

Parent and nonparent residential family members as providers of warmth and supervision to young adolescents.

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Abstract:

In contrast to previous studies that have examined only parents as sources of warmth and supervision, this study examined any residential family member as a source of warmth and supervision. Ss were 6th and 7th graders from 434 2-parent, 66 single-divorced-mother, and 90 stepfather families. The frequency with which mothers, (step)fathers, siblings, and other nonparent family members were nominated as providers of warmth and supervision varied by family structure and adolescent gender. Findings indicate that stepparents, siblings, and adult nonparents need to be viewed as socialization agents, particularly in families affected by divorce and remarriage.

Keywords: family studies | family structure | stepfamilies | parenting | child care | psychology

Article:

Current theories of socialization posit warmth and supervision as core dimensions of parental behavior (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Indeed, adolescents who rate their (step)parents as high on both of these dimensions score higher on measures of psychosocial competence than those who rate their (step)parents as low on both dimensions (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991).

The purpose of this study was to assess whether residential family members other than parents were perceived by young adolescents in two-parent, single-divorced-mother, and stepfather families as important providers of warmth and supervision. This issue is of theoretical importance because it addresses socialization processes from the standpoint of the entire family system rather than just that of the parents (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Our general expectation was that adolescents in single-divorced-mother and stepfather families would differ from those living with both parents on the basis of whom they perceived as providing warmth and supervision. Divorce and remarriage often result in diminished availability of the residential parent; restricted access to the nonresidential parent; and residence with nonparent relatives, a stepparent, or stepsiblings (Buehler & Langenbrenner, 1987; Sweet & Bumpass, 1987).

Method

Subjects

Data are reported for 286 boys and 304 girls. The mean age of the sample was 12.31 years, and 88% of the sample was White. The number of participants in the two-parent, single-divorced-mother, and stepfather groups was 434, 66, and 90, respectively. For students in single-divorced-mother and stepfather groups, the modal interval length of parental divorce was more than 7 years. The modal level (24% of students) of education of parents was high school graduation.

Measures and Procedures

The students whose parents did not object to their participation anonymously completed surveys administered by classroom teachers in their study halls.

Background information

Students provided information regarding age, grade, gender, race, family structure, parent educational level, and, when relevant, length of parental divorce.

Nominations of residential family members providing warmth and supervision

Students read eight statements regarding their family. There were four items for warmth (“at least someone in my family takes time to talk about things that are important to me,” “someone in my family will help me with my personal problems,” “I can always turn to someone in my family for help,” and “someone in my family takes an interest in the things I do”) and four items for supervision (“someone in my family makes sure that my homework is done,” “someone in my family takes an interest in my friends,” “generally, someone in my family knows where I am and what I am doing,” and “someone in my family keeps a close eye on me”).

Next to each statement, on a blank line, students indicated the one family member they lived with who was most likely to do what the statement said. In all, 20 family members were named and were categorized into one of six family member groups: father, mother, stepfather, stepmother, sibling (including brothers, sisters, stepbrothers, stepsisters, half-brothers, and half-sisters), and an “other family” group (including aunts, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers, nieces, nephews, cousins, sister-in-law, and brothers-in-law).

Results

The mean number of times the five types of family members were nominated as providing supervision or warmth are presented by family structure and gender in Table 1. Because scores for stepmothers were near zero (see Table 1), they were not considered further. Two analyses were conducted. The first included adolescents from all family structures and involved provider scores for no one, fathers, mother, siblings, and other family members. The second analysis included only adolescents from stepfather families so that provider scores for stepfathers could also be considered.

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Mean Provider Scores by Family Structure, Adolescent Gender, Type of Provision, and Provider

A 3 (family structure) \times 2 (gender) \times 2 (type of family process: warmth vs. supervision) \times 5 (provider) multivariate analysis of variance (with repeated measures on the type of family process and provider variables) yielded a significant main effect for family structure, $F(2, 584) = 19.76$, $p < .001$, and provider, $F(4, 581) = 745.79$, $p < .001$. No other main effects were significant. However, these main effects were qualified by a Family Structure \times Gender \times Provider interaction, $F(8, 1164) = 2.44$, $p < .01$, and a Gender \times Type of Family Process \times Provider interaction, $F(4, 581) = 4.85$, $p < .001$.

The Family Structure \times Gender \times Provider interaction was interpreted by one-way (family structure) analyses of variance on each of the five provider scores separately for boys and for girls. When significant family structure effects were obtained, they were interpreted by Student Newman-Keuls comparisons ($p < .05$ here and below). The pattern of effects is summarized in Table 2.

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Findings were similar for boys and for girls with regard to the “no one” scores (no family structure differences) and the father scores (adolescents in two-parent families nominated their fathers as a provider more frequently than those in either divorced mother or stepfather families). However, for the mother scores, boys in two-parent families nominated their mothers as providers less frequently than boys in either divorced mother or stepfather families, whereas for girls there were no family structure differences. For the sibling scores, boys in two-parent families nominated their siblings as providers more frequently than girls in either two-parent or stepfather families. Finally, for the other family members score, the family structure effect was nonsignificant for boys, but girls in divorced mother families nominated other family members as providers more frequently than girls in either two-parent or stepfather families.

The Gender \times Type of Family Process \times Provider interaction was interpreted by a series of paired t tests that compared the supervision and warmth score of each of the five providers for boys and girls separately. Relevant means are presented in Table 3. For both boys and girls, supervision and warmth scores were equivalent for no one. Boys nominated their fathers more

frequently for warmth than for supervision, but girls nominated their fathers more frequently for supervision than for warmth. Boys nominated their mothers more frequently for supervision than for warmth, but girls nominated their mothers equally often for supervision and warmth. Although boys nominated their siblings equally often for supervision and warmth, girls nominated them more frequently for warmth than for supervision. Finally, whereas boys nominated other family members equally often for supervision and warmth, girls nominated other family members more often for warmth than for supervision.

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A 2 (gender) \times 2 (type of family process) \times 6 (provider) multivariate analysis of variance (with repeated measures on the type of family process and provider variables) conducted on data from subjects in the stepfather group yielded a significant main effect for provider, $F(5, 84) = 329.86$, $p < .001$. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant Gender \times Type of Family Process \times Provider interaction, $F(5, 84) = 2.55$, $p < .05$.

This interaction was interpreted by a series of paired *t* tests that compared the supervision and warmth scores of each of the six providers for boys and girls separately. Relevant means are presented in Table 4. For both boys and girls, supervision and warmth scores were equivalent for no one, mothers, siblings, and other family members. Boys nominated their fathers more frequently for warmth than for supervision, but girls nominated their fathers equally often for supervision and warmth. In addition, whereas boys nominated their stepfathers equally often for supervision and warmth, girls nominated their stepfathers more frequently for supervision than for warmth.

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Discussion

In contrast to the classic view of socialization that views parents as primary providers of warmth and supervision (Maccoby & Martin, 1983), the current findings indicate that although young adolescents perceive parents—particularly mothers—as providers of warmth and supervision, nonparent family members are also perceived in this fashion. Who the particular nonparent provider is, however, depends on the gender of the adolescent, family structure, and whether the focus is on warmth or supervision.

Furstenberg and Nord (1985) found that nonresidential fathers decrease active involvement in their children's lives over the postdivorce period. Consistent with this finding is the fact that adolescents in two-parent families more frequently nominated their fathers as providers of warmth and supervision than did adolescents in divorced single mother and stepfather families.

Although boys from different family structures did not differ as to the frequency with which they nominated nonparent adult family members, girls in divorced single mother families nominated

nonparent adult family members (as well as their siblings) more frequently than girls in two-parent families. These gender effects are congruent with other findings that highlight the availability of social support for girls (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). If single divorced mothers experience personal, family-related, and work-related stresses (Buehler & Langenbrenner, 1987) that result in their inability to provide warmth and supervision, daughters in particular may be protected against negative consequences because siblings and nonparent adult family members may serve as compensatory providers.

This study also revealed gender differences in how young adolescents perceived their fathers, mothers, siblings, nonparent adult family members, and stepfathers as providers of warmth versus providers of supervision. Generally, boys saw their fathers as more likely to provide warmth than supervision, whereas girls saw their fathers as more likely to provide supervision than warmth. Boys saw their mothers as more likely to provide supervision than warmth, whereas girls saw their mothers as equally likely to provide warmth and supervision. Overall, these findings provide additional support for the view that same-gender parents are key socialization agents during adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

The finding that girls perceived their siblings as more likely to provide warmth than supervision whereas boys perceived their siblings as equally likely to provide warmth and supervision is consistent with Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) finding with fifth and sixth graders that sibling relationships were more harmonious for girls than they were for boys. This same pattern of findings was also true for nonparent adult family members. Finally, the finding that boys saw stepfathers as equally likely to provide warmth and supervision whereas girls saw stepfathers as more likely to provide supervision than warmth is congruent with previous reports (e.g., Hetherington, 1989) that the stepfather–stepchild relationship may be more strained for stepdaughters than for stepsons.

Because this study was limited by the use of self-reports, the current findings need to be replicated with behavioral observations and ratings by other informants. Future self-report assessments could also be improved by using the format of Furman and Buhrmester's (1992) network assessment to assess directly adolescents' perceptions of the degree of warmth and supervision from mothers, fathers, stepmothers, stepfathers, siblings, stepsiblings, and nonparent adult residential family members. Data from such assessments would add valuable information regarding the relative—and perhaps unique—contributions made by nonparental socialization agents and whether these contributions compensate for relative deficiencies in the warmth and supervision provided by parents.

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