

Children's perspectives on their relationships with their nonresident fathers: influences, outcomes and implications

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Background: Children's relationships with their nonresident fathers, and associations between these relationships, children's relationships with mothers and stepfathers, and the children's adjustment were studied in 162 children from single-parent and stepfamilies, selected from a representative community sample in the UK, studied at 2 time points two years apart. **Method:** Children were interviewed about their relationships with their nonresident fathers, mothers and stepfathers; mothers reported on children's adjustment, and other family variables. **Results:** Positive child–nonresident father relationships were correlated with (a) contact between child and father, (b) the quality of the mother–child relationship, and (c) the frequency of contact between the mother and her former partner. Conflict between child and father was correlated with conflict between child and mother, and child and stepfather. Child–nonresident father contact and relationships were stable over 2 years, and related to children's adjustment; these associations were stronger for children from single-parent families than for those with stepfathers, and for those whose mothers had been first pregnant as teenagers. **Conclusions:** Associations between the quality of children's relationships with nonresident fathers and their adjustment need to be considered within the framework of the larger family system; child–father relationships are particularly important for children from 'high risk' families. **Keywords:** Child Behavior Checklist, divorce, fathers, mothers, parent–child relationships, separation. **Abbreviations:** ALSPAC: Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children; CBCL: Child Behavior Checklist.

Increasing numbers of children experience separation of their parents; the great majority of these children then live primarily with their mothers, and may subsequently live with a stepfather as a result of their mothers' new partnership. The risks of problems in children's adjustment following these family transitions is substantially increased; however, individual variation in children's outcomes following parental separation and stepfamily formation is great. The family factors and socio-economic adversities associated with these individual differences in adjustment outcome have been investigated widely (for reviews see Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). One feature of children's family lives which may contribute to this variation concerns their relationships with the fathers who do not live with them. What are the links between the children's accounts of their relationships with their nonresident fathers, and their experiences and relationships with their mothers and stepfathers? Does the quality of their relationships with their *nonresident* fathers, and the contact between children and nonresident fathers, relate to their adjustment as they grow up?

The research literature on nonresident fathers has until recently focused chiefly on the frequency or amount of face-to-face father–child contact, and the payment of support, and much less on the emotional closeness and psychological significance of their relationships. In a recent meta-analysis of 63

studies dealing with nonresident fathers and children's well-being, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) argued for the importance of looking 'beyond contact' to 'more pertinent dimensions of the father–child relationship, such as feelings of closeness and authoritative parenting' (p. 568). Contact can vary along several dimensions such as frequency, regularity, continuity and nature (face-to-face, or communication by telephone/email/letter; see Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner, & Williams, 1999; Smyth, 2002); however, as Amato and Gilbreth note, in most studies contact usually refers to the frequency of visitation (see also White & Gilbreth, 2001; Whiteside & Becker, 2000); duration and regularity of contact are also sometimes reported. Overall, the Amato and Gilbreth meta-analysis showed that contact was significantly associated with academic outcomes, and with lower levels of internalising problems, though the effect sizes were weak, and significant variability suggested that some samples showed stronger associations between contact frequency and outcome. Amato and Gilbreth suggest that future research should move beyond simple measures of frequency of contact towards measures of relationship quality. In this study we investigated the question of how children's perceptions of their relationships with their nonresident fathers during childhood were associated with their relationships with their mothers and stepfathers, and with their adjustment outcome, in the context of data from a

longitudinal study of children growing up in different family settings (Dunn et al., 1998).

We examined three sets of questions. The first concerned the quality of children's relationships with their nonresident fathers and its relation to frequency of contact and time since parental separation; the second concerned links between children's relationships with their resident and nonresident parents and stepparents; the third concerned possible associations between the quality of children's relationships with their nonresident fathers, the frequency and regularity of their contact with their fathers, and their adjustment outcome.

Relationship quality and contact with nonresident fathers

The findings on the issue of what the associations may be between relationship quality and contact with nonresident fathers have been mixed: Amato and Gilbreth (1999), commenting that support for the hypothesis that nonresident paternal contact may be linked to children's well-being has become stronger in the more recent studies, speculate that this is perhaps because in recent cohorts nonresident fathers have been more committed to a parental role. Frequency of contact between children and their nonresidential fathers varies widely, but in the earlier studies was reported to be low for many children. In the USA, a number of studies reported that over half the children whose parents separated lost contact with their fathers completely 10 years after separation (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Seltzer, 1991; but see Braver & Connell, 1998, for consideration of why contact may be under-reported in Furstenberg & Nord). Other research reports that 1 in 5 children see their nonresident fathers weekly (Thompson, 1986). Both Amato and Gilbreth (1999) and Pryor and Rodgers (2001), in their overviews of research on families in transition, comment that there is some indication that children and their nonresident fathers may be seeing each other more frequently in recent years. To assess such changes, measures of child-father relations need to include not only frequency of face-to-face contact but more sensitive indices of the children's relationships. A recent study of a representative community sample of stepfamilies in the London area reports that nearly half the children studied were in regular and frequent (more than monthly) contact with their nonresident parents (Smith, Robertson, Dixon, Quigley, & Whitehead, 2002). This latter study reports that it was the nature of the relationship rather than frequency of contact that was important in relation to children's outcome, supporting Amato and Gilbreth's (1999) argument for a focus on the quality of child-father relationships, rather than solely on contact frequency (see also Melli, 1999). Other studies report correlations between frequency of contact, positive qualities in father-child relation-

ships, and better adjustment (Bray, 1999), while yet others find that the correlations are mediated by parenting, or the extent of interparental conflict (Emery, 1998; Hetherington, 1993; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989).

In this study we addressed the unresolved issue of the links between relationship quality, child-father contact and children's outcome. We first examined the proposal (a) that children's accounts of the closeness or conflict in their relationships with their nonresident fathers were unrelated to the frequency of contact (following Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Munsch, Woodward, & Darling, 1995), or (b) that a positive relationship between child and nonresident parent was associated with the frequency of contact (following the findings of the meta-analysis of research on young children's relations with nonresident parents by Whiteside & Becker, 2000). We also investigated the possibility that there would be a decrease over time in frequency of contact and in both positivity and conflict in the relationship between child and nonresident father, given the evidence for increasing disengagement between separated parents over time, and a lowering of negative feelings (Ahrons, 1981; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Forehand et al., 1991; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Changes over time in the quality of children's relationships with their nonresident fathers and their contact were examined with data collected on the participating children from two time points two years apart. The measure of contact employed was a global measure of the frequency and regularity of visitation and communication by telephone/email; frequency of face-to-face contact was highly correlated with telephone communication (see below). The significance of the time since the father left the mother's household, and children's age, for the quality of the relationship between child and father were also investigated.

Relations among relationships

The second set of questions we investigated concerned links between children's relationships with their resident and nonresident parents and stepparents. Three alternative proposals were examined. The first was that the quality of children's relationships with their nonresident fathers would be unrelated to their relationships with their resident stepfathers (as found by Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; and White & Gilbreth, 2001, in a study of adolescents). The second, contrasting proposal investigated was that there would be negative associations between children's relationships with their nonresident fathers and their stepfathers (as reported by Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; see also Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). This would be expected to the extent that children may resent the entrance of the stepfather and resist viewing him as a replace-

ment for their nonresident father (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). The third proposal investigated was that positive relationships between child and mother would be correlated with positive relationships between child and nonresident father. Such positive associations would be expected in terms of attachment theory, social learning theory, or on the grounds that child characteristics played a significant role in contributing to the quality of all the child's relationships.

In addition, we investigated the hypothesis that the quality of children's relationships with their nonresident fathers would be systematically linked to the relationship between their biological parents. Evidence that supportive coparenting between mother and former partner is a key factor in influencing father-child contact, the involvement of nonresident fathers with their children, and better parent-child relationships has accumulated from the initial studies of Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1982) to more recent research (e.g., Funder, 1996; see meta-analysis of Whiteside & Becker, 2000). We focused on the contact between mother and former partner, and on the extent of support and conflict over parenting issues that she described receiving from him; our hypothesis was that children's relationships with their nonresident fathers would be more positive in families in which mothers had more frequent contact with their former partners and described their relationship as supportive.

The significance of the family situation in which the children lived – in a single-parent family or a stepfamily – for these links between family relationships was examined. The hypothesis we investigated was that children's relationships with their nonresident fathers would differ in quality if children were in single-parent families or in stepfather families: the possibility that children in single-parent families who had no other (competing) father-figure within the family household would have more positive relationships with their nonresident fathers than those who had stepfathers was examined.

We framed these questions about links between relationships within a life-course perspective by investigating the significance for children's relationships with their nonresident fathers of their mothers' own earlier life-course experiences. We were interested in the possibility that children's relationships with their nonresident fathers were less positive, and more conflicted, if their mothers had experienced more adverse life-course experiences. There is accumulating evidence that women's experience of teenage pregnancy is importantly linked to the current quality of their relationships with their children and those of their partners with the children (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2000), and to the outcome of their children (Hardy, Astone, Brooks-Gunn, Shapiro, & Miller, 1998; Jaffe, in press; Jaffe, Caspi, Moffitt, Belsky, & Silva, 2001). Selection effects may well be important here. There is evidence

that similarity in mother-child and in father-child relationships can in part result from selection effects in both parents' life histories – that a series of adverse early life-course experiences increase the likelihood of women forming partnerships with men who have also experienced earlier negative life events (Dunn et al., 2000; see also Quinton, Pickles, Maughan, & Rutter, 1993). That is, similarity in mothers' and fathers' relations with their children can reflect general selection effects. Here we were concerned with the possibility that in addition to problems in their relationships with their mothers, these children whose mothers had faced earlier adversities were also at risk for less supportive and affectionate relationships with their nonresident fathers.

Relationships and adjustment

The third set of questions investigated concerned the possible association between the quality of children's relationships with their nonresident fathers, their contact with them, and their adjustment outcome. The first possibility examined was that high levels of conflict and low positivity in child-nonresident father relationships would be associated with high internalising and externalising scores, paralleling the evidence for links between children's adjustment and the quality of child-mother relationships (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). White and Gilbreth (2001) report such patterns for adolescents' relationships with stepfathers, and similar but less consistent patterns for nonresident fathers. Second, we investigated the question of whether such associations were independent of the children's relationships with their mothers and stepfathers, or alternatively reflected a common pattern across the children's different relationships. White and Gilbreth's (2001) findings for adolescents suggested that the benefits of a good relationship with a nonresident father were relatively independent of the quality of the adolescent's relationship with the custodial mother.

We also examined the possibility that the significance of the quality of the relationship with the nonresident father for children's adjustment would be greater for those children who did not have a 'second' potential father-figure – that is, the children who were growing up in a single-parent family rather than a stepfamily. Specifically, the hypothesis that a poor or conflicted relationship with a nonresident father would be more closely linked to adjustment problems for children from single-parent families than for children in stepfamilies, who had a stepfather, was examined. We also tested the hypothesis that a poor relationship with the nonresident father would be particularly closely linked to adjustment for those children who were 'at risk' in terms of their mothers' earlier life-course experiences. That is, the possibility was examined that within the single-parent families, the adjustment of those children whose mothers had experienced adverse earlier

experiences (had been pregnant as teenagers, for instance) would be more closely linked to the quality of their relationship with their nonresident fathers than the adjustment of children whose mothers' life-course experiences had not included such risks. This hypothesis was grounded in the accumulating evidence (noted above) that children whose parents had suffered adverse life-course experiences were at greater risk for adjustment problems (Hardy et al., 1998). The implication of the findings of Hardy and colleagues is that the risks associated with teenage parenting are derived from characteristics of the parents rather than (or in addition to) the actual experience of having a teenager as a parent.

Method

Sample

The Avon Brothers and Sisters Study (ABSS) on which this study is based is a subsample drawn from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), a study of around 10,000 families. The design of ALSPAC included all the women in the Avon Health District who gave birth between April 1991 and December 1992 (Golding, 1996). It was estimated that 85–90% of the eligible population took part. The families in the ALSPAC study represent those in Britain as a whole, with a slight under-representation of minority groups: at 3% this is lower than the 7.6% for Britain as a whole, but similar to the 4% rate for the geographical area from which the sample is drawn (Baker, Morris, & Taylor, 1997). The level of retention over the first 5 years of the study was 75%, an attrition rate within the range reported for large-scale surveys (e.g., Booth & Amato, 1991). The rates of stepfamilies, single-parent and nonstep families resembles that of the UK population (O'Connor, Hawkins, Dunn, Thorpe, & Golding, 1998).

For the ABSS subsample, approximately 50 families, each with at least two children, were randomly selected from each of four family types: (a) nonstepfamilies in which both parents were biologically related to all children in the family, (b) stepfather families in which at least one child was not biologically related to the resident father, (c) 'complex' stepfamilies in which both parents had brought children from previous relationships or there was a stepmother, (d) single-mother families. One hundred and ninety-two families were initially recruited: 50 nonstepfamilies, 49 stepfather families, 45 complex stepfamilies and 48 single-mother families. The representativeness of the families in each family type group in ABSS was assessed by comparing them with families in these family type groups within the large representative ALSPAC sample, in terms of maternal education, paternal education, family income and children's adjustment (Total Difficulties and Prosocial scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Goodman, 1997). There were no significant differences between the ABSS and the ALSPAC families in each of the family type groups on these measures.

The data examined in this study come from two data collection points two years apart in this longitudinal research; 174 families provided data, a response rate of

90.6%. Of the 18 families who did not participate, 4 were not contactable, 2 withdrew because of family bereavement, and the remaining 12 withdrew because of time factors. Children older than 7 years were interviewed; of these, 162 had nonresident fathers, and formed the sample for this study. There were 83 (51%) boys (mean age at second data collection point = 10.52 years, $SD = 3.30$), and 79 girls (mean age 10.61, $SD = 3.02$). Among the children who had contact with their nonresident fathers, 72% had nonresident fathers who lived within the same town or city, 14% had nonresident fathers who lived within 25 miles, and 13% had nonresident fathers who lived more than 50 miles away. The age of the children when their fathers had left ranged from $-.3$ (during the mother's pregnancy) to 8.3 years, with a mean of 2.8 ($SD = 2.4$) and median of 2.4 years. The duration of time since the father had left also varied widely, from .3 to 16.1 years, with a mean of 7.5 ($SD = 3.1$) and median of 6.5 years.

Mothers of all 162 children were interviewed, and completed questionnaires. All 162 children were interviewed; children's reports of their relationships with their nonresident fathers, stepfathers and mothers, and mothers' reports of children's adjustment and of their own contact with nonresident fathers (their former partners) were employed, to avoid the problem of single-reporters on both relationships and adjustment.

Measures

Parent-child relationship measures. In the models tested in this paper, we used the children's reports on their relationships with their nonresident fathers, mothers and stepfathers. Two scales, assessing child-parent positivity and child-parent conflict respectively, were employed.

Child-parent positivity. This is an interview measure designed for the present study. It consisted of 4 questions each rated by the interviewer on a 4-point scale (0 = 'little or none', 1 = 'some', 2 = 'moderate', and 3 = 'marked'), the scales focusing on (1) enjoyment of company of the other, (2) overt warmth in the relationship, (3) confiding, and (4) time spent together. Possible scores ranged from 0–16. Z-scores of these items were summed to form a composite scale for analyses. Internal consistency for this scale was $\alpha = .74$.

Child-parent conflict. This is an interview measure derived from 4 questions assessing parent-child conflict, focused on: (1) level of punishment (coded on a four-point scale: 0 = 'no punishment', 1 = 'tell child firmly what to do' or 'debates point of view', 2 = 'ignores child' or 'removes privileges' or 'nags', 3 = 'shouts' or corporal punishment such as 'hits child with hand or other object'), (2) level of upset of parent during conflict and (3) level of child upset during conflict (both coded on 4-point scales: 0 = 'very minor', 1 = 'moderate upset', 2 = 'marked upset', and 3 = 'extreme, protracted upset'); (4) frequency of disagreement (coded on a 5-point scale: 0 = 'never', 1 = 'occasionally, monthly', 2 = 'sometimes, 1 to 2 weekly', 3 = 'often, 3 times weekly', and 4 = 'frequently, most days'). Possible scores ranged from 0–16. Z-scores of these items were summed to

form a scale; internal consistency for this scale was $\alpha = .67$.

Mother-partner conflict. Conflict between mother and resident partner was assessed with the Disagreement scale of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test, a 9-item, 6-point scale (where 1 = always agree, 2 = almost always agree, 3 = occasionally disagree, 4 = frequently disagree, 5 = almost always disagree, 6 = always disagree); items include issues such as handling family finances, friends, conventionality, ways of dealing with in-laws etc. (Locke & Wallace, 1987) as reported by the mother. Possible scores ranged from 0–54. Internal consistency of the scale was $\alpha = .86$.

Child's contact with nonresident father. The measure of contact employed in the analyses that follow was a global 6-point general scale assessing how often and with what regularity children had contact with their nonresident fathers (1 = never, 2 = little – less than once per month, and irregular, 3 = little, less than once per month, but regular, 4 = moderate – more than once per month – irregular, 5 = moderate – more than once per month and regular, and 6 = very frequent, regular contact – once per week or more); contact included face-to-face contact, talking on the phone, emailing, and letters. No contact meant no face-to-face contact or communication of any kind. (Two scales measuring these specific aspects of contact were also employed, assessing (a) how often child sees his/her nonresident father, and (b) how often child talks with father on telephone/email. Each of these two scales was coded 1 = never, 2 = less than once a year, 3 = 1–3 times a year, 4 = 4–6 times a year, 5 = once or twice a month, 6 = once a week, 7 = every 2 or 3 days, 8 = almost every day. The correlations between the global scale used in the analyses that follow, and these two more specific scales were $r(136) = .88$ and $r(136) = .81$ respectively, both significant at $p < .0001$).

Mother's contact with nonresident father. Three aspects of mothers' contact were assessed: (1) frequency of seeing the father, (2) frequency of talking on the phone, (3) frequency of receiving letters or cards from nonresident fathers (each coded as follows: 1 = never, 2 = less than once a year, 3 = 1 to 3 times a year, 4 = 4 to 6 times a year, 5 = once or twice a month, 6 = once a week, 7 = every 2 or 3 days, and 8 = almost every day). Combined mean scores of these three items were used to create an overall contact score (possible scores ranged from 1–24); internal consistency for these was $\alpha = .84$.

Mother's conflict with nonresident father over parenting issues. This scale was adapted from Hetherington and Clingempeel's (1992) Child-Rearing Issues scale. Mothers reported how frequently they had argued or disagreed with their former partner over the past month about child-rearing issues (e.g., how to handle quarrels between brothers and sisters, or bedtime routines, manners, responses to parental authority). This conflict was assessed with 11 items assessing the frequency of mothers' and nonresident fathers' argument or disagreement on each item. Each item was

scored on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all in the last month, 2 = not at all in the last week, 3 = once or twice in the last week, 4 = 3 or 4 times in the last week, 5 = 5 or 6 times in the last week, 6 = every day, 7 = more than once a day). Possible scores ranged from 1–77. Items were summed to form a scale, $\alpha = .86$.

Mother's support from nonresident fathers. Support reported by mothers was assessed with 3 items assessing (1) to what extent mothers and nonresident fathers were working together on child discipline (0 = not working together, 1 = occasionally working together, 2 = sometimes working together, 3 = often working together, and 4 = frequently working together), (2) the extent to which the nonresident father provided practical/emotional support (0 = no support, 1 = unreliable support, 2 = low support, 3 = moderate support, and 4 = very reliable support), and (3) the extent to which the nonresident parent took some of the 'parenting load' for the mother (0 = takes no load, 1 = minor load taking, 2 = some load taking, 3 = active load taking, and 4 = major load taking). Scores of these items were summed and averaged by number of items to form a support scale (possible scores ranged from 0–14). Internal consistency for the scale was $\alpha = .87$.

Child behavioural adjustment. Children's adjustment difficulties were measured using the externalising and internalising scales of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), completed by mothers. The externalising scale was the sum of the Delinquent and Aggressive syndrome profiles and the internalising scale was the sum of the Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints, and Anxious/Depressed syndrome profiles. Each item was scored on a 3-point scale (0 = not true in the past 6 months, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, 2 = very/often true). CBCL raw scores controlling for children's age were used. A high score indicated more problems. Possible scores were 0–64 for each scale. Internal consistency of scores in the present study was $\alpha = .90$ for externalising problems and $\alpha = .92$ for internalising problems.

Adult depressed mood: The Malaise Inventory. The Malaise Inventory (Rutter, Tizard, & Whitmore, 1970) was completed by the mothers. This is a self-report instrument which assesses depressed mood and affective symptomatology, drawing heavily on the Cornell Medical Index Questionnaire, with 24 yes–no items; total number of 'yes' items is the score. Possible scores range from 0–24. Mean total malaise scores provide an index of low mood, while scores of >6 show good sensitivity and specificity by comparison with interview measures of clinical depression (Maughan & Taylor, 2001; Rodgers et al., 1999; see also corroboration in studies with independent clinical assessments, e.g., Bowling, 1983; Rutter et al., 1970). The Inventory has been used in studies of the long-term effects of parental divorce on the mental health of adults in the National Child Development Study (NCDS: Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995), of links between family stress and mental health in the UK (Grant, Nolan, & Ellis, 1990), in the Rochester Longitudinal Study of mental health (Sameroff, Seifer, Barocas, Zax, & Greenspan, 1987)

and in the Dunedin Longitudinal study in New Zealand (McGee, Williams, & Silva, 1986). High test-retest stability coefficients have been demonstrated in these studies (e.g., in the NCDS, a stability coefficient of $r = .78$, in the study by Rutter and colleagues (Rutter et al., 1970), $r = .91$). In the present study, the internal reliability was $\alpha = .92$.

Lifecourse measures

- Mother's age at first pregnancy was included, as a continuous variable.
- Parental education. Highest level of educational attainment of both mothers and nonresident fathers was coded on a 5-point scale, from 0 = no qualification, 1 = CSE, 2 = 'O' Level or equivalent, 3 = 'A' Level or 'S' Level, 4 = Undergraduate degree, 5 = Postgraduate degree.
- Time since father and mother separated was recorded from maternal interview.
- Child's age when mother and father separated was recorded.

Child gender and current age

These were also included.

Results

Descriptive statistics are first reported. Then the findings on the question of how quality of relationship with nonresident father was related to contact, and to time since parental separation, family type, and child age are reported. Next, findings related to the question of links between relationships are

reported: the associations between children's relationships with their nonresident fathers and their resident mothers and stepfathers, and mothers' relations with nonresident fathers are described. Then, findings related to the third set of questions, concerning the associations between children's relationships with their nonresident fathers, resident parents, and their adjustment (externalising and internalising), are reported.

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the measures included in this study.

Contact. Of the 162 children who had nonresident fathers, 133 had some contact with them and 29 (18%) had no contact, according to mothers' report. For those children who did have contact with their fathers, 10% were reported to have contact 'less than once per month and irregularly', 6% had contact 'less than once a month but regular', 7% had contact 'more than once a month but irregular', 11% had contact 'more than once a month and regular', and 33% had contact 'once a week or more, and regular'.

Children's relationships with their nonresident fathers. The positivity and conflict in children's relationships with their nonresident fathers showed much variation. Comparison of relationship quality (positivity and conflict) in child-nonresident father, child-mother and child-stepfather relationships was undertaken using repeated measures ANOVA. For positivity there was no significant main effect for

Table 1 Means, SDs, and bivariate correlations between children's relationships with their mothers, stepfathers, and nonresident fathers, and demographic variables

Measures	X	SD	n	Child-parent positivity			Child-parent conflict		
				Mother	Stepfather	NR father	Mother	Stepfather	NR father
Child-mother positivity	-.00	.70	151	-					
Child-stepfather positivity	-.00	.80	93	.32***	-				
Child-NR father positivity	-.00	.71	123	.29***	.01	-			
Child-mother conflict	-.05	.72	151	-.21**	-.15	.02	-		
Child-stepfather conflict	-.10	.79	93	.01	-.07	.03	.30**	-	
Child-NR father conflict	-.22	.75	117	-.24**	-.03	-.08	.33***	.25*	-
Child's age	10.56	3.16	158	-.17*	-.25*	.04	-.21**	-.14	-.29**
Female child	.47	.50	162	.06	-.10	-.16	.14	.00	.06
Child's age when NR father left	2.83	2.37	141	-.15	-.00	.10	-.05	-.11	-.02
Time since NR father left	7.53	3.12	141	.00	-.28**	-.04	-.15	-.02	-.28**
Length of child-stepfather relation	5.88	3.53	79	-.13	-.19	-.09	-.12	-.14	-.40**
Child's contact with NR father	4.01	2.04	136	.10	-.25*	.20*	.15	-.04	.26**
Mother's education	1.43	.88	162	.06	-.03	.03	-.08	-.14	-.08
NR father's education	1.49	1.56	118	-.10	-.42***	.12	.03	.06	-.02
Mother's age at first pregnancy	22.13	4.57	149	.03	.03	-.01	.01	.05	.14
Mother's malaise	5.31	4.29	135	-.26**	-.25*	-.13	.17	.02	-.02
Mother's conflict with partner	1.84	.70	77	.09	-.12	.13	-.05	.16	-.16
Mother's conflict with NR father	.95	.79	136	.02	-.18	-.18	.10	-.05	.25*
Mother's contact with NR father	5.57	1.60	136	.07	-.29**	.24*	.17	-.07	.32**
Mother's support from NR father	.88	1.04	136	-.10	-.15	.13	.17	.10	.25*

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. NR = nonresident.

these different relationships ($F_{2,70} = .99, p = .37$). For conflict there was also no significant main effect for the different child–parent relationships ($F_{2,68} = 2.29, p = .11$). Multiple comparisons adjusted for the number for independent tests showed that mother–child conflict was significantly greater than stepfather–child conflict (Scheffé post-hoc comparison, $p < .05$).

Table 1 shows that both more positive and more conflicted relationships with nonresident fathers were associated with more contact between children and their fathers. Child gender, child age at the time of interview, the time since the father left the household, and the children's age when their fathers left were unrelated to the variation in child–nonresident father positivity. However, older children reported less conflict in their relationship with their nonresident fathers than younger children ($r(117) = -.29, p < .01$); also, as time since the father had left increased, the amount of conflict in the relationships decreased ($r(104) = -.28, p < .01$).

To clarify these associations, partial correlations were conducted. When children's age was partialled out, this correlation with time since separation ceased to be significant ($r(101) = -.11, ns$). When the duration of time since the father had left was partialled out, the correlation between conflict in child–nonresident father relationship and age also ceased to be significant ($r(101) = -.15, ns$). It appears that the correlation between child's age and the duration of time since the father had left ($r(141) = .70, p < .001$) affected the associations between these demographic variables and the relationship quality variable. That is, child's age and the duration of time since the father had left were not independent significant correlates of relationship quality between children and their nonresident fathers. It should be noted that Table 1 includes 88 correlations, and around 5 would be expected to be significant by chance at $p < .05$. The coefficients are presented for reader interest.

We also examined changes in relationship quality and in contact over the two years for which the children had participated in the study. There were no significant changes in mean levels of the global measure of frequency/regularity of children's contact with their nonresident parent (mean = 4.00, $SD = 2.06$ to mean = 4.05, $SD = 2.08$ respectively, $t(df = 120) = .36, ns$), nor in the positivity or conflict of their relationships (positivity: mean = .08, $SD = .74$ to mean = .01, $SD = .64, t(df = 65) = .77, ns$; conflict: mean = $-.18, SD = .76$ to mean = $-.32, SD = .71, t(df = 36) = 1.00, ns$). Frequency of children's talking on the phone with their nonresident fathers actually increased between time 1 and time 2 (means 2.84, $SD = 2.18$ to mean = 3.48, $SD = 2.30, t(df = 119) = 3.93, p < .001$). Mothers reported that they themselves saw and talked on the phone with their ex-partners significantly more frequently over the two years (means for seeing 2.75, $SD = 2.17$

at time 1, and 3.31, $SD = 2.23$ at time 2, $t(df = 107) = 2.98, p < .01$; and means for phone communication 2.75, $SD = 2.16$ at time 1, and 3.25, $SD = 2.32$ for time 2, $t(df = 105) = 2.62, p < .01$).

The correlations between these measures at time 1 and time 2 showed that individual differences in the quality of children's relationships with their nonresident fathers were moderately stable over the two years studied (positivity, $r(66) = .44, p < .001$; conflict, $r(37) = .25, ns$), and contact was very stable over this period ($r(121) = .73, p < .001$). Contact between mother and former partner was stable too ($r(108) = .61, p < .01$, for seeing and $r(106) = .62, p < .01$ for phone communication).

Correlations were conducted to see if there was evidence on the direction of effects between contact and relationship quality at the two time points. There was no evidence that time 1 contact influenced the quality of child–nonresident father relationships at time 2; however, there was a significant correlation between child–nonresident father positivity at time 1 and child–nonresident father contact at time 2 ($r(62) = .26, p < .05$), controlling for stability over time.

The question of whether the quality of children's relationships with their nonresident father varied according to whether they had a stepfather was examined by comparing mean levels of positivity and negativity in child–nonresident father relationships in children from single-parent and stepfamilies. No significant difference was found.

Relations among relationships: correlations between children's relationships with mother, stepfather, and nonresident father

The second set of questions that we investigated concerned the associations between the children's relationships with their parents and stepparents. Correlations are shown in Table 1. Positivity in the relationship with the nonresident father as reported by the child was correlated moderately with the positivity the child reported in the relationship with the mother; there was not, however, a significant relation with the positivity the children described in the child–stepfather relationship ($r = .01$). Conflict in the child–nonresident father relationship was moderately correlated with conflict in the relationship both with the mother and with the stepfather (Table 1).

The positivity in children's relationships with their stepfathers was, however, negatively correlated with the frequency/regularity of contact children had with their nonresident fathers, and positivity between child and stepfather was lower in families in which mothers had more contact with their ex-partners (Table 1). It was also negatively related to the duration of time since the biological parents had separated, and to the children's age. To clarify these associations we conducted partial correlations

between duration of time since father left, children's age and stepfather-child positivity. When the duration of time since father left was controlled, the correlation with child age was not significant, and when child age was controlled, the correlation with duration of time since father left was not significant. So, as with the analysis of child-nonresident father relationships, the connection between duration of separation from the father and the positivity of the child-step father relationship was confounded by the child's age.

Mother's relationship with her child's nonresident father

We next investigated links between children's relationships and contact with their nonresident fathers, and the mother's own contact with her former partner, and other family background measures (Table 2).

Children's contact with their nonresident fathers was strongly associated with mothers' contact with nonresident fathers, and with mothers' accounts of the support they received from nonresident fathers, as well as the conflict with their ex-partners over child-rearing issues. The life-course variable of maternal age at first pregnancy was also important. Children tended to have less contact with their nonresident fathers if their mothers had been relatively young when pregnant ($r(149) = .21$). The mothers who had been younger when first pregnant tended to have more relationship conflict with their current partners, less frequent contact with ex-partners, and less support from nonresident fathers than the mothers who were older when first pregnant. Note that the children's relationships with their nonresident parents were not significantly different for the two groups of families.

As noted above for the children, mothers' contact with the nonresident father was correlated both with conflict over child-rearing issues, and with support over parenting.

Children's relationships with their nonresident father, and their adjustment

The third set of questions we investigated concerned possible links between children's adjustment (internalising and externalising scores), and the quality of their relationships and extent of contact with their nonresident fathers. Table 3 shows the correlations between externalising and internalising problems, contact with nonresident fathers, and positivity and conflict in children's relationships with their nonresident fathers.

Externalising problems were negatively correlated with the positivity of the relationship between child and nonresident father, and between child and mother, and with the extent of child-nonresident father contact. Internalising problems were associated with the quality of the child's relationship with the mother (with more positive relationships associated with lower internalising scores), with child-nonresident father contact, but not with the quality of the relationship with the nonresident father. The question of whether contact and positivity in the child-nonresident father relationship were associated with internalising and externalising problems *independently* of the quality of the relationship with the mother was next tested with regression analysis.

A series of hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted, using the children's internalising and externalising problems as dependent variables; in the first step, child's gender and contact with their nonresident fathers were entered (with gender included because of the inconsistent findings in the literature on the significance of gender in the relations between children and their nonresident fathers, see Bray, 1999). In the second step, the quality of the relationships between child and nonresident father, and child and mother, were entered. Models involving interaction terms between child's gender and contact, child-nonresident father relationship quality and contact failed to account for additional variation and the interaction terms

Table 2 Bivariate correlations between measures of mothers' relationships with their partners and demographic variables

Measures	<i>n</i>	Child's contact with NR f	NR father's education	Mother's education	M's age at first pregnancy	M's depression	M's conflict with partner	M's conflict with NR f	M's contact with NR f	M's support from NR f
C's contact with NR f	136	–								
NR father's education	118	.16	–							
Mother's education	162	.14	.34***	–						
M's age at 1 st pregnancy	149	.21*	.20*	.11	–					
M's depression	135	–.15	.05	–.02	–.05	–				
M's conflict with partner	77	.11	.08	–.01	–.34**	.24*	–			
M's conflict with NR f	136	.56***	.05	–.01	.23*	–.01	.01	–		
M's contact with NR f	136	.80***	.27**	.17*	.25**	.01	.07	.57***	–	
M's support from NR f	136	.57***	.23*	.02	.21*	–.09	–.09	.33***	.64***	–
Child's age	158	–.05	.00	–.08	–.21*	.04	.25*	–.12	–.16	–.04

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

C = child, M = mother, NR = nonresident, f = father.

Table 3 Means, SDs, and bivariate correlations between measures of children’s relationships with their mothers, stepfathers, and nonresident fathers and outcome variables

Measures	Child–parent positivity			Child–parent conflict			Child’s outcomes		
	Child–mother	Child–stepfather	Child–NR father	Child–mother	Child–stepfather	Child–NR father	Child’s contact with NR father	IP X = .22 SD = .23 n = 139	EP X = .30 SD = .27 n = 137
Internalising problems	-.23**	-.18	.07	.28**	.09	.02	-.26**	–	–
Externalising problems	-.33***	-.07	-.23*	.28**	.06	.16	-.19*	.52***	–

Note: **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001. NR = nonresident.

themselves were not significant (*p* > .10 in all cases). Results are therefore presented for the main effects only (child–stepfather relationship quality was not included in the analysis because it was not correlated with the adjustment variables). Table 4 shows the results.

First, with internalising problems as outcome variable, children’s relationship positivity between child and mother, and contact with their nonresident fathers were significant predictors, accounting for 8% of the total variance.

Second, with externalising problems as outcome variables, relationship positivity between child and mother was a significant predictor. Together these variables accounted for 15% of the total variance. In summary, these results indicated that both the frequency/regularity of contact with their nonresident fathers and the quality of the child–mother relationship were significant predictors of the children’s adjustment problems.

Children’s relationships with their nonresident fathers, and their adjustment by family type and by mother’s age at first pregnancy

The next set of analyses tested the hypothesis that for children in single-mother families, the quality of the relationship with their nonresident fathers would be more important in relation to their adjustment than for children who had an additional potential father-figure – that children from single-mother families who had relationships with their nonresident fathers that were low in positivity might be more vulnerable to the risk that poor father–child relationships represent than children who were

growing up with a stepfather. The sample was then divided into two sub-groups: the children in single-parent families (*n* = 81), and those in stepfamilies (*n* = 81), and correlations between child–nonresident father relationship quality and the adjustment measures were run for each group separately. Table 5 shows the results.

As expected, the correlation between the positivity of the relationship with nonresident fathers and children’s externalising problems was statistically significant for the children in single-parent families. Using Fisher’s *z_r* transformation, the significance of the difference between the correlations in the two sub-groups (–.37 and 1.04) was tested: this correlation for children in single-mother families was significantly different from the correlation for children in stepfamilies (*z* = 2.17, *p* = .03). That is, for children in single-mother families, low levels of positivity of the relationship with their nonresident fathers were more closely associated with their externalising problems than were low levels of positivity for children who had ‘two’ potential father-figures: a stepfather and a nonresident father.

Following this, we pursued further the evidence that the pattern of findings linking child–nonresident father relationships and adjustment might differ in families in which the mother had become pregnant in the teenage years, by focusing on this issue in single-mother families. It was hypothesised that for children in single-mother families, those in the relatively high-risk families in which the mothers had first become pregnant in their teenage years, relationships with nonresident fathers that were high in conflict and low in positivity would be particularly strongly associated with poor adjustment. Some

Table 4 Regression analysis: children’s relationship positivity with mother, nonresident father, frequency of contact with nonresident fathers, and demographic variables on internalising and externalising problems

Measure	Internalising problems			Externalising problems		
	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Female child	.04	.41	.684	-.01	.07	.947
Child’s contact with NR father	-.27**	2.71	.008	-.14	1.52	.131
Child–NR father positivity	.17	1.66	.099	-.18	1.81	.074
Child–mother positivity	-.20*	2.04	.044	-.31**	3.23	.002
Variance explained	<i>R</i> ² (adjusted) = .08 <i>F</i> (4,101) = 3.12*			<i>R</i> ² (adjusted) = .15 <i>F</i> (4,102) = 5.61***		

Note: **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001. NR = nonresident.

Table 5 Correlations between measures of quality of relationship with nonresident fathers and adjustment measures in single-parent and stepfamilies

Measure	Single parent <i>n</i> = 81		Stepfamily <i>n</i> = 81	
	Externalising problem	Internalising problem	Externalising problem	Internalising problem
Relationship with NR father (positivity)	-.37** ^a	.03	-.04 ^a	.20
Relationship with NR father (conflict)	.09	-.10	.21	.12

Note: ***p* < .01. ^aDifference between correlations significant ($z = 2.17$, $p = .03$).
NR = nonresident.

support for this hypothesis was found: for children in single-mother families whose mothers had been pregnant as teenagers, the correlation between conflict in the relationship with the nonresident father and externalising was $r(22) = .57$, $p < .05$; for children in single-mother families whose mothers had not been pregnant as teenagers, the correlation was $r(55) = .03$, ns; this difference between correlations was significant ($z = 2.30$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Individual differences in the quality of children's relationships with their nonresident fathers in this sample of children were marked; these differences showed considerable stability over the two years we studied them, and were linked to the children's externalising problems. The findings raise a number of general developmental issues, centred around the question of what factors were linked to the variation in the positivity and conflict in the relationship between child and nonresident father, and more generally to individual differences in children's adjustment.

The significance of contact. The first issue concerns the contact between children and their fathers following parental separation. Earlier studies have reported some inconsistent findings on the significance of contact. Our results were unequivocal: more frequent and regular contact (which included communication by telephone) was associated with closer, more intense relationships with nonresident fathers (relationships that were both more positive and more conflicted), and fewer adjustment problems in the children. In this relatively stable community, many of the children had face-to-face contact and talked to their nonresident fathers quite frequently and regularly (33% at least once a week), and most fathers did not live very far away. While we should be cautious about generalising from this study to samples in which separated parents live far apart, it is worth noting that recent reviews of the literature worldwide have argued that there is a general trend for more extensive and regular face-to-face contact between nonresident fathers and their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; note, however, that the need for research into

contact to recognise both quantitative and qualitative differences in parents' interactions with children is increasingly emphasised, Melli, 1999). Similar rates of father-child contact to those in this study are reported in a recent representative community sample in the London area (Smith et al., 2002). The length of time since the father and mother were separated, and the child's age were not in this study related to a decrease in the positive aspects of the child-father relationship, though a decrease in the conflict in the relationship was found; as Bray (1999) notes, there may be further developmental changes in the relationship as the children progress through adolescence.

The direction of effects in these patterns of association between contact and relationship quality remains unclear. On the one hand, it could be that nonresident fathers enjoyed and encouraged more frequent contact with their children as a consequence of the positive warm and affectionate relationship they enjoyed together; on the other hand, it could be that the contact contributed to the children's friendly relationship with their fathers, or that both processes are important. The correlational analysis suggested that positive relationships between the children and their nonresident fathers were associated over time with more frequent and regular contact rather than vice versa.

Links between relationships. A second general issue concerns the links between the various relationships between family members. The findings show how important it is to view the pattern of children's relationships with nonresident fathers within the framework of other family relationships. Various alternative and contrasting proposals have been made concerning the links between children's relationships within their immediate household and with their nonresident fathers. It has been proposed that there would be no association between child-stepfather and child-nonresident father relationships (White & Gilbreth, 2001), that there would be negative associations (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) or that there would be positive associations between these relationships. We found that the affection, companionship and support children reported within their relationship with their nonresident fathers was closely linked to the positivity the children reported

in their relationships with their mothers, as would be predicted in terms of attachment theory or social learning theory, or on the grounds that children's characteristics play a role in the quality of their various relationships. However, the evidence from the analyses of child-stepfather relationships does not fit with a simple version of such views. The positivity in the child-nonresident father relationships showed no relation to the positivity in the children's relationships with their stepfathers; here the findings parallel those of White and Gilbreth (2001). In this respect the positivity and negativity of children's relationships with their fathers did not generalise across to their relationships with their stepfathers. It should be noted, too, that in some cases, the correlates of positivity in child-nonresident father relationships were opposite in direction from those of the child-stepfather relationship (Table 1), for instance those involving mothers' contact and relations with their former partners, indicating that we are dealing here with more than simply the independence of the positive features of children's relations with two fathers.

Conflict in children's relationships with their nonresident fathers, in contrast, was significantly correlated with conflict in both child-mother and child-stepfather relationships. While the direction of effects in these associations remains uncertain, the idea that the characteristics of 'difficult' children contribute to negative relationships with all three 'parents' by eliciting similar responses from different people (Caspi & Elder, 1988) is a plausible one. And as noted, these associations also fit with the predictions of attachment and social learning theories, and resemble what we found in families in which children were living with two biological parents.

Importantly, we also found that children's mothers' contact with their former partners, and the conflict they described in this relationship were associated with the children's contact with their nonresident fathers, and with the conflict in the child-nonresident father relationship, paralleling the findings of the meta-analysis of Whiteside and Becker (2000) which focused on young children. This pattern indicates that mothers' relationships with their former partners may indeed function as a 'gateway' for children's continuing contact with their nonresident fathers.

Links with adjustment. The third developmental issue investigated concerns the evidence on links between children's relationships with their nonresident fathers, and their adjustment. We had hypothesised that difficult or unaffectionate relationships with nonresident fathers would be associated with high levels of adjustment problems. The correlations supported this hypothesis in the evidence that low levels of positivity were correlated with externalising problems. However, the regression analyses showed that it was the positivity in the children's relation-

ships with their *mothers* that was the key relationship variable contributing to variance in adjustment. The quality of the relationship between child and nonresident parent did not make an *independent* contribution to the variance, but was, as we have seen, closely linked to the quality of the mother-child relationship. It is important to emphasise that contact with nonresident fathers made a key independent contribution to lower levels of the children's internalising problems, and that such contact was strongly related to mothers' contact with their former partners. It is possible that the global measure of contact used here could index a variety of features of fathers' interactions with their children – including their financial support – that were important in relation to their adjustment.

The analyses here again underline how important it is to consider the links between children's adjustment and their relationships with their nonresident fathers within the framework of the larger family system – taking account of the relationship and support between mother and her former partner, as well as between child and mother. The associations between children's relationships with their fathers and their adjustment were stronger if the children were in single-mother families – that is, if they had only one father-figure, and no stepfather – or if they came from 'high risk' families in which their mothers had been pregnant as teenagers. The findings add to a growing literature showing that adversities in women's early lives cast a long shadow – not only in women's own lives but in those of their children (Dunn et al., 2000; Jaffe et al., 2001). As noted in the introduction, selection effects may well contribute to the pattern found here. Evidence from national cohort studies of the relation between divorce and children's outcome, for example, points to the significance of both selection effects (parental and child characteristics and family processes existing prior to the divorce), and post-divorce factors (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). We know that in the families studied here, assortative patterns were evident (Dunn et al., 2000). Women who had experienced teenage pregnancy, who had left home early, or had a series of cohabiting relationships were more likely to form partnerships with men who had also experienced a series of cohabiting partnerships and frequent negative life events than other mothers; the evidence from both parents and children showed that less affectionate and supportive relations with both father and mother were in part the result of such selective partnerships.

Limitations

Five cautions should be noted about generalising from this study. First, the study was based on a sample of children growing up within a relatively stable community, with the majority of nonresident fathers living quite close by, and frequent contact

between children and their fathers. It is clearly important not to assume that these findings would generalise to children in different cultures or communities.

A second caution concerns the age range of the children. Since the children were reporting on their own relationships, this age range is of some concern – the older children were presumably more articulate and able to express their feelings. However, the general age pattern found, with older children reporting both less positivity and less conflict in their relationships with their nonresident fathers, was paralleled with the mothers' and stepfathers' reports on their relationships (Dunn et al., 2000).

A third limitation concerns the problems in making inferences about direction of effects. As in the great majority of family studies, the causal direction of influence between parent measures and children measures remains unclear, as we have noted. Fourth, it would also clearly be very useful to have fathers' reports on the issues investigated here. We initially planned to include nonresident fathers' perspectives in the investigation; however, fathers who had no contact, and those fathers whose former partners did not want us to contact them directly because current relations between mother and father were very poor, did not complete the interviews and questionnaires. The findings were therefore limited and probably unrepresentative of nonresident fathers' views. Finally, a notable gap to be addressed in future research is the examination of how financial support and difficulties relate to nonresident fathers', mothers' and stepfathers' contact and relationships patterns.

Implications for application and public policy

Among the implications of the study, the following should be noted. First, the issue of whether contact between children and their nonresident parents should be fostered has been a matter of concern and dispute. The findings of this study indicate that contact with nonresident fathers was, for the sample here, associated with children's wellbeing, and was related to mothers' own contact with their ex-partners and the quality of their relationship. This underlines the importance of parents developing a good 'working' relationship over children's issues, and of keeping any problems in their own relationship separate from their parenting (Ricci, 1997). However, it has to be recognised that there are some family situations where contact may be inappropriate (situations in which children have experienced or are likely to be exposed to domestic violence or child abuse). Some children in the study commented explicitly on the relief they experienced at not having to see their fathers (following violence to their mothers, for instance). Clearly, the complexity of these interrelations has to be taken into account in formulating policy, and simple rules of thumb such

as 'contact is to be fostered' are not appropriate. Children's own views of contact should certainly be taken into consideration; the importance of getting children's perspective on family issues such as contact with both of their parents after separation is increasingly recognised; indeed they can make useful practical suggestions concerning contact arrangements (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001).

Second, the special significance of the quality of the child–nonresident father relationship for children who were growing up in single-mother families deserves note, and provides further evidence for the potential vulnerability of such children. Third, it is also important to recognise the risks for children whose parents suffered adverse earlier life experiences; the findings add to the growing literature on the significance of teenage pregnancy as a marker for later problems in family relationships.

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