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Parenting as mediator between post-divorce family structure and childrens well-being

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Introduction

According to Amato’s divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, divorce and the subsequent transitions are stressful for children, possibly having a negative impact on their well-being (Amato, 2000). Whether this stress actually does have a negative impact depends heavily on various mediators and moderators, one of the most important of which is effective parenting. Previous studies have indicated that effective parenting (characterized by high levels of support and control) can improve the well-being of children after a parental divorce (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2005; Lansford, 2009). Although most of these studies concentrated on maternal parenting (e.g., Lengua et al., 2000; Wood, Repetti & Roesch, 2004), scholars have recently begun to investigate the role of paternal parenting as well (Bastaits, Ponnet & Mortelmans, 2014; King & Sobolewski, 2006). Nevertheless, studies on parenting and children in various post-divorce family structures tended to concentrate on either the repartnering of one of the parents (e.g., Hetherington, 2006; Gibson-Davis, 2008) or on the custodial arrangement (e.g., Campana et al., 2008; Lee, 2002). Moreover, many studies of family structure and transitions focused on the structure and transitions of the mother, leaving the father out of the picture (as observed by Bjarnason et al., 2012; Langton & Berger, 2011). To understand the impact of family structure on children’s well-being, research on parenting of both mothers and fathers as a mediator is important.

Studies on parenting often draw upon the renowned and widely used theory of parenting styles developed by Baumrind (1991, 2013). This theory has several advantages over other parenting theories (e.g., attachment theory). First, it is not linked to the gender of the parent. Second, its focus is not restricted to parental support, but extends to include parental control (contrary to attachment theory or other perspectives). Third, although it stems from research concentrating on intact families, it is frequently applied in research on divorced families (Bronte-Tinkew, Scott & Lilja, 2010; Ozen, 2004; Stewart, 2003).

Baumrind’s theory of parenting styles is based on parent-child interaction (Baumrind, 2013). According to this theory, children develop by interacting with their parents, and the socialization of children runs through this interaction. Through training, education, and imitation of their parents, children learn the essential values, habits, and skills that they need in order to function. The optimal development of children requires both support and control from parents. Support refers to the emotional warmth (love and affection) that parents give to their children, as well as their supportive acts with respect to the individual needs and plans of their children (Baumrind, 2013). With regard to control, Baumrind identifies “confrontive control” as optimal for the development of children. Confrontive control is goal-oriented, and it involves setting boundaries and limits for
children in order to help their optimal development. Parenting should thus not be defined along a continuum with support and control at opposite ends. Instead, it should be defined as consisting of two different dimensions: support and control (in particular, confrontive control). In order to be effective in child development, parenting should include both of these dimensions.

Establishing whether parenting mediates between family structures and the well-being of children requires the identification of three relationships: (1) between parenting and children’s well-being, (2) between family structure and parenting and (3) between family structure and children’s well-being. First, the relationship between parenting and children’s well-being is established by Baumrind and corroborated in previous studies: parenting with high levels of support and control effectively improved children’s well-being (Baumrind, 2013). Based on studies of parenting and the substance use of adolescents in various family structures, she concluded that authoritative upbringing with high levels of support and control was a sufficient (albeit not a necessary) condition for raising well-adjusted children (Baumrind, 1991). Similarly, results reported by Bastaits, Ponnet, and Mortelmans (2014) indicated that the well-being of children was promoted when parents avoided a non-involved parenting style and, especially, when they raised their children in an authoritative manner. In contrast, Verhoeven et al. (2010) reported that both maternal and paternal control were positively related to higher levels of externalized problem behavior.

Second, a relationship between parenting and family structure can be identified, given the essential role of contact in parenting. According to parental resource, parents can provide both money and time to their children theory (Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994). If parents have money, they can provide their children with a certain lifestyle; if parents have time, they have the opportunity to support and control their children. After a divorce, parents work out custodial arrangements to divide the time that each will spend with their children. The resulting reduction in contact can lead to a decrease in parental support and control.

Previous studies have revealed that residential parents (in most cases, mothers) provided more support and control than do non-residential parents (in most cases, fathers) (Bastaits, Ponnet & Mortelmans, 2012; Hetherington, & Stanley-Hagen, 1999; Vandoorne, Decaluwe, & Vandemeulebroecke, 2000). Research has also indicated that parents with joint custody were more involved than non-residential parents were, and that their parental involvement and parenting styles more closely resembled those of residential parents (Bastaits, Van Peer & Mortelmans, 2013; Campana et al., 2008). Moreover, the time that parents and children spend together after a divorce may decline due to the presence of a new partner in the household. If a divorced parent repartners,
he or she must divide time between the new partner and the child, possibly leading to role conflict and a subsequent decrease in support and control (Adamson & Pasley, 2006; Thomson et al., 2001). However, this loss of time does not automatically result in a loss of support or control. New partners bring along resources of their own, and they may take up part of the parenting, possibly even having a positive effect on the parental support and control of the divorced parent (Hetherington, 2006). Previous studies have reported mixed results in this respect. Some results indicated that repartnered parents were less controlling and, in some cases, less supportive (Henderson & Taylor, 1999; Thomson et al., 2001), while others suggest that parental support increased when a new partner was present (Vandoorne et al., 2000).

Third, previous research indicated the existence of a relationship between family structure and children’s well-being, although it focused largely on negative indicators of subjective well-being among children (e.g., Brown, 2006; Langton & Berger, 2011). Nevertheless, the absence of problem behavior and depression does not necessarily equate to happiness, success, and growth (Ben-Arie, 2000). We should therefore look beyond negative indicators (e.g. deviant behavior or psychological problems) and concentrate on positive indicators of subjective well-being, such as self-esteem and satisfaction with life, in line with other studies (Ben-Arie & Frønes, 2011; Huebner, Gilman & Laughlin, 1998). Self-esteem reflects the affective component of subjective well-being, and life satisfaction reflects to the cognitive component (Diener & Diener, 1995; Huebner, Gilman & Laughlin, 1998). Self-esteem refers to a person’s feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance (Rosenberg, 1965). Satisfaction with life refers to an overall evaluation of a person’s life (Diener & Diener, 1995). Children were able to distinguish between these two indicators, as demonstrated in a study involving children in secondary school (Huebner, Gilman & Laughlin, 1998). Both self-esteem and life satisfaction can be affected by family structure and parenting, due to the nature of these factors.

Consisting of the level of satisfaction with and acceptance of one’s self and one’s behavior, self-esteem is constructed in childhood and adolescence, in close relationships with significant others, especially parents. In early sociology, this is described by Cooley (1902) as the “looking-glass self”: the appreciation of one’s self is shaped through reflected appraisals of significant others (like parents) within a context of social interaction. Because parents provide the first socialization of children, their parenting and the ways in which they interact with their children will largely shape their children’s self-esteem. Previous research has established that parenting is closely related to children’s self-esteem. Chan and Koo (2011) reported that children in various family structures had significantly higher levels of self-esteem when their parents had an authoritative parenting style, as characterized by high levels of both support and control. Focusing on possible gender differences
between mothers and fathers, Milevsky et al. (2007) observed a positive association between maternal authoritative parenting with high levels of support and control and higher self-esteem in children. A similar finding was reported in relation to paternal authoritative parenting.

Disruptions in this pattern of initial socialization (e.g., parental divorce and the ensuing family transitions) might also affect the self-esteem of children, given their potential to influence parenting. Previous research has indicated that children who did not live with both parents in the same household had lower self-esteem than did children living in intact families (Langton & Berger, 2011; Robson, 2010). As indicated by Chan and Koo (2011), parenting partially explained the link between family structure and children’s self-esteem. It is important to note, however, that joint physical custody was not included as a category of family structure in those studies. In an overview of the literature, Sodermans and Matthijs (2014) indicated that joint physical custody can influence child adjustment in two ways. First, children benefit from the continuity of parental involvement and resources. Second, because the adjustment of children depends on stability, living in alternating households might increase stress levels for children. Nevertheless, the outcomes of joint physical custody for children might depend on the differentiating factors (e.g., family structure), as well as on the indicator of child adjustment. Proceeding from parental resource theory, we expect that joint custody is beneficial to the self-esteem of children, as it ensures the continuity of parental resources and involvement.

A similar pattern to that of children’s self-esteem has been observed with regard to children’s satisfaction with life. Given that life satisfaction refers to an overall evaluation of the lives of children, it is logical that it is affected by individuals who are close to them (e.g., parents). The family systems perspective regards families as complex, multilateral, and integrated systems, with family members being necessarily interdependent and the actions of one family member affecting other family members (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974). Living arrangements and the actions of parents should thus necessarily influence the ways in which children perceive and evaluate their lives. Evidence from different studies indicated that an authoritative parent (as characterized by high levels of both parental support and control) affected children’s life satisfaction in a positive manner (Milevsky et al., 2007; Suldo & Huebner, 2004).

Family structures in which children grow up should also affect their satisfaction with life. Bjarnason et al. (2012) compared the life satisfaction of children in various types of families (i.e., single-mother, residential-mother and stepfather, single-father, residential-father and stepmother, and joint physical custody) to that of children in intact families. They reported that children from intact families had significantly higher life satisfaction than did
children in all other types of families, with the exception of children in joint physical custody arrangements. According to Bjarnason et al. (2012), the latter result might be explained by the fact that children benefit when separated parents share the emotional and other tasks of child-rearing, as the full burden of parenting does not fall upon one parent. These results provided evidence to support parental resource theory. Levin and Currie (2010) also reported lower levels of life satisfaction for children living in single-parent or stepfamilies than for children in intact families. This result was particularly strong for boys. In a later study, Levin, Dallago, and Currie (2012) identified parental gender differences, with children in single-father families having lower life satisfaction, as compared to children in single-mother or stepfamilies and to children living with both parents. Moreover, previous studies on life satisfaction and family structure have demonstrated that indicators of the parent-child relationship (e.g. parent-child communication) played a significant role in determining the impact of family structure on the life satisfaction of children (Bjarnason et al., 2012; Levin & Currie 2010).

Still, the specific role of both paternal and maternal parenting has yet to be investigated within different family structures, at least to our knowledge. Thus, the overall goal of this study is to understand the role of parenting in explaining the relationship between family structure and children’s subjective well-being. Analyzing dyadic data from the ‘Divorce in Flanders’ study, we answer the following research questions: (1) Does maternal parenting mediates between family structure and children’s well-being? & (2) Does paternal parenting mediates between family structure and children’s well-being?. Therefore, we address intact families as well as various divorced families, taking into account the possible repartnering of both parents and custodial arrangements. Based on the parenting model of Baumrind (1991, 2013), we hypothesize that the parenting of both mothers and fathers can function as an important mediator between family structure and children’s subjective well-being.

Method

Participants

Our analyses are based on data from 618 parent-child dyads participating in the ‘Divorce in Flanders – DiF’ study (Mortelmans et al., 2011). The DiF study is a multi-actor study providing information on parents, children 10 years of age or older, grandparents, and stepparents. For our subsample of 618 parent-child dyads, we selected children between the ages of 10 and 18 years (following the example of McLeod, Weisz, & Wood, 2007). These children had contact with both their parents. For these 618 parent-child dyads, 224 parents had
been continuously married, and 394 parents had been divorced. Children (50.48% girls) were on average 14.19 years old (SD = 2.54). Mothers were on average 42.77 years old (SD = 4.13), fathers 44.39 years (SD = 4.24). 13.30% of the mothers completed at most lower secondary education, 41.67% of the mothers completed higher secondary education and 45.03% of the mothers completed higher education. 18.23% of the fathers completed at most lower secondary education, 46.13% of the fathers completed higher secondary education and 35.65% of the fathers completed higher education.

**Procedure**

For the DiF dataset, both continuously married (1/3) and divorced partners (2/3) were contacted as primary respondents, based on their addresses, which were selected at random from the National Register. Requirements for primary respondents were as follows: having been married between 1971 and 2008 and divorced only once. The response rate for these primary respondents was 42.2% (N = 6470; Pasteels et al., 2011). This is in line with other European multi-actor studies (Arránz Becker et al., 2012; Dykstra et al., 2005). The primary respondents provided contact information for the secondary respondents: one child (in the case of multiple children, this child was selected at random), one maternal grandparent, one paternal grandparent, and all possible stepparents. Data were collected between October 2009 and December 2010. Parents and children were interviewed using a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI), while grandparents and stepparents completed written questionnaires. As stated above, we selected a subsample of parents and children. Information regarding the family structure and the background characteristics of parents and children was provided by the parent, while information regarding the parenting of the mothers and fathers and regarding the children’s well-being was reported by the child.

The DiF dataset is particularly suitable for this study for several reasons. First, given its multi-actor approach, it includes information on both parents and children. Second, because married parents were questioned in the survey as well, the data allow continuous comparisons between married families and various family constellations after divorce. Third, Belgium is amongst the front runners in the rising European divorce rates (Eurostat, 2012). Moreover, it has exhibited a specific legal preference for joint physical custody since 2006 (Sodermans, Matthijs & Swicewood, 2013). Taken together, these features imply that Belgium has both a large number of divorced parents and a significant number of children in joint physical custody arrangements.
Measures

Family structure Family structure was operationalized into six mutually exclusive categories, based on two criteria. First, information regarding the presence of a partner in the households of both the mother and the father was used. If divorced, the parents reported whether they were living with a new partner and whether the other parent was living with a new partner. Second, information on custodial arrangements was retrieved from the double custody calendar. On this calendar, participating parents indicated all of the nights in a month that their child spent in their household and all of the nights in a month their child had spent in the household of their former partner. In line with other research regarding custodial arrangements, children who had stayed with their mothers for more than 66% of the nights and with their fathers for less than 33% of the nights were defined as children with residential mothers (Melli, 1999; Smyth & Moloney, 2008). Children who had stayed with their fathers for more than 66% of the nights and with their mothers for less than 33% of the nights were defined as children with residential fathers. Children who had stayed with their mothers between 33% and 66% of the nights and with their fathers between 33% and 66% of the nights were defined as children in joint physical custody arrangements. Combining information on the presence of a new partner in the household with information on custodial arrangements resulted in six different categories of family structure: still-married parents (n = 224), residential single mothers (n = 116), residential mothers living with new partners (n = 109), parents with joint custody (n = 138), residential single fathers (n = 13), and residential fathers living with new partners (n = 16).

Parenting To measure parental support and parental control, we used two subscales from the Parenting Style Inventory II (Darling & Toyokawa, 1997). Information from children was gathered using items asking about each parent separately. Each subscale consisted of five items rated along a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Confirmatory factor analysis of the subscale of support revealed a single factor with sufficiently high loadings on the latent factor for both mothers and fathers (factor loadings for mothers ranged from 0.47 to 0.83; factor loadings for fathers ranged from 0.41 to 0.81). Sample items include, “I can count on my mother/father to help me out if I have a problem,” and “My mother/father and I do things that are fun together.” Various fit indices indicated a good fit after twice freeing the covariance between similarly worded items in the latent construct for mothers and fathers (RMSEA = 0.06; CFI = 0.95; SRMR = 0.04), and the composite reliability score was 0.80 for both mothers and fathers. Confirmatory factor analysis of the subscale of control revealed a single factor for three out of five items, with sufficiently high loadings on the latent factor for both mothers and father (factor loadings for mothers ranged from 0.46 to 0.94; factor loadings...
for fathers ranged from 0.60 to 0.93). Sample items for the subscale of control include, “If I don’t behave myself, my mother/father will punish me,” and “My mother/father points out ways that I could do better.” The model exhibited a good fit after freeing the covariance between a similarly worded item in the latent construct for mothers and fathers (RMSEA = 0.05; CFI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.03), and the composite reliability scores were 0.70 for mothers and 0.76 for fathers.

**Children’s well-being** We measured the well-being of children according to two positive indicators. First, we used the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale to measure the children’s self-esteem. This scale contains 10 items, which children rated along a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Confirmatory factor analysis consistent with the procedure detailed by Marsh (1996) revealed a single factor, with factor loadings ranging from 0.45 to 0.73. To improve the model fit, an error covariance was freed between two very similarly worded items in Dutch. This led to an adequate fit (RMSEA = 0.08; CFI = 0.90; SRMR = 0.05). The composite reliability score was 0.81. Second, we measured the life satisfaction of children according to one indicator (“All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with life as a whole nowadays?”). Children rated this item along an eleven-point Likert scale (0 = extremely dissatisfied; 11 = extremely satisfied). This measure is based on Cantril’s (1965) classic measure of life satisfaction (adapted for younger children), and it is similar to measures of life satisfaction used in other studies (e.g., Bjarnason et al., 2012; Levin & Currie, 2010; Levin, Dallago & Currie, 2012).

**Control variables** Our analyses were controlled for background characteristics of the child, the mother, and the father. Child characteristics were age and gender. Maternal and paternal characteristics were age and educational level.

**Data Analyses**

As stated above, we analyzed a dyadic subsample of parents and children. For this type of subsample, raw data are restructured dyadically, with each data line containing information on both the child and the parent. This restructuring is based on the dyadic data-organization technique used by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006). The dyadic structure of our data allowed us to estimate actor effects (e.g., the indirect effect of the maternal family structure on children’s well-being through maternal parenting) and partner effects (e.g., the indirect effect of the maternal family structure on children’s well-being through paternal parenting).
Both direct and indirect effects were estimated using a mediated structural equation model. Because a preliminary test indicated that our subsample deviated from the normality assumption, all models were estimated using MLR estimation, which is suitable for non-normal data (Brown, 2006). Missing data on the dependent variables were treated with FIML (full-information maximum likelihood). Missing values exceeded 8% for specific independent variables (e.g., the presence of a new partner in the household of the divorced parent). Multi-actor data proved highly useful in cases where information was missing, as it allowed missing information from one parent to be imputed from information provided by the other parent. This substantially reduced the extent of missing data (from 10.4% to 0.5% for information on the new partner of the mother; from 13.9% to 2.5% for information on the new partner of the father). For all other independent variables, missing data were treated with listwise deletion.

Mediated structural equation models allowed us to test both direct and indirect effects. We estimated the direct effects of the family structure on maternal and paternal parenting, as well as on the children’s well-being, together with the indirect effects (using MODEL INDIRECT command in Mplus) of family structure through parenting on children’s well-being. All estimated effects were controlled for various background characteristics of mothers, fathers, and children. Statistical analyses were performed in Mplus 6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). Each model generates standardized coefficients.

Results

The measurement model for all latent constructs is presented in Figure 1. For all parenting indicators (maternal support and control, and paternal support and control) and for children’s self-esteem, paths between the indicators and their latent constructs were sufficiently high ($\geq 0.42$). The measurement model also exhibited an adequate model fit (RMSEA = 0.04; CFI = 0.92; SRMR = 0.05). Correlations between latent constructs revealed that both maternal and paternal support are significantly and positively related to children’s self-esteem. Moreover, maternal support was significantly and positively related to paternal support, and the same was true for maternal and paternal control.

*insert Figure 1*

For a mediated model, it is necessary to identify relationships between independent, mediating and dependent variables. Family structure should therefore be linked to parenting and to children’s well-being (either directly or
indirectly for the latter). Moreover, parenting and children’s well-being should also be related to each other. Given the multitude of these relationships, we report only the significant relationships. First, we investigated whether the impact of parenting on children’s well-being and the mediating role of parenting differed for various family structures after a divorce, as compared to those of never-divorced parents (reference category). Overall, the model indicated an adequate fit (RMSEA = 0.04; CFI = 0.88; SRMR = 0.05).

As indicated in Figure 2, family structure and parenting were linked. We found that children living with residential mothers experienced lower levels of paternal control than did children with continuously married parents. Moreover, if the residential mother was single, the child also experienced a lower level of maternal control than did children with continuously married parents. Living with a residential father proved to be positively related to paternal support but negatively related to maternal support, regardless of whether the residential father was single or living with a new partner. Children living in joint physical custody arrangements reported lower levels of maternal control than did children with continuously married parents.

With regard to the relationship between parenting and children’s well-being, we noted that maternal support enhanced both the self-esteem and the life satisfaction of children. The same was true for paternal support. For maternal and paternal control, no significant relationship with children’s well-being could be identified. When estimating the model with maternal and paternal control excluded, results did not differ, although the fit indices did indicate a better fit (RMSEA = 0.04; CFI = 0.91; SRMR = 0.04).

With regard to the impact of family structure on children’s well-being, no significant direct effects could be noted, although various indirect effects were present. According to the results, parenting did indeed mediate between family structure and children’s well-being. In relation to maternal support, the results revealed that living with a residential father (whether single or repartnered) had a significant indirect effect on children’s self-esteem and life satisfaction, through maternal support. In other words, children living in residential-father families experienced less maternal support, which indirectly led to lower levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Several indirect effects emerged for paternal support. First, family structure had a negative indirect effect on children’s self-esteem and life satisfaction, through paternal support, for children living with residential single mothers. These children experienced less paternal support, indicating that living with residential single mothers affected their well-being negatively. Second, family structure had a positive indirect effect on children’s self-esteem and life satisfaction, through paternal support, for children living with residential fathers (whether single
or repartnered). Children living with residential fathers experienced higher levels of paternal support, which affected their well-being in positively, although the size of the indirect effects indicate that this result was outweighed by the reduction in support from the non-residential mother. No significant indirect effects were identified for either maternal or paternal control. Overall, we can conclude from these findings that divorced families generally experienced a decline in support on the part of the non-residential parent, as compared to intact families. The only exceptions were for families with repartnered residential mothers.

Second, we estimated a mediated structural equation model examining only post-divorce family structures, taking single-mother families as the reference category. The overall model (presented in Figure 3) showed a good fit (RMSEA = 0.04 ; CFI = 0.92 ; SRMR = 0.05). The results of this model revealed a close link between parenting and post-divorce family structure. For children living with residential fathers, in joint physical custody arrangements, or with repartnered residential mothers, fathers showed more support than was the case for children living with single residential mothers. With regard to maternal parenting, we found that children living with repartnered residential mothers experienced less maternal control than did children living with single residential mothers. Concerning the link between parenting and children’s well-being, we found that having a supportive mother and/or a supportive father led to higher self-esteem for children. With regard to children’s satisfaction with life, our results indicated that higher levels of control on the part of fathers lead to lower levels of life satisfaction.

The results revealed no direct or indirect effects for the impact of family structure on children’s well-being in terms of life satisfaction, indicating that children in different post-divorce family structures do not differ with regard to life satisfaction. The results did reveal indirect effects with regard to children’s self-esteem. For all post-divorce family structures (with the exception of single-mother families), family structure had a positive indirect effect on children’s self-esteem through paternal support, as compared to single-mother families. This indicates that children growing up in family structures other than post-divorce single-mother families have more supportive fathers, which enhances their self-esteem. No mediating effects were found for maternal parenting. Overall, we can conclude that maternal support is important to the well-being of children in divorced families and that its impact does not function as a mediator, whereas paternal support is also important for children’s well-being, and it does function as a mediator in divorced families.

*insert Figure 2*

*insert Figure 3*
Discussion

Parenting has been identified as an important protective factor for the well-being of children after parental divorce (Amato, 2000; Lansford, 2009). It might also mediate between the family structure and children’s well-being. Although previous studies have concentrated on parenting as a protective factor, they focus only on various parts of the variation within the family structure after divorce. Whereas some scholars investigated the impact of parental repartnering, others concentrated on custodial arrangements. Moreover, maternal parenting has received far more attention than paternal parenting has. In this study, we attempted to overcome these shortcomings by investigating the mediating role of maternal and paternal parenting, in comparing the impact of intact and post-divorce family structures on children’s well-being, while taking into account both custodial arrangements and maternal and paternal repartnering after divorce. The study is based on a dyadic approach, drawing on data from a subsample of the multi-actor DiF dataset.

According to our results, parenting did indeed mediate between family structures and children’s well-being. Compared to intact families, residential single-mother families were negatively related to paternal support, which led both directly and indirectly to lower levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction for children. Families with residential fathers (whether single or repartnered) were positively related to paternal support, which subsequently had a positive impact on the self-esteem and life satisfaction of children. Moreover, in comparison to intact families, maternal support was lower in residential-father families, thus leading to lower self-esteem and life satisfaction for children. In line with our hypothesis, our results thus indicated that both maternal and paternal parenting are important mediators in explaining the association between family structure and children’s well-being. Overall, parental support (provided by both mothers and fathers) increased the well-being of children. Support from the non-residential parent decreased after a divorce (except in the case of families with repartnered residential mothers), which had a negative impact on children’s well-being.

When investigating only the differences between various types of post-divorce families, our results indicated that support from the father was particularly related to post-divorce family structure. Compared to single-mother families, fathers demonstrated significantly higher levels of support in all other family types. This result could be explained by two mechanisms: residential fathers and joint-custody fathers see their children more often than non-residential fathers do, and this provides them with more opportunities to support their children, as argued by parental resource theory (Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994). For non-residential fathers whose children are living with the new partners of their mothers, it could be that competition with the new parental figure in the
child’s life and household stimulates the parental involvement of non-residential fathers, with the rivalry possibly increasing paternal support.

In contrast, we found no differences in maternal support between the various post-divorce family structures. All of the divorced mothers in our subsample demonstrated relatively similar levels of support. Nevertheless, maternal support remained important to children’s well-being after divorce. With regard to maternal control, we did find that mothers living with new partners were less controlling than single mothers were, which could be explained by possible role conflict and the division of time between the children and the new partners (Adamson & Pasley, 2006). Overall, both maternal and paternal support increased the self-esteem of children, although only paternal control decreased their satisfaction with life. With regard to the mediating role of parenting, only paternal support was found to be an important mediating factor for children’s self-esteem, as living in family structures other than single-mother families increased paternal support, which in return increased children’s self-esteem.

Neither of the mediated models revealed evidence of a mediating function for parental control in relation to children’s self-esteem and life satisfaction. This might be due to the fact that the models addressed only positive indicators of children’s well-being, based on the findings of other studies on parenting and negative indicators of children’s well-being, which revealed a relationship between parental control and those indicators of children’s well-being. In conclusion, the inclusion of both the custodial arrangement and the repartnering of both partners in our family-structure indicator revealed variation in the possible mechanisms at play with regard to parenting and children’s well-being. According to our results, loss of time spent with the child was related to lower levels of parental support and control. The presence of a new partner made the parenting of divorced parents in repartnered families comparable to that of continuously married parents, even increasing the involvement of non-residential fathers. Moreover, our analysis revealed that parental support (especially of the residential parent) was an important mediator between family structure and the well-being of children.

As formulated by Amato (2000), the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective emphasizes the protective role that parenting can play in the well-being of children after a parental divorce. In this regard, Amato refers to the parenting of the residential parent (usually the mother). Our results confirmed that the parenting of the residential parent is a protective factor. In addition to Amato’s model, however, our findings revealed that the parenting of the non-residential parent can function as either a risk factor or a protective factor for children’s well-being, depending upon the post-divorce family structure. This study thus provided clear evidence of the importance of
expanding the focus of research beyond the parenting of the residential parent (usually the mother) to include the parenting of the non-residential parent (usually the father) as well when investigating the role of parenting as a protective or risk factor. Our findings also demonstrated the importance of considering variations in family structure. Future research should therefore address the complexity in family structure. Overall, the results of this study are highly consistent with recent insights that define families according to their actions rather than according to their location (Morgan, 2011).

Despite the contributions of this study, the results should be viewed with caution in light of their limitations. First, due to the small numbers in some categories of family structure (i.e., residential-father families), we did not distinguish between divorced parents who had remarried and those who were cohabiting with new partners. We can nevertheless assume that actual living situations are more important with regard to parenting and the well-being of children than are legal situations (cf. custodial arrangements), given that alterations in actual family structures can lead to alterations in family functioning and family roles (Cavanagh, 2008). Moreover, the small number of residential-father families in our subsample requires a careful interpretation of the results for these family types.

Second, our analyses and results are based on cross-sectional data, and they provide only a snapshot of the mediating role that parenting played at a certain point in time. Future research should study the mediating role of parenting from a longitudinal viewpoint, in order to investigate whether this mediating role changes over time. Longitudinal data on family transitions, parenting, and children’s well-being would allow future researchers to investigate whether the mediating role of parenting changes in response to family transitions, whether the length of time since a family transition plays a role, and whether parenting continues to affect the well-being of children as they grow older.

A third limitation of our study has to do with the specific DiF sample, which does not include parents who were never married. In Western European countries, the number of parents who cohabited and possibly separated after cohabitation without ever having been married is increasing. Future research should therefore investigate the mediating role of parenting for post-separation family structures and children’s well-being.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the existing literature by incorporating both the custodial arrangement and the repartnering of both parents in post-divorce family structures, as well as by taking a dyadic approach that includes both maternal and paternal parenting as mediating factors. In this respect, it extends the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective developed by Amato (2000), which originally specified a mediating role
only for the parenting of the custodial parent (usually the mother). The results revealed that the parenting of the residential parent played a protective role for the self-esteem and life satisfaction of children and that the parenting of the non-residential parent could serve as either a risk or protective factor for these indicators of children’s well-being, depending upon the post-divorce family structure. When investigating the well-being of children, therefore, it is important to consider the parenting of both parents, even after divorce.
References


Darling, N. & Toyokawa, T. (1997), *Construction and Validation of the Parenting Style Inventory II (PSI-II).* Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, department of human development and family studies.


Figure 1: Measurement model for latent constructs
Figure 2: Mediated structural equation model (showing only significant results)

Indirect effects

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Single, residential mother</th>
<th>Support mother</th>
<th>Support father</th>
<th>Control mother</th>
<th>Control father</th>
<th>Self-esteem child</th>
<th>Life satisfaction child</th>
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</table>

χ²(585)=1155.114  RMSEA=0.040  CFI=0.881  SRMR=0.048

*p<0.05  **p<0.01  ***p<0.001

N=599
Figure 3: Mediated structural equation model for post-divorce families only (showing only significant results)

Indirect effects:
- Joint custody → Paternal support → Self-esteem child: 0.08*
- Residential mother with new partner → Paternal support → Self-esteem child: 0.08*
- Single, residential father → Paternal support → Self-esteem child: 0.11**
- Residential father with new partner → Paternal support → Self-esteem child: 0.06*

χ²(564)=908.214  RMSEA=0.040  CFI=0.924  SRMR=0.050

*p<0.05  **p<0.01  ***p<0.001

N=381
Acknowledgement

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