***									
12. D Coalition	.02	.13	.42	-.69***	.19	.19	-.03	-.04	.71***	-.19*	-.28**								
13. M Alienating	.72***	.70***	-.10	-.02	.26**	.21	.22	.33	.46***	.19	.06	.31							
14. D Alienating	.64**	.33	-.29	-.09	.24*	.05	-.05	-.10	.48***	.30**	-.11	.47*	.44***						
15. M Violence	.14	.30**	.05	-.26*	.30**	.14	.09	.17	.47***	.08	-.05	.32***	.57***	.36***					
16. D Violence	.53***	.29**	-.35**	.09	.17	.07	.09	.09	.16**	.49***	.26**	.09	.27**	.44***	.34***				
17. M Warmth	-.11	-.60**	-.05	.38	-.43**	-.33***	-.33*	-.10	-.49***	.13	.27	-.47**	-.26	.05	-.26**	.11			
18. D Warmth	-.49*	.06	.79***	-.06	.09	-.17*	-.41**	-.30*	.04	-.54***	-.38*	.17	.15	-.19	.02	-.36***	.10		
19. Coparenting	.32	.44	-.23	-.48*	.16	.34*	.26**	-.27	.22*	.30**	.26**	.10	.31	.41	.22*	.22*	-.18	-.39*	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; M = Mother, F = Father, Att = Attachment

Table 3.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Relationship Conflict with Mother and Father(N= 292)

	B	SE	p	Partial R ²
Predictors of Conflict with Father				
Intercept	1.33	.44	.001	
Contact Refusal of Father	-.08	.07	.12	.05
Coalition with Mother	.16	.08	.03	.19
Mother Alienating Behavior	.18	.15	.10	.15
Father Violence	.14	.08	.046	.06
Father Warmth	-.13	.10	.10	.09
Male	.23	.17	.08	.05
Predictors of Conflict with Mother				
Intercept	2.46	.60	<.001	
Contact Refusal of Mother	.02	.09	.41	.02
Coalition with Father	-.06	.12	.31	.05
Father Alienating Behavior	.18	.18	.16	.10
Mother Violence	.05	.08	.28	.01
Mother Warmth	-.17	.12	.08	.10
Male	-.04	.16	.41	.01
<i>Note.</i> For model predicting conflict with father: R-Squared = .57, Adjusted R-Squared = .56. For model predicting conflict with mother: R-Squared = .32, Adjusted R-Squared = .30.				

Table 4.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Relationship Depth with Mother and Father(N= 292)

	B	SE	p	Partial R ²
Predictors of Relationship Depth with Father				
Intercept	.99	.72	.09	
Contact Refusal of Father	-.07	.10	.22	.02
Coalition with Mother	.02	.14	.45	.04
Mother Alienating Behavior	.02	.16	.46	.02
Father Violence	-.02	.14	.45	.01
Father Warmth	.43	.15	.002	.28
Male	.28	.25	.13	.03
Predictors of Relationship Depth with Mother				
Intercept	2.78	.73	<.001	
Contact Refusal of Mother	-.05	.11	.33	.02
Coalition with Father	-.12	.14	.19	.06
Father Alienating Behavior	.05	.19	.40	.03
Mother Violence	-.08	.11	.25	.01
Mother Warmth	.16	.15	.15	.06
Male	-.01	.23	.48	.01
<i>Note.</i> For model predicting relationship depth with father: R-Squared = .49, Adjusted R-Squared = .48. For model predicting relationship depth with mother: R-Squared = .30, Adjusted R-Squared = .28.				

Table 5.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Predicting Depressive Symptoms (N= 292)

	B	SE	p	Partial R ²
Intercept	1.96	1.59	.11	
Coalition with Mother	.27	.10	.004	.16
Coalition with Father	.16	.19	.19	.07
Combined Alienating Behaviors	.10	.18	.29	.03
Coparenting Conflict	-.03	.24	.44	.03
Combined Warmth	-.15	.14	.14	.07
Combined Violence	.07	.14	.30	.02
Male	.25	.33	.22	.02

Note. R-Squared = .39, Adjusted R-Squared = .38. Combined variables are sums of scores for both parents on that variable.

Table 6.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Predicting Anxious Symptoms (N= 292)

	B	SE	p	Partial R ²
Intercept	2.57	.70	<.001	
Coalition with Mother	.17	.08	.02	.11
Coalition with Father	.14	.11	.11	.06
Combined Alienating Behaviors	.02	.16	.46	.03
Coparenting Conflict	.02	.17	.46	.02
Combined Warmth	-.16	.06	.003	.09
Combined Violence	-.04	.11	.36	.01
Male	-.10	.20	.30	.01

Note. R-Squared = .30, Adjusted R-Squared = .29. Combined variables are sums of scores for both parents on that variable.

Table 7.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Predicting Attachment Anxiety (N= 292)

	B	SE	p	Partial R ²
Intercept	5.13	1.58	<.001	
Coalition with Mother	.18	.09	.02	.04
Coalition with Father	-.04	.17	.40	.01
Combined Alienating Behaviors	-.01	.38	.49	.05
Coparenting Conflict	.21	.25	.20	.03
Combined Warmth	-.27	.13	.02	.10
Combined Violence	-.04	.25	.44	.02
Male	.30	.35	.20	.01

Note. R-Squared = .26, Adjusted R-Squared = .24. Combined variables are sums of scores for both parents on that variable.

Table 8.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Predicting Attachment Avoidance (N= 292)

	B	SE	p	Partial R ²
Intercept	6.30	2.42	.005	
Coalition with Mother	-.09	.20	.34	.05
Coalition with Father	-.13	.27	.32	.06
Combined Alienating Behaviors	.11	.27	.34	.03
Coparenting Conflict	-.40	.48	.20	.12
Combined Warmth	-.30	.17	.04	.14
Combined Violence	.15	.20	.23	.03
Male	.07	.48	.44	.01

Note. R-Squared = .37, Adjusted R-Squared = .35. Combined variables are sums of scores for both parents on that variable.