

Divorce and Children's Adjustment Problems at Home and School: The Role of Depressive/Withdrawn Parenting

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ABSTRACT: This study examined linkages between divorce, depressive/withdrawn parenting, and child adjustment problems at home and school. Middle class divorced single mother families ($n = 35$) and 2-parent families ($n = 174$) with a child in the fourth grade participated. Mothers and teachers completed yearly questionnaires and children were interviewed when they were in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. Structural equation modeling suggested that the association between divorce and child externalizing and internalizing behavior was partially mediated by depressive/withdrawn parenting when the children were in the fourth and fifth grades.

KEY WORDS: divorce; preadolescence; adjustment problems; depressive/withdrawn parenting.

Introduction

Divorce is linked with heightened externalizing behavior problems (e.g., aggression and disobedience), internalizing behavior problems (e.g., anxiety and depression), and parent-child relational problems among preadolescents and early adolescents.¹⁻⁵ The magnitude of differences between children from divorced families and children

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from 2-parent families appears to be relatively modest, but has remained stable or increased over the past 20 years based on meta-analyses of over 100 studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶ Epidemiological data suggest that rates of psychiatric disorder are somewhat greater among children of divorce, particularly boys,⁷ but the great majority of children from divorced households do not exhibit clinically significant levels of disturbance. Nonetheless, children of divorce are at increased *risk* for both current and future adjustment problems. Ongoing psychosocial problems are often reported by adults whose parents divorced during childhood^{8,9} and divorce effects appear to remain stable or *increase* with the passage of time during childhood.⁶ Preadolescent children from divorced families appear to be susceptible to adjustment difficulties at home and school; the present study aims to identify mediating processes that might account for these difficulties.

Divorced single mothers are often burdened with multiple demands and fewer resources: assuming household responsibilities that were formerly shared with a spouse, working more hours at their jobs to make ends meet, and making do with less social support than their nondivorced counterparts.^{10,11} It is therefore not surprising that divorced single mothers are at increased risk for depressive symptoms,¹² which may manifest as withdrawal from social interactions with their children. In addition, the multiple demands placed on divorced single mothers may simply lead to less time for tasks such as parenting. The mood state and behavior of the single mother can reverberate throughout the family system and have an impact on all family members.¹³ Current models emphasize parent's emotional adjustment and parenting behavior as likely mediators of the effects of divorce on children.^{6,14} The present study tests whether maternal depressive symptoms, withdrawn parenting, and preadolescent adjustment problems are heightened in a sample of middle-class divorced single mother families, compared to nondivorced families, over the course of 3 years. More important, we investigate the extent to which depressive symptoms and withdrawn parenting may account for differences in adjustment between preadolescent children from divorced families and nondivorced families.

The Significance of a Middle-Class Divorced Sample

Economic decline has been linked to many of the outcomes associated with divorce, such as parent-child difficulties and child behavior

problems.¹⁵ A significant loss of family income following divorce may therefore account for some, but probably not all, of the negative effects of divorce experienced by children and adolescents.^{5,9,16} Middle-class samples of divorced families, though fairly rare in the divorce research literature, have the advantage of eliminating poverty/low Socioeconomic status (SES) as a competing explanation for poor child outcomes. The use of a middle-class sample in this study permitted us to explore other potential mediators of the effects of divorce. Of course, we did not expect a large number of children or mothers from either the nondivorced or the divorced families to report a *clinically significant* level of problem behavior, due to the modest effects of divorce reported in previous studies.⁵ Nonetheless, elevated symptoms of behavior and mood disturbance in childhood may signify an increased *risk* for later psychopathology,¹⁷ particularly in light of the increased rate of disorders such as major depression in early adolescence.¹⁸ Our goal here is to illustrate the processes through which divorce may lead to symptom elevation in children.

Depressive / Withdrawn Parenting in Divorced Families

Because divorced parents are at greater risk for symptoms of depression than are married parents,^{6,12,19} parental depressive symptoms may be one factor in divorced homes that increases children's risk for adjustment problems.²⁰ For example, depressed parents may model negative affect and poor coping strategies.¹⁸ A study by Larson and Gillman¹³ suggests that children and adolescents are susceptible to "emotional transmission" from single mothers—that is, children's momentary mood states are likely to change to match the mood states experienced by their single mothers when they are together. Thus, when divorced single mothers are sad or irritable, their children may also experience these mood states.

The heightened depressive symptoms experienced by divorced mothers may have a specific effect on their parenting, namely, withdrawal and disengagement from interactions with their children, as Field and her colleagues have demonstrated.²¹ Mothers experiencing depressive symptoms may be more self-focused, have less motivation for social interaction, and be less socially involved than mothers who are not experiencing symptoms of depression.¹⁸ Parental withdrawal may be one manifestation of these depressive symptoms. Indeed, some studies suggest that mothers are less involved

with their children in divorced families than in 2-parent families. In the Virginia Longitudinal Study, divorced mothers of preadolescent children reported spending less time with their sons (but not their daughters) than did nondivorced mothers, although this finding was not replicated in a second study of early adolescents.^{2,22} In a study of 953 adolescents, divorce was associated with memories of lowered maternal positive involvement during childhood—an effect not accounted for by family SES or interparental conflict.²³ These findings suggest that divorced mothers are more withdrawn and disengaged from their children than are married mothers. This withdrawal may represent an extension of maternal depressive symptoms into the parenting domain. In the present study, we examine depressive symptoms and maternal withdrawal as a single construct: “depressive/withdrawn parenting.” We use this term to describe a parent who is experiencing symptoms of depression, and is less sociable and less engaged, on both an emotional and a behavioral level, in the child’s daily life.

No research to date has examined depressive/withdrawn parenting as a mediator of the effects of divorce on children’s adjustment. In addition, there are no studies that have tested parental withdrawal (independent of depressive symptoms) as a mediator. We are aware of one study that has examined the mediational role of maternal depressive symptoms, but there was no evidence that this variable accounted for the higher levels of conduct problems and depression reported by adolescents from divorced families as compared to nondivorced families.⁴ Given the evidence that both depressive symptoms and parental withdrawal are more common in divorced families, it is surprising that these variables have received so little attention as mediators of divorce effects.

Other aspects of parenting behavior have been tested for mediational effects. For example, in the study of adolescents described above,⁴ aversive maternal childrearing behavior partially accounted for the association between divorce and adolescent externalizing behavior. Two additional studies found indirect paths between divorce, measures of aversive parental behavior, and composite measures of child functioning.^{19,24} Clearly, more frequent aversive and hostile parenting may account for some of the adjustment problems observed in the children of divorced mothers. However, a withdrawn parent with depressive symptoms may exhibit low aversive behavior (e.g., scolding and punishing), yet still provide few positive interactions and little reinforcement to their children. The parenting literature has demonstrated consistent links between paren-

tal withdrawal, on one hand, and child externalizing and internalizing symptoms, on the other hand, in both divorced and nondivorced families.^{20,25} Depressive/withdrawn parenting may play an important role, distinct from that of aversive parenting, in the adjustment problems experienced by some children from divorced families.

From a child's perspective, having a sad, self-oriented, and withdrawn mother may evoke a sense of isolation and rejection, particularly if the mother is the primary caregiver. The child may attempt to re-engage the mother by making bids for "negative attention." For instance, disruptive behavior may attract the attention of an otherwise busy and distracted single mother or other adult caregivers in the child's life (e.g., teachers, mentors). Gaining such attention may reinforce and heighten the disruptive behavior so that it becomes a stable pattern over time.²⁶ Thus, adjustment problems at home, school, and other settings observed in some children may occur in reaction to effects that divorce has had on the mother's mood and parenting style. This hypothesis forms the basis of the conceptual model that guides this study: The stress associated with divorce results in greater depressive/withdrawn parenting and this style of parenting is, in turn, associated with (and partly accounts for) more adjustment problems among preadolescent children living with their divorced single mothers.

Our model posits that increased depressive/withdrawn parenting is a stable accommodation to the high level of chronic daily demands experienced by single mothers. We would expect an immediate post-divorce increase in depressive/withdrawn parenting and child adjustment problems, rather than a linear increase in each over time. However, it is possible that even if children from divorced families continue to experience more adjustment problems than their peers from non-divorced families as they enter adolescence, the role played by depressive/withdrawn parenting may change. For instance, because children become increasingly independent as they enter adolescence, they may be less influenced by maternal variables than they were in earlier years. Our longitudinal dataset permitted us to test for changes in the putative mediational process (i.e., the depressive / withdrawn parenting model) as the participating children transitioned into early adolescence. Additionally, we utilize the repeated measures aspect of our dataset to explore the possibility of differential trajectories over time between post-divorce vs. 2-parent families in parenting and child adjustment.

Method

Participants

The participants included school-age children, their parents, and their teachers. All children began the study when they were in the fourth grade. The average age of the children at the start of the study was 9.49 years. The average age of the mothers was 42.19 years. In the current study, only 2-parent, nondivorced families and divorced, single mother families were selected for data analysis from a total sample of 248 participating families. In the 2-parent families both biological parents were currently living at home. In the divorced single mother families, only the biological mother was living at home; mothers with cohabiting partners were excluded.

Only families who remained consistently married (for 2-parent families), or divorced and nonremarried (for divorced families) over the 3-year period of the study were included. At Year 1, 39 families were excluded from the analyses because either (a) they were neither 2-parent nor divorced single mother families, or did not report their marital status ($n = 21$) or (b) they changed marital status over the course of the study ($n = 18$). Subject loss due to attrition between Year 1 (grade four) and Year 3 (grade six) was 10.0%: At Years 1, 2, and 3, data were collected from 174, 164, and 159 2-parent nondivorced families and 35, 33, and 29 divorced single mother families, respectively. There were no significant differences between subjects who remained in the study and those who attrited on any of the demographic, mediator, or outcome variables. Of the participating children, 113 were boys (18 in divorced households) and 96 were girls (17 in divorced households). Divorced families had an average of 1.70 ($SD = 0.67$) children in the home, compared to the 2-parent family average of 2.39 ($SD = 0.91$) children. This difference was statistically significant ($t = 3.76$, $p < 0.01$).

Participating families were primarily middle and upper-middle class and European-American. Among the 185 mothers who identified their ethnicity, 83.3% identified themselves as European-American, 1% as African-American; 3.6% as Latina, 6.5% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.6% as Native American, and 4% as Other. Mothers also reported on family income on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (under \$ 10,000 per year) to 6 (\$ 30,001–40,000 per year) to 11 (over \$ 100,000 per year). The median response for divorced mothers at Year 1 (1992–1994) was 8 (\$ 50,001–60,000). The median response for nondivorced mothers at Year 1 was 11 (over \$ 100,000). Among the 188 mothers who reported on their educational background, 57% of the divorced mothers and 74% of the nondivorced mothers reported having graduated from college.

To compensate participants for their effort, each year children and parents received an honorarium that ranged from \$ 5.00 to \$ 20.00, and teachers received \$ 5.00 for each child they rated.

Recruitment

Families were recruited with letters sent home to the parents of all fourth grade children attending three elementary schools (two public schools and one parochial school) in a large metropolitan area. Parents

were asked to return a response form to indicate if they were interested in participating. Those who were interested were then contacted by telephone and were sent consent forms. Introductory letters were mailed to 677 families over the course of 3 years. A total of 248 parents returned a signed consent form (37% participation rate).

Procedure

Once each year (for 3 years), data were collected from children, teachers, and parents. Children were interviewed at school, and teachers and mothers completed questionnaires.

Measures

Child Adjustment

Mother Ratings. Mothers rated their child's behavior on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), a well-validated instrument with established internal consistency and test-retest reliability.²⁷ This measure is comprised of 113 items with a 3-point response scale that taps symptoms of externalizing behavior (e.g., hyperactivity, disobedience, and physical aggression) and internalizing behavior (e.g., anxiety and social withdrawal). Raw CBCL scores, rather than *T*-scores, were used in this study because we were interested in elevations in symptom counts that may signify risk for later psychopathology. In the CBCL manual, Achenbach (1991a)²⁷ notes that there is greater variability in raw scores than in *T*-scores in samples of nonreferred children and raw scores allow researchers to take account of the full range of variation. We did not expect, nor observe, clinically significant behavior problems in the vast majority of children in either group. Two broadband scales, Externalizing and Internalizing, were used in this study. Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.86 to 0.88 and 0.85 to 0.87 for the Externalizing and Internalizing scales, respectively, over the 3 years of the study. Mean scores are reported at the item level (i.e., range: 0–2). There were no gender differences on the two CBCL scales used in this study.

Teacher Ratings. Children's home room teachers rated children's behavior at school on the Teacher Report Form (TRF), a well-validated instrument with established internal consistency and test-retest reliability.²⁸ The TRF contains 113 items with a 3-point response scale that tap symptoms of child externalizing and internalizing behavior. As with the CBCL, raw TRF scores, rather than

T-scores, were used in this study. The two TRF broadband scales, Externalizing and Internalizing, were used. Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.88 to 0.95 and 0.85 to 0.90 for the Externalizing and Internalizing scales, respectively, over the 3 years of the study. There were no significant gender differences on either of these broadband scales.

Child Self-reports. Children described their experiences of symptoms of depressive symptoms using the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI).²⁹ The CDI is a 27-item questionnaire with a 3-point response scale. According to the test manual, CDI scores have been found to be highly correlated with other measures of self-esteem and depression, and test-retest reliability coefficients have ranged from 0.41 to 0.83.²⁹ In this study, the CDI was administered by an interviewer. This scale yields one raw score, indicating the degree of depressed mood the child is currently experiencing. Cronbach's alphas for this scale ranged from 0.85 to 0.89 over the 3 years of the study. There were no gender differences on this measure at any of the assessment periods.

Children rated their symptoms of externalizing behavior problems on Harter's Perceived Competence Scale for Children.³⁰ Convergent validity coefficients ranged from 0.32 to 0.55 in the scale development study for this measure, and test-retest reliability ranged from 0.69 to 0.87.³⁰ The Behavior Conduct subscale contains six items that use a 4-point response scale. This scale yields one raw score, indicating the extent to which the child reports engaging in oppositional and defiant behaviors. Cronbach's alphas for this scale ranged from 0.81 to 0.87 over the 3 years of the study. Boys had higher scores than girls on this measure at Year 2 ($F = 7.03$, $df = 1,190$, $p < 0.01$) and Year 3 ($F = 7.24$, $df = 1,185$, $p < 0.01$).

Depressive/Withdrawn Parenting

Depressive/withdrawn parenting was operationalized as mother-reported depressive symptoms and maternal withdrawal.

Maternal Depressive Symptoms. Mothers rated their own symptoms of depressed mood on the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D).³¹ The CES-D is a 20 item questionnaire with a 4-point Likert-type response scale that taps symptoms such as feelings of sadness, loss of appetite, etc. This scale yields one score, which was calculated as the mean of all symptoms combined (pro-

ducing a score from 1 to 4). The CES-D, developed to assess depressive symptoms in a normal population, has been shown to have high internal consistency and test-retest reliability. The validity of CES-D is indicated by its correlation with other self-report measures and with clinical ratings of depression. In our sample, Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.89 to 0.91 over 3 years. Mother's ratings of depressive symptoms were significantly correlated across the 3 years of data collection (r 's ranged from 0.52 to 0.54; all p 's < 0.01).

Maternal Withdrawal. A seven item self-report measure of maternal withdrawal was developed for this study on the basis of a factor analysis of a larger group of 54-items describing the parent-child relationship.³² The scale assesses the parent's perception that she is disengaged from the child's day-to-day life and is too tired or lacks sufficient energy to become actively involved with the child. Six of the seven items of the Maternal Withdrawal scale were adapted from the Daily Parent-Child Withdrawal scale,³³ and one item was adapted from the Parent Perception Inventory.³⁴ Cronbach's alphas for this scale ranged from 0.71 to 0.74.

Two of the Maternal Withdrawal items were rated on a 4-point response scale corresponding to how frequently each type of parent-child interaction occurs in a typical week, ranging from 1 (this never or almost never occurs) to 4 (this almost always occurs). The two items are: "Most of the time we are together, I am too tired to interact with my child" and "We are together but not really interacting." The remaining five items were rated on a 4-point response scale that ranged from 1 (definitely false) to 4 (definitely true). Sample items that used this response scale are: "Most of the time we are together, I ignore, do not pay attention to, or do not talk to my child" and "I am interested in what my child has to say (reverse scored)." Mother's ratings of Maternal Withdrawal were strongly correlated across the 3 years of data collection (r 's range from 0.56 to 0.73; all p 's < 0.01). Mothers of sons did not differ from mothers of daughters in mean ratings on this measure at any of the assessment periods.

Data Analyses

Data analysis was conducted in two steps. First, repeated-measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) tested whether divorced and nondivorced families differed in their trajectories over the 3 years of the study on the mediators (maternal depressive symptoms and withdrawal) and the child outcome variables. The statistic of interest

was the time by family type interaction term. Because, as reported below, there were no significant time by family type interactions, follow-up contrasts were conducted to test for cross-sectional differences between divorced and nondivorced families on the study variables at each yearly assessment.

Second, structural equation modeling (SEM) tested the mediational role of depressive/withdrawn parenting and SES in the association between divorce and child adjustment problems. Because the repeated measures ANOVAs failed to show significant time by family type interactions, separate cross-sectional models were tested for each yearly assessment. For each model, a listwise covariance matrix was submitted to the SEM program EQS. Results reported herein are based on the maximum likelihood estimation procedure. Models with a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.95 or greater were accepted and parameters were assessed.³⁵ Mediation was assessed for each SEM model by testing the indirect effect of family type on the child outcome construct³⁶ using the significance test formula reported in Baron and Kenny.³⁷ In cases in which the multivariate indirect effect was significant, follow-up univariate indirect effects were tested for each indicator of the latent outcome variable.

Results

Family Income and Maternal Education

Nondivorced mothers reported higher scores than divorced mothers on the 11-point family income scale ($M_s = 9.61$ and 6.93 , $SDs = 2.21$ and 2.79 , respectively; $F(2,168) = 43.10$, $p < 0.01$). Nondivorced mothers also reported higher educational attainment than did divorced mothers, but the difference was not significant. Hence, although mean scores on these measures reflected middle or upper-middle class status for both groups, there was some evidence that nondivorced mothers represented a group that was higher in SES than divorced mothers.

Longitudinal and Cross-Sectional Mean Comparisons

Depressive/Withdrawn Parenting

Initial repeated-measures ANOVAs suggested that divorced and married mothers did not differ from each other in the rate of change

(slope) on the indicators for depressive symptoms and parental withdrawal over the three assessments (i.e., when the children were in grades four, five, and six). Nonsignificant effects for time also suggested that on average, mothers in both groups had relatively stable scores for depressive symptoms and withdrawal over the course of the study. Follow-up contrasts indicated that divorced mothers reported both more depressive symptoms and withdrawal than did nondivorced mothers at each yearly assessment (see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, ranges, and *F*-tests for these variables).

Child Adjustment

Repeated-measures ANOVAs were also conducted for each child outcome variable. The time by family type interaction term was nonsignificant for all of the child adjustment variables. Additionally, there was no main effect for time for any of the child outcome variables.

Cross-sectional contrasts revealed that mothers rated children from divorced families higher on the CBCL Internalizing and Externalizing scales at all three yearly assessments (see Table 1). Teachers rated children from divorced families as higher on the TRF Internalizing and Externalizing scales at two of three yearly assessments (for Year 2 TRF Externalizing scores, this effect was marginal, $p = 0.06$). Although children from divorced families rated themselves higher on the CDI and the Harter Behavior Conduct scale than did children from nondivorced families at each yearly assessment, these differences were not statistically significant. There was only 1 (out of 18 possible) significant child gender by family type interaction effects for the child outcome variables, a finding that could be attributable to chance alone. However, due to the small sample size of divorced families, the null results for interaction effects should be interpreted with caution. In summary, mothers, teachers, and children consistently rated children from divorced families as having more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Differences based on mother and teacher ratings were usually more pronounced as well as statistically significant, whereas the differences reported by the children were not.

The Mediating Role of Depressive / Withdrawn Parenting

Because divorced and nondivorced families differed on intercepts but not slopes for the mediators and outcome variables, six cross-

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and F Ratios for Mother and Child Variables

Construct/ Informant / Year	Divorced		Nondivorced		<i>F</i>	
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Range	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Range		
Depressive/Withdrawn Parenting						
Mother's Depression						
Year 1	1.68 (0.55)	1.00–3.20	1.44 (0.40)	1.00–3.55	7.91**	
Year 2	1.73 (0.40)	1.05–2.75	1.44 (0.38)	1.00–2.90	13.32**	
Year 3	1.66 (0.53)	1.00–2.95	1.43 (0.37)	1.00–2.65	7.01**	
Mother's Withdrawal						
Year 1	0.70 (2.00)	-2.36–6.25	-0.20 (1.35)	-2.36–5.53	12.06**	
Year 2	0.33 (1.52)	-2.38–4.34	-0.14 (1.32)	-2.38–4.34	4.39*	
Year 3	0.30 (1.38)	-2.25–3.60	-0.18 (1.37)	-2.25–5.79	3.84*	
Child Externalizing Behavior						
Mother (CBCL)						
Year 1	0.34 (0.25)	0.00–0.97	0.20 (0.18)	0.00–0.94	11.29**	
Year 2	0.29 (0.21)	0.00–0.91	0.18 (0.17)	0.00–1.00	9.63**	
Year 3	0.26 (0.20)	0.03–0.91	0.16 (0.15)	0.00–0.70	6.85**	
Teacher (TRF)						
Year 1	0.24 (0.29)	0.00–1.24	0.16 (0.28)	0.00–1.74	2.62	
Year 2	0.18 (0.25)	0.00–0.85	0.10 (0.18)	0.00–1.06	3.63 ^a	
Year 3	0.17 (0.23)	0.00–0.88	0.08 (0.11)	0.00–0.50	7.51**	
Child (Harter)						
Year 1	1.86 (0.57)	1.00–2.83	1.74 (0.55)	1.00–3.67	0.84	
Year 2	1.80 (0.57)	1.00–3.17	1.62 (0.54)	1.00–3.50	2.77	
Year 3	1.73 (0.57)	1.00–3.00	1.64 (0.54)	1.00–3.50	0.85	
Child Internalizing Behavior						
Mother (CBCL)						
Year 1	0.35 (0.24)	0.00–0.97	0.17 (0.14)	0.00–0.74	32.86**	
Year 2	0.30 (0.27)	0.00–1.19	0.15 (0.15)	0.00–0.87	19.60**	
Year 3	0.29 (0.27)	0.00–1.12	0.13 (0.13)	0.00–0.81	18.11**	
Teacher (TRF)						
Year 1	0.27 (0.26)	0.00–1.04	0.14 (0.18)	0.00–0.91	12.83**	
Year 2	0.12 (0.11)	0.00–0.40	0.08 (0.12)	0.00–0.74	1.79	
Year 3	0.21 (0.27)	0.00–0.89	0.07 (0.08)	0.00–0.31	25.37**	
Child (CDI)						
Year 1	0.25 (0.20)	0.00–0.74	0.19 (0.20)	0.00–1.30	1.87	
Year 2	0.19 (0.15)	0.00–0.63	0.17 (0.20)	0.00–1.41	0.21	
Year 3	0.23 (0.24)	0.00–0.70	0.18 (0.20)	0.00–1.04	1.46	

Note. Means are reported at the item level.

^aThis effect approached significance, $p = 0.06$.

** $p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$.

sectional SEM models were estimated to test whether the association between divorce and child adjustment problems was mediated by depressive/withdrawn parenting and SES (one for both child adjustment domains—externalizing and internalizing behavior—at each of the three yearly assessments).

Externalizing Behavior

For externalizing behavior, models were specified with mother CBCL scores, teacher TRF scores, and child Behavior Conduct scores serving as indicators of the latent variable. The mediator latent variables were specified as depressive/withdrawn parenting (with indicators of maternal depressive symptoms and maternal withdrawal) and SES (with indicators of family income and maternal education). Paths were specified from family type to child externalizing behavior through the depressed/withdrawn parenting and SES latent variables. At Year 1 and Year 2, the specified model fit adequately (see Table 2). Paths from divorce to depressive/withdrawn parenting and from divorce to SES were significant (see Figure 1). The path from depressive/withdrawn parenting to child externalizing behavior was also significant, whereas the path from SES to child externalizing behavior was very weak and nonsignificant. Therefore, the significant indirect effects for these models (values are reported in Figure 1) were primarily attributable to depressive/withdrawn parenting and not to SES. Thus, divorce was associated with more depressive/withdrawn parenting, which was, in turn, associated with

Table 2
Summary of Goodness of Fit Indices for SEM Models Testing the Mediating Role of Depressive/Withdrawn Parenting and Socioeconomic Status

Model / Year	χ^2	P	CFI
Externalizing Behavior			
Year 1	17.04	0.45	1.00
Year 2	16.24	0.51	1.00
Year 3	26.88	0.04	0.879
Internalizing Behavior			
Year 1	13.97	0.67	1.00
Year 2	19.53	0.30	0.977
Year 3	30.60	0.02	0.872

Note. $Df = 17$ for all models. CFI = Comparative Fit Index.

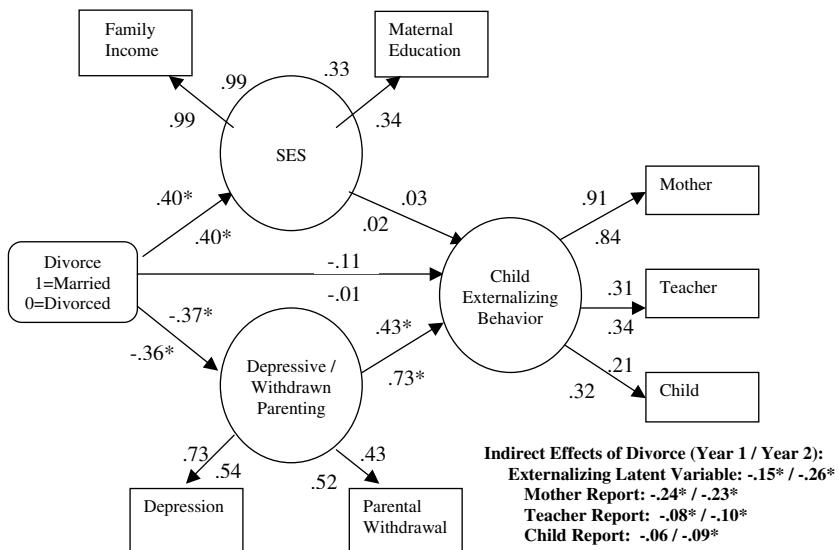


Figure 1. Structural Equation Model for Child Externalizing Behavior at Years 1 and 2. Path Coefficients are Above the Arrows for Year 1, and Below the Arrows for Year 2 * $p < 0.05$.

more child externalizing behavior when the children were in the fourth and fifth grades.

The model for Year 3 (grade six) child externalizing behavior did not fit adequately ($CFI = 0.879$). Therefore, model parameters were not estimated. There was a substantial loss of full cases ($n = 113$ at Year 3, compared to $n = 149$ at Year 2) due to incomplete data from sixth grade teachers at Year 3. This may have contributed to a different (and poor-fitting) set of parameters in Year 3, compared to Years 1 and 2.

Internalizing Behavior

Internalizing behavior models were specified with mother CBCL scores, teacher TRF scores, and child CDI scores serving as indicators of the latent variable. The mediators and paths were otherwise the same as those specified in the externalizing behavior model (above). The model fit adequately at Years 1 and 2 (see Table 2). Paths from divorce to depressive/withdrawn parenting and from divorce to SES were significant (see Figure 2). The paths from

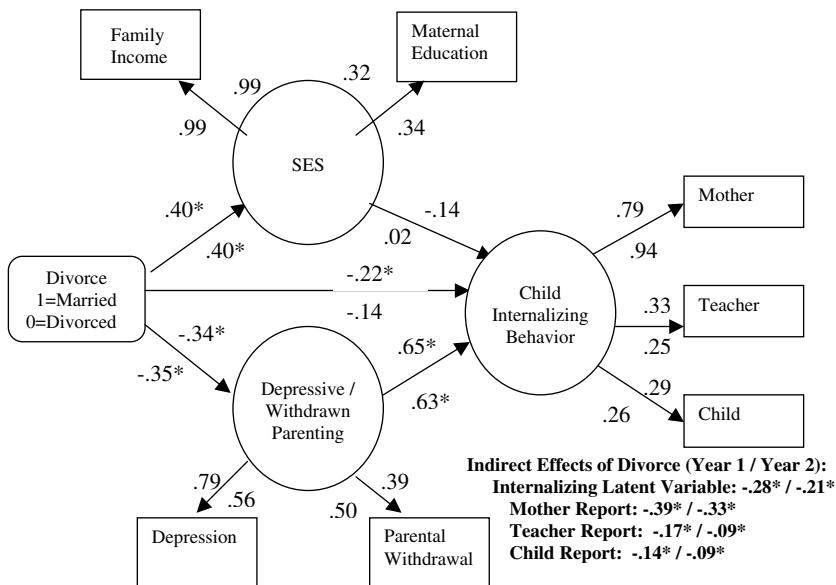


Figure 2. Structural Equation Model for Child Internalizing Behavior at Years 1 and 2. Path Coefficients are Above the Arrows for Year 1, and Below the Arrows for Year 2 * $p < 0.05$.

depressive/withdrawn parenting to child internalizing behavior in Years 1 and 2 were also significant; however, the paths from SES to child internalizing behavior were nonsignificant. As with the Year 1 and Year 2 externalizing behavior models, the indirect effects of divorce were significant for these two internalizing behavior models (see Figure 2). Divorce was associated with more depressive/withdrawn parenting, which was, in turn, associated with more child internalizing behavior when the children were in the fourth and fifth grades.

The Year 3 model did not fit adequately ($CFI = 0.872$) and parameters were not estimated.

Discussion

The present results suggest that divorce is associated with ongoing adjustment difficulties for both preadolescent children and their mothers in divorced single mother families. Because we utilized a

middle-class divorced sample and controlled for SES in our models, we were able to rule out family income and other indicators of SES as a confounding third variable. Findings suggested that depressive/withdrawn parenting among the divorced mothers accounted for the higher levels of externalizing and internalizing behavior that the children exhibited at home and school in the fourth and fifth grades. However, there was no evidence of a mediational role for this parenting style once children entered the sixth grade. These data suggest that although youth from divorced families continue to experience more externalizing and internalizing symptoms than their counterparts from 2-parent families, the role of depressive/withdrawn parenting in this process may begin to diminish as children transition from preadolescence into early adolescence. This study appears to be the first to test this particular aspect of parenting as a mediator of divorce effects.

Differences between children of divorced and nondivorced parents in externalizing and internalizing problems remained constant over the course of 3 years, spanning fourth through sixth grades. Repeated-measures analyses failed to detect significant changes in levels of symptoms for either group over the course of time. Adjustment problems may remain at a relatively stable level in preadolescence. Of course, with the onset of adolescence, certain disorders such as major depression may begin to emerge in those children with predisposing vulnerabilities such as elevated preadolescent symptom counts.^{17,18}

Externalizing Behavior

There are several possible developmental and methodological explanations for our finding that externalizing behavior associated with divorce was mediated by depressive/withdrawn parenting during preadolescence but not early adolescence. As discussed above, acting-out behavior may represent an attempt on the part of preadolescents from divorced families to re-engage mothers who are preoccupied with their own stressors and negative mood, or to gain attention from teachers or other adult caregivers.

Regarding the change in the role of depressive/withdrawn parenting as a mediator when children were in sixth grade, some researchers have speculated that maturational processes associated with the onset of adolescence may allow children from divorced families to distance themselves from family-based sources of stress that

affect the adjustment of younger children.^{14,19} For instance, the increasing peer social support networks at school and in after-school activities that youth typically develop in adolescence may serve as an alternative source of nurturance for adolescents whose custodial parent is withdrawn and disengaged. Developing cognitive abilities may also allow adolescents from divorced families to more realistically assess the meaning of a single mother's negative mood and lack of availability (e.g., multiple demands on the mother's time) and avoid blaming themselves for their mother's mood and withdrawal. Nonetheless, externalizing behavior problems that began in earlier years could become self-perpetuating by the time the children reach early adolescence (but no longer contingent on current levels of depressive/withdrawn parenting). Research on externalizing problems in youth suggests that once initiated, such behavior can be fueled by interactions with deviant peers and other extrafamilial reinforcing mechanisms.^{38,39} It is also possible that methodological factors (i.e., the reduced sample size at Year 3) contributed to the different pattern of findings for the sixth grade model.

Internalizing Behavior

Previous studies have generally not found a mediational role for maternal mood or parenting behavior in the internalizing problems experienced by children from divorced families, as compared to children from 2-parent families. For instance, in an adolescent sample, aversive parenting did not account for internalizing behavior problems associated with divorce.⁴ The present findings therefore appear to be the first to suggest a type of parenting behavior—depressive/withdrawn parenting—that may in fact contribute to the greater internalizing problems experienced by the children whose parents are divorced.

Although our cross-sectional results show that child internalizing behavior may be an indirect effect of divorce that is mediated by depressive/withdrawn parenting, other evidence would suggest that conditions in the predivorce household may also contribute to both child internalizing symptoms and maternal depressive symptoms. For example, child internalizing symptoms may precede marital dissolution, possibly as an effect of conflict between parents.^{40,41} Similarly, parental conflict has been found to be associated with depressive symptoms in mothers.⁴² Perhaps the cross-sectional indirect effect that we found for depressive/withdrawn parenting on

divorce-related child internalizing behavior is actually established before the divorce occurs in some families.

Alternative Mediators of Divorce Effects

Although not assessed in this study, the quality of children's relationships with their fathers also appears to be related to children's post-divorce adjustment,²⁰ and this may be especially true for boys.^{4,43–45} For instance, in a sample of adolescents, reduced father involvement accounted for the effects of divorce on externalizing behavior among boys (but not girls).⁴ Additionally, preadolescent boys—although not older adolescent boys—who live in father custody^{44–48} and boys of all ages who live in joint custody^{44,49} appear to exhibit fewer adjustment problems than do boys who live in primary mother custody. Hence, the quality of children's contact with their fathers may be an important mediator of divorce effects.

An additional mediating factor to consider in future research is parental overinvolvement. In recently divorced families, there is often a high level of personal self-disclosure from single parents to their children⁴⁴ and increased parental overprotection or overinvolvement.^{23,50} This may be due, in part, to parental loneliness and insufficient social support from adult partners or friends. In one study, adolescents who felt responsible for providing emotional support to their single parents had more adjustment problems themselves.⁴⁴ In summary, there are many factors not assessed in this study that may have also contributed to the heightened adjustment problems that we observed among the children from divorced single mother families; predivorce child adjustment and aspects of the household prior to the divorce, the quality of the father-child relationship, and parental overinvolvement are a few that merit further attention.

Limitations and Assets

Limitations of the present study may have contributed to the pattern of results that we obtained. The sample size precluded the inclusion of potential moderator variables, such as child gender, in the models. Additionally, because our sample was middle-class and primarily Caucasian, we do not know the extent to which our findings would generalize to children in different socioeconomic strata and different racial or ethnic groups. Therefore, testing for replication of these findings in other samples will be important.

Slightly different specifications of the model may also have merit. For instance, although we tested parenting and SES as simultaneous mediators of the effects of divorce on children, there may be value in assessing a model in which SES is a direct mediator of parenting, which in turn mediates child adjustment. Assuming that the stresses associated with lower SES might have a specific effect on mothers' adjustment and availability, this alternative specification of the model could potentially demonstrate a role for SES that was not evident in our statistical model.

Of course, because this study was based on correlational data that was obtained from post-divorce families, the direction of causality in our SEM models could not be tested. However, the current study provides an initial evaluation of the model, testing whether depressive/withdrawn parenting could account for the symptomatology exhibited by children of divorced mothers and thus establishing the plausibility of the causal model. Additionally, comparison of the cross-sectional models from the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades allowed for the detection of changes over time in the mediational process itself.

A strength of the present study was the use of multiple informants and repeated assessments over 3 years. Additionally, in light of evidence that economic decline may partially account for the effects of divorce on children,⁵ it was important to control for differences in income between divorced and nondivorced families. In this study, although nondivorced mothers reported significantly higher family incomes than did single mothers at each of the yearly assessments, the median family income for the divorced single mothers still placed them in the middle class range in the early 1990's, when these data were collected. Thus, this sample provided a natural control for the effects of extreme financial insecurity or poverty, which often co-occur with divorce. We took the additional precaution of testing SES as a simultaneous mediator in our SEM models, and there was no evidence that there was an indirect effect from divorce to child adjustment through SES in this sample, highlighting the role of depressive/withdrawn parenting as a robust mediator.

Summary

According to our conceptual model, increased depressive/withdrawn parenting is one possible stable accommodation to the stressors experienced by many divorced mothers (e.g., more daily hassles

and responsibilities, multiple roles, etc.). For these mothers, divorce leads to an initial increase in depressive/withdrawn parenting followed by a plateau. We did not expect or observe substantial changes in either depressive/withdrawn parenting or child adjustment at home or school over the course of the study. Instead, we found that divorced mothers consistently reported elevated levels of depression and withdrawal, as compared to the married mothers, over the course of 3 years. More importantly, however, we found evidence suggesting that the role of depressive/withdrawn parenting in contributing to children's parent- and teacher-reported adjustment problems might have diminished during the period of transition between preadolescence and early adolescence. A possible implication of this finding is that preadolescence may be an important time to implement intervention programs for families going through divorce to prevent a trajectory of escalating adjustment problems in adolescence.

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