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# Implications of Divorce: Do Co-parenting Relationships Influence Individual Parent-child Relationships?

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Implications of Divorce:

Do Co-parenting Relationships Influence Individual Parent-Child Relationships?

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Honors Thesis

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**Abstract**

This study examined the influence of co-parenting on the parent-child relationship. Using data from the 7<sup>th</sup> wave of collection of the Early Years of Marriage Study factors such as parents' perceptions of parent-child relationship quality, the role of gender on time parents spend with their children on parent-child relationship quality were analyzed to determine whether perceptions of the co-parenting relationship were related to the parent-child relationship in divorced families. Results indicated that certain aspects of the co-parenting relationship affected some aspects of the parent-child relationship but not others. There were also differences based on parent gender where fathers reported more satisfaction with their ex-spouse's relationship with their children than mothers. Further, satisfaction with one's relationship with their former spouse was the single greatest predictor of overall parent-child relationship quality. Results of this study demonstrate that establishing a cooperative post-divorce co-parenting relationship for both former spouses as well as parent-child relationships. If parents come to better understand the importance of cooperative co-parenting, divorce may less negatively affect family functioning.

## Implications of Divorce:

### Do Co-parenting Relationships Influence Individual Parent-Child Relationships?

#### **Introduction**

On average, 40% of all first marriages in the United States (Teachman, Tedrow, & Hall, 2006) and over half of all divorced families have children under 18 years of age (Amato, 2000). These high percentages highlight a need for research on parenting and co-parenting relationships post-divorce. Overtime, researchers' perceptions on divorce have changed. Earlier research often took a standpoint that children of divorce would have poorer overall well-being and increased behavioral problems (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993); however, over time, it became clearer that divorce can actually better the lives of children, especially those in high conflict families (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 2005). Earlier research often suggested that divorce had negative consequences for family relationships. Overtime however, it has become clearer that divorce can be better for both the parents' and children's lives.

#### **Co-Parenting**

Often in research on divorce and co-parenting, the process of divorce is analyzed to see how it affects co-parenting afterward (Baum, 2003; Bonach, 2005). The process of divorce is generally operationalized as length of the actual proceedings and the overall difficulty of divorce. Baum (2003) sought to determine whether or not there is a correlation between difficulty of divorce and post-divorce parental role fulfillment. It was found that when fathers feel more at fault for the divorce they tend to exert better parental role fulfillment. Additionally, a negative experience with divorce proceedings led to a conflictual co-parental relationship for both mothers and fathers. Lastly, when divorce proceedings were difficult and tumultuous fathers were less likely to fulfill parental duties; whereas mothers' parenting abilities were not generally

impacted by divorce proceedings. In a similar study, Bonach (2005) assessed the relationship between pre-divorce problems and post-divorce co-parenting abilities. Bonach looked at factors such as who the parent thought to be at fault, cause of divorce, difficulty of the actual divorce, satisfaction with post-divorce arrangements as well as years of marriage. Ultimately, Bonach's finding seemed to mimic those of Baum (2003). However, Bonach (2005) found that forgiveness was the single best indicator of whether or not two divorced parents could successfully co-parent. In this case, forgiveness refers to the ability of one parent to let go of the actions of their ex-spouse in order to end their conflictual relationship and successfully co-parent their children. Future research should consider parents' adjustment to divorce when examining co-parenting behaviors and how they might affect the parent-child relationship.

In relation to co-parenting, Baum (2004) identified three clusters of post-divorce parenting styles: cooperative, conflictual, and parallel. In a cooperative co-parental relationship there is a good, low conflict co-parental dynamic, moderate parental involvement from both mother and father and low parental attack (which essentially refers to how often two parents argue with one another rather than compromise). Parallel co-parenting is "less good" than cooperative and is made up of the father's will to be involved and the mother's attempts to compromise rather than attack. Finally, conflictual co-parenting is far less successful than the other two clusters and is comprised of an inability to avoid attacking and a lack of involvement from the father. Slightly more than 75% of the parents in this study fell into either the cooperative or parallel parenting groups which is a positive sign in terms of ultimate parent-child relationships and child outcomes. Similarly, Amato, Kane, and James (2011) looked at the effect of different co-parenting types on children's behavior post-divorce. Obviously, children in the

cooperative parenting cluster fared better than those with parents that fell into any other category. Despite the overarching themes discovered about co-parenting and parental role, future research should examine which aspects of the spouses' relationship most influence co-parenting behaviors.

### **Pre-Divorce Relationships**

Levels of commitment and emotion present in a marriage before divorce are two important factors in determining how effective co-parenting will be after divorce. According to Madden-Derdich, Leonard, and Christopher (1999) boundary ambiguity (a lack of clarity in regards to what is appropriate behavior within a particular relationship) within divorced individuals is one of the best ways to predict co-parenting abilities. Furthermore, the study found that the mother's feelings toward her ex-husband were a good indicator of whether boundary ambiguity would be present. They deduced that there may be a connection between an increased lack of relational clarity between a divorced mother and father and poor co-parenting skills; whereas a relationship with clear, well defined boundaries tends to equate to more successful co-parenting. In a fairly similar study by Kamp-Dush, Kotila, and Schoppe-Sullivan (2011) the association between pre-relationship dissolution commitment and subsequent quality of post divorce parenting skills were assessed. After looking at the relationships of 4, 898 mothers and fathers it became clear that couples with higher pre-dissolution commitment had poorer co-parenting skills immediately following a divorce but were able to quickly better their parenting abilities. In contrast, couples with low pre-dissolution commitment had a steady co-parental relationship of poor quality.

Amato and Booth (1996) examined the relationship between pre-divorce quality of marriage and parent-child relationships and post divorce parent-child relationships and affection.



Results revealed that parents who reported a divorce were more likely to feel that their children gave them more problems than in an average family; furthermore, parents who went on to get a divorce, reported higher behavior problems in their children eight to twelve years prior to their eventual divorce. Results like this suggest that it is the highly conflictual relationships often seen in divorced and pre-divorce families that result in childhood behavioral problems rather than the divorce itself acting as a catalyst. The researchers also found that following a divorce, father's levels of affection for their children often decreased while divorce did not affect a mother's affection at all. Results of Amato and Booth provide much insight into what familial problems are present before as well as after divorce. Further research should examine the potential influence of the co-parenting relationship on individual parent-child relationships.

### **Proportion of Data on Mothers and Fathers**

Unfortunately, despite the variety of foci in divorce research, many samples tend to be limited to data collected largely from mothers (Luedemann, Ehrenberg, & Hunter, 2008; Arditti, 1999; Markham, Ganong, & Coleman, 2007). Arditti (1999) focuses solely on the impact of divorce on mother-child relationships, in what becomes a highly informative qualitative study. The college student participants were asked to talk about their relationships with their mothers as openly as they wanted; the researcher asked certain questions to assess relational closeness (ability to share information with one another), availability, communication, and parental support. Through her research, Arditti found that mothers are often able to maintain close, healthy relationships with their children; this assertion even holds true for non-residential mothers. Interestingly, many participants mentioned their mother's as one of their "best friends" and they acted as mutual sources of support and disclosure for one another; although, with the

exception of one male participant, only females made this distinction which may warrant further research with a better male-to-female participant ratio.

Markham et. al., (2007) tested the impact of parents' expectations of oneself and others on cooperative co-parenting skills. For the purposes of this study, expectations for oneself refers to how a mother/father wants to parent and the expectations of others refers to how they expect their spouse to parent; through which, individuals create unique parental identities. In general, higher levels of co-parental cooperation are associated with creating an ideal parental identity for oneself and similarly, commitment to that specific parental identity ultimately leads to more effective cooperative co-parenting over time. The fact that these parents were involved in parenting classes may have increased their ability to successfully co-parent, indicating that results are not applicable to individuals who have not taken classes. Furthermore, this study solely looked at mothers who took part in mandatory parenting classes post divorce; this type of sample is confounding because we lack knowledge about how fathers react in a similar situation and therefore this data is not particularly generalizable and calls for further research which includes more paternal data.

Luedemann et al., (2008) investigated the perspectives of 97 daughters who experience a parental divorce in childhood. Using both individual interviews and self-report questionnaires researchers assessed the impact of post-divorce mother-daughter discussions on mother-daughter relationships in the long-term. These adolescent and young adult daughters were asked a variety of questions regarding their level of mother-to-daughter disclosure including information on: finances, feelings about the father, child support, intimacy, dating, sexual needs/experiences, divorce/remarriage, job, happiness from parenthood, parenting concerns, entertainment, hobbies, physical appearance, personal pride, hopes, and personal concerns. Participants ranked the

aforementioned categories from 0 to 5 depending upon how often their mothers spoke with them about each item.

Ultimately, researchers found that depending upon the topic, frequency of discussion has an influence on subsequent mother-daughter relationships quality. For example, those who frequently discussed positive aspects of their father, happiness that the mother gets from being a parent, hobbies and the mother's hopes for the future often had more positive mother-daughter relationships than those who discuss these topics less frequently. Whereas, frequent conversation about negative aspects of the father, dating, sexual experiences, and child support was linked to poorer mother-daughter relationship quality. These results highlight a need for further research on what parts of the parent-child relationship impact overall quality.

Like the studies of Arditti (1999) and Markham et al., (2007), Luedemann et al. (2008) was a very mother oriented study; because of this, we have little to no information on how fathers see their children after a divorce. Such a lack of fathering information in studies on the effects of divorce on children establishes a clear need for further research on fathers in the future.

### **Longitudinal vs. Cross-Sectional Research**

Both cross-sectional and longitudinal research have their positives and negatives. When it comes to research on divorce however, it may often be particularly beneficial to look at how effects change over time. For example, Arditti's 1999 study on mother-child relationships post divorce would not necessarily benefit from a longitudinal design as she was able to investigate her topic of interest without examining changes in participants over time.

In contrast, Sobolewski and Amato (2007) used data from a study on marital instability which was collected over the course of seventeen years. Researchers randomly dialed over 2,000 individuals and of those who were ultimately interviewed, 122 came from divorced families.

Ultimately, Sobolewski and Amato (2007) were hoping to analyze the well-being of children in comparison to whether they were close to one parent, neither parent, or both parents. It was found that children from both married and non-married families have inconsistent parental relationships; daughters, no matter what family type they are from, are more likely to have a close relationship to their mother rather than their father. Interestingly, closeness to mothers is more likely in all types of families and across all sexes. Furthermore, as expected high conflict co-parenting relationship, regardless of marital status often led to the likelihood of not being close to either parent and vice versa for low conflict.

Beginning in 1980 Amato, Loomis, and Booth (1995) conducted interviews with both married and divorced families. They interviewed them several more times through 1992 when they interviewed the children as well. Through these interviews researchers were able to assess marital conflict which is operationalized by argument frequency and whether anyone in the couple has ever been violent. It was discovered that only in married families does conflict have a negative relationship with well-being; this can most likely be attributed to the prolonged exposure to conflict children would have in a married family versus divorced. Furthermore, researchers found that it seems as though depending on conflict levels, divorce can often benefit a child's well-being. Children coming from families with low pre-divorce parental conflict often have lower well-being than those with high conflict families; showing that children exposed to large amounts of parental conflict often benefit from divorce.

Studies like those conducted by Sobolewski and Amato (2007) as well as Amato, Loomis, and Booth (1995) were only possible because of longitudinal data. When a study starts with entirely married couples we are open to analyzing both pre and post divorce data from a firsthand perspective rather than looking back at it.

### **Impact of Divorce on Children**

Burns and Dunlop (2009) compared the relationships, adjustment, and self image of several adult children (children whose parents got divorced between the ages of thirteen and sixteen) from both married and divorced families. Using a scale measuring parental marital quality in comparison to children's reports of their parents' relationship it became clear that older children are much more aware of the problems in their parents' marriage leading up to a divorce. Ultimately, the child's awareness of marital conflict was a good predictor of the amount of anxiety in the child's life; daughters often reported more anxiety than sons despite reports of similar parental conflict.

In 2006, Ahrons conducted a qualitative study in which participants were urged to tell their personal stories and memories surrounding parental divorce. Question and answer sessions focused on how adult children give meaning to events surrounding divorce as well as the divorce itself; they also took into consideration whether or not their perceived interpretations were representative of the truth. Using predetermined parenting types the majority of adult children categorized their parents as cooperative colleagues and those children also report significantly better relationships with both their mother and father. Another consistent trend amongst participants was the hope that their parents would just get along; when parents do not get along, adult children report feeling as if they are caught in the middle and often struggle with feelings of loyalty from parent to parent.

In a similar study, Frank (2008) looked at whether or not divorce impacted parent-child relationships into adulthood; they also examined the impact of divorce on sibling relationships in adulthood, a very unique and under served population within divorce research. Using two scales which assess both parent-child and sibling relationships researchers went on to discover that

children tend to have similar sibling and parent child relationships; in other words, in divorced families we see male sibling relationships that are similar to the perceived father-child relationships of each sibling. Given that 63 percent of participants claim to have lived with their mothers this cannot be solely attributed to living arrangement and most likely has more to do with theories such as the family systems or social learning theory. Social learning theory is a big influence here and should be taken very seriously in future research as children learn how to treat all of their future relationships based upon those that they are exposed to within their own families. One major problem of this study is that all of the participants were recruited through a university mental health clinic where their own therapists requested that they participate. This poses a conflict of interest for potential participants as they may feel as though they have been coerced into the study; furthermore, participants attending a mental health clinic are not necessarily representative of all young adult children of divorce.

In another study on the impact of divorce on adult children Greenwood (2012) asked participants to give a thorough summary of their parents' divorce. After asking children to openly speak about their parent-child relationship leading up to, during, and after divorce Greenwood was able to see that participants were often put into a mediator role when their parents argued. Additionally, children were used as pawns in the divorce, meaning that parents often tried to convince their children that the other parent had wronged them and the divorce was not their fault. One last important finding had to do with parent-child role reversals in which the child felt responsible for the emotional well-being of their parents rather than the other way around. Greenwood mentions that it is important to note that those who reported greater parent-child relationship problems were more likely to have had significantly less time pass since the divorce.

Ultimately, these studies highlight the importance of divorce on older children as well. Although adult children are affected in a different way (i.e., their parent-child relationship's wellbeing) they still go through major changes following a divorce.

### **Remaining Questions**

Despite the various studies already completed on divorce questions still remain. For example Arditti (1999) examined mother-child relationships post-divorce; solely from the point of view of the child. Future research should examine parent-child relationships post-divorce from the parents' perceptions. Furthermore, there is little research on the perspective of a father. Father's are often neglected in this type of familial research. Research is needed to compare differences between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of relationships with their children post divorce. Lastly, there is sparse research pertaining to the potential impact of a positive versus negative co-parenting relationship's effect on subsequent, individual parent-child relationships.

The goal of the current study is therefore to begin clarifying the aforementioned gaps as well as address the following questions:

1. How do parents' perceive parent-child relationship quality post-divorce?
2. How does parents' gender impact the amount of time, in days, parents spent with children post-divorce?
3. How does parents' gender impact parent-child relationship quality post-divorce?
4. Is cooperative co-parenting a successful indicator of subsequent parent-child relationships?

## Method

### Sample and Procedures

**Participants:** For this study a subsample of participants from the Early Years of Marriage Study were used. The Early years of Marriage study is a longitudinal study that began in 1986 and followed 373 couples who applied for a marriage license in Wayne County, Michigan. In order to be eligible to participate in the study, this marriage needed to be the first for both partners, partners needed to be same-race, and the wife had to be less than 35 years of age. In Comparison to the General Social Survey Data (1980-1994), no significant differences between demographic qualities such as income, education, parental status, likelihood of cohabitation, and employment status were found; this emphasizes the representative nature of our participants to the U.S population.

This particular study included a sample of 135 divorced individuals who were divorced from their wave one spouse by the 7<sup>th</sup> wave of data collection (Year 16) and had at least one child under the age of 18.

**Procedure:** For the 7<sup>th</sup> wave of data collection, researchers located all of the couples interviewed in their Year 1 data collection. In total 517 face-to-face interviews were conducted with both married and unmarried couple; of which came the 135 divorced individuals in this study. This subset consisted of 75 females and 59 males who reported having divorced their year 1 spouse and also reported having at least one child under the age of 18 at the time of the interview.



## Measures

### Co-parenting:

**Joint Custody/Other Legal Agreements:** Joint custody was measured by asking parents the following question: “Does your legal agreement give you and your spouse an equal say in making decisions about your child/children” Participants were also asked whether or not they have a legal or informal agreement with their former spouse about visitation times and where the child lives (yes/no responses).

**Cooperation/communication between divorced parents:** Two items assessed the level of cooperation between divorced parents. Questions such as: “How often do you have contact with your former spouse?” (Scale of 1-6 ranging from 1 = never to 6 = once a week); and “How often do you and your former spouse make equal decisions about your child/children?” (Scale of 1-4 ranging from 1 = never to 4 = always). These two questions were reverse recoded so that the higher the number the more frequent the contact or decision making occurred.

**Individual parental adjustment:** Parents were asked: In general, how would you say you have adjusted to this divorce/separation? (Scale of 1-4 with answers ranging from 1 = very poorly adjusted to 4 = very well adjusted).

### Parent-Child Relationships:

**Quality of relationship:** Parent-child relationship quality was assessed using 4 items that assessed how participants saw their own relationships with their children. The included items were: “Overall, how much do you enjoy the relationship between you and your oldest child?” on a scale of 1-4 (1 = not enjoyable at all to 4 = very enjoyable); “Overall, how satisfied are you with the relationship between you and your oldest child?” (1 = very dissatisfied to 4 = very satisfied); “Overall, how happy are you with the relationship between you and your oldest

child?" (1 = very unhappy to 4 = very happy); and "How is your overall experience with your oldest child?" (1 = Not good to 4 = extremely good). These items were reverse recoded, then summed - so that higher values signify a more positive relationship ( $\alpha = .861$ ).

**Time spent with child:** Several questions pertaining to time participants spend with child were used to assess parent-child relationships as well. Including: "On average, how many hours in a typical day do you spend taking care of your child?" In the last year, on average, how much time has your oldest child spent with your former spouse? (Per month and per year); and "In the last year, on average, how many overnights has your oldest child spent with your former spouse?" For the purposes of this study the unit of time is in days.

**Communication about spouse with child:** The frequency at which parents discuss their former spouse with their children was measured with the following question: "How often do you talk about your child/children with your former spouse?" With answers ranging from a couple of times a week to once a year, or never (1 = a couple of times a week, 7 = never).

#### **Demographic information:**

Gender for all participants was dichotomously coded as either male (1) or female (2).

### **Results**

#### **How do parents perceive parent-child relationship quality post-divorce?**

Frequencies of several items measuring parents' perceptions of the parent-child relationship show that more people perceive their relationships positively than those who view it negatively. Approximately, 67.3% report a positive overall experience with their oldest child. Furthermore, 88.9% report high levels of happiness with their parent-child relationship, 86.2% report high relationship satisfaction, and 96.1% report high relationship enjoyment.

### **The Parent-Child Relationship and Parent Gender**

An Independent Samples T-Test was conducted to compare reports of ex-spouse's time (hours) spent with their oldest child each month over the past year based on parent gender. There was a significant difference between father's perceptions of mother's time spent with child ( $M=104.47, SD=147.470$ ) and mother's perceptions of father's time ( $M=50.19, SD=108.276$ ); where fathers reported that their ex-spouse spent more time with their oldest child in the past 12 months than mothers reported;  $t(125) = 2.384, p < .001$ . This result suggests that mothers may spend more time with their children post-divorce; this is most likely due to custody arrangements.

An additional Independent Samples T-Test was conducted to compare reports of the number of overnights the oldest child spend with the ex-spouse in the past year based on parent gender. There was a significant difference between father's reports ( $M=230.06, SD=134.025$ ) and mother's reports ( $M=80.29, SD=109.661$ ); where fathers reported higher numbers of overnights spent with their ex-spouse than mothers do;  $t(98)=6.127, p < .001$ .

A third Independent Samples T-Test was conducted to compare reports of satisfaction with ex-spouse's relationship with their oldest child based on parent gender. There was a significant difference between father's ( $M=2.9725, SD=0.92861$ ) and mother's ( $M=2.5059, SD=1.16111$ ) reports of their satisfaction with their ex-spouse's relationship with their oldest child;  $t(152)=2.447, p = .016$ . This result suggests that father's may be more satisfied with their ex-wives' relationship with their children than mothers are with father's relationships.

### **The Co-Parenting Relationship and Parent Gender**

An Independent Samples T-Test was run comparing how often parents reported making equal decisions about their oldest child with their spouse based on parent gender. There was a

significant difference between fathers ( $M=2.333$ ,  $SD=1.00593$ ) and mothers ( $M=1.9459$ ,  $SD=1.03225$ ) where fathers reported making more equal decisions with their ex-wife than mothers did regarding ex-husbands;  $t(129)=2.153$ ,  $p = .033$ .

A second Independent Samples T-test was conducted for whether or not the couples reported having a legal or informal agreement regarding spousal visitation and where the child would be living. There was no significant difference for fathers ( $M=2.57$ ,  $SD=1.966$ ) and mothers ( $M=2.40$ ,  $SD=1.918$ );  $t(153) = .542$ ,  $p > .05$ . A similar Independent Samples T-Test was conducted for whether or not parents reported having joint custody based on parent gender. There was no significant difference for fathers ( $M=2.31$ ,  $SD=1.894$ ) and mothers ( $M=2.86$ ,  $SD=2.009$ );  $t(124) = -1.562$ ,  $p > .05$ .

Subsequently, an Independent Samples T-Test was conducted for reports of how often they had contact with their ex-spouse based on parent gender. There was no significant difference for fathers ( $M=3.37$ ,  $SD=1.934$ ) and mothers ( $M=3.13$ ,  $SD=1.943$ );  $t(186) = .862$ ,  $p > .05$ . Another Independent Samples T-Test was conducted for how adjusted each parent felt they were to the divorce or separation based on parent gender. There were no significant differences between fathers ( $M=3.63$ ,  $SD=.649$ ) and mothers ( $M=3.66$ ,  $SD=.554$ );  $t(188) = -.365$ ,  $p > .05$ . This result suggests that mothers and fathers tend to be equally adjusted to the divorce.

One final Independent Samples T-Test was conducted for how satisfied with their relationship with their ex-spouse each parent was based on parent gender. There were no significant differences for fathers ( $M=2.7674$ ,  $SD=1.07018$ ) and mothers ( $M=2.7980$ ,  $SD=1.22040$ );  $t(183) = -.180$ ,  $p > .05$ .

## Correlations

A series of correlations were run on multiple variables testing both the co-parenting relationship and the parent-child relationship to investigate which variables influence one another. Parent gender was strongly correlated with how much time the child spent with the ex-spouse in the past 12 month  $r(125) = -.209$ ,  $p < .05$ , how many overnights the oldest child spends with the ex-spouse  $r(98) = -.526$ ,  $p < .01$ , reported satisfaction with ex-spouse's relationship with the child  $r(152) = -.195$ ,  $p < .05$  and, how often the parents report making equal decisions about the child with their ex-spouse  $r(129) = -.186$ ,  $p < .05$ .

How often a parent talks with their child about their ex-spouse is strongly correlated with how often they have contact with their ex-spouse  $r(150) = .788$ ,  $p < .01$ , how satisfied they reported being with their ex-spouse's relationship with the child  $r(152) = -.390$ ,  $p < .01$ , how often they make equal decisions about their children with their ex-spouse  $r(128) = -.596$ ,  $p < .01$  and, how satisfied they are with their relationship with their ex-spouse  $r(150) = -.281$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Whether or not parents reported having a legal or informal agreement with their ex-spouse about visitation and where the child lives was strongly correlated with how satisfied they are with their relationship with their ex-spouse  $r(150) = .020$ ,  $p < .05$ .

The frequency with which the oldest child spent time with the ex-spouse over the past 12 months was strongly correlated with the gender of the parent  $r(125) = -.209$ ,  $p < .01$ . The frequency with which the oldest child spent time with the ex-spouse over the past 12 months was also strongly correlated with how many overnights the oldest child spent with the ex-spouse  $r(96) = .644$ ,  $p < .01$  as well as how often parents reported making equal decisions about children with their ex-spouse  $r(108) = .275$ ,  $p < .01$ .

The amount of time the child spent over the past year with the ex-spouse is strongly correlated with how much time the child spent with the ex-spouse each month over the past year  $r(125) = .581, p < .01$  and the number of overnights the child had with the ex-spouse  $r(96) = .295, p < .01$ .

The number of overnight the child spent with the ex-spouse is strongly correlated to the parent's gender  $r(98) = -.526, p < .01$ , time the child spent with the ex-spouse each month over the last year  $r(96) = .644, p < .01$ , time the child spent with the ex-spouse over the last year  $r(96) = .295, p < .01$ , parent's satisfaction with their ex-spouse's relationship with the child  $r(98) = .387, p < .01$  and, how often parents made equal decisions about their child  $r(97) = .272, p < .01$ .

Whether or not parents have joint custody was strongly correlated with how often parents reported making equal decisions with their ex-spouse about their children  $r(124) = -.247, p < .01$ . How often parents had contact with their ex-spouse is strongly correlated to how often they talk with their children about their ex-spouse  $r(150) = .788, p < .01$ , parent's satisfaction with ex-spouse's relationship with child  $r(150) = -.290, p < .01$  and, how often parents made equal decisions about their child with their ex-spouse  $r(127) = -.550, p < .01$ .

Parent's level of adjustment to the divorce or separation is strongly correlated with how satisfied they are with their relationship with their ex-spouse  $r(188) = .284, p < .01$ . Satisfaction with ex-spouse's relationship with children is strongly correlated with parent's gender  $r(152) = -.195, p < .05$ , how often they talk with their child about their ex-spouse  $r(152) = -.390, p < .01$ , the number of overnights the oldest child spends with the ex-spouse  $r(98) = .387, p < .01$ , how often they have contact with their ex-spouse  $r(150) = -.290, p < .01$ , how often they make equal decisions with their ex-spouse about their children  $r(128) = .628, p < .01$  and, how satisfied they are with their relationship with their ex-spouse  $r(150) = .375, p < .01$ .

How often parents make equal decisions about their children with their ex-spouse is strongly correlated with parent gender  $r(129) = -.186$ ,  $p < .05$ , how often parents talk with children about ex-spouse  $r(128) = -.596$ ,  $p < .01$ , how much time the child spent each month with the ex-spouse over the last year  $r(108) = .275$ ,  $p < .01$ , the number of overnights the child spends with the ex-spouse  $r(97) = .272$ ,  $p < .01$ , whether or not parents have joint custody of the child  $r(124) = -.247$ ,  $p < .01$ , frequency of contact with ex-spouse  $r(127) = -.550$ ,  $p < .01$ , satisfaction with ex-spouses relationship with the child  $r(128) = .628$ ,  $p < .01$  and, how satisfied they are with their relationship with their ex-spouse  $r(127) = .518$ ,  $p < .01$ .

How satisfied the parent is with their relationship with their ex-spouse is strongly correlated with how often they talk with their children about the ex-spouse  $r(150) = -.596$ ,  $p < .01$ , whether or not parents have a legal or informal agreement about visitation and where the child will live  $r(150) = .175$ ,  $p < .05$ , how adjusted the parent feels they are to the divorce or separation  $r(183) = .284$ ,  $p < .01$ , satisfaction with ex-spouse's relationship with the children  $r(150) = .375$ ,  $p < .01$ , how often they make equal decisions about the children  $r(127) = .518$ ,  $p < .01$  and, overall quality of the parent-child relationship  $r(149) = .223$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Lastly, the overall parent-child relationship is strongly correlated with how satisfied the parent is with their relationship with their ex-spouse  $r(149) = .223$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### **Discussion**

This study examined the link between the co-parenting relationship and subsequent post-divorce parent-child relationships. I found that multiple aspects of the co-parenting relationship were associated with different aspects of the parent-child relationship. The current study contributes to divorce literature by highlighting the importance of quality co-parenting after a

divorce in order to positively impact parent-child relationships. Furthermore, this study emphasizes gender differences between perceptions of mother and fathers.

In general, parents' perceptions of their individual parent-child relationships post-divorce are positive; with two-thirds of parents reporting either a 3 (very good) or 4 (extremely good) for their overall experience with their child. Furthermore, over 85% reported high levels of happiness and satisfaction with their parent-child relationship as well as a staggering 96% reporting high relationship enjoyment. These findings contradict earlier research which suggests that divorce is solely a negative event for both parents and children (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993) and is supported by research that suggests that divorce can be beneficial in some circumstances (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). This finding suggests that the majority of the time parent-child relationships do not suffer from divorce.

Interesting, but expected, gender differences emerged for time parents spend with their child post-divorce. When asked how much time their oldest child spent with their former spouse fathers were more likely to report a greater amount of time than mothers. This finding can potentially be linked to the decrease in affection fathers often face post-divorce (Amato and Booth, 1996). This finding is still unique however, because unlike much other literature on divorce paternal reports were included. Additionally, mothers reported fewer overnights per year with fathers than fathers reported which is supported by the finding that mothers frequently maintain close, healthy relationship with children post-divorce (Arditti, 1999). These findings suggest that despite fathers reporting that their child spent more days on a monthly and yearly basis with their mother we see that children do get to some at least some time with their fathers post-divorce. These results could be attributed to formal custody and visitation arrangements in cases where parents do not share joint physical custody. There is a lack of research on father



involvement and future research should attempt to look at how increased paternal involvement post-divorce may impact parent-child relationships.

There were many significant findings in terms of the impact of parent gender on parent-child relationship quality. One finding of particular importance is that fathers tend to report a more positive opinion of their former spouse's relationship with their child than mothers do about the father's relationship. This finding is unsurprising in that it is supported by earlier research which suggests that mother-child relationships are very strong post-divorce (Luedemann et al., 2008). However, much of the research that supports this finding were completed with mostly female participants which warrants further research into why mothers seem to have more positive parent-child relationships than fathers. Furthermore, once we understand these differences it is important to develop social policies that address these discrepancies in parent-child relationship satisfaction.

In contrast to the aforementioned differences between mothers and fathers there was no significant difference between mothers' and fathers' satisfaction with their relationship with their former spouse. This suggests that despite any other differences in perceptions mothers and fathers may have there is a fairly mutual understanding when it comes to the parental relationship and that mothers and fathers tend to be equally adjusted to divorce. This is important to take into consideration because a discrepancy in former spouse relationship satisfaction could impede upon the ability to successfully co-parent.

I also found that the number of overnights a child spends with the former spouse is related to one's satisfaction with their former spouse's relationship with their child. This finding is important because it takes into account the potential for time a parent spends with their child to have an influence on how the other parent views that relationship. In other words, if a father

takes on the responsibility of weekly overnights with their child, the mother may be more likely to be satisfied with the relationship her ex-husband has developed with their child. This finding could be linked to earlier research suggesting that fathers who feel more at fault for the divorce have better parental involvement (Baum, 2003). This finding has implications for co-parenting abilities as well given that it makes sense that a parent who is satisfied with their former spouse's relationship with their child would be more likely to be able to cooperatively co-parent and therefore see the benefits of doing so.

The ability to take part in equal decision making with one's former spouse is of particular importance when it comes to co-parenting abilities. This finding is supported by Baum's 2004 classification of three co-parenting clusters in which cooperative co-parenting was the most positive for parents and children. Therefore, it makes sense that joint custody was highly correlated with frequency of equal decision making with former spouse about the child. This finding supports the almost nationwide preference for joint custody among low to average conflict families and should be used to further implement joint custody agreements in divorce policy and planning.

Interestingly, a parent's self-reported level of personal adjustment to the divorce itself was strongly correlated with one's satisfaction with their spouse's relationship with their child. This discrepancy of satisfaction due to individual adjustment may be explained by a parent's ability to forgive their former spouse post-divorce often being associated with one's ability to co-parent (Bonach, 2005). This suggests that unresolved issues between divorced parents can have an effect on individual parent-child relationships. This can be both positive and negative. In cases where a parent is particularly well adjusted to the divorce and acknowledges that it was for

the best they may be more likely to speak highly of their former spouse when talking to their children and therefore help to foster a positive parent-child relationship for their former spouse.

In contrast to this, a parent who has not yet gotten over the divorce may have an innate ability to damage the parent-child relationship of their former spouse. These findings contrast the idea that fathers exert better parental role fulfillment when they feel more at fault for the divorce (Baum, 2003). Considering that better personal adjustment to divorce led to higher levels of satisfaction with an ex-spouses relationship with their child further research is needed on how feelings of adjustment, forgiveness and fault are related to one another. It is important to better understand this finding in future research so that counselors, divorce education instructors etc. can understand how important it is for their clients to move past the divorce in order to foster a cooperative co-parenting relationship as well as a positive parent-child relationship.

Parents' reported satisfaction with their former spouse's relationship with their child was correlated with several things including: gender, frequency of contact with former spouse, number of overnight the child spends with their former spouse, frequency of equal decision making, and satisfaction with their relationship with their former spouse. The fact that reported feelings of satisfaction with former spouse has a potential impact on so many aspects of both the co-parenting relationship as well as individual parent-child relationships highlights the importance of understanding that no single factor can predict parent-child relationship quality post-divorce. However, all of the aforementioned variables are part of successful co-parenting and therefore emphasize the importance of quality co-parenting after a divorce.

Frequency with which parents report making equal decisions about their child with their former spouse is strongly correlated to how often parents speak to their children about their former spouse, how much time they spend with their children, whether or not parents have a joint

custody agreement, how frequently they have contact with their former spouse, their satisfaction with their spouse's relationship with their child and, their own satisfaction with their relationship with their former spouse. These findings are similar to the finding that frequency with which mothers discussed certain topics with their children impacts the mother-child relationship (Leudemann et al., 2008). This is important because it emphasizes the importance of the ability of parents to compromise with their former spouse when it comes to their children post-divorce. One's ability to share the burden of decision making when it comes to children leads to better communication with both the former spouse and the children and improves the quality of both the parent relationship and the parent-child relationships. This finding has important implications for social policy and planning because it suggests that joint legal custody, even joint physical custody may be beneficial for families going through divorce.

One finding of particular interest is the impact of a parents' satisfaction with their former spouse on the overall quality of the parent-child relationship. This is important to understand and take note of because if a parent cannot move past their differences and conflicts with their former spouse it may be inevitable that their parent-child relationship will suffer too. In accordance with this is the finding that the overall quality of the parent-child relationship is highly correlated with satisfaction with one's former spouse. This ties back into the idea that cooperative co-parenting has the least detrimental effect on both parents and children (Baum, 2004). Essentially, however you go about it, parents cannot expect to have the best possible relationship with their children after a divorce without a cooperative relationship with their former spouse.

Ultimately, the results of this study are important because they stress the importance of cooperative co-parenting after a divorce as well as further indicate the possibility of divorce as a neutral or potentially even positive thing for families in certain circumstances. Co-parenting is

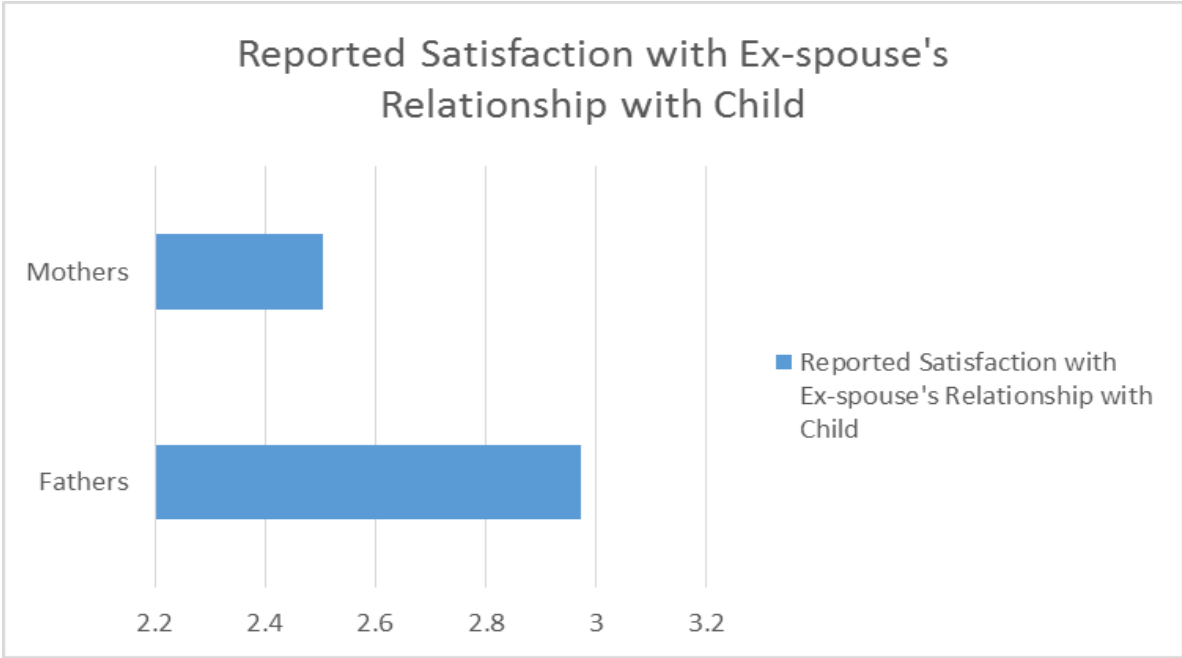
not a particularly common topic in divorce literature and it is important that we come to better understand the role it plays in divorced families. Furthermore, we cannot ignore fathers when it comes to research on divorce; in the past, much of the research on divorce has focused on mothers (Arditti, 1999; Luedemann et al., 2008) and this study was able to show that fathers in general, spend at least some time with their children following a divorce, something that was largely ignored in previous research. Further research should better explore the role of co-parenting in parent-child relationship in both married and unmarried families. Additionally, future research should seek to better understand the discrepancy between the amount of time children tend to spend with their mothers rather than their fathers after a divorce and the potential implications of such a difference.

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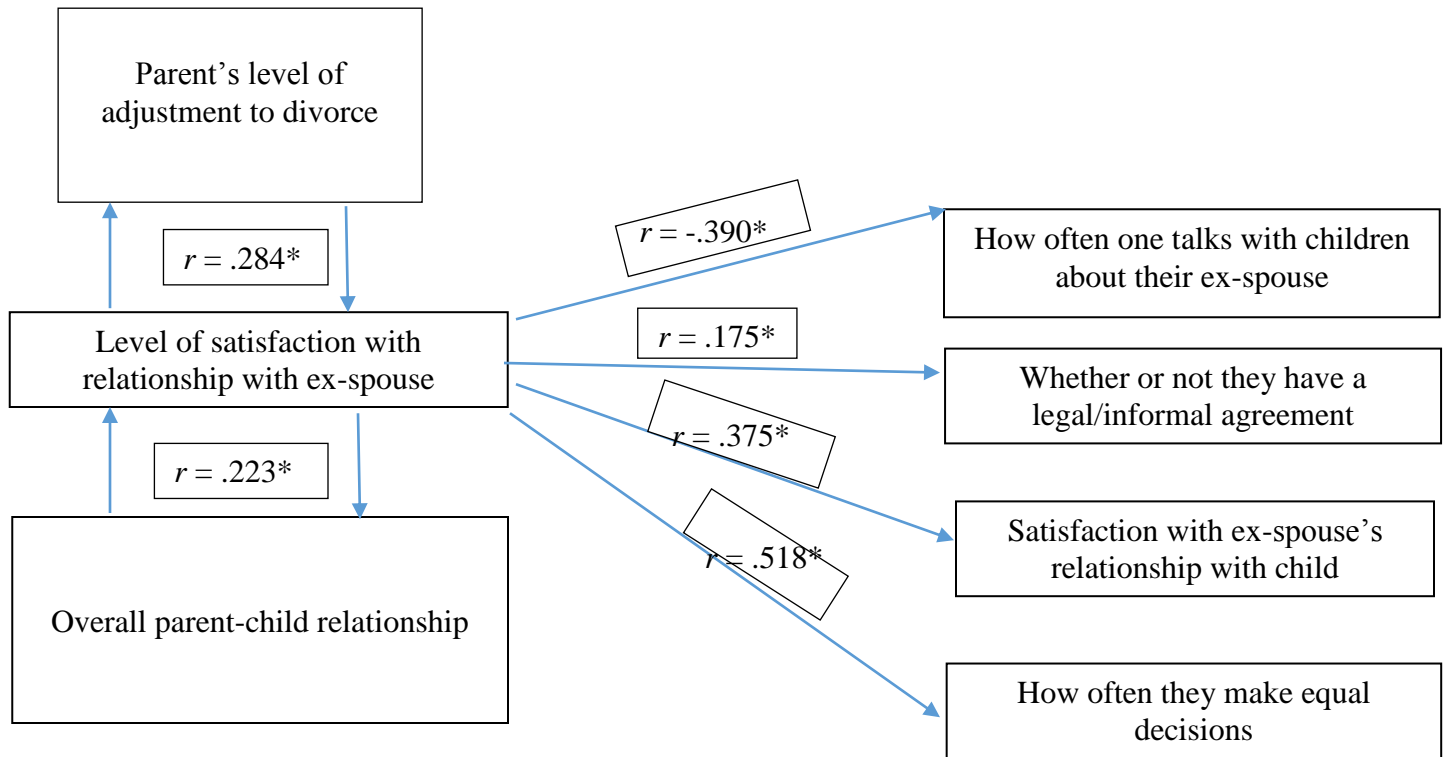
**Chart 1**





**Chart 2**

Associations among Variables



**Chart 3**

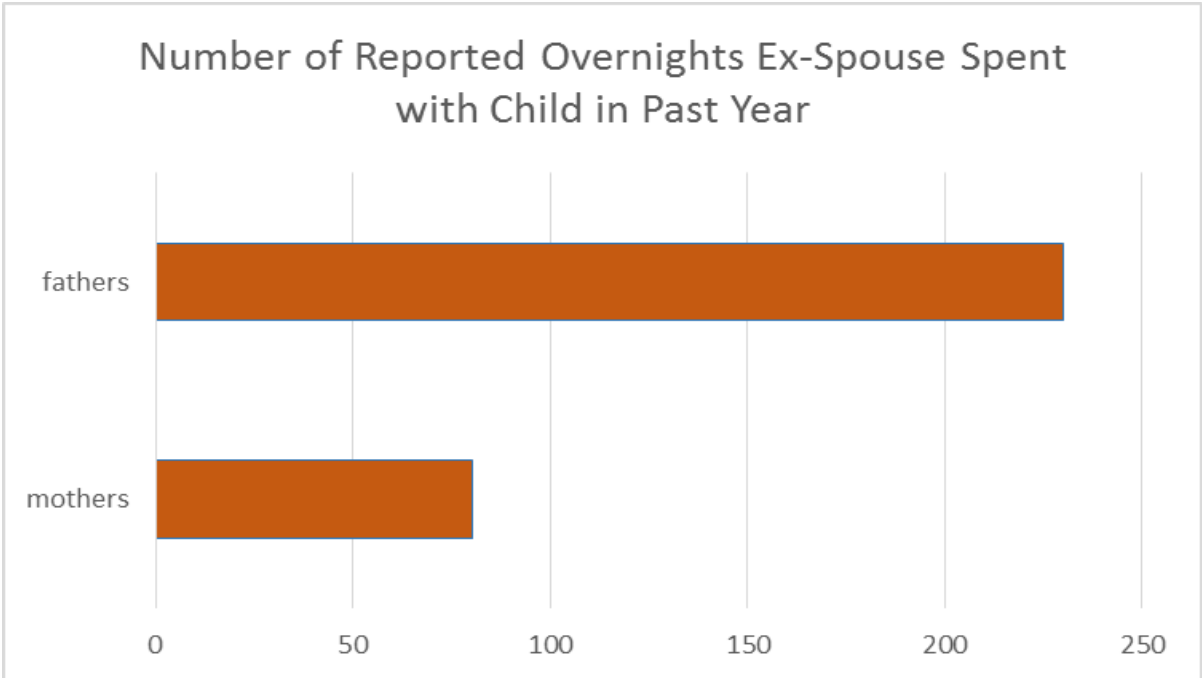


Chart 4

