

Post-Divorce Father-Adolescent Relationship Quality

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Introduction

Many studies focus on events immediately before and after divorce that influence parent-offspring relationship quality. Less is known about the influence that long-term patterns of father involvement, offspring's stage of development, and youth's early life course experiences, and transitions to adult roles, have on stability and change in father-offspring closeness following divorce. We examine the contribution of each of these factors in an attempt to explain: (1) why some high-quality father-adolescent relationships remain the same and others decline, and (2) why some low-quality relationships are stable and others improve.

We begin by exploring the extent to which fathers are secondary parents by comparing father's pre-divorce closeness with mothers. Next, we examine the extent to which divorce exacerbates the typical decline in father-child and mother-child relationship quality that accompanies adolescent development. We then link offspring's familial (mother-offspring bond,) and extra-familial experiences (school attachment, group membership), sense of well-being, and transition to adult roles (leaving home, educational achievement, working for pay, becoming a parent, and marrying or cohabiting) to the trajectories of father-adolescent closeness over the five-year period mentioned below.

Methods

Data are from The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. From respondents who were interviewed both in 1995 and 2000 we extracted youth who were living with both biological parents during the first wave and whose parents had divorced by wave 3 ($N=570$). We also selected youths whose biological parents remained together across the study period ($N=4,800$). The two samples allowed us to compare the change in father- and mother-children relationship quality for youths who experience a divorce with those who did not. The divorce only sample was used to examine the factors that account for stability and change in father-offspring relationship quality.

Closeness was derived from the question, "How close do you feel to your father/mother?" Response categories were; *not at all* (1), *very little* (2), *somewhat* (3), *quite a bit* (4) and *very much* (5). To estimate the amount of change in parent relationships, closeness at Wave 1 was subtracted from closeness at Wave 3. Four groups were created to capture stable and change trajectories; increase in closeness, decline in closeness, no change low closeness, and no change high closeness.

Results

Our first goal was to estimate the extent to which fathers were more likely to have a secondary parenting role relative to mothers (Table 1). Overall, offspring were more likely to be closer to their mothers—evidence that fathers occupy a secondary parental role within the household.

Table 1 *Pre-divorce Levels of Parent-Offspring Closeness*

How close do you feel to your biological father/mother?	Pre-Divorce Father-Offspring Closeness	Pre-Divorce Mother- Offspring Closeness
Not at all	1.4	.3
Very little	1.9	2.9
Somewhat	13.6	6.9
Quite a bit	25.7	18.9
Very much	57.4	71.1

Our second goal was to compare decreases in closeness with parents in intact marriages with those who divorced (Table 2). Although there was some decline in father-offspring closeness among respondents who did not experience a divorce, the amount of change in the divorced sample was much greater. The figures for increasing closeness and consistently high closeness favored respondents who did not experience a divorce. Closeness to mother was largely unaffected by divorce. Although the primary pattern is one of decline in father-offspring closeness, some respondents were able to maintain high-quality relationships and a few were able to enhance relationships of low-quality.

Table 2. *Change and Consistency in Offspring's Closeness to Fathers and Mothers*

<u>Trajectory</u>	<u>Fathers</u>		<u>Mothers</u>	
	Divorce	No Divorce	Divorce	No Divorce
Decrease	56.5	28.5	26.5	23.6
Increase	14.1	19.7	18.1	16.5
Consistently High	25.1	48.2	54.1	58.4
Consistently Low	4.3	3.6	1.2	1.5
X ² (df=3)	183.19***		4.19	

The third goal was to assess the extent to which life experiences were associated with change and stability in father-offspring closeness among youth whose parents divorce. High and stable father-offspring closeness is contrasted with a decline, and low and stable closeness is contrasted with an increase. Life course experiences are first shown one at a time, with controls for offspring age, gender, and parental education (Table 3). Next variables significant at the bivariate level are entered as a group.

Table 3. *Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Patterns of Change in Father-offspring Closeness*

Predictors	Consistently High vs. Decrease		Increase vs. Consistently Low	
	1 ^a	2 ^b	3 ^a	4 ^c
	<i>B</i> (<i>eB</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>eB</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>eB</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>eB</i>)
<i>Controls</i>				
Offspring Age		.17 (1.19)		-.25 (0.78)
Offspring Gender ^d		.43 (1.54)		-.06 (0.94)
Parents' Education		-.07 (0.93)		-1.75 (0.17)
<i>Pre-divorce Adolescent Variables</i>				
Mother-offspring Bond	2.05* (7.78)	1.27 (3.56)	-.97 (0.38)	
Involvement in group activities	.01 (1.01)		.17 (1.19)	
School Attachment	.37 (1.45)		-.30 (0.74)	
<i>Adolescent Well-being Transition to adulthood variables</i>				
Left home	-.05 (1.05)		1.13 (0.32)	
Post-high school education	.42 (1.52)		-2.15** (0.12)	-1.75 (0.17)
Employed	.20 (1.22)		.16 (1.17)	
Live with biological children	-.19 (0.83)		2.38* (10.80)	1.42 (4.14)
Married ^e	.29 (1.34)		.25 (1.28)	-.41 (0.66)
Cohabiting ^e	-.97 (0.38)		4.96*** (142.59)	4.54*** (93.69)

^a Each variable entered separately, all models include controls

^b Model includes only those variables significant in Column 1 and controls

^c Model includes only those variables significant in Column 3 and controls

^d Reference category = Male ^e Reference Category = Single

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results indicate that, compared to offspring whose relationship declined following divorce, those who maintained a close relationship with their father had a stronger mother-offspring bond and an overall sense of well-being. Among those who began the study with a poor relationship, it strengthened when offspring experienced family transitions such as cohabiting, having children, and having education. Less educated offspring may turn to their fathers for assistance, while better educated offspring may be more independent.

Despite the dreary prospects for father-offspring relationship quality following divorce, there are bright spots. Early positive experiences and later transitions to adult roles are important in maintaining and improving post-divorce father-offspring relationship quality.