

**A Biopsychosocial Model of Stress-Related Health Outcomes in Young Adults from Divorced Families:  
 The Roles of Parent Conflict and Time with Father**

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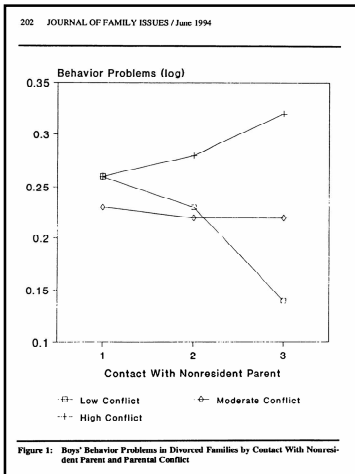
**There were two motivations for the present research**

**1. Policy Issue:**

Does more time with the father benefit the child even in high conflict families?

Probably the most influential paper on this question is:  
 Amato, P. R. & Rezac, S.J. (1994). *Contact With Nonresident Parents, Interparental Conflict, and Children's Behavior*. *Journal of Family Issues*, 15, 191 – 207.

Amato and Rezac conclude that the answer is "No," based on their main finding below (note the "sideways-V" pattern):



**12 Years Later this Finding Remains Tentative, for 3 Reasons:**

- Amato & Rezac's model only held for boys.
- Other studies fail to replicate (Healy, Malley and Stewart, 1990; Kurdek, 1986).
- Time with father has been and often still continues to be an unmeasured confound in studies of the effects of parent conflict on children (Bauserman, 2002).

**Second motivation for the present research:**

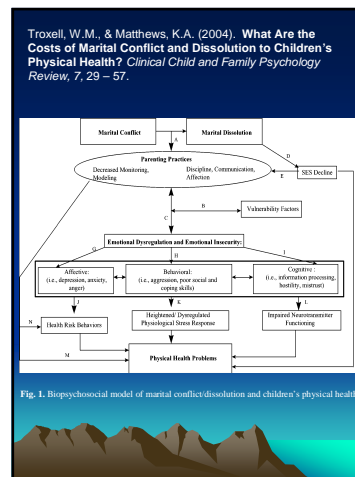
**2. Theoretical issue:**

Are the effects of stressful childhood experiences such as disrupted parenting and parent conflict mediated through the child's emotional security systems?

Theoretical models of the role played by emotional security systems have been proposed by:

Davies, P.T., Harold, G.T., Goetze-Morey, M.C., Cummings, E.M. (2002). *Childhood Emotional Security and Interparental Conflict*. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 67 (3, Serial No. 270).

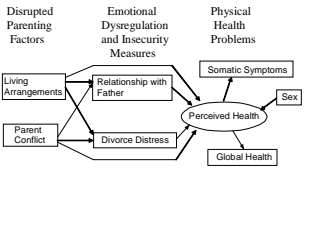
and



Our first study:

Fabricius, W.V. & Luecken, L.J. (in press). **Post-Divorce Living Arrangements, Parent Conflict, and Long-Term Physical Health Correlates for Children of Divorce.** *Journal of Family Psychology.*

Hypothesized model:



## Sample

- 266 College students
- Parents divorced before they were 16
- In-class survey as part of Introductory Psychology course

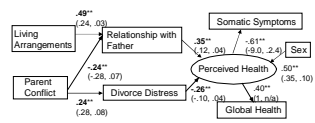
Distribution of Living Arrangements Reported by Students in Spring 2002



We have found that these categories match the following amounts of actual time students reported spending with dad:

Living Arrangement Categories	During School Year		During School Vacations	
	# months (28 days) # days	# overnights	# weeks in which schedule differed	% time during those weeks
"Minimal/No time with dad"	1 1	1	most said 0 weeks, a few said 1 to 3 weeks	31%
"Some time with dad"	3 2	2	3	50%
"Moderate time with dad"	6 4	4	4	50%
"A lot of time with dad"	12 7	7	4	50%
"Equal time with both"	13 13	13	3	50%

Obtained Path Coefficients from Structural Equation Modeling with AMOS 5.0



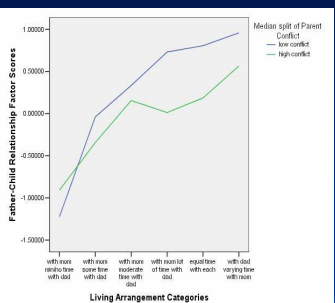
Note: Standardized regression weights shown, parentheses represent unstandardized estimates and SEs. Error terms not shown.

"Sex" is coded as female=0, male=1.

Higher scores on the divorce distress factor indicate more distress, and higher scores on the relationship with father factor indicate better relationships.

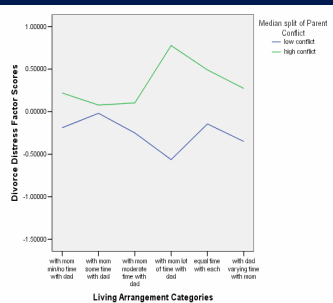
\*\* p < .01

Regarding Relationship with Father, there was no evidence of the "sideways-V" pattern of Amato & Rezac



Thus we find that parent conflict "harms" father-child relationship, and more time with dad "improves" it. No amount of time "harms" it even in high conflict families.

Regarding Divorce Distress there was also no evidence of the "sideways-V" pattern



Thus we find that only parent conflict "increases" divorce distress; time with dad has no effect on it.

Current Study (Fabricius & Horowitz, in preparation)  
 Add Mother-Child Relationship

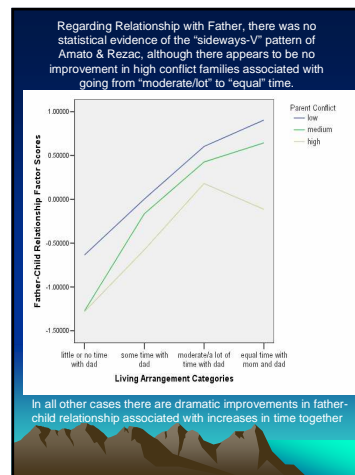
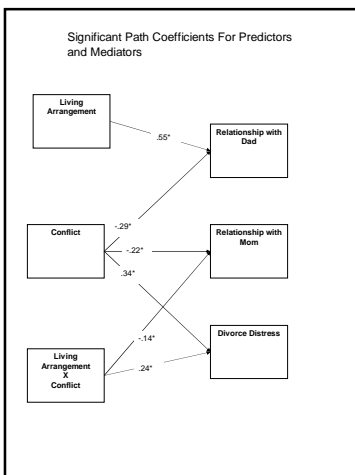
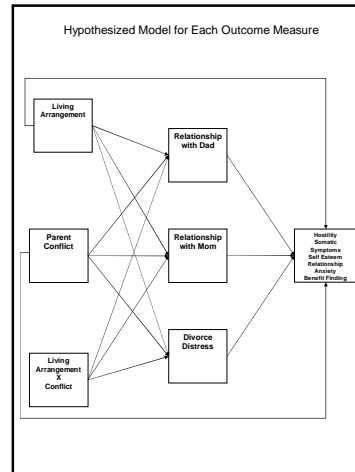
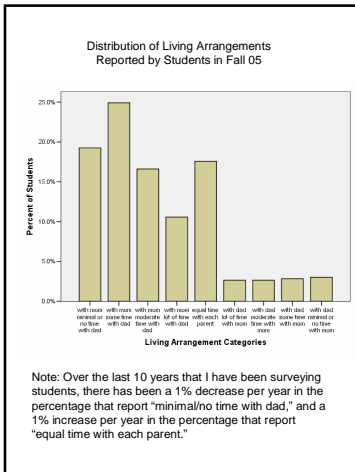
Measure Both Frequency and Severity of Parent Conflict (was only Frequency before)

Add More Parent-Child Relationship Measures:  
 Closeness to Parent  
 Anger at Parent  
 Perceived Mattering to Parent

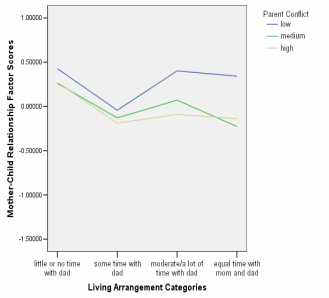
Replicate the Model on a Range of Negative AND Positive Child Outcomes:  
 Somatic Symptoms  
 Hostility  
 Romantic Relationship Anxiety  
 Self-Esteem  
 Benefit Finding From Divorce

### Sample

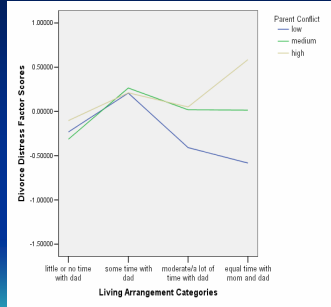
- 471 College students (200 more)
- Parents divorced before they were 16
- On-line survey for Introductory Psychology course credit



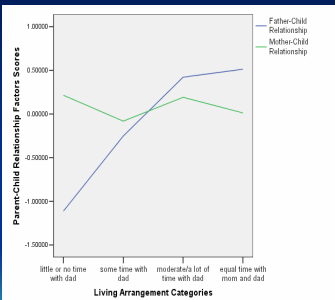
Regarding Relationship with Mother, this was the first statistical evidence of the "sideways-V" pattern of Amato & Rezac, starting from "some time with dad," but it's only due to an improvement in low conflict families. There's no decrease in mother-child relationship with increases in time with dad even for high conflict families.



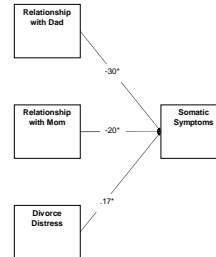
Regarding Divorce Distress, here we finally find the same "sideways -V" pattern as Amato & Rezac, starting from "some time with dad." But the increase in divorce distress is limited to high conflict families going from "a lot of time with dad" to "equal time with both parents."



Finally, a comparison between Father-Child and Mother-Child Relationships (averaged over all levels of parent conflict) as a function of time with dad. Relationship with mother doesn't suffer as relationship with dad improves.



Last but not least, the emotional security measures (Relationship with Father and Mother, and Divorce Distress) significantly predicted all of the Positive and Negative Child Outcome measures. Here's an example with the physical health outcome measure (note, the relationship with dad is the strongest predictor here):



Thus, time with father and parent conflict in divorced families are associated with the young adult child's emotional security and regulation systems, which in turn are associated with a range of long-term outcomes, including indicators of physical health.

## Conclusions

- Support for the mediating role of the child's emotional security systems.
  - One system maintains security in each child-parent dyad.
    - Child-Father
    - Child-Mother
  - One system maintains security in the family context (Davies, et al., 2002).
  - All three types of security had independent associations with a range of outcomes.
  - Researchers should not focus on simple associations between conflict, living arrangements, etc. and child outcomes. We need to understand HOW they work.

## Conclusions

- Can more time with father benefit children even in high-conflict families?
  - In **high-conflict families** (only the top third) YES, up to "a of time with dad." Then MAYBE going from "a lot of time with dad" to "equal time" is not a good idea:
    - slight increase in divorce distress may not be compensated for by improvement in father-child relationship; no change in mother-child relation.
  - In the remaining two-thirds of families YES, father-child relationship improves at all levels of increasing time with father, and there is either improvement or no change in mother-child relationship and divorce distress.

## Out of College, into the Community

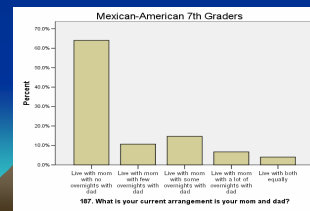
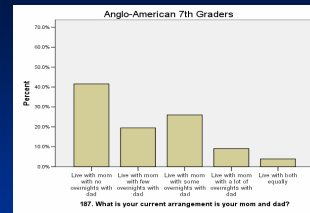
We will be testing these models in a current study of 392 Anglo-American and Mexican-American Adolescents from Intact and Step-Father Families in AZ and CA, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (Braver, Fabricius, Saenz [AZ] Coltrane, Parke [CA]).

3 Waves: 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 8-9<sup>th</sup> grade, 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

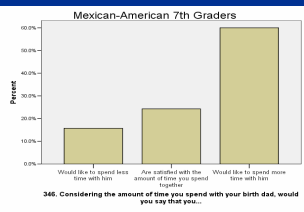
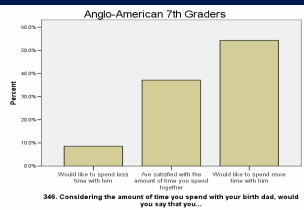
First Peek at the Wave 1 data:



## How Much Do They Live With Dad?



## Do Children Want What's Best For Them?



## Deja vu all over again...

- We see similar distressing high rates of minimal father contact in this recent sample of 7<sup>th</sup> graders as we have found in college samples.
- We see the same expression of desire for more father contact in 7<sup>th</sup> graders as we have found in college samples.
- Evidence is mounting that these very low levels of contact may seriously harm the father-child relationship with long-lasting and wide-ranging consequences.
- Much of the low father contact can be explained by the fact that many of those fathers live more than an hour's drive away from their children.

