

Mothers, fathers, stepfathers, and siblings as providers of supervision, acceptance, and autonomy to young adolescents.

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Abstract:

This study examined whether 124 young adolescents living with 2 biological parents and at least 1 sibling (TP) and 27 young adolescents living with mothers, stepfathers, and at least 1 sibling (SF) differed in the extent to which they agreed that mothers, fathers or stepfathers, and siblings often provided supervision, acceptance, and opportunities for autonomy. Support was obtained for the view that the family systems of TP adolescents, more than the family systems of SF adolescents, are hierarchically organized in terms of which specific family members are involved in socialization processes.

Keywords: psychology | family psychology | family relations | nuclear families | stepfamilies | adolescents

Article:

Because of evidence that young adolescents are negatively affected by divorce-related parenting transitions, the remarriage of a divorced parent has been regarded as a stressful life event (Hetherington et al., 1992). Indeed, children and young adolescents who have experienced a remarriage of the divorced parent with whom they reside tend, on average, to be slightly less well-adjusted than are those who have continuously lived with both biological parents (Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1994). One explanation for this difference is that divorce and remarriage each occasion changes in family processes that negatively affect young adolescents' well-being (Kurdek & Fine, 1993b).

However, with few exceptions (e.g., Hetherington et al., 1992), most of the work aimed at understanding changes in family processes associated with remarriage following parental divorce has focused on the parent-child subsystem within the family. In light of evidence that siblings are also active socialization agents (Dunn, Slomkowski, & Beardsall, 1994; Kurdek & Fine,

1993a), the purpose of this study was to compare the family systems of young adolescents living in two-biological parent (TP) families to those of young adolescents living in stepfather (SF) families, where the family system members included mothers, fathers or stepfathers ([step]fathers), and siblings.

We accomplished this purpose by contrasting the extent to which young adolescents from TP and SF family systems perceived mothers, (step)fathers, and siblings as providers of supervision, acceptance, and opportunities for autonomy. These three particular family processes were of interest because they have been found to be independently and positively related to adolescents' well-being (Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).

In the most relevant previous study regarding differences between TP and SF young adolescents' appraisals of which family members provide these family processes, Kurdek and Fine (1993a) asked sixth and seventh graders from TP and SF families (as well as from single-divorced-mother families) to nominate the one residential family member who was most likely to provide supervision or acceptance. TP adolescents perceived mothers as the most frequent providers of supervision and acceptance, followed by fathers, and then siblings. In contrast, whereas SF adolescents perceived mothers as the most frequent providers of supervision and acceptance, they tended to perceive stepfathers and siblings as equally likely to provide supervision and acceptance. Thus, TP adolescents were more likely than SF adolescents to perceive mothers, (step)fathers, and siblings as hierarchically organized with regard to the provision of supervision and acceptance.

Although Kurdek and Fine's (1993a) study provided preliminary evidence that TP and SF family systems are differentially organized, it had three limitations. First, although Kurdek and Fine (1993a) identified supervision and acceptance as family processes of particular importance to the well-being of adolescents, they did not study opportunities for autonomy, a third dimension of family processes relevant to adolescent adjustment (Steinberg et al., 1989). Second, because Kurdek and Fine (1993a) had their participants identify salient providers of supervision and acceptance on the basis of single nominations (e.g., "Who in your family is most likely to keep an eye on you?"), it was impossible to determine the extent to which family members who were not nominated were also regarded as important providers. Finally, because Kurdek and Fine (1993a) did not limit their sample to young adolescents residing with siblings, their study did not provide a direct comparison of TP and SF family systems that include mothers, (step)fathers, and siblings.

We redressed these problems in the present study by having young adolescents in TP and SF families who lived with at least one sibling provide independent ratings of the extent to which mothers, (step)fathers, and siblings provided supervision, acceptance, and opportunities for autonomy. Our general expectation was that young adolescents' ratings would vary as a function of type of family, type of provider, and type of family process. On the basis of the differences between TP and SF families reported by Kurdek and Fine (1993a), we predicted that TP

adolescents would be more likely than SF adolescents to perceive their family members as hierarchically ordered with regard to the provision of supervision, acceptance, and autonomy granting, such that mothers would be identified as the most frequent provider, followed by fathers, and then by siblings. On the basis of evidence that the experience of negative life events is related to increased warmth between siblings (Dunn et al., 1994), we predicted that SF adolescents would be more likely than TP adolescents to perceive siblings as frequent providers of acceptance (and possibly opportunities for autonomy).

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from a pool of 415 sixth graders, 305 of whom participated in a larger study of family and peer influences on school competence (Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995). Of interest in the present study was data for 55 boys and 69 girls in TP families and 7 boys and 20 girls in SF families who lived with at least one sibling. The mean ages of adolescents in the two family structures were 11.74 and 12.00 years, respectively. White participants made up 92% of the TP group and 78% of the SF group. The mean number of siblings was 1.77 for the TP group (with a mean of 0.84 sisters) and 1.92 for the SF group (with a mean of 0.96 sisters). All SF adolescents experienced only one divorce of their mothers. A one-way (family structure: TP vs. SF) multivariate analysis of variance indicated that the two family structures were equivalent in proportion of White participants, number of siblings, and number of sisters.

Measures and Procedures

The students whose parents did not object to their participation completed the following measures administered by classroom teachers in study halls.

Background information

Participants provided information about age, gender, ethnicity, family structure, and residential family members.

Ratings of family providers and family processes

The frequency with which respondents perceived each of three types of family members (mothers, fathers in TP families and stepfathers in SF families, and siblings) to provide each of three types of family processes (supervision, acceptance, and autonomy granting) was measured by nine single-item ratings that were integrated into the Family Climate Inventory (Kurdek et al., 1995). As part of this inventory, participants indicate how much they agree with statements regarding the extent to which someone in their family provided supervision, acceptance, and autonomy granting. After making ratings for each family process, participants use a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) to indicate the extent to which they agree that each of the three types of family members was “someone who supervised or watched over me”

(supervision item), “someone who showed that he or she loves me and cares about me” (acceptance item), and “someone who helped me feel that I can do things on my own” (autonomy-granting item). The nine ratings derived by crossing the three family providers with the three family processes were the only scores of interest in the present study. In all instances, high scores indicate that the relevant family member was perceived as a frequent provider of the relevant family process.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analyses indicated that all effects involving gender were nonsignificant. To simplify the presentation of the findings, this factor is not considered here. Mean supervision, acceptance, and autonomy-granting means are presented by provider (mother, [step]father, and sibling) in the left side of Figure 1 for TP adolescents and in the right side of Figure 1 for SF adolescents.

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Figure 1. Mean ratings by family process and provider for young adolescents living with both biological parents (left) and young adolescents living with a mother and stepfather (right)

These data were analyzed by a 2 (family structure) \times 3 (family process) \times 3 (provider) mixed-model analysis of variance in which family structure was the between-subjects factor and both family process and provider were the within-subjects factors. All effects involving the within-subjects factors were tested with a multivariate approach. As expected, the Family Structure \times Family Process \times Provider interaction was significant, $F(4, 147) = 4.80, p < .001$. This interaction was interpreted with both family structure and family process as the moderating variable.

Family Structure as the Moderator Variable

To understand the nature of the Family Process \times Provider interaction in the TP families versus that in the SF families, we conducted simple effects analyses such that the 3 (family process) \times 3 (provider) interaction was evaluated separately for the two family structure groups. (In this and in all subsequent simple-effects analyses, the pooled within-subjects error term was used.) These analyses indicated that the Family Process \times Provider interaction was significant for both the TP group and the SF group, $F s(4, 174) = 5.05$ and 9.72 , respectively, $p s < .01$.

To identify the pattern of mean differences for each family structure group, we conducted further simple-effects analyses such that differences among the three providers for each of the three processes were evaluated within each family structure group. These analyses indicated that TP adolescents perceived the three providers differently with regard to supervision, acceptance, and autonomy granting, $F s(2, 149) = 100.55, 62.61, \text{ and } 34.48$, respectively, $p s < .01$, whereas SF adolescents perceived the three providers differently with regard to only supervision and acceptance, $F(2, 149) = 27.16$ and 9.16 , respectively, $p s < .01$.

Student Newman–Keuls comparisons ($p < .05$ here and later) indicated that for the TP adolescents, the expected hierarchical pattern emerged for each family process (see the left side of Figure 1). That is, for each family process, means for mothers were higher than those for fathers, which, in turn, were higher than those for siblings. In contrast, this hierarchical pattern did not emerge for SF adolescents (see right side of Figure 1). Instead, Student Newman–Keuls comparisons indicated that for supervision, means for mothers and stepfathers were higher than the mean for siblings but did not differ from each other, and that for acceptance, the mean for mothers was higher than that for either stepfathers or siblings, which did not differ from each other.

Taken together, these findings confirm the notion that TP and SF families are family systems with different organizations (Barber & Eccles, 1992). For the three family processes studied here, TP families were hierarchically organized systems, with TP adolescents perceiving mothers as the most frequent provider of supervision, acceptance, and autonomy granting, followed by fathers, and then by siblings. In contrast, SF families were not organized in such a clear-cut hierarchical fashion. In these families, whereas mothers were still regarded as the family member who most often provided supervision and acceptance, mothers and stepfathers were perceived as equally likely to provide supervision, and stepfathers and siblings were perceived as equally likely to provide acceptance.

In the absence of longitudinal data that followed the SF families through the TP, single-parent, and SF family phases, we cannot identify the specific factors linked to the nonhierarchical nature of the SF family, nor can we determine the consequences arising from this nonhierarchical family system. However, it seems likely (Barber & Eccles, 1992) that this feature of SF families is linked to the redistribution of patterns of authority and influence associated with divorce-related changes in parenting roles.

Family Process as the Moderator Variable

To identify specific differences between TP adolescents and SF adolescents in the extent of agreement regarding how often the three family members provided the three family processes, we conducted simple-effects analyses such that the 2 (family structure) \times 3 (provider) interaction was evaluated separately for each of the three family processes. These analyses indicated that the Family Structure \times Provider interaction was nonsignificant for supervision and for autonomy granting, but was significant for acceptance, $F(2, 149) = 8.26$, $p < .01$.

To identify the pattern of mean differences, we conducted further simple-effects analyses such that differences between the two family structure groups were evaluated among the three providers for acceptance. These analyses indicated that whereas TP and SF participants did not differ in appraisals of the frequency with which mothers and (step)fathers provided acceptance, SF participants rated their siblings as providing acceptance more frequently than did TP participants $F(1, 150) = 7.27$, $p < .01$.

These findings provide additional support for the notion that divorce-related events are linked to siblings becoming increasingly important socialization agents (Kurdek & Fine, 1993a), perhaps in response to a decrease in the parenting competence of the biological parent often associated with divorce and remarriage (Hetherington et al., 1992). That SF adolescents were more likely than TP adolescents to perceive their siblings as providing acceptance is consistent with evidence that the experience of negative life events is related to increased warmth between siblings (Dunn et al., 1994).

However, we cautiously speculate that the relatively important role that siblings in SF families play as socialization agents for young adolescents may be linked to ambiguity regarding the sibling role in these families. Although difficulties in SF families have typically been attributed to ambiguity surrounding the stepfather role (Hetherington et al., 1992), the present findings indicate that increased attention should be paid to the potential causes and consequences of ambiguity in the role of siblings in stepfather families.

Several limitations of this study need to be noted. First, we did not obtain direct observations of family members providing supervision, acceptance, and opportunities for autonomy. Second, our convenience samples of adolescents from TP and SF families were small and cannot be claimed to be representative. Third, because we targeted siblings as a collective group, we had no information (such as age) on specific siblings. Finally, we did not have longitudinal data on families making the transition from TP to SF families, and we did not examine how the length of time in the stepfamily affected findings for the SF participants.

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