



## Parent-child relationships after parental separation: Adult children's retrospective reports

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### ABSTRACT

Research with adult children of divorce (ACD) has contributed to literature suggesting the adverse long-term effects of parental separation and divorce. The role of the parent-child relationship following parental separation, when a parent's availability and support might well be especially important for a child, particularly if there is ongoing parental conflict, has received little empirical attention and was examined here. The present investigation was designed to assess ACDs' retrospective ratings of their mothers' and fathers' parenting in the two years following parental separation. ACDs' reports of each of their parents' dating behaviors as well as the conflict they remembered between their parents during this period were also examined. The results of the present investigation indicate that ACD view their mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior in the two years following separation as an important factor related to their current relationships with each of their parents.

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Parenting, divorce, children

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## INTRODUCTION

Research with adult children of divorce (ACDs) has contributed to literature suggesting the adverse long-term effects of parental separation and divorce (Amato, 2000). Long-term effects of divorce have been linked to problems with social relationships, health, behavior, and socioeconomic status (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). For example, when comparing children from divorced homes to children from intact homes, children from divorced homes often have greater disadvantages such as behavioral problems, decreased performance in school, and they are more likely to have psychological and social difficulties (for reviews, see Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

In the related literature, parental conflict, particularly when it continues beyond separation, has also been shown to be a key factor associated with poorer child adjustment (van Lawick & Visser, 2015). In fact, research suggests that hostility within a family may play a more important role in child outcome than family structure (Bishop & Ingersol, 1989). When parental conflict continues in the aftermath of divorce, and children continue to be exposed to more intense parental conflict than those children in intact families, poorer child outcomes exist (Gohm, Oishi, Darlington & Diener, 1998). Additionally, in many cases, ongoing parental conflict impacts the quality of parent-child relationships following separation. Although children observing parental conflict has been shown to have a deleterious effect on children, the parent-child relationship following separation appears to be of more importance (Amato & Booth, 1996). Amato and Booth (1996) also found that children with close relationships with their parents in the aftermath of divorce, had similar levels of adjustment, and well-being when compared to children from intact families.

The findings of parent-child closeness as a predictor for positive child outcomes, highlights the importance of parenting practices in the aftermath of divorce. Following parental separation, the visitation, assignment of custody and parent-child relationship is established and has been found to be a contributing factor to poorer parent-child relationships (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Following divorce, children often receive less practical and emotional support from their parents (Furstenberg, Hoffman & Shrestha, 1995). In addition to custody arrangements, the majority of parents begin dating with one year following divorce, and many of those, within 2 months post-divorce (Anderson et al., 2004). Becoming overly concerned with finding a new partner, or managing a new relationship can also impact children in the aftermath of divorce (Koerner et al., 2004). Therefore, the perception of the parents' dating behavior post-divorce may impact the parent-child relationship, and adult child adjustment.

There has been limited research on the adult children of divorce (ACD) and their current relationship with their parents. Hoffman and Ledford (1995) found that cooperative parental relationships in the aftermath of divorce were predictive of ACDs' evaluation of their current relationship with both their mothers and fathers. They also found ACDs' post-separation relationships with each parent were predictive of the current relationships with both parents. This is important because ACDs' current relationships with their parents may be reflective of how ACD were able to adjust to their parents' separations.

Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989), suggest that young adults from divorced families tend to exhibit low self-esteem. In other studies (see Bun Louselle, Misukanis & Mueller, 1988) self-esteem was related to parenting styles, and parental involvement. Also, parental nurturance has also been correlated with positive self-concept and self-esteem (Parish & McCluskey, 1992). Although ACD tend to have lower levels of self-esteem, research findings suggest parenting styles and parental nurturance may be better indicators of ACDs' self-esteem.

The role of the parent-child relationship following parental separation, when a parent's availability and support might well be especially important for a child, particularly if there is ongoing parental conflict, has received little empirical attention and was examined here. If parents are concerned with the transitions associated with separation and are less emotionally available to their children during this transitional period, long-term ACD adjustment as well as their relationships with their parents may well suffer. Parents who focus upon meeting their own needs, as in the manner in which they pursue dating and a new relationship, may diminish their relationship with their child. The present investigation was designed to assess ACDs' retrospective ratings of their mothers' and fathers' parenting in the two years following parental separation. ACDs' reports of each of their parents' dating behaviors as well as the conflict they remembered between their parents during this period were also examined. For this preliminary report, a model examining these variables as predictors of ACDs' reports of their own current self-esteem and relationships with each of their parents was tested.

## METHOD

ACD volunteers (157 females, 62 males), whose biological parents separated after the ACD's third and before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays ( $M$  age at the time of parental separation was 8.2,  $SD=4.4$ ), completed a demographic assessment and provided retrospective ratings of each of the scales indicated below. The current age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 63 years old ( $M=26.6$ ;  $SD=8.1$ ).

Forty eight percent of the participants indicated they were Caucasian, 14% African American, 21% Latino, 8% Asian, 1% Native American; the remaining 8% indicated "other" or did not respond to the item. Forty-four percent of the participants completed two or more years of college. Sixty percent of the participants were single, 29% married, and 12% were separated or divorced. Hollingshead's (1977) occupational scales were used to classify the occupations of the participants. Twenty-one percent of ACD were not employed or did not respond to the item. Of those responding, 20% were classified as Small Business owners, Clerical or Sales Workers, Technicians or Semi-Professional categories; 26 were in the Minor Professional and Higher Occupation groups. Forty-two percent of the respondents' parents separated between their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, 26% between their 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, 19% between their 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, and 12% between their 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. The mean age of the participants at the time of their parents' separation was 8.2 ( $SD=4.4$ ; mode = 3 years old). Eighty-four percent of the participants lived with their mother, 11% lived with their father, and 5% indicated "other" living arrangements.



Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which “examines how your parents handled their separation, and current perspectives about this experience in your life.” Participants completed a questionnaire which included a demographic assessment, and divorce related questions from prior scales. Scales were presented in one of four predetermined random orders, with all items rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree); ACDs’ rated their current relationships with each parent from 1 (never) to 7 (constantly).

### Measures:

**Assessment of mothers’ and fathers’ parenting following separation.** (mom-child/dad-child.) Sixteen items were used on two separate subscales, one for mother, and the other for father, to measure ACDs’ retrospective ratings of their relationship with each of the mothers and fathers during the two years following separation. Ten of these items were derived from the Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ) developed by Kenny (1985), and they included items such as, “I was able to count on my father for emotional support when I felt troubled,” and “My mother made me angry.” The remaining six items were created for the present study. Sample items were, “I always felt like a priority in my father’s life,” and “My mother seemed uninterested in parenting.” Eight items were stated negatively and were recoded for analysis to indicate higher scores represented better parent-child relationships following separation.

**Dating scale.** (momdate/daddate.) A 13-item scale, one for mother and one for father was created to measure ACDs’ retrospective perceptions of their parents dating behavior during the two years following separation. Sample items were, “dating distracted my father from me,” and “My mother chose her new relationship over me.” All of the items were recoded positively, and higher scores indicated a better relationship between parent and child.

**Post-Separation Parental Conflict Scale.** (conflict.) Thirteen items were created to measure ACDs’ retrospective perceptions of conflict during the two years following the parents’ separation. Eleven items were stated positively regarding conflict (e.g., “my parents argued a lot”). Two of the items were stated negatively (e.g., “My parents got along well”). Two negative statements were recoded for analysis, and higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived inter parental conflict.

**Current relationship with mother and father.** (currentmom/currentdad.) Participants responded to the Parent-Child Relationship Survey (Fine, Worley & Schwebel, 1985) which assessed ACDs’ current levels of connection with each parent. Twenty-four items were used on two separate subscales, one for mother and one for father. Sample statements were, “I communicate well with my father,” and “I resent my mother.” Two negative items were recoded for analysis, and higher scores represented better, current, relationships with their parents.

**Assessment of self-esteem.** (selfesteem.) Participants’ self-esteem was assessed with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1965), a 10-item scale which included 5 items stated positively (e.g., “I feel that I do not have much to be proud of”). The five negative statements were recoded for analysis, and higher scores indicated higher levels of self-esteem.

**Attachment in intimate relationships.** Participants’ reports of being in an intimate relationship was assessed with the Secure Attachment Style Subscale (Simpson, 1990), a 13-item scale which included items such as, “I find it relatively easy to get close to others,” and “I’m comfortable having others depend on me.” Higher scores indicated a greater ability to become close to others.

## RESULTS

Separate correlational analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between the independent variables and each of the dependent variables (ACDs’ current relationships with their mother and their father, and self-esteem). The demographic variables of age, education, and occupation were also analyzed, and were not found to be significantly related to any of the dependent measures.

The father-child relationship following separation was found to be significantly related to the current relationship of the ACD and the father ( $r = .78, p < .01$ ). The mother-child relationship was found to be significantly related to the ACDs’ current relationship with their mother ( $r = .73, p < .01$ ). Also, the fathers’ dating patterns and the ACDs’ current relationship with their fathers were found to be related ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ). The mothers’ dating patterns were found to be related to the current relationships between ACD and their mothers ( $r = .47, p < .01$ ).

If the ACD indicated they had a good relationship with their mother following separation, there was a negative effect on the current relationships with their father ( $r = .24, p < .01$ ). Similarly, if the mother prioritized her children while she was dating post-divorce, then there was a negative effect on the current relationship of ACD and their fathers ( $r = .17, p < .05$ ). Father’s dating patterns were unrelated to ACDs’ current relationships with their mothers, although if fathers maintained positive relationships with their children following separation, a negative effect on ACDs’ current relationship with their mothers was found ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ ).

Conflict was negatively related to ACDs’ current relationship with their fathers ( $r = -.13, p < .05$ ), and with their mothers ( $r = -.32, p < .01$ ). Conflict was also found to be negatively related with ACDs’ self-esteem ( $r = -.26, p < .01$ ).

The father-child relationship and fathers’ dating patterns following separations were unrelated to participants’ reports of their self-esteem. However, both mothers’ relationship with their children ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ), and their dating patterns ( $r = .25, p < .01$ ) were significantly related to ACDs’ self-esteem.





Three separate two-step hierarchical multiple regression analyses were carried out to examine the relationship between the predictor variables (mom-child and dad-child, momdate and daddate, and conflict) and each of the three criterion measures (currentmom, currentdad, and selfesteem). As a control, the demographic variables of age, income, and education levels reported, were entered on Step 1 for each analysis, and the five predictors on the second step. The amount of variance accounted for by the demographics was not significant in any of these analyses.

For the currentmom analysis, the amount of additional variance accounted for on Step 2 was significant,  $R^2$  change = .55 (total  $R^2$  =.58, Adjusted  $R^2$  = .55), change  $F(5, 169) = 45.63, p < .001$ . Significant betas were obtained for participants' ratings of their mother's post-separation parenting and parental conflict in this analysis.

For the currentdad analysis, the amount of additional variance accounted for on Step 2 was significant,  $R^2$  change = .62 (total  $R^2$  =.66, Adjusted  $R^2$  = .65), change  $F(5, 169) = 65.94, p < .001$ . Here a significant beta was obtained only for participants' ratings of their father's post-separation parenting. Finally, Step 2 of the analysis of participants' ratings of their self-esteem yielded a significant  $R^2$  change = .14 (total  $R^2$  = .17, Adjusted  $R^2$  = .13), change  $F(5, 169) = 5.86, p < .001$ . A significant beta was obtained only for participants' ratings of their mother's post-separation parenting.

## DISCUSSION

The importance of the role of the parenting relationship following parental separation, when a parent's availability and support might well be especially important for a child was supported by the present findings. The results of the present investigation indicate that ACDs view their mothers' and fathers' parenting behavior in the two years following parental separation as an important factor related to their current relationships with each of their parents. When entered together, as in the preliminary regression analyses reported, the only other significant predictor of ACDs' relationships with either parent was the relationship between parental conflict and their current relationship with their mothers. The post-separation parenting of their mothers was the only factor found to predict ACDs' reports of their self-esteem.

These analyses are preliminary, but are strongly indicative of the importance of the study of mothers' and fathers' parenting relationships with their children in the two years following parental separation. Further, how ACDs remember their parents pursuing dating and a new relationship was highly correlated with the obtained parenting ratings. This may well account for the failure to demonstrate a statistical relationship between this factor and the criterion measures in the preliminary regression analyses reported and will be examined in further analyses. Differential effects based on ACD and parent gender, as well as the relative contributions of the parent-child relationship factors and of reports of parental conflict, will also be explored in further analyses.

These findings are limited by the retrospective nature of ACDs' reports and the correlational design. Thus, having a good current relationship with their parents may well color participants' remembrance of how their parents behaved toward them, their dating behavior, and parental conflict in the two years following parental separation. Nevertheless, the role of the parent-child relationship following parental separation has received little empirical attention and the findings relative to the role of parental conflict in particular are quite compelling and suggestive of further study in the area.

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