

Examining the Process by Which Marital Adjustment Affects Maternal Warmth: The Role of Coparenting Support as a Mediator

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This study assessed the longitudinal process by which marital adjustment affects change in maternal warmth over time. Change in coparenting support was examined as the potential mechanism by which the marriage affects parenting. Self-report data were gathered from 148 married mothers of first-born 4th graders at 3 time points, over the transition to early adolescence. Path analyses supported the proposed hypothesis, indicating that marital adjustment leads to increased coparenting support, which then leads to increased maternal warmth. Two alternative models of the time-ordered direction of effects among the study variables were ruled out. This study has important implications for the development of parenting interventions targeting the promotion of maternal warmth.

Keywords: marital adjustment, coparenting support, maternal warmth, longitudinal mediation

Previous research has consistently shown a significant relation between positive marital relationships and positive parent–child relationships (Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988; Engfer, 1988; Erel & Burman, 1995; Simons, Lorenz, Wu, & Conger, 1993). On the basis of empirical research and theoretical models, intervention efforts to promote positive parenting should begin in the marital relationship, one of the most influential sources of support for parenting in two-parent families (Belsky, 1984; Belsky & Vondra, 1989). However, research indicates that significantly improving the quality of the marital relationship is a daunting task (Shadish et al., 1993; Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2006); thus, it may be more effective to identify other potential intervention targets related to marital adjustment. Examining mediators of the relation between marital adjustment

and positive parenting will identify additional targets for parenting interventions. The next step for researchers is to address the question, “How does the marital relationship influence parenting?”

The coparental relationship, the relationship between two people in their role as parents (Gable, Crnic, & Belsky, 1994), has been identified as an important aspect of the overall interparental relationship that has significant effects on parent–child relationships (Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 2000; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). Although the marital and coparental relationships are closely interrelated (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Floyd & Zmich, 1991; McHale, 1997), evidence suggests that they are unique constructs by showing that coparenting is more closely related to parenting than the quality of the marital relationship (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Frosch et al., 2000). Thus, the coparental relationship appears to have a more proximal impact on the parent–child relationship than does the quality of the marital relationship. The present study advances the current research by exploring the role of coparenting support as a mediator of the relation between marital adjustment and maternal warmth.

Family systems theory is the most pivotal theoretical model underlying the interrelations between marital and parent–child relationships (Cox & Paley, 1997; Grych, 2002; Minuchin, 1985). The fundamental principle of this theory states that the family is an organized whole consisting of subsystems (e.g., marital subsystem, coparent subsystem, parent–child subsystem) that are interdependent. Family systems theory refers to the interparental relationship as the executive subsystem. Parents are hypothesized to regulate family interactions and individual outcomes in their roles as co-managers of family members’ relationships and behaviors (Minuchin, 1985). According to family systems theory, the executive subsystem could be interpreted as a distal predictor of all aspects of family and individual func-

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tioning. The marital, or executive, subsystem is a prominent force driving the relations between family subsystems because the marital relationship is formed prior to other family subsystems, such as coparenting, in most two-parent families. Thus, the marital relationship may be a more distal predictor of parent-child relationships, and the coparenting relationship may be a more proximal predictor. This theoretical framework suggests that coparenting support may mediate the relation between the marital relationship and quality of parenting (Floyd, Gilliom, & Costigan, 1998). Identifying more proximal predictors of parenting, such as coparenting support, will maximize the potential for promoting positive parenting in intervention programs.

Coparenting support is an essential component of the coparental relationship defined as acknowledging and respecting the other parent's competency as a parent, contributions to parenting, and parental decisions and authority (Belsky, Woodworth, & Crnic, 1996; Feinberg, 2003; McHale, 1995; Weissman & Cohen, 1985). Applying family systems theory to the present study, we sought to determine whether the marital relationship is a more distal predictor of parental warmth by examining the role of coparenting support as a mediator of the relationship between marital adjustment and maternal warmth. McHale and colleagues (McHale, 1995; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004) supported this idea by suggesting that happily married parents feel enduring positive affection for each other and that these feelings, in turn, predispose them to support each other as coparents and interact positively with their children. Furthermore, marital problems disrupt the ability of parents to provide coparenting support, which then leads to deterioration in the parent-child relationship.

It is important to establish the conceptual uniqueness of the marital and coparenting relationships. In families with married parents, the executive subsystem has two main components: the marital relationship and the coparental relationship. The marital relationship is motivated by the needs of each spouse and the couple as a whole, whereas the coparental relationship reflects the ways parents relate to each other in their roles as parents (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Feinberg, 2003; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; Weissman & Cohen, 1985). The conceptual distinction is apparent in the case of divorced parents, where the coparenting relationship continues in the context of a dissipating marital relationship. Although the marital relationship is terminated, parents and children adjust better to the divorce if the parents maintain a cooperative coparenting relationship (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Coparenting and marital relationships remain distinct in married couples as well (Bearss & Eyberg, 1998), yet we expect the quality of the marital relationship to affect the quality of the coparenting relationship.

Previous research suggests that there is a positive relation between the marital and coparenting relationships in cross-sectional (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Floyd & Zmich, 1991; McHale, 1997) and longitudinal investigations (McHale et al., 2004; Lewis, Owen, & Cox, 1988; Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1997). Both marital and coparenting relationships have been linked to parenting practices, but several

researchers have reported that the coparental relationship has a stronger influence on parenting than does the quality of the marital relationship (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Bearss & Eyberg, 1998; Jouriles, Murphy, Farris, & Smith, 1991). This finding suggests that the coparental relationship is a more proximal predictor of parenting than the marital relationship and is consistent with the domain-specific view suggesting that coparental relationships are more proximally and causally related to parenting than is the marital relationship (Margolin et al., 2001).

Coparenting Support as a Mediator

Very few studies have directly assessed the mediational effects of coparenting support on the relation between marital adjustment and parenting. Margolin et al. (2001) conducted a cross-sectional study with married and cohabiting parents of preschool-age children to examine the effect of coparenting as a mediator of the relation between marital conflict and positive parenting. Correlation analyses indicated that there was a significant, negative relation between marital conflict and positive parenting. The multiple regression results suggested that the relation between marital conflict and positive parenting was nonsignificant after controlling for coparenting. The results provided support for the mediational hypothesis, yet the cross-sectional research design does not permit the authors to rule out the alternative hypothesis, that is, that less positive parenting may lead to more marital conflict.

Floyd et al. (1998) assessed the process by which general marital quality affects parenting competence over time with a sample of married and cohabiting parents of school-age children with mental retardation. The goal of the study was to identify coparenting support as a mediator of the relation between marital quality and parent-child relationships. The measures of marital quality, coparenting support, and parenting competence were collected at two time points, 18–24 months apart. Structural equation modeling analyses indicated that marital quality at Time 1 predicted parenting competence at Time 2 after controlling for parenting competence at Time 1. The results suggested that more positive marital quality was related to increased parenting competence over time. The next structural equation modeling analysis suggested that the relation between marital quality and change in parenting competence was mediated by coparenting support at Time 1. Although the results supported the mediation hypothesis, this study was limited by not establishing a time-ordered direction of effects between marital quality and coparenting support. The present study will use three time points to accurately model the longitudinal mediation process. Additionally, the sample in the Floyd et al. (1998) study may have been experiencing unusually high levels of stress in all family subsystems as a result of the child's developmental disability. We do not expect the process to differ in the present study; nevertheless, it is important to be able to generalize the effects of coparenting support as a mediator beyond the context of parenting in high-stress situations.

In addition, we examined these processes among mothers

and children who were making the transition to early adolescence. Much of the extant research focused on marital quality, and parenting has focused on a developmental transition occurring much earlier in the family's ontogeny, the transition to parenthood. Late middle childhood represents another important transitional period for parents and their children, involving changes in autonomy, supervision, and affective relations in the family as well as changes in the child's engagement in social contexts such as school and peers (Collins, Madsen, & Susman-Stillman, 2002; Cox & Paley, 1997). Although most families negotiate this transition successfully, it can be stressful. A number of authors have suggested that the effect of marital conflict may be particularly strong at challenging times in a child's life (e.g., Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988; see also Cox & Paley, 1997). Likewise, we suggest that positive marital functioning may be particularly relevant during times of individual and family challenge, including the transition to early adolescence. Thus, we focus on marital adjustment, coparenting, and warmth as the children in our sample progress from 4th to 6th grade.

The Present Study

The primary goal of the present study was to examine the role of coparenting support as a mediator of the relation between marital adjustment and maternal warmth. We examined the hypothesis stating that positive marital adjustment leads to increased coparenting support, which, in turn, leads to increased maternal warmth. The results will help validate current theories and extend previous research by testing the mediation model over three time points to accurately test the time-ordered direction of effects. We also tested two additional models to rule out the possibility of alternative hypotheses for the time-ordered direction of effects among the study variables. First, we tested the alternative model, exploring the potential for coparenting support to lead to change in marital adjustment, with subsequent changes in maternal warmth. Next, we examined a model testing the reverse order of the hypothesized model, suggesting that maternal warmth may lead to increased coparenting support, which, in turn, leads to increased marital adjustment. Eliminating these alternative models would strengthen the empirical and theoretical support for the hypothesized model.

Method

Participants

Self-report data were collected from 165 married mothers and their first-born fourth graders (71 boys, 94 girls) in the first year of the study. The sample was primarily European American (95%). The target preadolescents were between the ages of 9 and 11 years ($M = 9.64$, $SD = 0.54$). The mothers reported that they had been married for an average of 13.3 years and had an average of 2.5 children in their family. Among the mothers, 3% completed a graduate or professional degree, whereas 15% received a master's degree, 36% obtained a bachelor's degree, 19% had an associate's degree, 26% received a high school diploma, and 1% did not

receive a high school diploma. Sixty-eight percent of the mothers reported working full- or part-time, whereas 32% were homemakers. The annual household incomes of the study participants ranged from \$5,400 to \$400,000, with an average annual income of \$79,593 ($SD = \$51,917$).

Procedure

During the first year of the study, participants were recruited from several public school districts and private Catholic schools in a medium-sized, midwestern U.S. city. Potential participants were contacted either by giving the fourth graders letters about the study to take home or by direct mailings to their home addresses if provided by the particular school. The contact letters briefly described the study and instructed mothers to call the research office if interested. Five hundred thirty-seven mother–preadolescent dyads contacted the research office. Eligibility was determined by screening questions administered over the phone by research assistants. Participants were eligible if the fourth grader was the oldest child in the family and the mother was currently married to the target child's father and had never been divorced. Of the 537 who contacted the research office, 182 met the criteria, whereas 355 did not meet the criteria, either because they had an older child or because they were divorced or remarried. One hundred sixty-five (91%) of the eligible dyads completed the study; 13 dyads (7%) declined participation after hearing more about the study, and 4 dyads (2%) dropped out of the study after repeatedly canceling the laboratory appointment.

The present analyses were based on 148 mother–preadolescent dyads (64 boys, 84 girls) that completed Years 1 through 3 of the study (90% of the original sample). Six of the original 165 dyads were lost to attrition during Years 2 and 3 of the study, 4 dyads could not be located, and 2 refused to continue. In addition, data were excluded from the present analyses for 5 dyads who continued in the study but experienced marital divorce at Years 2 or 3 and 6 cases in which only the mother completed all 3 years of data collection. The 6 mother-only cases were the result of family relocation ($n = 3$) or preadolescent refusal to continue ($n = 3$) at Years 2 or 3. Because we were concerned that the relocated preadolescents would not be able to complete their surveys properly without assistance, an issue that might subsequently jeopardize their confidentiality, we chose to not have them complete their surveys by mail. The nonparticipants in Year 3 did not differ from the participants with regard to race, age, or family income ($ps > .10$).

At each year of data collection, a packet consisting of self-report parenting measures was mailed to the mother to be completed 1 week before attending the laboratory visit. This was done to reduce the amount of material the mother had to complete during the visit. Mothers and their preadolescents independently and separately completed self-report questionnaires during the laboratory visit. Participants were paid \$30 for their participation in Year 1, \$40 in Year 2, and \$50 in Year 3.

Measures

The marital adjustment, coparenting support, and maternal warmth measures were administered in identical forms at each year of the study. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliability coefficients for the study variables are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency Reliability Coefficients for the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum	α
Marital adjustment					
Year 1	111.66	16.75	38	139	.94
Year 2	111.28	16.75	47	139	.94
Year 3	109.87	18.09	41	140	.95
Coparenting support					
Year 1	83.29	12.53	35	100	.96
Year 2	83.27	13.03	37	100	.96
Year 3	82.67	12.84	27	100	.96
Mother report of maternal warmth					
Year 1	41.90	5.24	28	52	.88
Year 2	41.51	5.19	28	52	.89
Year 3	41.53	5.32	26	52	.90
Child report of maternal warmth					
Year 1	45.40	5.94	27	52	.87
Year 2	45.19	5.70	26	52	.87
Year 3	44.39	6.74	19	52	.92

Note. $N = 148$.

Marital Adjustment

The mothers' report on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) was used to assess the quality of the marital relationship in the 1st year of the study. The DAS is a widely used 32-item measure consisting of four subscales: Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Cohesion, and Affectional Expression. The present study included the total Dyadic Adjustment Scale, which was calculated by adding the scores for each subscale. Higher scores on the total scale indicated higher levels of marital adjustment.

Coparenting Support

We followed the work of Floyd et al. (1998) by operationally defining coparenting as parenting alliance. The 20-item Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; Abidin & Brunner, 1995) was used to measure coparenting support in the present study. The PAI assesses the extent to which the mother and father have a supportive relationship around parenting issues, such as emotionally supporting each other as parents, having a desire to communicate about the child, respect for each other's beliefs on issues regarding the child, and commitment to parenting the child (Konold & Abidin, 2001; Weissman & Cohen, 1985). Sample items included, "My husband believes that I am a good parent" and "My husband and I have the same goals for our child." The mothers responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Higher scores indicated higher levels of coparenting support.

Maternal Warmth

Maternal warmth (at Years 1 and 3) was measured with mother and child versions of a 13-item scale developed for our longitudinal project (Bonds, Gondoli, Sturge-Apple, & Salem, 2002). The scale was based closely on the 10-item Acceptance Versus Rejection subscale of the revised Child Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI; Barber & Thomas, 1996; Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997). The original CRPBI (Schaefer, 1965) was developed to assess children's perceptions of parenting but has been adapted to obtain parental ratings of parenting as well (Barber & Thomas, 1996; Bonds et al., 2002; Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson,

1990; Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997). Our Warmth scale measured warm affect, affection, and nurturance. Sample items included, "My mom smiles at me" and "My mom makes me feel like I am really important to her." The preadolescents were instructed to indicate how often their mother acted like each statement on the same 5-point Likert-type scale. The mothers were instructed to indicate how often they acted like each statement on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *never* (0) to *always* (4). Higher scores indicated higher levels of warmth. Models were tested for mother and preadolescent reports of maternal warmth separately.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

As depicted in Table 2, the correlation analysis indicated that the bivariate relations among the key study variables were statistically significant and in the expected directions. Preliminary path models were conducted to examine the direct effect of marital adjustment on maternal warmth over time. The direct effect models assessed the relation between marital adjustment at Time 1 and maternal warmth at Time 3 while controlling for maternal warmth at Time 1. The models were just identified and thus fit perfectly. Therefore, it was necessary to examine the standardized path coefficients to determine the significance of the relations among the variables in the model. The standardized path coefficient representing the direct relation between marital adjustment at Time 1 and mother report of maternal warmth at Time 3 was positive and statistically significant when controlling for maternal warmth at Time 1 ($\gamma = .14, p > .05$). The direct effect of marital adjustment on change in preadolescent report of maternal warmth was also positive and statistically significant ($\gamma = .28, p > .05$). The results suggested that higher levels of marital adjustment predicted increases in maternal warmth over time. We also tested the direct relation between marital adjustment at Time 1 and maternal warmth at Time 3 while controlling for mothers' years of education, mothers' age, number of years mothers

Table 2
Intercorrelations Among the Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Marital adjustment, Year 1	—											
2. Marital adjustment, Year 2	.87*	—										
3. Marital adjustment, Year 3	.75*	.82*	—									
4. Coparent support, Year 1	.74*	.67*	.59*	—								
5. Coparent support, Year 2	.73*	.79*	.70*	.78*	—							
6. Coparent support, Year 3	.63*	.69*	.71*	.75*	.81*	—						
7. Mother report of maternal warmth, Year 1	.29*	.27*	.28*	.20*	.23*	.24*	—					
8. Mother report of maternal warmth, Year 2	.21*	.23*	.22*	.12	.26*	.22*	.68*	—				
9. Mother report of Maternal warmth, Year 3	.32*	.28*	.26*	.21*	.31*	.28*	.67*	.81*	—			
10. Preadolescent report of maternal warmth, Year 1	.11	.11	.05	.13	.13	.09	.31*	.30*	.21*	—		
11. Preadolescent report of maternal warmth, Year 2	.21*	.20*	.12	.26*	.26*	.18*	.36*	.43*	.41*	.59*	—	
12. Preadolescent report of maternal warmth, Year 3	.32*	.25*	.18*	.30*	.27*	.21*	.38*	.43*	.43*	.42*	.61*	—

Note. $N = 148$.

* $p < .05$.

were married, annual family income, and preadolescent gender, as well as maternal warmth at Time 1. The lack of a significant relation between preadolescent gender and change in maternal warmth suggests that the hypothesized model will not differ by preadolescent gender. The results also indicated that there was essentially no difference between the direct effect of marital adjustment before and after controlling for these sociodemographic variables for mother (before, $\gamma = .14$, and after, $\gamma = .18$) or preadolescent (before, $\gamma = .28$, and after, $\gamma = .29$) reports of maternal warmth. For the sake of parsimony, the sociodemographic variables were not included in the subsequent analyses.

Mediational Models

The structural equation modeling approach to path analysis with observed variables was used to test the indirect relations proposed in the hypothesis (Schumacker & Lomax, 1996). We used Mplus 3.1 to estimate relations among the variables, assess model fit, and test the significance of the indirect effect (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2004). The fit of the models was assessed with the chi-square statistic, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the comparative fit index (CFI). These particular fit indices were suggested as a good combination to assess the fit of models with small sample sizes (e.g., $N < 250$; Fan, Thompson, & Wang, 1999; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Yadama & Pandey, 1995). The SRMR index indicated a good-fitting model if the value was less than or equal to .08. If the RMSEA index was less than or equal to .05, the model was considered a good fit, and if the index was greater than or equal to .10, the model was considered a poor fit. A CFI value greater than or equal to .95 indicated that the model was a good fit. The significance of the standardized path coefficients was determined by comparing the t ratio to a critical t of 1.96 ($p <$

.05). The significance of the indirect effect between marital adjustment at Time 1, coparenting support at Time 2, and maternal warmth at Time 3 was calculated with the delta method of assessing indirect effects. The overall fit of the models was determined by using a combination of the results from the fit indices, the chi-square statistic, the significance of standardized path coefficients, and the significance of the indirect effect.

To appropriately model relations that are hypothesized to change, it was necessary to predict changes over time while factoring out the effects of stable, sustained functioning. The present study addressed this issue by using a cross-lagged regression design (Ragossa, 1980) including measures of marital adjustment, coparent support, and maternal warmth at all three time points.

Hypothesized Model

We hypothesized that the effect of marital adjustment on change in maternal warmth would be mediated by coparent support. To test this hypothesis, we assessed the fit of the cross-lagged mediation models, including marital adjustment, coparental support, and mother and preadolescent reports of maternal warmth at all three time points. We included all possible intercorrelations among the study variables and excluded the direct effect between marital adjustment and maternal warmth (see Figures 1 and 2). Results for mother report of maternal warmth indicated that the mediation model fit the data relatively well, $\chi^2(14, N = 148) = 21.21, p = .10, CFI = .99, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .06$. As shown in Figure 1, the standardized path coefficients between marital adjustment, coparent support, and maternal warmth were positive and statistically significant. The results also indicated that the indirect effect between marital adjustment at Time 1, coparent support at Time 2, and

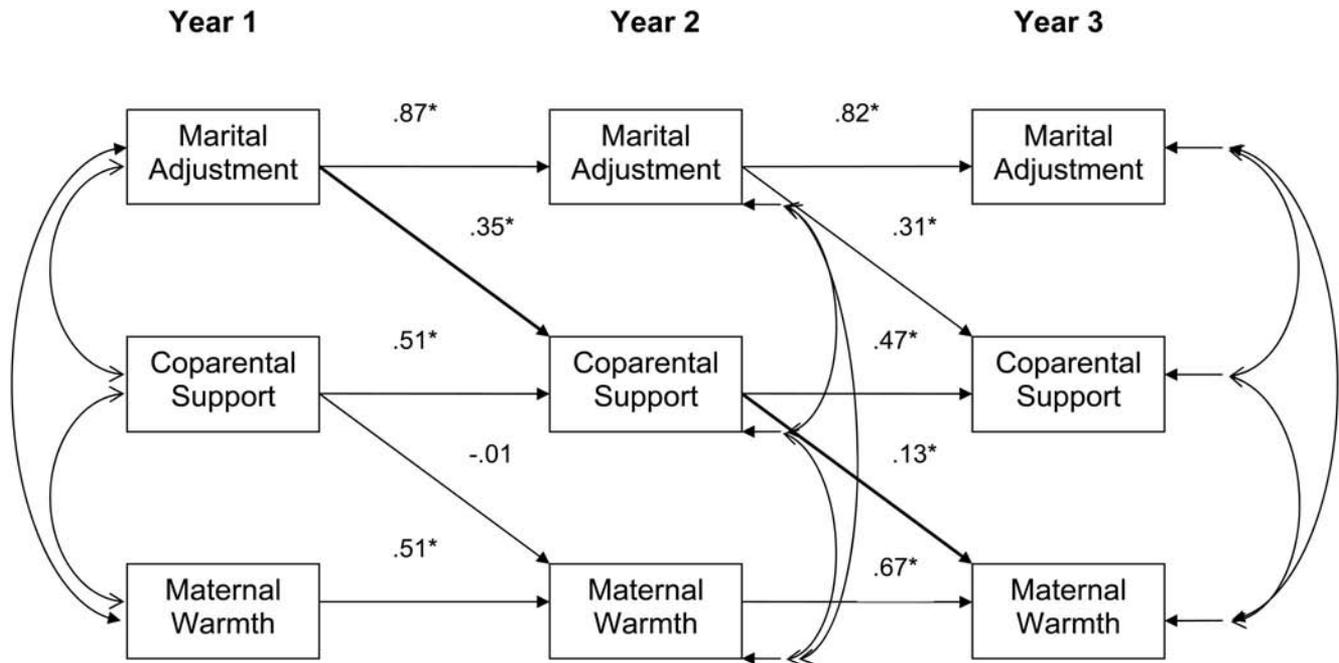


Figure 1. Coparenting support as a mediator of the effect of marital adjustment on mother report of maternal warmth. $\chi^2(14, N = 148) = 21.21, p = .10$; comparative fit index = .99; root mean square error of approximation = .06; standardized root mean square residual = .05.

maternal warmth at Time 3 was statistically significant: indirect effect = .05, $t(147) = 2.10, p < .05$. Taken together, the results indicated that the relation between marital adjustment and change in mother report of maternal warmth was mediated by change in coparent support.

The model examining preadolescent report of maternal warmth also indicated that the mediation model fit well, $\chi^2(14, N = 148) = 17.98, p = .21$; CFI = 1.00; SRMR = .04; RMSEA = .04. Figure 2 shows that the standardized path coefficients between marital adjustment at Time 1, coparental support at Time 2, and maternal warmth at Time 3 were positive and statistically significant; however, the indirect effects were only marginally significant: indirect effect = .05, $t(147) = 1.84, p < .05$. This evidence provides only limited support for the hypothesis.

To provide a comprehensive analysis of the data, we also tested the hypothesized model for the composite of mother and preadolescent reports of maternal warmth. The model predicting the maternal warmth composite fit the data relatively well, $\chi^2(14, N = 148) = 23.80, p = .05$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .04. The indirect effect of marital adjustment at Time 1 on coparental support at Time 2 and maternal warmth at Time 3 was also significant: indirect effect = .05, $t(147) = 2.10, p < .05$.

Alternative Models

First, we tested the alternative model, exploring the potential for coparenting support to drive the model, which

would suggest that the marital relationship is more proximally related to maternal warmth than is the coparental relationship. The fit indices indicated that the model did not fit the data well for mother reports, $\chi^2(14, N = 148) = 47.25, p < .01$; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .13; SRMR = .09, or preadolescent reports, $\chi^2(14, N = 148) = 44.44, p < .01$; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .12; SRMR = .08, of maternal warmth. In addition, the indirect effect between coparenting support at Time 1, marital adjustment at Time 2, and maternal warmth at Time 3 was nonsignificant for mother reports, indirect effect = .02, $t(147) = 1.75, p > .05$, and preadolescent reports, indirect effect = .02, $t(147) = 1.70, p > .05$, of maternal warmth. Next, we examined the alternative model testing the longitudinal impact of maternal warmth on coparenting support and marital adjustment, the reverse of the hypothesized model. As expected, the longitudinal effect of maternal warmth at Time 1 on coparenting support at Time 2 and marital adjustment at Time 3 did not fit the data well for mother reports, $\chi^2(14, N = 148) = 50.98, p < .01$; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .13; SRMR = .10, or preadolescent reports, $\chi^2(14, N = 148) = 53.04, p < .01$; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .14; SRMR = .12, of maternal warmth. The indirect effect was nonsignificant for mother, indirect effect = .01, $t(147) = 1.05, p > .05$, and preadolescent, indirect effect = .01, $t(147) = 0.46, p > .05$, reports of maternal warmth as well. These findings lend further support to the hypothesized model, suggesting that coparenting support mediated the relation between marital adjustment and maternal warmth over time.

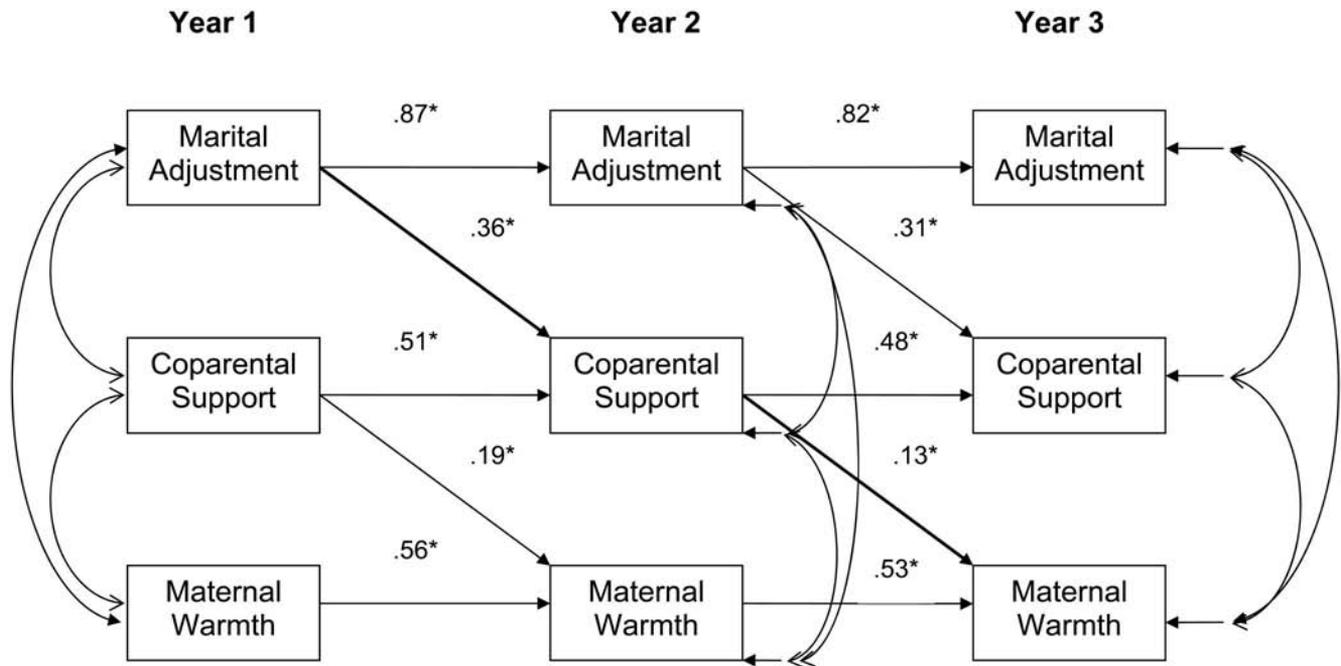


Figure 2. Coparenting support as a mediator of the effect of marital adjustment on preadolescent report of maternal warmth. $\chi^2(14, N = 148) = 17.98, p = .21$; comparative fit index = 1.00; root mean square error of approximation = .04; standardized root mean square residual = .04.

Discussion

The present study explored the role of coparenting support as a mediator of the relation between marital adjustment and maternal warmth. We found support for the hypothesized model and lack of support for the alternative models, suggesting that higher levels of marital adjustment lead to increased coparenting support, which then leads to improved maternal warmth. Thus, improvements in maternal warmth over time were more proximally determined by support for parenting from the spouse than by the quality of the marital relationship. An interpretation of this finding may be that positive marital interactions set the stage for coparenting that is characterized by good teamwork, mutual support, and consistent perceptions of the child, which then facilitates the positive emotional tone of parent-child interactions. This interpretation of the results supports family systems theory, suggesting that the marital, or executive, subsystem is a more distal predictor of maternal warmth than is the coparenting relationship.

Although the quality of the marriage initiates the process, the significant relation between change in coparenting support and change in maternal warmth has important implications for parenting interventions. The more proximal effect of change in coparenting support on change in maternal warmth suggests that intervention programs may improve parenting, and ultimately child adjustment, by promoting coparenting support. This finding could be especially useful for interventions designed to improve parenting in couples who decide to stay together for the sake of their children

despite their irreconcilable marital problems. Researchers have suggested that significantly distressed couples may be more resistant to participating in marital interventions than nondistressed couples (McHale et al., 2002). Distressed couples might be more willing to participate in an intervention or therapy targeted to helping the coparental relationship or child well-being. It is possible that intervening at the level of the coparenting relationship may be more effective than focusing on the marital relationship under certain circumstances. Showing mothers and fathers how to support each other in their roles as parents may encourage them to focus on more positive aspects of the marriage, such as the children, rather than the negative aspects.

This study also contributes to the extant research on marriage and parenting by assessing the relation between these variables during the transition to early adolescence. Many of the previous longitudinal studies of marriage and parenting have been limited to young couples during the transition to parenthood (e.g., Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989; Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988; Engfer, 1988). Researchers have suggested that the link between marriage and parenting changes during different developmental periods (Engfer, 1988) and that support in the marital relationship is more crucial during potentially stressful family transitions, such as the transition to early adolescence (Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988). Margolin et al. (2001) reported a significant, negative relation between marital conflict and positive parenting for parents of early adolescents; however, they did not explore the effects of coparenting

support as a mediator during this developmental period. The present study validated the application of this mediational process to parents of older, typically developing children. Improving the quality of the marital relationship and increasing coparenting support may provide mothers with the emotional and psychological resources required to be more warm and supportive during the transition to early adolescence, thereby reducing the intensity and frequency of parent–adolescent conflict while increasing adolescent competence.

This study includes some methodological shortcomings. It is important to note that we used only questionnaire data to measure the variables of interest. Our reliance on self-report measures as well as a single reporter for the marital measures may have increased the likelihood of capitalizing on method and source variance. The use of observational methods as well as inclusion of father reports of marital functioning and parenting would help to address these issues. Analysis of father data may be particularly compelling, as prior research has indicated that fathers' parenting may be even more sensitive than mothers' parenting to dimensions of marital quality (Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine, & Volling, 1991), and fathers' perceptions of coparenting support has been found to influence their parenting practices (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1995). This evidence suggests that the hypothesized model in the present study may operate similarly but have stronger relations for fathers. Our sample was also homogeneous with respect to ethnicity and was composed of mothers who were predominantly well-educated and middle-class. Replications of our findings with a more heterogeneous sample would foster generalization of findings to a broader population.

Future research on the effects of the marital relationship on coparenting and parenting must focus on models that further reveal the underlying processes linking these variables. It is important to address the question, How does positivity in the marital relationship transfer into the coparental and parent–child relationships? The affective spillover hypothesis refers to the direct transfer of affect from one context to another (Repetti, 1987). Family researchers have adopted this theory to explain the process by which marital conflict negatively impacts the parent–child relationship (Erel & Burman, 1995; Fauchier & Margolin, 2004; Grych, 2002; Katz & Gottman, 1996; Margolin et al., 2001; Margolin, Gordis, & Oliver, 2004). According to this theory, negative emotions engendered in the course of marital conflict may lead to less warmth and greater harshness in the parent–child relationship. Although the affective spillover hypothesis has most commonly been used to describe the transfer of negative affect from one context to the next, we suggest that positive affect may be similarly transferred from the marital relationship to parent–child interactions. Accordingly, positive emotions engendered in a well-adjusted marital relationship may lead to more coparental support and parental warmth. Future studies should examine whether positive affect in the marital relationship “spills over” into the coparental and parent–child relationships by using innovative methods to measure affect in the marital,

coparenting, and parent–child relationships. For instance, daily diaries of parents' feelings while interacting with their spouse and their child or laboratory observations of parents interacting with each other and their child may lend important insight into the affective link across family subsystems. The current study provides a foundation for future research that may lead to more effective methods for intervening with parents by identifying important proximal intervention targets.

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