Family Processes and Adolescent Adjustment in Intact and Remarried Families

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This study examines whether family processes that predict positive and negative developmental outcomes are the same in intact and remarried families. Surveys were administered to 758 tenth graders from intact families and 95 from stepfather families. Measures of cohesion, democratic decision-making style, permissiveness, and conflict were used to predict self-rated depression, worry, and self-esteem. Remarried and intact families provide similar family environments for permissiveness and democratic decision making. Remarried families are more conflictual and less cohesive than intact families. In both family types, conflict had negative effects, and cohesion and democratic decision-making had positive effects on adolescents' adjustment. In remarried families, but not intact, permissiveness was related to higher self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by realignment and redefinition of family ties (Hill, 1980). Parent–child relationships are subtly transformed as adolescents develop "responsible autonomy" from their families (Steinberg, 1990). Parents who are warm, democratic, and demanding, a constellation described as authoritative parenting, may be

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more adept at negotiating with their adolescent child a more independent role, helping their child to become a self-reliant, behaviorally and academically competent, and mentally healthy young adult (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby and Martin, 1983; Steinberg, 1990; Steinberg et al., 1992).

Over the last two decades it has been well established that authoritative parenting is associated with the development of competence and mental health in white middle-class children and adolescents (Maccoby and Martin, 1983; Steinberg, 1990). Recently, several studies have examined the impact of authoritative parenting styles on the development of psychosocial competence in adolescents from differing socioeconomic, ethnic, and family structure backgrounds (Steinberg et al., 1991; Lamborn et al., 1991; Baumrind, 1991). These studies afford the opportunity to examine the ways in which family processes may operate differently in varying family contexts, a research direction suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1989; Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1983). Steinberg et al. (1991), Lamborn et al. (1991), and Baumrind (1991) have all concluded that authoritative parenting is beneficial, and preferable to authoritarian or permissive parenting, regardless of the adolescent's ecological niche. These studies provide strong evidence that the benefits of authoritative parenting have transcontextual validity in the United States.

One area that deserves more careful examination is the relationship between parenting style and adjustment in different family types. The Steinberg et al. (1991) and Baumrind (1991) studies, while carefully examining family ethnicity and socioeconomic status, combined divorced and remarried family structures for analysis. Combining divorced and remarried families into one category, “nonintact,” may mask important differences in “process-by-context” interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1989; Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1983), as remarried and divorced families are structurally quite different. The Lamborn et al. (1991) study, examining three family structures (intact, mother-only, and stepfather families), found that the adolescent’s family structure did not moderate the relations between parenting style and psychosocial development, school achievement, and problem behavior. However, when they examined internalized distress, they found a different pattern. Although there were significant differences in the prevalence of internalized distress as a function of parenting style among adolescents from intact families, there was no relationship between parenting style and internalized distress in either mother-only or stepfather family types.

Lamborn et al. (1991) did not report whether the mother-only families were composed of divorced mothers and their children or never-married mothers and their children or a combination of the two groups.