

Relations between parental control and warmth and child well-being in stepfamilies.

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Abstract:

Examined type-of-stepfamily differences in child well-being and parenting behaviors and how child well-being in stepfamilies relates to parenting behaviors. Data were drawn from the National Survey of Families and Households (J. A. Sweet et al, 1988) and included fathers and mothers in 448 stepfather, 76 stepmother, and 41 complex stepfamilies. Biological parents in stepfamilies perceived themselves as having higher quality relationships with their children than stepparents reported having with their stepchildren. Although stepfathers reported behaving less positively toward their children than did other fathers, stepmothers reported responding as positively to their stepchildren as did biological mothers in stepfamilies. In general, child well-being was positively related to perceptions of parental warmth. The relations between parental control and child well-being varied for different dimensions of well-being and in different types of stepfamilies.

Keywords: parenting | stepfamilies | divorce | remarriage | family psychology | parenting behaviors

Article:

Studies that have examined family structure differences in child well-being (i.e., adjustment and the quality of parent-child relationships) have typically found that children in stepfamilies were more poorly adjusted on some domains (e.g., behavioral problems, social competence, and substance abuse) than were children in first-marriage families (Bray, 1988; Dawson, 1991; Dornbusch et al., 1985; Fine, Kurdek, & Hennigen, 1991; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Needle, Su, & Doherty, 1990; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Steinberg, 1987; Zill, 1988). However, some investigations (e.g., Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988) have not found these family structure differences, and some (e.g., Needle et al., 1990) have found negative effects for girls only.

With respect to the quality of parent–child relationships, several studies have found that relationships between stepparents and stepchildren are less positively perceived than are those between biological parents and children in first-marriage families (Furstenberg, 1987; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987; Sauer & Fine, 1988). The family structure effect sizes in these studies have typically been small.

Attempts to explain the causal mechanisms underlying these family structure differences have increasingly focused on family processes (Amato & Keith, 1991; Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Grych & Fincham, 1990). According to this perspective, changes in family structure (i.e., first-marriage family to single-parent family to stepfamily) lead to changes in processes in families (i.e., parenting behaviors), which, in turn, affect child development. Thus, the less positive well-being of children in step families, in relation to those in first-marriage families, may not be due to the impact of being in a stepfamily per se but rather to the effects of changes in family processes that occur when stepfamilies are formed.

The focus of this study was on one commonly investigated set of family processes—parenting behaviors. Parental socialization theories have identified two primary dimensions of parental behavior: warmth and control (Amato, 1990; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Warmth refers to the extent to which parents support their children, spend time and communicate with them, and are responsive to their needs. Control refers to the degree to which parents set and enforce limits and monitor their children's activities.

On the basis of parental perceptions from the National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988), Thomson, McLanahan, and Curtin (1992) found that stepparents provided less warmth and nurturance to their children than did biological parents, although there were no differences in the extent of control. On the basis of their results, Thomson et al. (1992) speculated that the more frequent behavior problems of stepchildren, in relation to children in first-marriage families, may be due to the lower levels of parental warmth and communication that they receive.

However, Thomson et al. (1992) did not empirically examine the relations between parenting practices and child adjustment in stepfamilies. Furthermore, Thomson et al.'s argument assumes that it is desirable for stepparents to express as much warmth and nurturance to their stepchildren as do biological parents. This assumption may not be valid, because the qualitatively different nature of stepfamilies, in comparison with first-marriage families, suggests the possibility that stepparents should behave differently than biological parents to facilitate child development (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). Thus, it is possible that the relatively low levels of warmth expressed by stepparents are adaptive.

This investigation was designed to extend the findings of Thomson et al. (1992). Consistent with researchers' recommendations to study processes within stepfamilies that may relate to child adjustment (Ganong & Coleman, 1987), analyses in the present study were restricted to

stepfamilies to explore the ways in which parents and stepparents report behaving toward their children and how these behaviors relate to child development. Furthermore, as compared with including a comparison group of first-marriage families, restricting the sample to stepfamilies provides greater statistical sensitivity and power in identifying possible type-of-stepfamily differences in child well-being and parental behaviors.

The first purpose of this study was to determine whether there were type-of-stepfamily (stepfather vs. stepmother vs. complex) differences in two aspects of child well-being: adjustment and the quality of parent–child relationships. Both of these aspects were considered because they reflect important intrapsychic (i.e., adjustment) and interpersonal (i.e., quality of parent–child relationships) components of children's functioning.

As described in this report, stepfather and stepmother stepfamilies are considered simple because only one spouse has children from a previous marriage living in the home. Complex stepfamilies consist of those in which both spouses have children from a previous marriage living in the home. The data set used in this study, drawn from the 1987/1988 National Survey of Families and Households, was sufficiently large to permit a rare analysis of stepmother and complex stepfamilies.

Although the clinical literature has suggested that roles and relationships are more difficult and stressful in stepmother and complex stepfamilies (Visher & Visher, 1988) than in stepfather families, empirical studies have not found differences in child adjustment between simple and complex stepfamilies (Fine & Kurdek, 1992). Furthermore, the quality of stepfather–stepchild relations in simple and complex stepfamilies does not seem to differ (Clingempeel, Ievoli, & Brand, 1984).

Findings are mixed with respect to child adjustment differences between stepfather and stepmother families. Although Fine and Kurdek (1992) found that adolescents living with stepfathers had higher self-esteem and fewer social problems than those living with stepmothers, the authors found no differences in grades, health problems, or drug use. Similarly, other investigations have not found child adjustment differences between stepfather and stepmother families (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Fine, Kurdek, & Hennigen, 1992). Thus, no hypotheses were posed with respect to type of stepfamily differences in child adjustment.

Because of consistent findings that stepparent–stepchild relationships are perceived less positively than biological parent–child relationships in first-marriage families (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), we hypothesized that the relations between stepfathers and their stepchildren (in stepfather families) would be perceived less positively than those between biological fathers in stepmother families and fathers/stepfathers in complex stepfamilies. Furthermore, we predicted that stepmother–stepchild relations (in stepmother families) would be perceived less positively than those between biological mothers in stepfather families and mothers/stepmothers in complex stepfamilies.

The second purpose of this investigation was to examine type-of-stepfamily differences in parental warmth and control. Studies of parenting practices in stepfamilies have generally found that stepparents provide less warmth and nurturance to their stepchildren than do biological parents in stepfamilies (Amato, 1987; Thomson et al., 1992), although one study of stepfather families within 2 years of remarriage found that stepparents were more positive and less negative toward children (i.e., “sociable polite strangers”) than were biological fathers (Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich, & Clingempeel, 1991).

Findings with respect to family structure differences in parental control are mixed. Amato (1987) found that adolescents in stepfather families reported lower levels of paternal control than adolescents in first-marriage families, whereas Thomson et al. (1992) found no differences in the extent of control by stepparents and biological parents.

On the basis of this literature, we expected that stepfathers would provide less warmth to their stepchildren than fathers in stepmother families and fathers/stepfathers in complex stepfamilies. Similarly, stepmothers were expected to provide less warmth to their stepchildren than were mothers in stepmother families and mothers/stepmothers in complex stepfamilies. Because of mixed findings from previous studies, no hypotheses were posed with respect to type-of-stepfamily differences in parental control.

The third purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which parental warmth and control were related to child well-being in stepfamilies. Previous studies of children in primarily first-marriage families have found that social competence and academic success are positively related to parental warmth (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Kurdek & Fine, in press; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989). The few studies that have examined the parenting behavior correlates of child adjustment in stepfamilies have also indicated that parental warmth was positively related to child well-being (Bray, 1989). Consequently, we hypothesized that high levels of parental warmth would be related to positive child well-being.

However, results related to the adjustment correlates of parental control have been inconsistent. Studies have found that parental control and well-being were positively related (Astone & McLanahan, 1991), negatively related (on some dimensions; Kurdek & Fine, in press), and unrelated (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). As a result, we posed no hypothesis on the relation between parental control and child well-being.

Furthermore, interactions between type of stepfamily and parenting behaviors were assessed to determine whether parenting practices were similarly related to child well-being in the three types of stepfamilies. In the absence of these interactions, one could conclude that parental warmth and control had similar associations with child well-being in stepfather, stepmother, and complex stepfamilies.

Method

Sample

Data were drawn from the 1987/1988 National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). In each household, a primary respondent was identified, interviewed, and asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire. In addition, if spouses were available, they were given a self-administered questionnaire to complete. On questions related to children, respondents were asked about a randomly selected child in the family (the “focal” child).

For purposes of this study, respondents meeting the inclusion criteria were living in a stepfamily, had children under the age of 19 years living in the home, were presently married, and had spouses who also participated in the survey. The inclusion of respondents meeting these criteria resulted in a total sample size of 565. Of these, 448, 76, and 41 were in stepfather, stepmother, and complex stepparent families, respectively. In the complex stepfamilies, the survey respondent was either the biological parent or the stepparent of the focal child. However, because of small sample sizes, it was not possible to compare the perceptions of biological parents with those of stepparents in complex stepfamilies.

Measures

Control variables

The following demographic variables were selected as control variables: respondent's age, respondent's race, and age of the focal child. Ages of the respondent and focal child were coded in years, and race was coded as 0 (non-White) or 1 (White). These variables were included because they have previously been identified as related to adjustment in stepfamilies (Clingempeel, Brand, & Segal, 1987) and because they were significantly correlated with the measures of child well-being (described in the following sections).

Other demographic variables—number of people in the household, respondent's education, gender of the focal child, and the focal child's age at the time of parental marriage—were not included because they were not significantly correlated with the dependent variables or because they did not interact with family structure in their effects on the child well-being variables (Stevens, 1986).

Parenting behaviors

Three measures assessed parenting behaviors. The first two measures tapped the dimension of parental warmth, and the third measured parental control. Positive responses consisted of the mean of eight items that assessed how often the parent engages in the following activities: praises child; hugs child; spends time with child; plays or works on a project with child; reads to child; has private talks with child; and eats breakfast or dinner with child. High scores reflect frequent positive parenting responses. The negative responses scale consisted of the mean of two

items that measured how often the parent spansks and yells at the child. High scores reflect frequent negative responses.

The control scale consisted of the mean of nine items that assessed the extent to which the parent places limits on the amount of television the child watches and the type of programs he or she watches; whether the child is allowed to be at home alone in the morning before school, in the afternoon after school, all day when there is no school, at night, and overnight; whether the child is supposed to let the parent know where he or she is when away from home; and whether the child is required to complete his or her chores before playing, watching television, or going out. High scores reflect a high degree of parental control. Because there were no comparable items for focal children of ages 0–4 years, the control scales were computed only for families in which the focal children were 5–18 years old.

Similar to Thomson et al. (1992), separate scales on each measure were created for (step)fathers and (step)mothers. Cronbach alphas were .76, .49, and .84, respectively, for the positive responses, negative responses, and control scales for fathers, and .74, .39, and .85 for the respective scales for mothers. Even for two-item measures, the internal consistencies for the negative responses scales were low. However, as in Thomson et al. (1992), the scales were retained for exploratory purposes despite their low internal consistency.

For the father scales, the absolute values of the correlations between the parental behavior measures ranged from .10 to .32, with a mean of .19. For the mother scales, the values ranged from .11 to .28, with a mean of .19. Because the scales assessed distinct constructs, the individual measures were retained.

Perceptions of child adjustment and quality of parent–child relationships

Parental perceptions of child well-being were assessed by four measures. Only respondents, and not spouses, were asked these questions. The quality of child's life measure consisted of one item that assessed parental perceptions of how well the focal child's life is going. Responses ranged from not well at all (1) to very well (5).

Psychological maladjustment was measured by the mean of nine items that assessed parental perceptions of how often the focal child “is willing to try new things”; “is unhappy, sad, or depressed”; “keeps self busy”; “loses temper easily”; “is cheerful and happy”; “is fearful or anxious”; “bullies or is cruel or mean to others”; “does what you ask”; and “gets along well with other kids.” Responses ranged from often true (1) to not true (3). Items were coded so that higher scores indicated that the child was perceived as experiencing greater psychological maladjustment. Cronbach's alpha was .66.

Behavior problems consisted of the sum of five items that assessed whether the focal child has ever “been a behavioral problem requiring a meeting with the teacher or principal”; “been suspended or expelled from school”; “run away from home”; “been in trouble with the police”;

and “been particularly difficult to raise.” Responses were coded as the problem was not present (0) or the problem was present (1). Higher scores reflect more perceived behavior problems. This measure was used despite a low Cronbach's alpha of .52, because the low internal consistency was partly due to the skewed distributions of the individual items. Furthermore, the scale has theoretical relevance as a measure of poor self-regulation.

Parent–child relationship quality was measured by one item that asked participants, “How would you describe your relationship with each child?” Response options ranged from very poor (1) to excellent (7). Only the responses for the focal child were analyzed. Separate scores were computed for perceptions of (step)fathers and those of (step)mothers.

The absolute value of the correlations between the child well-being measures ranged from .17 to .32, with a mean of .24. Thus, the individual scores were retained.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

To determine which demographic variables to include as covariates, we computed correlations between each of the demographic variables and each of the five measures of child well-being (psychological maladjustment, quality of child's life, behavior problems, father–child relationship, and mother–child relationship). These correlations revealed that age of the respondent, gender of the focal child, age of the focal child, and race were significantly correlated with at least three of the measures of well-being. The general pattern was that children had more positive well-being when they had younger parents, were girls, were younger, and were non-White.

As a result, age of the respondent, age of the focal child, and race were used as covariates in subsequent analyses. Gender of the focal child was not used as a covariate because it did not interact with family structure in its effects on the measures of child well-being.

In addition, because of evidence that parents' personal adjustment is related to their perceptions of their children's adjustment (Kurdek, 1991; Lee & Gotlib, 1989; Webster-Stratton, 1988) and parental behaviors (Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984; Lovejoy, 1991), parental depression was explored as a possible covariate. However, analyses conducted with and without parental depression used as a covariate yielded identical results. Therefore, the results from analyses that did not use parental depression as a covariate are presented below.

Type-of-Stepfamily Differences on Demographic Variables

A one-way (family structure: stepfather vs. stepmother vs. complex stepfamily) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed on the following demographic variables: respondent's education, respondent's age, race, length of the respondent's present marriage, age of the focal child, gender of the focal child, and number of people in the household. The

multivariate family structure effect was significant, as based on Wilks's lambda, $F(16, 1068) = 6.87, p < .001$.

To determine the source of the multivariate effect, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were computed. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and univariate Fs on these variables. There were significant univariate effects on age of respondent, number of people in the household, and race. Student Newman-Keuls comparisons (here and later, based on $p < .05$) indicated that respondents in complex stepfamilies were older than those in stepfather families; complex stepfamilies had more household members than stepfather and stepmother families; and stepmother families had a higher proportion of White families than did stepfather and complex stepfamilies.

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Type-of-Stepfamily Differences in Child Well-Being

To determine whether there were type-of-stepfamily differences on the child well-being measures, we computed a series of one-way (family structure) analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) on the following variables: psychological maladjustment, quality of child's life, behavior problems, father-child relationship, and mother-child relationship. ANCOVAs were chosen rather than multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) because the adjustment dimensions were conceptually and empirically distinct. In such cases, MANCOVA results may mask effects that multiple ANCOVAs may detect (Haase & Ellis, 1987).

Table 2 presents the adjusted means, standard deviations, F values, and measures of effect size—eta squared—on the child well-being measures by type of stepfamily. As shown in the table, there were significant effects on father-child relationship and mother-child relationship. Student Newman-Keuls comparisons revealed that father-child relationships were rated more positively in stepmother families than in stepfather and complex stepfamilies and that mother-child relationships were rated more positively in stepfather and complex stepfamilies than in stepmother families. There were no significant type-of-stepfamily differences on the other measures of well-being.

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Type-of-Stepfamily Differences in Parental Behaviors

Type-of-stepfamily differences in parental behaviors were tested by a series of one-way (type of stepfamily) ANCOVAs on the parental behavior measures (father positive responses, mother positive responses, father negative responses, mother negative responses, father control, and mother control). Adjusted means, standard deviations, F values, and eta squared values are shown in Table 3. As the table reveals, there were significant effects on father positive responses, father negative responses, and mother negative responses.

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Student Newman-Keuls comparisons indicated that (a) stepfathers reported fewer positive responses to their children than fathers in stepmother and complex stepfamilies, (b) fathers in complex stepfamilies reported more negative responses toward their children than those in stepfather and stepmother families, and (c) mothers in stepmother families exhibited fewer negative responses toward their children than mothers in stepfather and complex stepfamilies.

Relations Between Parental Behaviors and Child Well-Being

To determine the extent to which parental behaviors were related to child well-being in stepfamilies, we computed partial correlations between each parental behavior and child well-being measure. Covariates were respondent's age, race, and age of the focal child. Preliminary analyses indicated that, except for two instances presented later, the interactions between parental behaviors and type of stepfamily were not significant. Thus, results are presented in Table 4 for the entire sample of children living in stepfamilies. 1

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As shown in the table, the partial correlations indicated that (a) father and mother positive responses were positively related to the quality of the respective parent–child relationship, (b) father and mother negative responses were positively related to psychological maladjustment and behavior problems and negatively related to quality of child's life, father–child relationship, and mother–child relationship, (c) father control was negatively related to psychological maladjustment and quality of child's life, and (d) mother control was negatively related to quality of child's life and mother–child relationship and positively associated with behavior problems.

In the following instances, there were significant interactions between type-of-stepfamily and parenting behaviors. To interpret the interactions, we computed separate partial correlations between parental behaviors and the child well-being measures for each stepfamily group. These partial correlations revealed that (a) mother negative responses was positively related to psychological maladjustment for children in stepfather and stepmother families but was negatively related to this well-being dimension for children in complex stepfamilies and (b) father control was positively related to mother–child relationship for children in stepmother families but was negatively associated with this variable for those in stepfather families.

Discussion

The first purpose of this study was to determine whether there were type-of-stepfamily differences in child adjustment and the quality of parent–child relationship. As expected, biological parents in stepfamilies perceived their relationships with their children more positively than did stepparents, which is consistent with previous research (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987).

However, there were no child adjustment differences in the three types of stepfamilies. This suggests that the poorer quality relationships that stepchildren have with their stepparents, in relation to their biological parents, do not lead to adjustment problems. The adjustment dimensions assessed in this study—psychological maladjustment, behavior problems, and the quality of the child's life—may be less vulnerable to disruption in the event of stepfamily stress than are the quality of parent–child relationships.

The second purpose of this study was to examine differences in parental warmth and control across the three of stepfamilies. Concordant with previous research (Amato, 1987; Thomson et al., 1992), it was found that stepfathers reported behaving less positively toward their children than did biological fathers in stepmother families and fathers/stepfathers in complex stepfamilies. Because stepfathers engaged in fewer positive and negative parenting behaviors than biological fathers in stepfamilies, stepfathers appear to refrain from becoming actively involved with their stepchildren (Thomson et al., 1992).

Although stepmothers reported responding less negatively to their children than biological mothers in stepfamilies, they perceived themselves as exhibiting as many positive behaviors toward their stepchildren as other mothers. This suggests that many stepmothers perceive their role in a manner consistent with traditional gender-related views of parental responsibilities (Thompson & Walker, 1989). In addition, the greater problems of stepmothers, relative to stepfathers, may be partially explained by their greater amount of contact with their stepchildren (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988).

There were no differences in the extent of parental control across types of stepfamilies, consistent with Thomson et al.'s (1992) findings from the same data set with slightly different measures of control. Although stepfathers are less involved with their stepchildren than biological fathers in stepfamilies are with their children, they are apparently as likely to supervise them. This suggests that many stepparents perceive their role as involving as much parental control as biological parents, but less warmth.

The third purpose of the study was to explore relations between parental warmth and control and child well-being. As expected, child well being was generally positively related to parental provision of positive responses and negatively associated with the provision of negative responses. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have documented the importance of parental warmth for child development (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg et al., 1989) and extend them to the stepfamily context. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the magnitudes of the partial correlations between the parental warmth variables and the well-being dimensions were generally small. Although common method variance may have inflated the correlations, lack of reliability in measurement may have attenuated them.

Significant interactions between type of stepfamily and some parental warmth dimensions revealed an anomalous result. For children in complex stepfamilies, mother negative responses

was positively related to psychological maladjustment. The particularly complicated roles and relationships in complex stepfamilies (Visher & Visher, 1988) may partially explain this finding. However, further empirical research is needed to replicate this finding and to determine why the direction of the relation between mothers' negative responses and child adjustment in complex stepfamilies was opposite that in the other stepfamily groups.

Findings related to the well-being correlates of parental control were mixed. Although paternal control was related to less psychological maladjustment, higher levels of paternal and maternal control were generally related to negative child well-being—lower quality of life, and for maternal behavior, lower quality mother–child relationships and more behavior problems. Rather than indicating that high levels of parental control cause negative child well-being, quite likely the converse is true: Parents in stepfamilies feel a heightened need to monitor and restrict their children when they perceive them to be functioning poorly. It is also possible that the causal direction between parenting behaviors and child well-being in stepfamilies is bidirectional.

A significant Type-of-Stepfamily \times Paternal Control interaction revealed that paternal control was positively related to the quality of mother–child relationships for children in stepmother families but was negatively related to this dimension for those in stepfather families. The former finding indicates that stepmothers have more positive relations with their stepchildren to the extent that their spouses control their children's activities. The latter result suggests that the more stepfathers engaged in control and supervision activities, the poorer is the quality of the relationships between children and their biological mothers. This finding, which needs to be replicated in future studies, is consistent with claims that stepfathers, at least in the early stages of stepfamily development, may disrupt family relationships if they actively discipline their stepchildren (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985).

In spite of a few exceptions noted earlier, the lack of Type-of-Stepfamily \times Parenting Behaviors interactions indicates that the relations between parenting behaviors and child well-being were generally similar across the three types of stepfamilies. This further supports the notion that parenting styles have similar effects on child development in a wide variety of family contexts (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

Strengths of this study include its large and nationally representative sample, which allowed for type-of-stepfamily comparisons; its focus on processes and child adjustment within stepfamilies; its assessment of both positive and negative child well-being dimensions; the inclusion of data from both spouses on some variables; and its control of potentially confounding demographic variables.

Limitations include the exclusive reliance on parental reports, the relatively small sample sizes in the stepmother and complex stepfamily groups, the moderate levels of internal consistency for some of the measures used, the limited range of constructs tapped by items on both the parenting and well-being measures, the low statistical power that characterized the test of whether parental

warmth and control interacted in their relations to child well-being, and the correlational nature of the research design. This latter limitation implies that the causal direction of the relations between parenting behaviors and child well-being cannot be determined. As noted above, these data do not allow one to determine whether parenting behaviors influence child development, whether child adjustment influences parenting behaviors, or whether the two sets of constructs are related to each other in a circular manner.

Future research should include additional sources of data (i.e., child self-report, teacher ratings, behavioral observations), use measures that tap a wide array of constructs related to parenting behaviors and child well-being, and study the relation between parenting practices and child development longitudinally. If parenting practices are found to predict later child adjustment, the inference that parenting behaviors in stepfamilies influence child adjustment will be strengthened.

Footnotes

1 Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether warmth and control interacted in their relation to each of the well-being variables. In each case, the interactive effect of warmth and control did not add a significant amount of variability in the measure of well-being, beyond that accounted for by the warmth and control measures separately. However, because the control measure was only available for a subsample of respondents who had children ages 5–18 years, the analyses were limited by low statistical power.

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