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Family Structure, Interparental Conflict and Parenting as Correlates of Children's Relationship Expectations

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Multiple theories and models (e.g., attachment theory, rejection sensitivity) suggest that relationship expectations, such as views of others as trustworthy, reliable and supportive, are important outcomes of relationship experiences. We used a new measure to assess children's ($N = 837$, age 9 to 13 years) optimistic and pessimistic relationship expectations of their family relationships separate from their expectations of peers/others. Our aim was to investigate whether family structure, interparental conflict and parenting dimensions were important correlates of these two aspects of children's relationship expectations. Six maternal and paternal dimensions of parenting were measured, including warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy support, and coercive behaviour. Children who reported witnessing more interparental conflict had more negative relationship expectations about their family and about others, but these associations were no longer significant when the parenting dimensions were considered. Family structure was not associated with children's relationship expectations of peers/others, but children who had experienced parental divorce had less positive family relationship expectations. Overall, many of the six parenting dimensions were associated with family expectations, but fewer were associated with expectations of peers/others. Further, the maternal parenting dimensions associated with children's relationship expectations differed from the paternal dimensions. These findings are important for understanding how children think about their relationships and may guide the development of interventions targeting children of divorce.

■ **Keywords:** divorce, parenting, interparental conflict, relationship expectations

Many theories, particularly attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), and cognitive relational schema theories (Bless, Fiedler, & Strack, 2004), point to early and concurrent family dynamics as important influences on the development of children's social cognitions, such as how children view themselves and others, and whether they are optimistic or pessimistic about their current and future relationships. For example, children's experience of parental divorce, children's parenting experiences (e.g., hostile or neglectful parenting), and parent conflict/dyadic adjustment are likely to be correlates of children's optimistic or pessimistic expectations of other people. Children's family experiences have been shown to be important to how they come to view their relationships with others, whether they expect others to be accepting or rejecting, and whether they are worthy of positive regard from others (Boyer-Pennington, Pennington, & Spink, 2001). However, most of this research has focused on children's functioning in the areas of internalising and

externalising problems, rather than on their view of others and relationships (Jekielek, 1998). In general, divorce, problematic parent–child relationships or parenting, and interparental conflict have negative implications for children's functioning across multiple domains.

DIVORCE AND PARENTAL SEPARATION

Divorce Rates and Outcomes for Children

Family dissolution is one of the most common and significant life stressors experienced by children (Hasan & Power, 2004). One third of Australian marriages are expected to end in divorce (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007a). In 2007, for example, 47,963 Australian

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marriages ended in divorce and 49% of these involved dependent children (ABS, 2007b). These figures do not include couples who have separated and do not file for divorce or couples who never married (*de facto* couples). Due to the large number of children who are affected by parental separation, extensive research has been conducted investigating the effects of divorce on children.

Divorce rates began to climb around 1970 (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990). At the same time, some of the earliest research was conducted on whether divorce would place children at risk of academic, social, and externalising and internalising problems (see Amato, 2000). In this early research, the expectation was that it was divorce, regardless of family circumstances, that was the risk factor associated with more negative child outcomes, including mental health and behavioural problems. Because of this, many studies were conducted to compare children who experienced divorce to children from intact families. In one of the first meta-analyses conducted of these studies, outcome variables such as academic achievement, conduct, and psychological and social adjustment from 92 studies were reported (Amato & Keith, 1991). In general, the effects of divorce on children were small, with mean effect sizes ranging from $d = .06$ to $-.26$; the largest effects were found for children's conduct ($-.23$) and father-child relations ($-.26$). Negative effect sizes indicated that the divorce group scored lower than the intact group. In addition, studies conducted from the 1950s to the 1980s found that the negative effects of divorce on children were less pronounced in the more recent studies as compared to studies conducted in earlier decades and that this change in findings over the decades could not be explained by the increasing sophistication of the research methodology (Amato & Keith, 1991).

In an update, Amato (2001) analysed another 67 studies. Effect sizes (d) ranged from $(-.12)$ self concept to $(-.22)$ conduct. Although these effect sizes were still small in magnitude, they were larger in studies conducted prior to the 1980s and in the 1990s when compared to studies conducted in the 1980s. Although not yet directly empirically tested, Amato posited that the slightly larger effect sizes found in studies from the 1990s compared to those in the 1980s may reflect the increasing economic differences between one- and two-parent families during the 1990s and the changing nature of divorce. With marriage dissolution becoming more widely accepted both legally and socially within the community, partners were often separating under less extreme circumstances. He suggested that children might be worse off following divorce only when there was overt conflict preceding divorce.

Recent investigations continue to extend upon the comparison of children's adjustment between those in divorced versus intact families. Researchers have discussed a divorce-stress-adjustment model and suggested that a

crisis model was appropriate for some and a chronic strain model was appropriate for others (Amato, 2000). From a review of the literature, it could be argued that family processes, especially the parent-child relationship and interparental conflict, are more important for children's development and adjustment than the actual event of divorce (Hines, 1997).

Divorce and Children's Relationship Expectations

There is evidence that the experience of parental divorce can be an important correlate of children's negative schemas about relationships. Some researchers have reported that adult children of divorce have more negative beliefs regarding relationships than those from intact families (Boyer-Pennington et al., 2001). Studies conducted with young adults have also found that those from divorced families have lower expectations and less positive attitudes towards relationships than young adults who grew up in intact families (Boyer-Pennington et al., 2001). However, these findings pertain only to expectations of marriage; that is, respondents were asked questions only in regard to their attitude towards marriage.

Children of divorce are at risk of developing negative general models of relationships. In one study of university students (mean age 19.7 years) who were currently involved in a serious relationship, it was found that females from divorced families had a relatively more negative view of themselves in terms of relationships compared to females from intact families, but there was no group difference in other domains such as social skills, academic achievement, physical appearance and general self-worth (Henry & Homes, 1998). Specifically, females from divorced families had more negative expectations about relationships, felt more helpless about interpersonal difficulties, were higher in fear of abandonment, had less optimism in their ability to resolve relationship problems, and were more likely to interpret, and react to, ambivalent behaviours from their partner as a sign of rejection, compared to females from intact families. It was argued that differences in cognitions about relationships and associated behaviours between females who experienced divorce as children and those who came from intact families may be due to both the divorce and, as most lived with their mothers, the change in the father-daughter relationship following divorce (i.e., the impact of the father leaving the home and the potential for a deteriorating relationship with the father following divorce). Although sensitivity to rejection was not measured in this study, the authors did speculate that females who experienced divorce in the family of origin might be more sensitive to rejection due to the experience of their father leaving the home.

In contrast to the findings for females in this study, no group differences were found when male university students who experienced divorce were compared to males from intact families (Henry & Holmes, 1998). Males

had more positive expectations towards relationships than females and the authors argued this may be because the relationship with the opposite sex parent was critical. Therefore, since most children remain with their mother, boys' relationships with their mother may have protected them from the disruption in the family environment that is expected to be most salient for the development of negative expectations of relationships.

In summary, research focusing on divorce and relationship expectations has predominantly focused on adults' retrospective account of their childhood experiences of divorce and expectations about marriage, rather than relationship expectations in general. Although the study described focused on young adults and their romantic relationships, it provided some evidence to suggest that divorce may be associated with children's relationship expectations. The preceding study also suggested there may be gender differences in these expectations. However, as this previous study was based on adults' retrospective accounts and there are no studies specifically measuring children, no specific gender differences were hypothesised in our study.

INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT

Divorce often covaries with interparental conflict (Emery, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Hence, an important extension of research on divorce and children's adjustment has been the inclusion of a measure of interparental conflict. Research on interparental conflict and children's adjustment shows that negative associations exist within both types of family, with the differences in children's adjustment accounted for by interparental conflict. For example, among intact families, interparental conflict has been linked to children's depressed/withdrawn behaviour, antisocial behaviour, impulsive/hyperactive behaviour and behaviour discipline problems at school, including suspension or expulsion (see Turner & Barrett, 1998). In one meta-analysis (Amato & Keith, 1991), interparental conflict was found to have a more powerful direct effect on children's wellbeing than divorce.

It is important to consider both family structure and interparental conflict when studying children's adjustment (e.g., Riggio, 2004). Moreover, aspects of the parent-child relationship can be a third important correlate of children's adjustment and well-being. Researchers including family structure, interparental conflict and the parent-child relationship in their studies have generally found (a) a unique main effect for the parent-child relationship on children's adjustment, (b) that the parent-child relationship mediates the association between interparental conflict and children's adjustment, or (c) that the parent-child relationship moderates (i.e., changes) the association between interparental conflict and children's adjustment (Lutzke, Wolchik, & Braver, 1996).

A mediating role of the parent-child relationship may be most likely, as it is often the case that when indicators of the quality of the parent-child relationship are included in analyses, interparental conflict has only indirect associations with children's adjustment via differences in the quality of the parent-child relationship (Fauber, Forehand, McCombs-Thomas, & Wierson, 1990). Children's adjustment is also more strongly associated with measures of the quality of the parent-child relationships when compared to the association with interparental conflict (Lutzke et al., 1996).

SIX DIMENSIONS OF PARENTING

Typically, parents are the primary caregiving figures during childhood and adolescence (Furman & Simon, 1999). This makes the parent-child relationship critical for many aspects of development. This belief has resulted in literally thousands of studies on parenting and parent-child relationships measuring many different dimensions of this relationship.

In a recent study that attempted to organise the many dimensions of parenting, Skinner, Johnson, and Snyder (2005) employed a framework that conceptualised parenting styles using a motivational model. Although parenting strategies are multifaceted, these authors identified six dimensions of parenting that were considered crucial to understanding the diverse ways that parenting can impact on children's development. The first dimension, involving love and affection, was labelled parental warmth. The second was structure and consistency, whereby the parent provided consistent limits and guidelines for the child. Last, autonomy support was described as important, and defined as a democratic style of parenting where children are encouraged to be independent in their way of thinking.

The three other dimensions of the framework identified negative parenting behaviours. These were rejection, chaos and coercion. Rejection included overt criticism and displays of signs of disapproval toward the child. Chaos included erratic, inconsistent and unpredictable parenting behaviours. Coercion included behavioural and/or psychological control where parenting is restrictive and over-controlling.

There is evidence that these six dimensions are associated, but that they form six separate factors and are differentially associated with a range of child and adolescent outcomes (Johnson, 2004). However, no previous research has examined whether these parenting dimensions are associated with children's relationship expectations. Using these six dimensions will assist in highlighting the importance of distinguishing between the different components of parenting to gain a greater understanding of the parent's role in children's socialisation processes. Our study also tested the validity of using these six dimensions as a framework for measuring parenting.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The general purpose of our study was to investigate how family structure (i.e., divorce) and family processes (i.e., interparental conflicts and parenting dimensions) were associated with a particular aspect of children's socio-emotional functioning, namely, children's expectations of relationships with others. Our focus was on children's optimistic and pessimistic expectations about the family and, separately, about peers/others. We had two general research questions. First, do relationship expectations differ when comparing children from divorced families to children from intact families? Second, do family processes (interparental conflict and parenting), rather than family structure, better explain children's optimistic and pessimistic relationship expectations?

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 837 children (411 boys, 426 girls) in grades 5 to 7 (aged 9 to 13 years, $M = 10.82$, $SD = .96$) and their parents drawn from four public primary schools in a large Australian city. The participation rate was 81%. A small number of children did not complete one or two survey items and subscales were formed with their completed items.

For 87% of participants, the mother was the respondent. Other respondents included fathers (11%) and other primary caregivers (2%). Parents' ages ranged from 27 to 80 years ($M = 39.97$, $SD = 5.51$). On average, three children lived in the household (range 1 to 8). Most parents were white/Caucasian (88%). Forty-three percent of parents had left high school before year 12 to pursue other training or work, and most were married (68%).

PARENT MEASURES

Parents completed a survey asking their age, relationship to the participating child, participating child's primary residence, education level of both parents, ethnicity of both parents, current marital status and whether they were separated or divorced from the participating child's other parent. Parents were asked to complete another section if they were separated/divorced from the child's other biological parent. This section asked how long they had been separated/divorced, how old the participating child was when they first separated, and what custody arrangements and visitation arrangements were in place.

CHILD MEASURES

All child measures had response options from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*).

Optimistic and pessimistic expectations of relationships outside the family. The Children's Optimistic and Pessimistic Expectations of Relationships Scale (COPER;

McGregor, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Creed, 2012) was used to assess children's optimism and pessimism about their future relationships with other children and people in general. This measure consisted of eight items that assessed optimistic expectations (ORE) and eight items that assessed pessimistic expectations (PRE). Please see Appendix A for a full list of items. Cronbach's α in the current study was .87 for ORE and .85 for PRE.

Optimistic and pessimistic family relationship expectations. Because development of the COPER revealed that expectations about the family may not be consistent with expectations about other kids and other people in general (McGregor, 2010), we also adapted the COPER to focus on expectations of family relationships (McGregor et al., 2012). This measure (the COPER-F) contained five optimistic (OFRE) and five pessimistic items (PFRE) about family relationship expectations. Please see appendix B for a full list of items. Cronbach's α in the current study was .87 for OFRE and .66 for PFRE.

Interparental conflict. The 19-item Conflict Property subscale of the Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) was used to measure children's witnessing of conflict between their parents. An example item was, 'I often see my parents arguing.' After reversing some items, a higher score indicated that a child had witnessed more conflict, higher levels of hostility and aggression, and poorer conflict resolution. Cronbach's α was .93 in the present study. Children did not complete items if they had no known second parent ($n = 21$). Because there were no differences in results when analyses were conducted with or without these 21 participants, their missing values were replaced with the mean of the sample.

Parenting. The Parents as Social Context Questionnaire (PSCQ; Skinner et al., 2005) was used to measure the six dimensions of parenting. Children completed 24 items pertaining to their mother, and the same 24 items pertaining to their father. The six parenting dimensions were parental warmth (e.g., 'My mother/father lets me know she/he loves me'), structure ('When I want to do something, my mother/father shows me how'), autonomy support ('My mother/father lets me do the things I think are important'), rejection (e.g., 'Sometimes I wonder if my mother/father likes me'), chaos ('When my mother/father makes a promise, I don't know if she/he will keep it') and coercion ('My mother/father is always telling me what to do'). Cronbach's α ranged from .71 to .90 in the present study. Children did not complete items if they could not identify a female ($n = 2$) or male ($n = 21$) parent. Because there were no differences in the results when these children were excluded or included because of missing scores for one parent, all children were maintained in all analyses by replacing the missing score for one parent with the score for the other parent.

PROCEDURE

Once approvals were obtained from the human ethics review committee, education department and school principals, we distributed parental information sheets, consent forms and demographic questionnaires to all students in grades 5, 6, and 7 at four schools. Students took materials home to their parents and returned them to the school. All participants had parent consent, assented to participate, and had complete demographic information.

We administered the questionnaire to children in their regular classrooms and read aloud a standardised set of instructions, while children followed and completed each item. Completion of the questionnaire took 30 minutes. We gave children a small gift for their time and offered debriefing. Referrals were provided when necessary.

Results

DESCRIPTION OF DIVORCED FAMILIES

Similar to rates reported in other research (e.g., Riggio, 2004; Storksen, Roysamb, Moum, & Tambs, 2005), 29% ($n = 244$) of parents reported they were separated or divorced. Of these, 56% had been separated/divorced for more than 5 years, 22% for more than 2 years but less than 5 years, and 19% for less than 2 years. In over half of the separated/divorced families, the mother had sole custody, with joint custody arrangements for 31% of the families. For 30% of families, the child had no contact with the noncustodial parent. There were a variety of different visitation arrangements, ranging from equal time at both households (10%) to once a month (10%).

OPTIMISTIC AND PESSIMISTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS: TWO SUBSCALES OR ONE?

Before testing our primary study hypotheses, we conducted analyses with children's optimistic and pessimistic expectations of relationships with peers and other people to determine whether the two subscales (optimistic and pessimistic) should be considered as a single dimension of views of relationships or should be maintained as two separate subscales. We conducted similar analyses to examine children's optimistic and pessimistic expectations of family relationships.

Inspection of the correlations between optimistic and pessimistic relationship expectations of peers and others ($r = -.33$) and optimistic and pessimistic family relationship expectations ($r = -.50$) revealed moderate associations. Although these correlations were only moderate, we used crosstabulations to further explore these associations. Groups were formed for crosstabulations. For each subscale, children who responded between 0 to 2 were recoded as 1 'low', 2.01 to 3.99 were recoded as 2 'moderate', and children responding 4 to 5 were recoded as 3 'high'. However, in some cases very few children were in the 'low' group, so the 'low' and 'moderate' groups were collapsed for crosstabulations.

Overall, in the analysis of relationship expectations of peers/others, 20% of children had low pessimistic relationship expectations and low/moderate optimistic relationship expectations, 41% had low pessimistic relationship expectations and high optimistic relationship expectations, 22% had moderate or high pessimistic relationship expectations and low/moderate optimistic relationship expectations, and 17% had moderate pessimistic relationship expectations and high optimistic relationship expectations.

In the crosstabulation of optimistic versus pessimistic family relationship expectations, some cells contained most children whereas other cells had very low numbers of children. In particular, most children (91%) had opposing optimistic and pessimistic views.

After taking into consideration the correlations between the subscales and the crosstabulation of groups low or high in optimistic and pessimistic relationship expectations, we maintained the separate subscales tapping optimistic ($M = 4.05$, $SD = .66$) and pessimistic ($M = 1.95$, $SD = .69$) relationship expectations of peers and others for further analyses. Because of the tendency for optimistic family relationship expectations to be in opposition to pessimistic family relationship expectations, these subscales were averaged to form one total score, after reversing pessimistic expectations. We refer to this total optimistic and pessimistic family relationship expectations scale as 'family relationship expectations' in further analyses. Higher scores indicated higher optimism and lower pessimism ($M = 4.75$, $SD = .42$). The Cronbach's α for family relationship expectations was .83.

RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS: INTACT VERSUS SEPARATED/DIVORCED FAMILIES

Independent groups t tests were conducted to test whether children who had experienced parental separation or divorce had lower optimistic expectations and higher pessimistic expectations of relationships than other children. No significant differences were found for children from separated/divorced families and intact families on optimistic and pessimistic relationship expectations of peers/others, but children from separated/divorced families ($M = 4.66$, $SD = .51$) had less optimistic family relationship expectations than children from intact families ($M = 4.79$, $SD = .38$), $t(357.73) = -3.61$, $p < .001$.

Additional analyses were completed to compare children who had experienced separation or divorce less than 5 years ago, those who had experienced divorce greater than 5 years ago, and children from intact families. No significant differences were found among these three groups for optimistic relationship expectations of peers/others, $F(2, 826) = 1.91$, $p = .149$, and pessimistic relationship expectations of peers/others, $F(2, 826) = 1.01$, $p = .365$. Yet, children from intact families

TABLE 1

Bivariate Correlations between Relationship Expectations, Interparental Conflict, and Parenting Qualities (N = 837)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. ORE	—	-.33	.37	-.15	.35	.30	.37	-.25	-.25	-.24	.26	.20	.33	-.19	-.18	-.19
2. PRE		—	-.25	.30	-.13	-.12	-.13	.31	.24	.19	-.13	-.06	-.14	.26	.24	.22
3. FRE			—	-.32	.51	.48	.56	-.41	-.40	-.39	.35	.21	.40	-.41	-.38	-.39
4. Interparental conflict				—	-.21	-.27	-.32	.34	.40	.37	-.24	-.19	-.28	.40	.41	.37
5. M Warmth					—	.58	.64	-.38	-.32	-.32	.40	.28	.35	-.25	-.16	-.19
6. M Structure						—	.65	-.29	-.35	-.28	.36	.46	.40	-.23	-.23	-.24
7. M Autonomy support							—	-.45	-.43	-.44	.36	.31	.56	-.33	-.27	-.29
8. M Rejection								—	.59	.55	-.21	-.08 ^a	-.25	.54	.35	.38
9. M Chaos									—	.57	-.19	-.07 ^a	-.24	.36	.48	.35
10. M Coercion										—	-.15	-.10	-.24	.32	.36	.54
11. F Warmth											—	.49	.71	-.55	-.45	-.43
12. F Structure												—	.53	-.25	-.13	-.23
13. F Autonomy support													—	-.55	-.48	-.52
14. F Rejection														—	.65	.63
15. F Chaos															—	.63
16. F Coercion																—

Note: ORE = Optimistic Relationship Expectations. PRE = Pessimistic Relationship Expectations. FRE = Family Relationship Expectations. M = Mother. F = Father.

All $p < .01$ except where noted: ^a $p < .05$

had more positive family relationship expectations ($M = 4.79$, $SD = .78$) than children whose parents had been separated/divorced for more than five years ($M = 4.62$, $SD = .55$), $F(2, 826) = 9.39$, $p < .001$. The group of children who had experienced a separation or divorce more recently did not differ from children from intact families or from children who had experienced separation/divorce more than 5 years previously.

SIMPLE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN MEASURED VARIABLES

Correlations between relationship expectations, family conflict, and parenting dimensions were conducted (see Table 1). Children who reported more maternal and paternal warmth, structure and autonomy support had more optimistic and less pessimistic relationship expectations about people outside and in the family. Conversely, children who reported more maternal and paternal rejection, chaos and coercion had less optimistic and more pessimistic relationship expectations. Further, children who reported more interparental conflict had more optimistic and less pessimistic relationship expectations of peers and other people, and reported less positive family relationship expectations.

RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS: UNIQUE ASSOCIATIONS WITH DIVORCE, CONFLICT AND PARENTING

Regression models were estimated to test for unique associations of relationship expectations with divorce — less than 5 years/more than 5 years since separation/divorce, interparental conflict and parenting dimensions after accounting for age and gender. Three hierarchical regression analyses were estimated, with one for each of the

three measures of children's relationship expectations (see Table 2 for the three models). Each model had six steps. Timing of divorce/separation, age and gender were entered at Step 1. Interparental conflict was entered at Step 2, maternal warmth, structure and autonomy support were entered in Step 3, and paternal warmth, structure and autonomy support were entered at Step 4. Maternal rejection, chaos and coercion were added at Step 5. Paternal rejection, chaos and coercion were added at Step 6.

Optimistic Relationship Expectations of Peers/Others

In the first regression model, the dependent variable was optimistic relationship expectations of peers/others. At the final step, 21.2% of the variance was explained by the 17 independent variables, $F(17, 813) = 12.83$, $p < .001$. The final results showed that paternal autonomy support, maternal warmth, gender and age were the significant, unique predictors of children's optimistic relationship expectations of peers/others.

At Step 1, separated/divorced less than 5 years, separated/divorced more than 5 years, age and gender accounted for 3.4% of the variance in optimistic relationship expectations, $F(4, 826) = 7.32$, $p < .001$, with gender, age and separated/divorced more than 5 years significant unique predictors. At Step 2, interparental conflict accounted for an additional 2.2% of the variance, $F(1, 825) = 19.42$, $p < .001$. Interparental conflict, gender and age were all significant, unique predictors in this step. After Step 3, maternal warmth, structure and autonomy support accounted for a further 12.4% of the variance, $F(3, 822) = 41.27$, $p < .001$. Maternal autonomy support, maternal warmth, gender and age were all significant, unique predictors. At Step 4, paternal warmth,

TABLE 2

Results of Regressing Children's Optimistic, Pessimistic and Family Relationship Expectations on Age, Gender, and Family Experience Measures ($N = 837$)

Variables	Optimistic relationship expectations ¹		Pessimistic relationship expectations ²		Family relationship expectations ³	
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE B</i>)	β	<i>B</i> (<i>SE B</i>)	β	<i>B</i> (<i>SE B</i>)	β
Step 1						
Separated/Divorced < 5 years	.01 (.07)	.01	.06 (.08)	.03	-.09 (.05)	-.07*
Separated/Divorced > 5 years	-.13 (.06)	-.07*	.08 (.07)	.05	-.17 (.04)	-.15***
Age	.07 (.02)	.10**	.01 (.03)	.01	.04 (.02)	.09*
Gender	.19 (.05)	.14***	.00 (.05)	.00	.05 (.03)	.06
Step 2						
Separated/Divorced < 5 years	.08 (.07)	.04	.00 (.08)	.00	-.00 (.04)	-.00
Separated/Divorced > 5 years	-.08 (.06)	-.04	.04 (.07)	.02	-.11 (.04)	-.09**
Age	.07 (.02)	.10**	.01 (.03)	.02	.04 (.01)	.08*
Gender	.20 (.05)	.15***	-.01 (.05)	-.01	.07 (.03)	.08*
Interparental Conflict	-.12 (.03)	-.16***	.10 (.03)	.13***	-.14 (.02)	-.29***
Step 3						
Separated/Divorced < 5 years	.01 (.07)	.03	.01 (.08)	.00	-.03 (.04)	-.02
Separated/Divorced > 5 years	-.02 (.06)	-.01	.02 (.07)	.01	-.06 (.03)	-.05
Age	.06 (.02)	.08**	.02 (.03)	.02	.03 (.01)	.06*
Gender	.14 (.04)	.11***	.01 (.05)	.01	.01 (.02)	.02
Interparental Conflict	-.03 (.03)	-.05	.08 (.03)	.10**	-.06 (.01)	-.13***
Mother Warmth	.23 (.06)	.17***	-.12 (.07)	-.08	.19 (.03)	.21***
Mother Structure	.05 (.04)	.06	-.03 (.05)	-.03	.07 (.02)	.13**
Mother Autonomy Support	.19 (.04)	.20***	-.04 (.05)	-.04	.17 (.03)	.28***
Step 4						
Separated/Divorced < 5 years	.06 (.07)	.03	.01 (.08)	.01	-.03 (.04)	-.02
Separated/Divorced > 5 years	-.02 (.06)	-.01	.01 (.07)	.01	-.05 (.03)	-.04
Age	.06 (.02)	.08**	.01 (.03)	.02	.03 (.01)	.06*
Gender	.14 (.04)	.11***	.02 (.05)	.01	.01 (.02)	.01
Interparental Conflict	-.02 (.03)	-.03	.07 (.03)	.09*	-.06 (.01)	-.12***
Mother Warmth	.24 (.06)	.18***	-.12 (.07)	-.08	.16 (.03)	.19***
Mother Structure	.04 (.04)	.05	-.04 (.05)	-.05	.09 (.02)	.16***
Mother Autonomy Support	.11 (.05)	.11*	.02 (.06)	.02	.14 (.03)	.24***
Father Warmth	-.01 (.05)	-.01	-.02 (.05)	-.02	.07 (.03)	.11*
Father Structure	.01 (.04)	.01	.06 (.04)	.06	-.06 (.02)	-.11**
Father Autonomy Support	.14 (.05)	.17**	-.10 (.05)	-.11	.04 (.03)	.07
Step 5						
Separated/Divorced < 5 years	.06 (.07)	.03	.03 (.07)	.01	-.04 (.04)	-.03
Separated/Divorced > 5 years	-.02 (.06)	-.01	.01 (.06)	.01	-.05 (.03)	-.04
Age	.05 (.02)	.08*	.03 (.02)	.04	.02 (.01)	.05*
Gender	.14 (.04)	.11***	.02 (.05)	.01	.01 (.02)	.01
Interparental Conflict	.01 (.03)	.01	-.00 (.03)	-.00	-.03 (.00)	-.05
Mother Warmth	.22 (.06)	.16***	-.04 (.07)	-.03	.13 (.03)	.15***
Mother Structure	.04 (.04)	.04	-.04 (.05)	-.04	.09 (.02)	.15***
Mother Autonomy Support	.07 (.05)	.07	.13 (.06)	.13*	.10 (.03)	.16**
Father Warmth	.01 (.05)	-.01	-.01 (.05)	-.01	.07 (.03)	.12**
Father Structure	.02 (.04)	.03	.01 (.04)	.02	-.05 (.02)	-.08*
Father Autonomy Support	.14 (.05)	.17**	-.09 (.05)	-.11	.04 (.03)	.07
Mother Rejection	-.02 (.04)	-.03	.24 (.04)	.27***	-.05 (.02)	-.08*
Mother Chaos	-.05 (.03)	-.06	.07 (.04)	.09*	-.03 (.02)	-.07
Mother Coercion	-.05 (.03)	-.06	.00 (.04)	.00	-.05 (.02)	-.10**
Step 6						
Separated/Divorced < 5 years	.06 (.07)	.03	.04 (.07)	.02	-.04 (.04)	-.03
Separated/Divorced > 5 years	-.01 (.06)	-.01	.03 (.06)	.02	-.06 (.03)	-.06*
Age	.05 (.02)	.08*	.03 (.02)	.04	.03 (.01)	.06*
Gender	.14 (.04)	.11***	.02 (.05)	.02	.01 (.02)	.01
Interparental Conflict	-.00 (.03)	-.00	-.03 (.03)	-.03	-.01 (.02)	-.01
Mother Warmth	.20 (.06)	.14**	-.07 (.07)	-.05	.16 (.03)	.19***
Mother Structure	.04 (.04)	.04	-.03 (.05)	-.03	.08 (.02)	.14**
Mother Autonomy Support	.05 (.05)	.05	.09 (.06)	.10	.13 (.03)	.22***
Father Warmth	.02 (.05)	.02	.04 (.05)	.04	.03 (.03)	.04

TABLE 2

(Continued)

Variables	Optimistic relationship expectations ¹		Pessimistic relationship expectations ²		Family relationship expectations ³	
	B(SE B)	β	B(SE B)	β	B(SE B)	β
Father Structure	.02 (.04)	.02	-.01 (.04)	-.01	-.03 (.02)	-.05
Father Autonomy Support	.17 (.05)	.20***	-.03 (.06)	-.03	-.02 (.03)	-.03
Mother Rejection	-.05 (.04)	-.07	.20 (.05)	.23***	-.01 (.02)	-.02
Mother Chaos	-.05 (.03)	-.06	.05 (.04)	.06	-.02 (.02)	-.05
Mother Coercion	-.06 (.04)	-.07	-.03 (.04)	-.03	-.02 (.02)	-.04
Father Rejection	.06 (.05)	.07	.05 (.05)	.06	-.05 (.02)	-.09*
Father Chaos	.00 (.04)	.00	.08 (.04)	.09	-.04 (.02)	-.08
Father Coercion	.03 (.04)	.03	.04 (.04)	.05	-.05 (.02)	-.11*

Note: ¹ $R^2 = .03^{***}$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .03^{***}$ for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = .13^{***}$ for Step 3; $\Delta R^2 = .02^{***}$ for Step 4; $\Delta R^2 = .01^*$ for Step 5; $\Delta R^2 = .00$ for Step 6 for Optimistic Relationship Expectations.

² $R^2 = .00$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .02^{***}$ for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = .01^{**}$ for Step 3; $\Delta R^2 = .01$ for Step 4; $\Delta R^2 = .07^{***}$ for Step 5; $\Delta R^2 = .01^*$ for Step 6 for Pessimistic Relationship Expectations.

³ $R^2 = .03^{***}$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .08^{***}$ for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = .26^{***}$ for Step 3; $\Delta R^2 = .02^{***}$ for Step 4; $\Delta R^2 = .03^{***}$ for Step 5; $\Delta R^2 = .02^{***}$ for Step 6 for Family Relationship Expectations.

$p < .05$; * $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

structure and autonomy support added a further 2% to the model, $F(3, 819) = 6.40$, $p < .001$. Maternal warmth, paternal autonomy support, maternal autonomy support, gender and age were all significant, unique predictors. At Step 5, maternal rejection, chaos and coercion added a further 1%, $F(3, 816) = 3.31$, $p = .02$. Paternal autonomy support, maternal warmth, gender and age were significant, unique predictors. Step 6 did not account for significant additional variance in children's optimistic relationship expectations of peers/others, $F(3, 813) = 1.09$, $p = .323$.

Pessimistic Relationship Expectations of Peers/Others

The analyses for optimistic relationship expectations were repeated for pessimistic relationship expectations of peers/others. At the last step, 12.4% of the variance was explained by the independent variables, $F(17, 813) = 6.78$, $p < .001$. Variables entered in Step 1 did not account for significant variance, $F(4, 826) = .55$, $p = .702$. At Step 2, interparental conflict added 1.6%, $F(1, 825) = 13.51$, $p < .001$. At Step 3, maternal warmth, structure and autonomy support added a further 1.5%, $F(3, 822) = 4.26$, $p = .005$. Interparental conflict was the only significant, unique predictor. At Step 4, paternal warmth, structure and autonomy support did not account for significant additional variance, $F(3, 819) = 2.20$, $p = .087$. Interparental conflict was the only significant, unique predictor. At Step 5, maternal rejection, chaos and coercion added a further 7.2%, $F(3, 816) = 21.94$, $p < .001$. Maternal rejection, maternal autonomy support and maternal chaos were all significant unique predictors. At Step 6, paternal rejection, chaos and coercion added a further 1%, $F(3, 813) = 3.47$, $p = .016$. Maternal rejection was the only significant, unique predictor. When 12 univariate outliers were identified and removed, the over-

all variance explained was reduced from 12.3% to 11% and ΔR^2 at Step 4 and Step 6 was no longer significant.

Family Relationship Expectations

When children's family relationship expectations was the dependent variable, 43.6% of the variance was explained by the 17 independent variables, $F(17, 813) = 36.90$, $p < .001$. At Step 1, separated/divorced less than 5 years, separated/divorced more than 5 years, age and gender accounted for 3.4% of the variance in family relationship expectations, $F(4, 826) = 7.21$, $p < .001$, with separated/divorced more than 5 years, age and separated/divorced less than 5 years all significant, unique predictors. At Step 2, interparental conflict accounted for an additional 8% of the variance, $F(1, 825) = 74.57$, $p < .001$. Interparental conflict, separated/divorced more than 5 years, age and gender were the significant, unique predictors in this step. At Step 3, maternal warmth, structure and autonomy support added a further 25.7%, $F(3, 822) = 111.95$, $p < .001$. Maternal autonomy support, maternal warmth, interparental conflict, maternal structure and age were all significant, unique predictors. At Step 4, paternal warmth, structure and autonomy support added a further 1.7%, $F(3, 819) = 7.74$, $p < .001$. Maternal autonomy support, maternal warmth, maternal structure, interparental conflict, paternal warmth, paternal structure and age were the significant, unique predictors. At Step 5, maternal rejection, chaos and coercion accounted for another 2.7% of the variance, $F(3, 816) = 12.36$, $p < .001$. Maternal autonomy support, maternal warmth, maternal structure, paternal warmth, maternal coercion, maternal rejection, paternal structure and age were all significant, unique predictors. At Step 6, paternal rejection, chaos and coercion accounted for another 2.1% of the variance, $F(3, 813) = 9.96$, $p < .001$. Maternal autonomy support, maternal warmth, maternal structure,

paternal coercion, paternal rejection, paternal chaos, age and separated/divorced for more than five years were all significant, unique correlates.

Summary

For mothers, but not for fathers, warmth was the strongest unique correlate of optimistic relationship expectations of peers/others. Maternal warmth was a unique correlate of family relationship expectations; however, it was not the strongest unique correlate. Again, for mothers but not for fathers, rejection was the only unique correlate of pessimistic relationship expectations of peers/others. Paternal rejection was a significant unique correlate for family relationship expectations; however, it too was not the strongest unique predictor.

Associations between interparental conflict and relationship expectations were not significant after accounting for parenting dimensions. For family relationship expectations, however, family structure (divorced/separated for more than five years) was associated with family relationship expectations even after considering the associations of parenting dimensions and interparental conflict with relationship expectations.

Discussion

Partly because of high rates of divorce over the last few decades, many research studies have been conducted investigating the links between divorce and children's adjustment. Much of the earlier research focused on comparing children from intact families with children from divorced families on various outcome variables (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991) without taking into account other important aspects of the family system such as family processes. More recently, researchers have considered family processes as well as family structure as correlates of children's adjustment. Drawing from theories and models that point to the importance of children's development of their models or views of relationships with others (e.g., Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001), the purpose of our study was to add to the divorce and interparental conflict literature by investigating how family dissolution and family processes are associated with a particular aspect of children's socio-emotional functioning, namely children's optimistic and pessimistic expectations of their relationships both inside and outside the family.

We examined children's pessimistic *and* optimistic expectations of relationships with their families separate from their expectations of relationships outside the family (i.e., with peers and others). Although some have argued that children can have expectations or models of family relationships that differ from their expectations of people outside the home, it was difficult to locate a study that measured this. The most closely related literature has focused on models of attachment to parents (e.g., Wilkinson, 2004).

Another contribution of our study is the focus on mothers separate from fathers. In a review of research, it was found that nearly 50% of studies investigating parenting and adolescents' adjustment focused on mothers only, and when fathers were included the unique attributes of mothers and fathers were often not assessed (Phares & Compas, 1992). Generally, when the contributions of both mothers and fathers are assessed it has been found that they have different effects on adolescents' behaviour and functioning (Hosley & Montemayor, 1997). Hence, not only did our research explore both optimistic and pessimistic expectations of the family, peers and others, it also identified the unique contributions of both mothers and fathers, as well as interparental conflict and divorce on children's relationship expectations.

Before considering the primary study findings, some issues regarding measurement of optimistic and pessimistic expectations of relationships should be considered. We developed a new measure of family relationship expectations to assess these expectations separate from relationship expectations about people outside the family (peers and other people). We found that it was necessary to maintain a subscale of optimistic expectations separate from pessimistic expectations when the focus was on peers and other people, but one global relationship expectation score was preferable when assessing children's family relationship expectations. More specifically, when considering children's expectations of relationships with their peers and other people, correlational results showed that optimistic and pessimistic relationship expectations had only a modest correlation with each other and had some different associations with other important measures. Further, crosstabulations revealed that some children were high or moderate in both optimistic and pessimistic expectations of relationships with peers and other people. Paradoxically, when examining children's expectations of family relationships, results showed that children who were high in optimism also tended to be low in pessimism and vice versa, signifying that the two subscales could be collapsed to form one scale without substantial loss of information. Hence, all analyses involving family relationship expectations were performed using children's optimistic and pessimistic expectations of family relationships as a single score with higher scores on this measure indicating higher optimism and lower pessimism.

CORRELATES OF CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

Parenting dimensions were associated with children's relationship expectations about their families, and were associated with children's relationship expectations about peers and other people. Specifically, maternal autonomy support was the strongest and most consistent correlate of optimistic relationship expectations both within and outside the family. Conversely, maternal rejection was the

most strongly correlated with children's pessimistic relationship expectations of peers and others. Importantly, when these parenting dimensions were accounted for, interparental conflict was only rarely associated with children's more negative relationship expectations, and family structure (i.e., divorce or intact family) was only associated with family relationship expectations. Children from divorced homes reported more negative family relationship expectations.

Optimistic Expectations of Peers and Others

Both mothers' and fathers' parenting were associated with optimistic expectations of peers and others. Mothers' autonomy support was the most important unique contributor, followed by mothers' warmth. Age and gender were also associated, with females and older children having more optimistic expectations of peers and others than males and young children, respectively. In general, it has been suggested that negative parenting variables are most strongly linked to negative outcomes (Fauber et al., 1990). We found that positive parenting dimensions were most strongly linked to the positive and optimistic outcome of children's relationship expectations of peers and of other people.

Interparental conflict was also a unique correlate of children's optimistic expectations of relationships outside the family. However, interparental conflict was no longer associated after accounting for parenting. This suggests that the association of interparental conflict with children's optimistic expectations is mediated via parenting by both mothers and fathers, and would be a useful future direction for research.

No studies could be located that investigated optimistic relationship expectations of peers or others outside the family. Nevertheless, previous research has investigated different components of children's peer relationships, which support the findings of our study. For example, in early to late adolescence, secure attachments with mothers and fathers (as rated by children's perception of security) have been found to be associated with perceived social support from friends and negatively correlated with negative social expectations of peer interaction (Liu, 2006), attachment relationships with parents in general have been demonstrated to be influential on the quality of peer attachment relationships (Wilkinson, 2004), attachment to mothers has predicted attachment security to friends (although in this study attachment security to fathers was negatively related to attachment security to friends; Markiewicz, Doyle, & Brendgen, 2001), maternal and paternal acceptance and lack of love withdrawal by mothers have been shown to be unique predictors of quality of peer relationships (Dekovic & Meeus, 1997), and views of relationships with parents has been related to their views of relationships with close friends (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchee, 2002).

Further, in early adulthood, regardless of family structure, significant correlations have been found between the quality of both parent–adult child relationships and satisfaction with the number of perceived social supports (Riggio, 2004). Other researchers have also shown that those who perceived their relationship with their parents as warm and less rejecting during their childhood were more likely to feel they could depend on others and were less likely to be anxious about being abandoned or unloved (Collins & Read, 1990). Additionally, it has also been suggested that parents who encourage autonomy tend to have children who are more assertive, agreeable and less self-absorbed in peer interactions (Ladd & Pettit, 2002). These researchers reported that when specifically looking at children's competence in relationships, the most important components seem to be secure, responsive, nonintrusive, playful parent–child relationships. Hence, there does seem to be support for the parent–child relationship being associated with other important elements of peer relationships.

Pessimistic Expectations of Peers and Others

When examining pessimistic expectations of peers and other people outside the family, it was maternal rejection that had the unique association. This indicates that children who were more pessimistic about their future relationships perceived their mothers to be more rejecting. This is consistent with research that has shown that negative childhood experiences of parenting, reported retrospectively, correlate with greater adult rejection sensitivity (e.g., Downey, Khouri, & Feldman, 1997; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Our findings lend further support to one premise of the rejection sensitivity model, which argues that when early experiences with parents are primarily negative, children will have a greater tendency to expect interactions with others to be negative (Downey, Bonica, & Rincon, 1999). We also significantly extend these previous findings to show that the perception of a rejecting mother, as compared to other aspects of mother–child relationships and fathers' parenting, is most strongly associated with children's negative expectations of peers and others.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

Family Dissolution

Children who had experienced separation or divorce had less optimistic expectations of relationships with their families than other children. Although children whose parents had separated over 5 years ago were still reasonably optimistic about their expectations of their family, they were less optimistic than children from intact families. Based on these findings, it would seem that divorce has a direct association with family relationship expectations. Further, based on our findings, the longer the period since the separation (and, relatedly the younger the child is when the separation occurs), the more negative these

expectations seem to be. In the first months or years post-divorce, children's expectations are the same as children who live with both of their biological parents; however, when the divorce occurred further in the past or when children were younger, children reported significantly less positive expectations of their family.

Although correlational, our findings do suggest that there may be long-lasting negative consequences of divorce for children, specifically related to their more negative views of family relationships, despite the evidence that restabilisation of the family usually occurs within 2 to 3 years after divorce (Wolchik, Tein, Sandler, & Doyle, 2002). There may be a number of changes within the family that may help explain this. For children whose parents have been separated or divorced for longer than 5 years their family dynamics may be more complex, in that they may have seen their biological parents enter a number of relationships, they may have step-parents and step/half siblings that could all alter their perceptions and expectations of their family. Alternatively, it may be that children who are younger when their parents separated or divorced may have less understanding of the circumstances surrounding the divorce, leading them to be more unsure about their family. However, age as a moderator has received conflicting results (Amato, 2001; Grych & Fincham, 1997). Overall, comparing children who have experienced divorce to other children creates a relatively simplistic comparison and researchers are now aware of the importance of investigating other family characteristics to understand the effect that divorce has on children. For example, when we included other family processes, namely interparental conflict and parenting dimensions, the correlation remained between family structure and children's expectations, but was much reduced in magnitude.

Parenting

When parenting and children's family relationship expectations were considered, children were found to be more optimistic about their family relationships when mothers provided more support for the child's autonomy (e.g., gives opportunities for independent decision-making and discussion about differences and values), and had a warmer relationship with their child, characterised by emotional availability, providing structure, being predictable, consistent, and setting boundaries for their child. For fathers, the important components for children to have optimistic expectations of their family are a relationship with their child that is not coercive, controlling or demanding, and is not rejecting, hostile or harsh. Other research has found that the greater amount of time spent with mothers, as well as the greater intimacy, disclosure, and closeness that adolescents report with their mothers, makes mothers more influential in some respects (Hosley & Montemayor, 1997). Nevertheless, our findings suggest that both mothers' and fathers'

parenting are linked to children's optimistic expectations of their family relationships.

Interparental Conflict

In the multivariate analyses, family structure (separated/divorced more than 5 years) and interparental conflict were both correlated with children's family relationship expectations; however, when parenting dimensions were included, interparental conflict was no longer significantly associated with family relationship expectations. This suggests that there may be an indirect effect of conflict on children's expectations via parenting. This possibility is consistent with previous findings that interparental conflict only had indirect effects on children by adversely affecting the parent-child relationship (Richardson & McCabe, 2001). Interestingly, family dissolution, for children whose parents were separated/divorced more than 5 years, was still significant even after interparental conflict and parenting were included in the multivariate models, again suggesting that there might be long-lasting negative consequences for children who experience parental separation/divorce.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

Our findings have several implications for theory and research. Most of the research on parenting focuses on mothers only or on parenting in general (Lamb, 2004). Our findings demonstrated the importance of asking children about their mothers and fathers separately, as different elements of maternal and paternal parenting dimensions were found to be important in accounting for children's relationship expectations.

It is also rare for research to examine the family and other relationships separately, especially for the age group (9 to 12 year olds) of participants in our research. There was value in considering the children's expectations of their families separate from the expectations of peers and of 'other people' to assist in understanding the development and maintenance of children's views of others and their future relationships. Longitudinal research designs could be used to extend these findings.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, our research adds to the existing literature examining the impact of family factors on children's social cognitions. We used a large sample of children providing concurrent accounts of relationships with their parents and relationship expectations. Our findings suggest that for children between the ages of 9 to 12 years, the longer the period their parents have been separated/divorced the more negative their expectations of their family become. In contrast, the experience of parental separation/divorce does not seem to disrupt children's expectations of peers/others. Furthermore, although family structure and interparental conflict are associated with children's relationship expectations, they become less

important when considered in the context of parenting dimensions. Based on our findings, it would seem that to maintain positive expectations of peers/others, it is important for children to perceive their father as providing autonomy support and that they have a warm relationship with their mother. For children who tend to have negative expectations of peers/others it would seem that maternal rejection is important. Finally, for children to maintain optimistic expectations of their family, the results suggest that having a mother who provides autonomy support, warmth and structure, and having a father who is not coercive or rejecting, are the most important factors. These results demonstrate the importance of measuring different dimensions of parenting in understanding children's relationship expectations.

APPENDIX A

Children's Optimistic and Pessimistic Expectations of Relationships Scale

Optimistic Relationships Scale

1. In the future, people will care about me.
2. In the future, people will be there for me.
3. In the future, people will be nice to me.
4. In the future, people will like me.
5. In the future, other kids will care about me.
6. In the future, other kids will be nice to me.
7. In the future, other kids will like me.
8. In the future, other kids will help me.

Pessimistic Relationship Scale

1. In the future, people will pick on me.
2. In the future, people will treat me badly.
3. In the future, people will not include me.
4. In the future, people will not understand me.
5. In the future, other kids will treat me badly.
6. In the future, other kids will not include me.
7. In the future, other kids will not talk to me.
8. In the future, other kids will pick on me.

APPENDIX B

Children's Optimistic and Pessimistic Expectations of Relationships Scale — Family

Optimistic Relationships Scale — Family

1. In the future, my family will help me
2. In the future, my family will care about me
3. In the future, my family will be there for me
4. In the future, my family will like me
5. In the future, my family will be nice to me

Pessimistic Relationship Scale — Family

1. In the future, my family will not talk to me
2. In the future, my family will pick on me
3. In the future, my family will treat me badly
4. In the future, my family will not understand me
5. In the future, my family will not include me

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