

Dissertation

The relationships among custody and visitation arrangements, parental conflict, and adolescent outcomes in the context of divorce

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## **ABSTRACT**

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by

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Experiencing parental divorce during adolescence has been associated with a number of negative adolescent outcomes. A high level of parental conflict has been identified as an important determinant of adolescents' adjustment to their parents' divorce. This study sought to examine the relationships between level of parental conflict, custody and visitation arrangements, and negative adolescent outcomes. This research is based on archival data obtained in the course of a forensic child custody evaluation, and utilized a sample of 89 couples and 196 pre-adolescents and adolescents. Results demonstrated that higher levels of parental conflict were associated with a greater number of negative adolescent outcomes. It was also found that children whose parents had joint custody experienced fewer negative adolescent outcomes than those who were in the sole custody of one parent. These results suggest several important implications for practice, policy, and future research.

## **DEDICATION**

To my parents, who I love.

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**CHAPTER I****Introduction**

Divorce rates have remained high for the past decade, with nearly half of all marriages ending in divorce (Carson, Butcher, & Mineka, 2000; Thomas & Gibbons, 2009). Over a decade ago, it was estimated that approximately one in three teens experienced parental divorce (Forehand & Neighbors, 1994). In the 1990's it was estimated that 50%-60% of children born in the United States would, at some point, live in a single-parent homes (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). In 2000, it was also estimated that approximately 20% of children under the age of 18 were living in single-parent households, some with unwed parents and others with divorced parents (Carson, Butcher, & Mineka, 2000). More recently, it has been estimated that approximately 1.5 million children in the United States experience parental divorce each year (Thomas & Gibbons, 2009). In addition, children whose parents were never married may face similar distress if their parents' relationship comes to an end.

Experiencing parental divorce during adolescence has the potential to be a particularly stressful event that may lead to negative outcomes for adolescents going through physical, cognitive and emotional changes. Although some adolescents are better able to cope with divorce than others, a significant proportion of adolescents are negatively affected by this experience. Negative outcomes can include depression, anxiety, delinquency, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and poor academic, behavioral, and social-emotional development (Hetherington et al., 1998; Farndale, Burton-Smith, & Montgomery, 2003; Richardson & McCabe, 2001; Rodgers, Boyce, & Rose, 2002; Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2005; Thomas & Gibbons, 2009; Wolchik, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000). The issue is further complicated by factors that may mediate and / or moderate the impact of divorce. For instance,

some researchers have suggested that it is not divorce per se that has a negative impact on adolescents, but rather, the nature of parental conflict (Bream & Buchanan, 2003; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Carranza, Kilmann, & Vendemia, 2009; Elder-Avidan & Haj-Yahia, 2009; Forehand & Neighbors, 1994; Grych, 2005; Lee, 2006; Moisy & Gunsberg, 2009). Parental conflict can include hostile arguments, financial disputes, disagreements regarding custody, and attacks of one another's character.

There is a debate in the divorce literature regarding the severity of the adverse effect of parental divorce on adolescents. In 1971 Judith Wallerstein conducted a pioneering study of divorce in which she determined that there are far-reaching effects of divorce on children that last well into adulthood (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). In 2000 she wrote a best-seller in which she presented the results of a 25 year longitudinal study of divorce, documenting the ill-effects of this marital transition on children. On the other side of the debate, Mavis Hetherington found that 75%-80% of children of divorce are well functioning and free of long lasting damage resulting from their parents' divorce (Hetherington, 2002; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Hetherington found that two years post-divorce, the majority of children were able to function well. However, she also stated that 25% of children from divorced families have serious social, emotional, or psychological problems.

This debate is further complicated by the severely different methodologies employed by Wallerstein and Hetherington. While the former relied on in-depth interviews of a limited number of adults who experienced parental divorce as children, the latter relied on large-scale studies of thousands of individuals who had this experience, without any reliance on personal interviews or accounts. Even if the number of adolescents who experience negative outcomes following parental divorce is limited to 25%, it seems rational that mental health professionals

would have a substantial interest in serving the needs of this 25%. This interest is further magnified by the inclusion of parental divorce in the trauma literature (Demby, 2009; Rickel & Becker, 1997) pertaining to children and adolescents, as well as the public health literature (Braver, Hipke, Ellman, & Sandler, 2004). It has been asserted that divorce has such an important influence on public health that interventions designed to mitigate its effects should be considered of primary importance (Haine, Sandler, Wolchick, Tein, & Dawson-McClure, 2003).

This paper reviews the current literature regarding custody arrangements, high parental conflict, and adolescent outcomes following parental divorce. Ultimately, this review is aimed at understanding and clarifying the needs of adolescents following the dissolution of their parents' marriage, and the ways in which to minimize the negative impact that divorce can have on adolescents. The review of the literature also provides a strong foundation for the investigation into the relationships among custody and visitation, parental conflict, and adolescent outcomes.

## Literature Review

### *Adolescence*

During the shift from childhood to adolescence there are changes in the importance of parents, peers, and personal identity. Some of the divorce literature suggests that adolescence can be a particularly difficult time to experience parental divorce. In one study, it was found that children in the middle age-range, or those who were in grade school to high school, fared worse than both older and younger children following a divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Other researchers have also documented a qualitative difference in the experience of younger children

versus older adolescents following parental divorce (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995).

It is hypothesized that adolescents can be more affected by divorce because they are better able to understand the transition that is taking place, and the ways in which this transition will change their lives. Along these lines, it has been suggested that adolescents experiencing their parents' marital transition can be at particular risk due to their simultaneous experience of this developmental transition. The fragile state of an adolescent's identity has also been suggested to create a vulnerability to distress caused by parental divorce. However, it has also been found that many adolescents experiencing their parents' divorce develop a greater sense of responsibility and personal competence (Amato & Keith, 1991; Carranza et al., 2009; Hines, 1997).

### *Negative Outcomes*

Hetherington (2002) suggests that a considerable portion of children of divorce do not suffer long-term negative outcomes. However, it is also clear that divorce can be associated with a number of negative outcomes in some adolescents. It should be noted that many of these studies did not differentiate between divorce in childhood or adolescence, which could potentially account for varied results. Nevertheless, researchers have found that children who experience divorce are more likely to have children during their teenage years, cohabit, and experience divorce themselves (Amato & Keith, 1991b). It has also been found that children whose parents divorce are more likely to exhibit lack of control over their behaviors, and less competent when compared to their peers (Ruschena et al., 2005).

In addition, survey data drawn from nationally representative samples indicate that those who experience parental divorce in childhood or adolescence have lower satisfaction with several dimensions of life, higher levels of psychological distress, and higher rates of involvement with mental health professionals (Amato & Booth, 1991; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994). The available data in the field are not consistent. The National Child Development Study used a longitudinal design on a large British sample to examine the long-term effects of divorce on young adults. Children who experienced divorce were followed up at ages 7, 11, 16, and 23. The authors concluded that although the risk of mental health problems increased following divorce, most of the participants did not show evidence of this risk. In this study mental health was measured by participants' total score on the Malaise Inventory (MI). It was found that the likelihood of scoring above the clinical cutoff on this scale increased from 8% to 11% as a result of parental divorce (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995).

There are other negative outcomes of parental divorce in adolescence documented in the literature. Children and adolescents who experience divorce can be more likely to suffer a range of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, internalizing and externalizing problems, as well as delinquency, and social adjustment difficulties (Amato, 2001; Buchanan et al., 1991; Oldehinkel, Ormel, Veenstra, DeWinter, & Verhulst, 2008; Richardson & McCabe, 2001; Rodgers et al., 2002). Those who experience divorce have also been found to have lower life satisfaction, lower educational attainment, lower incomes, and an increased probability of having children out of wedlock or being on welfare (Hetherington et al., 1998). Farndale et al. (2003) found an increase in social anxiety in adolescents who experienced divorce and/or parental separation. Harland, Reijneveld, Bragman, Verloov-Vanhorick, and Verhulst (2002) found that children whose parents had recently divorced were at greater risk for emotional and

behavioral problems than adolescents whose parents divorced in the distant past. Others have found that adolescents who experience divorce engage in more disruptive and aggressive behaviors, and are less likely to have positive relationships with their parents (Rodgers et al., 2002).

There is a trend in the literature for some children and adolescents who experience divorce to drop out of school, associate with deviant peers, be sexually active, and be unemployed in adulthood (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Demo & Acock, 1996; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Wolchik et al., 2000). However, it should be noted that the effect sizes documented in the literature vary widely, and that these outcomes do not apply to all adolescents affected by parental divorce. There are several factors related to parental divorce that have been demonstrated to increase or decrease the likelihood of negative impact on adolescents. For instance, Oldehinkel et al. (2008) conducted a prospective study of a large (N=2,149) sample of Dutch adolescents, and found an interaction between gender, age, and parental divorce. These researchers found that as adolescents increased in age, parental divorce was associated with increasing depressive symptoms among girls. However, the increase in depressive symptoms as associated with parental divorce was not found among the boys in their sample. Other researchers have suggested that adolescent girls may be more sensitive to marital discord between their parents than adolescent boys (Crawford, Cohen, Midlarsky, & Brook, 2001).

#### *Factors Related to Adolescent Outcomes*

There are several contextual factors that relate to negative adolescent outcomes following parental divorce. The literature has highlighted factors such as high parental conflict and the

relationship between parents and adolescents. The literature on parent-adolescent relationships is focused on closeness to parents, inappropriate disclosures, triangulation, and boundary diffusion. These topics are extremely relevant in high conflict situations, and have been identified as risk factors for poor adjustment to parental divorce. However, it should be noted that the presence of one or more risk factors does not guarantee that a negative outcome will follow, as many adolescents are resilient after facing their parents' divorce.

*High parental conflict.* Researchers have come to suggest that a high level of conflict between parents, and not divorce per se, is responsible for negative adolescent outcomes following parental divorce (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Hines, 1997; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Richardson & McCabe, 2001; Rodgers, 2002). This notion is based on evidence indicating that differences between children from divorced and intact families tend to disappear when the level of parental conflict is taken into account (Muransky & DeMarie-Dreblow, 1995). Thus, a high level of conflict is identified as one of the substantial risk factors for negative adolescent outcomes following divorce. According to Moisy and Gunsberg (2009), although hatred is directed toward the other parent and not the child, it inevitably injures the child and interferes with his or her adjustment to divorce. These authors express concern that children can learn hatred as a result of exposure to their parents' hatred of one another. According to Bream & Buchanan (2003), children are at greater risk of emotional difficulty when parents are so preoccupied with conflict that it interferes with their ability to carry out their parental responsibilities.

In their investigation into adolescents 'feeling caught' between divorced parents, Buchanan et al. (1991) studied children and adolescents between the ages of 10.5 and 18 years. These authors measured constructs such as feeling caught between parents, visitation with non-

custodial parents, closeness to parents, depression, anxiety, and deviance, all assessed by adolescent self-report. Parents were also asked to self-report information regarding co-parenting post-divorce. It was found that feeling caught between conflicting parents was related to variability in adolescent adjustment following divorce. The co-parenting relationship was predictive of adolescents' feelings of being caught between their parents. High discord, hostility, and poor communication between parents were associated with greater feelings of being caught between parents. Adolescents whose parents did not associate with one another felt less caught than those whose parents were still in a high-conflict relationship. However, these adolescents felt more caught than those who had parents who were actively cooperating with one another in the co-parenting relationship. It should be noted, however, that two-fifths of adolescents whose parents exhibited high-conflict did not feel caught between their parents. Similarly, there were several adolescents whose parents were in the low-conflict category who exhibited feelings of being caught between their parents.

There were several other important findings in this study. Closeness to parents had an important relationship to feeling caught. Emotional closeness to both parents made adolescents less likely to feel caught. Older adolescents were more likely to feel caught between parents, supporting the notion that as cognitive capability increases, so does the likelihood of being negatively affected by divorce. It is also possible that as adolescents get older, parents become more willing to engage in boundary breaching and enlisting their adolescents in dealing with their conflict with the other parent. Girls were also more likely to feel caught between their parents than boys, which may relate to the importance of interpersonal relationships to female adolescents. The results regarding adolescent psychological functioning as related to feeling caught between parents are important as well. Feeling caught between parents was related to

higher levels of depression, anxiety, and deviant behavior. The authors concluded that feeling caught between parents is not a necessary result of high-conflict divorces, but rather, “if children do not feel caught between battling parents, they are less likely to manifest negative adjustment outcomes” (Buchanan et al., 1991, p.1026).

Forehand and Neighbors (1994) conducted a four year longitudinal study based on the notion that high conflict can be as predictive as divorce in determining adolescent outcomes. These authors examined the individual, relative, and interactive effects of high conflict and divorce on adolescent outcomes. Participants included 227 Caucasian adolescents (age range from 11-15 years), their mothers, and one of their teachers. In this study, 124 of the adolescents were from intact families and 123 were from families in which divorce occurred within the past year. Due to attrition, the final sample contained 119 adolescents. The authors assessed level of parental conflict, adolescent behavior problems, and adolescent competence.

Marital status and level of current parental conflict had an independent influence on adolescent functioning. In the year following divorce, marital status predicted adolescent functioning in the domains of cognitive competence, social competence, and internalizing. This effect did not dissipate after the first year post-divorce. The current level of interparental conflict was related to adolescent functioning for three years of the study in all of the domains examined, including internalizing symptoms, externalizing symptoms, cognitive competence, and social competence. The interaction of marital status and conflict predicted both externalizing symptoms and cognitive competence, such that an increased level of conflict in divorced families was particularly harmful. The authors concluded that conflict is indeed as important as marital status, and that, “interparental conflict is one mechanism that can explain how divorce influences

adolescent functioning, it is certainly not the only one, nor is it sufficient to account for all divorce effects” (Forehand & Neighbors, 1994, p.11).

A study of 167 Australian undergraduates (ages 18-25) examined the roles of divorce, parental conflict, and adolescents’ relationships with their parents in determining later adjustment. Slightly more than half of the sample was from intact families, with the remainder of the sample representing divorced families. The authors identified seven domains of adjustment for study: life satisfaction, depression, anxiety, stress, opposite-sex relations, same-sex relations, and global self-concept. Results indicated that divorce was negatively correlated with life satisfaction and intimacy with parents and positively correlated with anxiety. It was found that conflict correlated negatively with same-sex relations, global self-concept, life satisfaction, and intimacy with parents, and correlated positively with depression, anxiety, and stress. The results of this study may have limited generalizability due to a sample of primarily female Caucasian university students (Richardson & McCabe, 2001).

It is noteworthy that individuals from divorced and intact families exhibited differences in only three of the domains assessed, with those from divorced families exhibiting poorer adjustment in the areas of life satisfaction, anxiety, and same-sex relations. The authors believe that this contradicts findings that there are large differences between adolescents in divorced and intact families. The authors also believe that the level of conflict may explain the similarity between these two groups (Richardson & McCabe, 2001). Other authors have advanced the hypothesis that conflict is an important determinant of adolescent outcomes, as children in high-conflict, intact families sometimes exhibited poorer outcomes than adolescents in divorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington et al., 1998; Rodgers et al., 2002).

Overall, there is support in the literature for the notion that high parental conflict has a detrimental impact on adolescents coping with divorce. It is also evident that even adolescents in intact families are negatively affected by high levels of interparental conflict. This suggests that high conflict independently influences adolescent outcomes, regardless of parents' marital status. However, there is also evidence that high conflict among divorced parents may lead to particularly negative outcomes for some adolescents. Conflict appears to be especially harmful to adolescents when they are drawn into the conflict, carrying messages between disputing parents and listening to their parents' respective sides of an argument. It should be noted that these studies are retrospective, and divorced families may have been different from intact families from the start. This may have led to possible confounds which influenced the results and require attention in interpreting the findings.

Further, various researchers have operationalized parental conflict differently. The Acrimony Scale, a twenty-five item measure of co-parenting conflict that yields a single score representing the mean of all items has been used in multiple studies (Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Sbarra and Emery, 2008). Other researchers have used a combination of items from several scales including the Acrimony Scale, the Discuss and Share Decision-Making Scale and the Content of Conflict Checklist (Pruett et al., 2003). The Forehand and Neighbors (1994) study measured conflict using the O'Leary-Porter Scale, a 10-item scale used to assess the frequency of overt parental conflict that occurs in the presence of the child(ren). Richardson and McCabe (2001) utilized the Conflict Scale of the Personal Data Form (PDF), which included 10 items on a 3-point scale regarding a young adults' home life during adolescence. A review of the literature reveals that the various measures that have been used to operationalize parental conflict have not been compared with one another based on psychometric properties.

Researchers have documented the beneficial effect of cooperative post-divorce parenting (Elder-Avidan, 2009; Grych, 2005). Unfortunately, most of the findings focus on the damaging effects of high parental conflict, and findings related to low-conflict outcomes are merely a by-product of studies examining high conflict situations. According to Hetherington et al. (1998), the most beneficial relationship between divorced parents is characterized by cooperation, mutual respect and support, and the absence of confrontation. However, only a small proportion of divorced parents are able to engage in this kind of relationship. These authors assert that many parents continue to engage in confrontational exchanges post-divorce, while others disengage from one another and go forward by “parallel parenting.” Although this type of parenting strategy is often devoid of open confrontation, it is not as beneficial as mutually supportive parenting between divorced couples.

*Parent-Adolescent Relationships.* Due to the fact that divorce is often mentally and physically stressful for parents, their ability to parent is inevitably affected by this life-altering change. There is a well-documented correlation between divorce and adult psychopathology (Amato & Booth, 1991; Amato & Keith, 1991b; Furstenber & Teitler, 1994; Hetherington et al., 1998; Ross & Wynne, 2010), however, the reason for the relationship is difficult to clarify. Therefore, it is difficult to know whether parents who experience divorce are more likely to suffer psychological impairment as a result of the psychosocial stress of the divorce, or whether their psychological difficulties predate the divorce itself. Many of the common consequences of divorce, such as court battles, custody fights, and a change in living arrangements, are likely to cause stress that will affect one’s ability to effectively parent. There is support in the literature for the tendency of recently divorced parents to be unavailable, inconsistent, less affectionate, and lacking in

control over their offspring (Bream & Buchanan, 2003; Hines, 1997; Ross & Wynne, 2010).

Specific to adolescent distress following parental divorce, Ross and Wynne (2010) found that adolescents who perceived their parents as depressed were more likely to self-report anxiety and depression. It was also found that participants whose parents were divorced were more likely to report that their parents also suffered from mental health problems.

There are several perspectives on the association between marital transitions and children's adjustment presented in the literature, many of which focus on the role of parents following divorce. For instance, emphasizing stress and socioeconomic disadvantage focuses on the social, economic, and practical changes that parents must cope with following divorce. Parents and their children might become socially isolated from their usual network of friends and family members. Economically, parents who experience divorce, particularly mothers, often experience a decline in family income as a result of divorce, leading to economic hardship. On a practical level, it is usually more difficult for one custodial parent to meet the responsibilities of parenting than it was for two parents to meet those responsibilities together. These practical problems are also related to the family composition perspective. This perspective emphasizes the effect of parental absence on children's adjustment, and the fact that this absence has been found to be related to problems with academic achievement and conduct disorder. Finally, the parental distress perspective focuses on the decline in overall well-being that may result from the divorce experience. Parents may come to suffer from depression, anxiety, irritability, and antisocial behaviors. Parents may have to cope with emotions such as anger, loneliness, fear, and regret, and some parents may not be able to cope as well as others (Hetherington et al., 1998; Ross & Wynne, 2010).

In a review of the divorce literature, Hines (1997) found that several parent factors were related to adolescent outcomes following dissolution of their parent's marriage. Many parents have difficulty protecting their children from the fallout following divorce, often because of their own inability to deal with the stressor. Divorced adults have been found more likely to suffer from alcoholism, depression, drug abuse, psychosomatic problems, and accidents (Hines, 1997; Ross & Wynne, 2010). Hines (1997) found that most of the literature delineates a two-year period of adjustment following divorce, during which the parent-child relationship is often disrupted. This period may be characterized by low parental monitoring and a lower level of parental support. These disruptions were found to be most pronounced in relationships between custodial mothers and their sons. Adolescent girls often experience an initial closeness with their custodial mothers, but the relationship may become contentious later in adolescence. In one study it was found that female college students reported a stronger coalition with their mothers as compared to males, as well as a tendency to align with their mothers against their fathers (Carranza et al., 2009). Notably, a good relationship with the non-custodial parent is also documented to be important to adolescent adjustment following divorce (Elder-Avidan, 2009; Faber & Wittenborn, 2010; Hines, 1997).

*Closeness to parents.* In their study of adult adjustment outcomes following parental divorce in adolescence, Richardson and McCabe (2001) examined the role of intimacy with parents as a factor determining adjustment. These authors found a negative correlation between adolescent's intimacy with their parents and their experience of depression, anxiety, and stress, such that less mother-adolescent intimacy was associated with greater amounts of adolescent depression,

anxiety, and stress. A greater amount of intimacy with both parents was associated with better same-sex relationships, global self-concept, and life satisfaction.

Positive parent-adolescent relationships can serve to protect adolescents from the negative impact of their parents' divorce. Several researchers have examined the role of the parent-adolescent relationship in ameliorating the effects of divorce. Closeness to parents is especially important in protecting adolescents. For instance, Richardson and McCabe (2001) found that intimacy with parents was associated with a decrease in the incidence of adolescent depression, anxiety, and stress. It also was associated with better global self-concept and life satisfaction. Among this sample of primarily female participants, intimacy with one's mother was associated with better same-sex relationships, whereas intimacy with one's father was associated with better opposite-sex relationships. These authors encourage parents to nurture their relationships with their adolescent children, as the literature has shown this to promote better adolescent adjustment.

Buchanan et al. (1991) found that the closeness of the parent-adolescent relationship was a potential predictor of adolescent outcomes following divorce, as was the amount of time spent with each parent, and the cooperativeness of the co-parenting relationship. In this study, adolescents who were close with their parents were the least likely to feel caught between them. The authors found this to be contrary to their expectation that being close to both parents would create loyalty conflicts for adolescents from divorced families. In fact, adolescents who were close to both of their parents fared even better than adolescents who were close to one parent or the other. It should be noted that the direction of this relationship needs to be clarified by future research, as it is possible that adolescents who do not feel caught between their parents are more

likely to be close to them, rather than that adolescents who are close to their parents are less likely to feel caught between them.

In a study directly examining the influence of the parent-adolescent relationship following divorce, the relationship that adolescents had with their parents was presented as a buffer against negative outcomes. The authors assert that the relationship between parents and their children following divorce is an important mediator of adolescents' responses. Closeness to parents, particularly the resident parent, is identified as especially important to positive adolescent outcomes. The most beneficial relationship is one that includes warmth, support, close monitoring, clear communication, and low levels of punitive punishment (Hines, 1997).

Hetherington et al. (1998) examined different types of parent-child relationships following divorce, including relationships with both custodial and non-custodial mothers and fathers. In regards to custodial mothers and children, the most beneficial relationship is one that is described as close, supportive, and warm. It is important that custodial mothers exhibit an authoritative parenting style in conjunction with the necessary amount of firm, consistent control. These authors acknowledge that many custodial mothers are unable to parent in this manner in the first two years following divorce, but they improve in their parenting skills over time.

In regards to custodial fathers and their children, these authors made more observations than they made recommendations for parenting. They observed that custodial fathers tend to report less child-rearing stress and better parent-child relationships than are reported by custodial mothers. Also, custodial fathers tend to be more child-oriented than non-custodial or married fathers (Hetherington et al., 1998). However, other studies have warned that custodial fathers have a tendency to be overly indulgent and permissive parents immediately following divorce (Hines, 1997).

In comparing non-custodial parents, Hetherington et al. (1998) noted that non-custodial mothers tend to have more ongoing contact with their children than do non-custodial fathers. Non-custodial mothers are also found to be more supportive, communicative, and responsive to their children than non-custodial fathers. In regard to time spent together, the quality of the time spent with non-custodial fathers seems to be more important than the amount of time spent. These authors recommend that non-custodial fathers spend a significant amount of time parenting their children, spending holidays together, and participating in a vast array of their children's activities in an effort to promote their children's well-being. A meta-analysis of non-resident father involvement found that closeness to non-resident fathers and authoritative parenting by the father were related to better adolescent adjustment following parental divorce, supporting these suggestions (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

*Inappropriate disclosures.* A substantial body of research explores the relationship between inappropriate parental disclosures during and following divorce and negative adolescent outcomes. Although much of the literature focused on maternal disclosures to adolescent daughters, there is some focus on both paternal disclosures and disclosures made to adolescent sons. The literature suggests that several outcomes may be related to inappropriate parental disclosures.

Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, and Raymond (2002) state that inappropriate disclosures occur when, "a parent regularly shares or discloses to his/her adolescent personal worries, concerns and/or complaints" (p. 470). Inappropriate disclosures are a form of intergenerational boundary breaching in which a parent engages in behavior(s) that blur the line between appropriate parent and child roles. These behaviors may include inappropriate disclosures,

inappropriate emotional and practical demands made on children, and requests to act as a mediator between divorcing parents. These behaviors are more likely to be present in cases of high parental conflict.

In a study specific to maternal disclosures to their adolescent daughters (Koerner et al., 2002), investigators focused on five topics of disclosure: finances, ex-husband, employment issues, parenting challenges, and personal concerns. The researchers were interested in five constructs: mother-to-daughter disclosure, daughter psychological distress, daughter closeness to mother, daughter worry about mother, and family financial deterioration, which functioned as a control variable. This means that the four other constructs were examined while the effect of financial deterioration was controlled for. Adolescents filled out self-report scales, as it was suggested that mothers may have a tendency to convey information that is more favorable or socially acceptable than the accurate portrayal may be. This study assessed maternal disclosure using a four point Likert scale in which responses ranged from, “my mother never says anything to me about this topic,” to “my mother has talked with me about this topic, going into quite a bit of detail.” There was also a choice to indicate if a topic did not apply to a particular adolescent.

It was found that the majority of mothers disclosed in all five of the target areas. However, the amount of detail given by the mothers varied. The depth of the disclosure regarding four target areas- financial concerns, negativity toward the ex-spouse, employment issues, personal concerns- was significantly associated with daughter’s experience of psychological distress and feelings of worry about their mothers. Depth of disclosure regarding parenting challenges was also associated at a “trend level” with daughter’s worry about their mothers. Further, depth of maternal disclosure regarding financial concerns, personal concerns, and parenting challenges were all negatively associated with daughter’s feelings of closeness to

their mothers. Ironically, it appears that disclosing these types of information makes daughters feel less close to their mothers (Koerner et al., 2002). It is likely that many of the mothers who engage in boundary breaching behavior would find this both surprising and disappointing.

Koerner and her colleagues concluded their 2002 study with a “cost-only interpretation” of the effect of maternal disclosure on adolescent girls. This interpretation was supported by the increase in daughter psychological distress and decrease in daughter’s perception of closeness to their mothers. The authors note that both the degree to which daughters worry about their mothers as well as the subsequent psychological distress they experience will vary depending on various situational and interpersonal factors.

In a longitudinal study of post-divorce maternal disclosures, Kenyon and Koerner (2008) examined the impact of these disclosures on adolescents’ perceptions of their relationships with their fathers. These authors identified a negative association between maternal negative disclosures about the father and the quality of the relationship between fathers and their adolescent sons. It was found that boys with lower autonomy from and higher inter-reactivity with their mothers were more likely to experience a negative impact on their relationship with their fathers following negative maternal disclosures. The effect of maternal disclosures remained for several years and was interpreted as a result of the adolescents’ tendency to over-identify with their mothers’ negative feelings about their father. These authors suggested that maintaining appropriate boundaries with adolescents who are experiencing parental divorce may serve a protective function.

*Triangulation & boundary diffusion.* Structural family systems theorists (SFST’s) have delineated the dangers of intergenerational boundary breaching or, crossing the line in the

appropriate parent-child relationship. According to the family systems literature, triangulation within the family, boundary diffusion between parents and children, and loyalty conflicts experienced by children may all result from inappropriate disclosures made by parents to their children. Adolescents may be at particular risk for subsequent negative outcomes as they are better able to cognitively process the information they are given than are younger children exposed to the same information.

Triangulation within the family typically occurs when a parent attempts to form an alliance with a child against the other parent. Some researchers assert that detailed inappropriate disclosures may contribute to triangulation within the family (Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 1998). It is also believed that animosity between parents and the degree to which parents attempt to triangulate children are positively correlated (Buchanan et al., 1991). That is, as animosity between parents increases, so does the likelihood that they will engage in behaviors that triangulate children. As previously stated, it has also been suggested that triangulation attempts are positively correlated with age. Therefore, in the case of a child who is getting older and a prolonged divorce in which animosity is increasing, the risk for triangulation may increase two-fold. More rarely, triangulation may also occur when a parent attempts to form an alliance with one sibling against another.

Boundary diffusion occurs under any circumstances in which a parent attempts to form an alliance with an adolescent against the other parent, or when the boundary between the parent-child subsystems becomes blurred (Buchanan et al., 1991; Koerner, 2000). For instance, when an adolescent acts as a confidant to a parent, or carries messages between disputing parents, the adolescent is brought into what should be a parent-parent domain. Under circumstances such as these, adolescents may become involved in parental conflicts and disputes, and may even be

called upon to negotiate on a parent's behalf. Researchers have found that confusion, stress, and adjustment problems are likely to result from boundary diffusion (Buchanan et al., 1991; Koerner et al., 2002). Further, adolescents may also experience psychological distress as a result of feelings of being torn, burdened or overwhelmed by worry about their own, or their parent's well-being (Koerner, 2000).

It is likely that older children who are experiencing parental divorce may be at greater risk for triangulation and boundary diffusion than younger children. According to Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch (1991), "as children get older, parents may become more willing to act in ways that make them [children] feel caught in the middle" (p. 1009). These behaviors may include inappropriate disclosures, engaging adolescents in the role of confidant, berating the other parent to the adolescents, and/or asking adolescents to obtain their own child-support.

Several studies document the prevalence of boundary diffusion between mothers and their adolescents (Dolgin, 1996; Kenyon & Koerner, 2008; Koerner et al., 2000; Koerner et al., 2002). Unfortunately, the consensus among these studies is that this type of boundary breaching is actually quite common among divorcing mothers, and has negative consequences for adolescents. Although mothers vary in the amount of detail and frequency of disclosure, common topics include financial concerns, negative feelings toward the ex-spouse, and parenting challenges. It should be noted that there is a lack of relevant literature regarding disclosures made to adolescents by their fathers, although there is no doubt that this does occur. Further investigation is needed regarding paternal disclosures of inappropriate information.

*Custody Arrangements.* Several researchers have examined the effects of different custody arrangements on children and adolescents. Much of this literature is focused on child-custody

mediation, different schedules of visitation, and sole versus joint custody in determining child and adolescent outcomes. As many jurisdictions are now mandating mediation in cases of child custody disputes, this research is pertinent to the determination of future directions in this area.

Custody arrangements are varied and can be conceptualized in many different ways. Legal custody refers to who is responsible for making decisions that affect a child's / adolescents life. Physical custody refers to the amount of time spent living with each parent. Joint physical custody is typically defined as when a child spends between 33%-50% with each parent (Kelly, 2006; Smyth, 2005). According to Kelly (2006) specific arrangements are influenced by the age of the child, number of years since separation, economic factors, and amount of conflict. Further, rates of children in joint versus sole custody arrangements and amount of time spent with each parent vary depending on whether state or national figures are being used and whether mothers or fathers are reporting.

Kelly (2006) asserts that custody arrangements in the United States are dominated by a "traditional" or "standard" arrangement consisting of every-other weekend with the non-custodial parent for one or two overnights. This was equated with approximately 14% of a child's time with the non-custodial parent (note that 33% is considered joint custody). Other variations of joint custody include mid-week overnight visits and extended visitation in the summer. Smyth (2005) developed a typology of custody arrangements based on a random sample of Australians. He classified custody arrangements as shared (at least 30% of nights spent with each parent), standard (set schedule of every other weekend for one or two overnights with non-custodial parent), daytime only (no set schedule), holidays only, occasional contact (once every 3-6 nights), and little or no contact (face to face contact less than one time per year). Among this sample the following percentages of participants were placed in each category:

shared (6%), standard (34%), daytime only (16%), holidays only (10%), occasional contact (7%), and little or no contact (26%). Smyth asserted that similar patterns are found in the United States.

Child custody arrangements have evolved with changing statutes. It seems that these changes have had a greater influence over legal, rather than physical custody of children. For instance, in the early 1990's twenty percent of divorced parents had joint legal custody, and when statutes changed to promote joint legal custody, these figures increased to between fifty and ninety percent. Also in the early 1990's, five percent of families in the United States had joint physical custody. However, in states such as Arizona and California, which have had statutes promoting joint physical custody for over two decades, the arrangements are now found in twelve to twenty-seven percent of divorced families. Depending on whether national or state figures are examined, and which specific states are examined, joint custody arrangements are now found in 35%-60% of divorced families. It should be noted that figures also vary depending on whether parents are litigating or mediating their divorce, with time spent with the non-custodial parent as low as ten to twenty percent for parents going through an adversarial process (Kelly, 2006).

Kelly (2006) reviewed the available literature regarding children's living arrangements following their parent's separation and divorce, and how living arrangements may be related to child outcomes. The author first traced the historical foundations of custody litigation and mediation. Several factors influencing children's living arrangements following their parent's divorce or separation are described, including institutional barriers, psychological and relationship barriers, relocation, and remarriage. Institutional barriers may involve adversarial attorneys and access to educational programs regarding child / adolescent adjustment to divorce.

Psychological and relationship barriers include maternal gatekeeping and ongoing maladaptive attachment to former spouse. According to Kelly (2006) there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding which custody arrangements and visitation patterns are associated with best outcomes for children and adolescents.

Bauserman (2002) examined differences in child outcome in cases of joint custody versus cases of sole maternal custody. This meta-analysis included 33 studies, 11 of which were published and 22 of which were not published. The studies were dated from 1982-1999. The combined sample size across studies was 1,846 sole-custody and 814 joint-custody children. Over 1/3 of this final sample were from convenience samples, and the remainder of the sample was based on court records, school populations, telephone surveys, and social service agencies. Only one sample was drawn from highly conflicted parents. Adjustment measures in this analysis included general adjustment, behavioral adjustment, emotional adjustment, self-esteem, family relations, academic / scholastic, and divorce specific.

Based on this review, children in joint-custody appear to be better adjusted than children in sole custody. The author notes that it is not necessary that children be in joint-physical custody, rather, the important thing is that they spend a substantial amount of time with both parents. Further, age did not influence whether or not children exhibited better adjustment in joint-custody situations. Neither the source of the sample (convenience, court, school-based) nor the person completing the adjustment measure influenced the finding of better adjustment in joint custody (Bauserman, 2002). It is important to note that the directionality of the relationship between joint-custody and positive adjustment is not clear.

It should be noted that the success or failure of a specific custody arrangement may depend on the presence of other related variables. For instance, the beneficial effect of

frequency of contact with non-custodial parent may not be found in high conflict cases.

However, it has been found that so long as parents encapsulate their conflict, high-conflict families are similar to low-conflict families. In high conflict situations in which the conflict is not encapsulated, frequent contact may be related to negative outcomes as a result of exposure to conflict (Kelly, 2006). Further, it is not being suggested that frequent contact with a severely mentally ill or abusive non-custodial parent would be beneficial.

Sbarra and Emery (2008) sought to examine patterns of interpersonal influence in the context of mediated or litigated child custody disputes. They achieved their experimental objectives by reporting a new analysis of the data from the Charlottesville Mediation Project (CMP) in which 71 families who petitioned a Virginia court in the mid-1980's for a contested custody hearing were approached at random and asked to consider settling their custody disputes through a mediation program, or continue with litigation.

Overall, co-parenting conflict decreased for mediation parents and increased for litigation parents. One interesting caveat is that for a small group of litigating families, co-parenting conflict decreased at 12-year follow-up. This subgroup also evidenced lowered conflict in the short-term. The authors interpreted this as support for the development of a taxonomy of custody conflicts, illustrating that there are likely to be differences within groups. These authors also found that where partners accepted the end of the marriage this acceptance predicted increased reports of conflict, especially among fathers. This finding was contrary to the theoretical viewpoint that non-acceptance of the divorce would lead to increased conflict (Sbarra & Emery, 2008).

**CHAPTER II****The Present Study***Rationale*

Future psychological research is necessary to fulfill the goal of attenuating adolescents' difficulties following their parents' divorce. One of the most prominent risk factors identified in the literature is high parental conflict. The relationship between high levels of parental conflict and poor adolescent outcomes is fairly well established (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Carranza et al., 2009; Hines, 1997; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Richardson & McCabe, 2001; Rodgers, 2002). Research has also been conducted comparing joint versus sole custody (Kelly, 2006; Smyth, 2005). The literature on visitation arrangements has not been developed as extensively, however, several researchers have observed that a 'standard' or 'traditional' visitation arrangement is often ordered. This arrangement typically consists of two weekends per month, with or without one mid-week overnight visit with the non-custodial parent. Other studies have examined frequency of contact with non-custodial parents rather than custody or visitation arrangements. Frequency of contact has been calculated as the number of days or hours per month spent with the non-custodial parent (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Johnston et al., 2005; Trinder et al., 2008).

It seems important that research examine the potential relationship among custody and visitation arrangements, high levels of parental conflict, and adolescent outcomes. Although judges frequently revert to a "standard" visitation arrangement, very little research directly examines the outcomes that are associated. According to Trinder et al. (2008) there has been limited investigation into the relationship between contact with non-custodial parents and adolescent outcomes using high-conflict samples. It is possible that the standard arrangement is

associated with higher levels of parental conflict, which is clearly related to poor adolescent outcomes. This could be the result of a lack of consistent exposure to the non-custodial parent. On the one hand, it is possible that conflict precedes this arrangement, and that judges order this arrangement as a result of the conflict. On the other hand, it is possible that regardless of the initial level of conflict, the standard custody arrangement serves to promote and maintain ongoing parental conflict.

In an effort to study the relationship between parental conflict and visitation arrangements, this study utilized a self-report measure of parenting resources (as described below) that has been used during court mandated custody evaluations. This questionnaire was supplemented with teacher reports. The questionnaire assesses level of parental conflict using several different questions and rating scales regarding communication problems, difficulties with co-parenting, and hostility. The questionnaire also assesses past and current custody and visitation arrangements, as well as child / adolescent outcomes. Utilizing this instrument and a sample of high-conflict divorced and divorcing parents, the relationships among level of parental conflict, custody / visitation arrangements, and adolescent outcomes were examined. It was expected that the highest level of parental conflict and the least amount of time spent with the non-custodial parent would be associated with poor adolescent outcomes.

### *Method*

*Aims. Specific aims of this study are as follows:*

1. To determine if custody status is related to level of parental conflict.
2. To determine if custody status is related to negative adolescent outcomes.
3. To determine if visitation arrangement defined as the number of days per month spent with the non-custodial parent is associated with the level of parental conflict.

4. To determine if visitation arrangement defined as the number of days per month spent with the non-custodial parent is associated with negative adolescent outcomes.
5. To determine if level of parental conflict is associated with negative adolescent outcomes.

*Research Design.* This study utilized a cross-sectional research design. Archival data were derived from the Parenting Resources Questionnaire (PRQ) and sub-scores were used to operationalize custody and visitation arrangement, level of parental conflict, and adolescent distress.

*Participants.* This sample consisted of families referred to Smart Parenting: The Family Center for a forensic child custody evaluation during or following a divorce. The final sample for which data were analyzed included families with pre-adolescents and adolescents between the ages of ten and sixteen years old. Families were all court-referred to Smart Parenting between 2005 and 2009. Exclusion criteria included a family court finding of abuse and / or neglect, and parents who were living in the same residence during their custody evaluation. Archival data were derived from the Parenting Resources Questionnaire (PRQ), a comprehensive questionnaire utilized by Smart Parenting as an assessment instrument. The questions selected for use in this study are part of this larger questionnaire that parents fill out during their first appointment at the Smart Parenting office. The questions selected included those pertaining to custody / visitation arrangements, parental conflict, and indicators of child / adolescent distress.

*Procedure.* Cases referred to Smart Parenting between 2005-2009 were reviewed. The final sample was based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria delineated above. For each case, the relevant PRQ questions were coded (see measures). Each PRQ was given an identification number and co-parents were assigned identification numbers with the same first digit (i.e. co-

parent ID #'s 11 and 12 will represent a couple). No identifying information was removed from the Smart Parenting office, wherein cases were reviewed and data were coded. Collateral sources of information included teacher reports of adolescent distress / functioning.

*Measures.* Constructs of interest included custody (sole versus joint), visitation arrangement (amount of time spent with non-custodial parent), parental conflict, and negative adolescent outcomes. As indicated, custody was coded categorically. The corresponding PRQ items for the custody variable included: Is there joint custody at the present time?; Do you have sole custody? Visitation arrangement was coded as the amount of time spent with [the non-custodial] each parent. The PRQ items that allowed for the coding of this variable included: Describe the current residence and visitation below; Please describe the days and times the child sleeps over or visits both parents; Are there extended periods of visitation (how are holidays, school recesses and summer vacations handled)? The conflict and negative adolescent outcomes variables were operationalized using questions included in the PRQ. Questions were selected based on their correspondence with findings from prior research. For instance, in regard to parental conflict questions that inquire as to the nature, level and period of conflict were selected.

Items from the PRQ that were used to operationalize the construct of conflict are presented in Appendix A. Higher scores indicated greater levels of conflict and co-parents scores were added together to derive a conflict score for each couple. The items from the PRQ that were used to operationalize the construct of negative adolescent outcomes are presented in Appendix B. Negative adolescent outcome was conceptualized by scoring 1 point each for each symptom / characteristic listed (range = 0 - 25). Each adolescent was given a total parent-reported negative outcome score and a total teacher-reported negative outcome score. Teacher-

reported outcome scores were derived from a similar symptom / characteristic list included in the Teacher Report Form section of the Parenting Resources Questionnaire.

*Data Analysis.* Preliminary analyses included reliability tests assessing inter-item correlations for the conflict items as well as the tendency for custody litigants to report opposing accounts. Co-parents responses were correlated with one another in order to assess consistency. Separate analyses were conducted for each parent, and with individuals nested under couples.

Descriptive statistics are reported below. These include the age of the parents, the number of children, the ages of the children, parent education level, and the joint versus sole custody composition of the sample.

Bivariate correlations were used to determine if visitation arrangement is associated with current level of parental conflict. Bivariate correlations were also used to determine if visitation arrangement is associated with the number of negative adolescent outcomes reported by teachers and parents. Bivariate correlations were used to determine if current level of parental conflict is associated with the number of negative adolescent outcomes reported by teachers and parents.

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine whether visitation pattern and level of parental conflict predicted negative adolescent outcomes.

**CHAPTER III****Results**

In order to answer the questions posed by this study, the data were aggregated and descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted. The results of these analyses are presented in this section.

**Descriptive statistics**

The final sample of parents included in this study ( $N = 178$ ) consisted of 89 couples. These couples collectively reported having a total of 357 children. Based on exclusion criteria, the final sample of children in this study consisted of 196 pre-adolescents and adolescents, ranging in age from 10 to 19 years ( $M = 12.84$ ,  $SD = 2.19$ ). The parents ranged in age from 28-61 years old ( $M = 41.86$ ,  $SD = 5.75$ ). When asked to report their highest level of education, 1.0% of parents indicated that they did not finish high school, 35% reported having graduated high school, 4.2% indicated they had completed a two-year college degree, 18.8% reported that they had a four year college degree, 5.2 indicated they completed a Master's degree and 5.2% reported having doctoral degrees. Of the parents of the selected sample, sole custody was reported by 30.3%, joint custody by 25.8%, undetermined custody status by 28.1 %, and 15.7% did not report their current custody status. Total parental conflict scores ranged from 22 to 69 ( $M = 48.30$ ,  $SD = 12.83$ ). Total negative adolescent outcome scores ranged from 0 to 22 ( $M = 7.82$ ,  $SD = 5.01$ ).

**Relationships among custody, visitation, level of parental conflict, and adolescent outcomes**

Bivariate correlations were run to determine the relationships between level of parental conflict, custody, visitation status, and negative adolescent outcomes. Due to the importance of the conflict variable, reliability of the conflict measure was assessed using Chronbach's alpha (.714). It appears as though the conflict measure is reliable in terms of each of the conflict variables being compared with one another and found to be measuring the same construct.

*Means, Standard Deviations and Relations Between Parental Conflict, Visitation Arrangement, Custody Status and Negative Adolescent Outcomes*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Parental Conflict	Visitation	Custody Status	NAOP
Parental Conflict	48.30	12.83	-	-	-	-
Visitation	16.84	10.88	-.125	-	-	-
Custody Status	2.30	1.07	.034	-.760**	-	-
NAOP	7.83	5.01	.189**	-.077	.075	-
NAOT	2.65	2.81	-.196	-.088	.178	.034

*Note.* NAOP = Negative Adolescent Outcome Score from Parent; NAOT = Negative Adolescent Outcome Score from Teacher;

\*\*  $p < .01$

Bivariate correlations revealed several non-significant correlations. The relationship between number of days per month spent with non-custodial parent and level of parental conflict was not significant, nor was the relationship between visitation and negative adolescent outcomes.

A relationship between level of parental conflict and negative adolescent outcome was found to be significant,  $r = .189, p = .016$ . A regression analysis further revealed that conflict score for each couple significantly predicted negative adolescent outcomes,  $F(1) = 5.56, p = .020$ . However, when number of days per month visiting with non-custodial parent was added to parents' total conflict score in the regression analysis, the equation no longer predicted negative adolescent outcomes,  $F(2) = 2.95, p = .056$ . It should be noted that this relationship is approaching significance.

In order to examine the impact of custody status on couple's conflict scores a one-way, between participants ANOVA was calculated. The ANOVA was significant,  $F(3) = 7.01, p =$

*Linear Regression with Parental Conflict, Visitation Arrangement and Custody Status as Predictors of Parent's Ratings of Negative Adolescent Outcomes*

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	
Step 1			
Constant	4.04	1.73	
Total Couple Conflict Score	0.08	0.03	.21*
Step 2			
Constant	3.59	1.94	
Total Couple Conflict Score	0.08	0.03	.21*
Custody Status	0.20	0.39	.05
Step 3			
Constant	4.42	3.08	
Total Couple Conflict Score	0.08	0.03	.20*
Custody Status	0.04	0.61	.01
Number of Days per Month	-0.02	0.07	-.35

*Note:*  $R^2 = .043$  for Step 1;  $R^2 = .002$ ; for Step 2;  $R^2 = .001$  for Step 3

.000. Post hoc analyses revealed that couples with undetermined custody status reported the highest level of interparental conflict ( $M = 52.94$ ,  $SD = 11.97$ ), followed by couples in which one parent has sole custody ( $M = 49.94$ ,  $SD = 12.02$ ). Couples with joint custody reported the least amount of interparental conflict ( $M = 41.52$ ,  $SD = 12.28$ ). Although couples with joint custody reported significantly less conflict than those with undetermined or sole custody, undetermined and sole custody groups did not differ significantly from one another. Caution should be taken in interpreting these findings in light of the fact that custody status was coded according to parent report rather than court determination. Further, the large proportion of parents reporting their custody status as undetermined warrants caution in interpretation as well.

Table 3

*Average Parental Conflict Score based on Custody Status*

Custody Status	<i>M</i> Couple Conflict Score	<i>SD</i>
Joint	41.52	12.28
Sole	49.94	12.02

Undetermined	52.94	11.97
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*Note:  $F(3) = 7.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .35$*

**CHAPTER IV****Discussion**

This study sought to examine the relationships between custody and visitation arrangements, level of parental conflict, and negative adolescent outcomes in the context of parental divorce. Specific aims of the study were to determine if custody status (sole versus joint), visitation arrangement (time spent with the non-custodial parent), and/ or level of parental conflict were related to negative adolescent outcomes.

Most notable among the findings is the consistent finding of a significant relationship between level of parental conflict and negative adolescent outcomes. The findings of the present study support previous findings of a significant relationship between these variables (Buchanan et al., 1991; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Forehand & Neighbors, 1994; Hines, 1997; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Muransky & DeMarie-Dreblow, 1995; Richardson & McCabe, 2001; Rodgers, 2002). The findings of the present study are unique in that they are based on a sample of parents engaged in a high conflict divorce and undergoing a forensic child custody evaluation, which had been called for in the previous literature (Trinder et al., 2008).

It was also found that couples with undetermined or sole custody arrangements reported significantly more conflict than couples who had joint custody of their child(ren). It is logical that couples whose custody status remains undetermined, or in which one parent has sole custody, may be in more conflict than couples sharing joint custody of their children. This is related to a previous finding that children in joint custody appear to be better adjusted than children in sole custody (Bauserman, 2002). Although custody status was not related to adolescent outcomes in the current study, the finding that couples in joint custody reported lower interparental conflict, and that interparental conflict was positively correlated with negative

adolescent outcomes supports previous findings that custody status is related to child and adolescent outcomes in the context of divorce.

Visitation arrangement was not found to be associated with level of parental conflict or negative adolescent outcomes, as was expected. There are several possible reasons for the lack of significance between these variables. There is a possibility that parents exhibited a reporting bias in regard to the amount of time spent with non-custodial parent. It is also possible that parents reported their written visitation schedule, however, they may not have been abiding by this schedule at the time that data were collected. Further, several parents neglected to report their visitation schedule, or reported that visitation was “undetermined.” The high-conflict sample may have led to a limited range of variability in the visitation variable, making it difficult to detect differences. This limited variability is evidenced by the high mean visitation found in this sample, as measured by the number of days per month spent with the non-custodial parent.

There are several noteworthy variables that were not examined in the current study. These include the time since divorce proceedings were initiated, the number of siblings, and the geographical distance between the child and the non-custodial parent. Each of these variables may be related to the associations between visitation arrangement, level of parental conflict, and negative adolescent outcomes. Future research should examine these variables in conjunction with visitation arrangement in an effort to assess the influence of visitation on adolescent outcomes.

Several aspects of this study warrant caution in interpreting the results. For instance, the visitation variable as coded in the current study was based on the number of days per month spent visiting the non-custodial parent, and did not address the quality of time spent together. Similarly, the symptom and characteristic list from the PRQ that was used to operationalize

negative adolescent outcomes did not account for other variables that may influence adolescent functioning and well-being, such as socioeconomic status and / or family history of mental illness. As noted previously, the custody variable may have been limited due to the fact that it was coded based on parent report rather than a court determination of custody.

The significance of the relationship between level of parental conflict and negative adolescent outcomes among a sample of high-conflict couples makes a valuable contribution to the literature. Although previous literature suggested the importance of examining visitation patterns in relation to level of parental conflict and adolescent outcomes, the effect of conflict on adolescents' well-being is essential to document regardless of visitation schedule. This finding has important implications for policy and practice alike. Several researchers and practitioners have highlighted parental conflict as an essential factor in children and adolescents adjustment to parental divorce (Behrman, 2010; Elder-Avidan, 2009; Emery, Sbarra, & Grover; Faber & Wittenborn, 2010; Grych, 2005; Kenyon & Koerner, 2008; Zimmerman, 2010).

The finding that parental conflict was significantly correlated with and predictive of negative adolescent outcomes supports the suggestion that programs aimed at reducing adverse reactions of children and adolescents to their parents divorce be aimed at reducing parental conflict. Such programs have been found effective when they foster positive relationships between divorcing parents, and prevent children from being caught in the conflict (Grych, 2005). The importance of educating parents about prioritizing their children's needs, maintaining their own functioning, and allowing their children to have meaningful relationships with both parents, as suggested by Emery et al. (2005), appears even more pertinent in light of the current finding regarding parental conflict and negative adolescent outcomes.

Results of this study, as well as previous research (Buchanan et al., 1991; Kelly, 2006), suggest that it may be helpful to conceptualize conflict along a continuum. Research suggests that level of parental conflict varies in terms of degree and exposure to the child. For instance, Buchanan and colleagues (1991) found that adolescents whose parents did not associate with one another felt less caught in their parents' conflict than those with parents who frequently associated but were in a high-conflict relationship that the child was exposed to. Kelly (2006) similarly suggested that when conflict is encapsulated children benefit from a strong relationship with both their custodial and non-custodial parents.

Results of the current study support the suggestion that parental divorce be considered a potentially traumatic ongoing event in a child or adolescent's life (Demby, 2009; Emery, Otto, & William, 2005; Rickel & Becker, 1997). Although many children of divorced parents have evidenced resiliency following parental divorce, many others have been found to suffer from ongoing psychological problems and adjustment difficulties. Results of the current study provide further support for the attention divorce is given in the public health literature, which has placed significant emphasis on the role of parental conflict in determining child and adolescent adjustment, and the need to develop policies and interventions that mitigate the negative effects of parental divorce on offspring (Braver et al., 2004; Haine et al., 2003).

### Implications and Future Directions

The literature regarding adolescent outcomes following parental divorce combined with the findings from the present study highlight several important implications. The literature

indicates that many adolescents react poorly following their parents divorce, and it seems that some parents are in need of assistance in ensuring their adolescent's positive adjustment.

One implication is that it might be necessary to conduct court mandated evaluations of all children and adolescents who are experiencing high-conflict parental divorce. Psychologists with specific training in family conflict and transitions in the context of divorce can conduct these evaluations. Not only should the evaluation have all of the main components of a basic psychological evaluation, such as objective measures for specific psychological disorders, but it should also include a relative weighting of the risk and protective factors that are documented in the academic literature. Any such evaluation should be informed by the recommendations of the American Psychological Association, documented in the Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings (APA, 2009). These guidelines emphasize a focus on the needs of the child(ren), the attributes of the parents, and the fit between them. Further emphasis is placed on the fact that psychologists conducting these evaluations are to assist the court in making custody determinations, and not to make these determinations themselves. It is recommended that psychologists utilize multiple sources of data in conducting these evaluations, including psychological testing, clinical interviewing, behavioral observation, and collateral sources of information.

Child custody evaluations and psychologists' involvement in them have become somewhat controversial in recent years. Emery, Otto, and O'Donohue (2005a) note several flaws of these evaluations that warrant concern. These authors assert that the prevailing custody standard and subject of evaluation, the "best interest of the child" standard, as well as the related statutes, are too vague. These researchers further assert that tests specifically designed to address issues of custody do not have a firm scientific basis. More traditional tests of personality and

intelligence are suggested to be irrelevant to determinations of child custody (Otto, Edens, & Barcus, 2000). Concern has also been expressed regarding the use of constructs such as parental alienation syndrome, which lacks scientific support, and lack of research regarding issues such as overnight visits for young children and adolescents' ability to assist in making decisions regarding their own custody (Emery et al., 2005). As a result of such concerns some researchers have suggested that parents resolve their custody disputes independently of our adversarial justice system, and make every effort to determine custody and visitation arrangements on their own (Emery et al., 2005a; Emery, Otto, & O'Donohue, 2005b; Otto et al., 2000). Although there are a number of promising alternatives to the traditional adversarial system (such as Emotion Focused Family Therapy, parent coordination, and collaborative divorce, discussed below) there is a sub-category of divorced and divorcing parents who simply may not be capable of making decisions regarding custody independently of the courts. In these cases a child custody evaluation conducted by a psychologist, and following prescribed professional guidelines, may be the most effective way to educate and assist the courts in making decisions regarding custody. According to Sparta (2008) the, "function of psychological evaluations for child custody is to provide a scientifically supported set of opinions which may better inform judicial decisions" (p.7).

It is further recommended that in any case in which it is found that an adolescent suffers from emotional distress or mental illness related to parental divorce, or in which the risk factors are found to outweigh the protective factors, court mandated professional intervention for the adolescent is indicated. It is indicated that treatment focus on alleviation of symptoms as well as the cultivation of protective factors that may improve adolescent adjustment. Several authors have presented models informed by the psychological literature that provide direction for treatment services for youths and families post-divorce (Braver et al., 2004; Faber &

Wittenborn, 2010; Lebow & Rekart, 2006). For instance, Faber and Wittenborn (2010)

recommend Emotionally Focused Family Therapy in cases of high parental conflict. The goal of this treatment is to reestablish connections between parents and children in an effort to foster attachment to both parents, build resiliency, and reduce risk factors for maladjustment following parents' divorce.

It is also warranted that courts strongly recommend parenting coordination, a form of mediation specific to child custody issues, in all divorce cases in which there is a high level of conflict surrounding child custody disputes. Along the same lines, it would be beneficial if within the context of parenting coordination, therapeutic services such as Integrative Family Therapy for Child Custody Disputes be offered (Lebow & Rekart, 2006). It seems appropriate that courts begin to take developmental factors into consideration, and that research findings be actively disseminated to attorneys, judges, and policy-makers so as to better inform those who are making important decisions.

The public health literature makes a valuable contribution to recommendations for mitigating the effects of parental divorce on children and adolescents. Braver and colleagues (2004) present a strengths-based model of the relationships between policies relating to divorce and custody, mediating factors, and children's adjustment. Two of the nine mediating factors identified are included in the current study, specifically, interparental conflict vs. coparenting and frequency of contact with the non-custodial parent. These authors suggest focusing on protective factors that mediate the negative effects of parental divorce, including positive coping skills of children, low levels of parental conflict, high warmth and consistency of parents, and the quality of contact with the non-custodial parent. It is further suggested that divorce be approached from a perspective that is analogous to other public health problems, and focus on

prevention of negative outcomes. Specific recommendations include the assignment of a Divorce Transition Guide (DTG) to assist couples in navigating divorce and custody issues, and interventions that can be classified as early, universal, and specialized (Braver et al., 2004).

The relationship between level of parental conflict and negative adolescent outcomes should also be discussed among primary care physicians, pediatricians, marriage counselors, and other mental health care providers. It is necessary that medical doctors be informed regarding the effects of high conflict and divorce on children and adolescents, as many parents do not seek the services of mental health professionals until symptoms have become severe enough to warrant this type of attention. It is also necessary that marriage and family therapists be aware of prevailing research in this area, so as to better guide clients as they make the decision to dissolve their marriage.

The findings of the current study imply that judges need to be better educated regarding the relationship between level of parental conflict and adolescent outcomes. Many states utilize lists of relevant criteria that are used in making determinations of custody. Braver et al. (2004) suggest that these lists should include factors such as minimizing conflict or shielding children from it, promoting feelings of closeness to both parents, exposing children to effective parenting, and minimizing changes in environment and/or economic status.

The current findings regarding level of parental conflict and negative adolescent outcomes provide support for the collaborative divorce model. This model recognizes the importance of divorce as a sensitive family transition that strongly affects all parties involved (Behrman, 2010; Kline Pruett & Barker, 2010; Zimmerman, 2010). Collaborative coparenting and collaborative divorce represent a shift in approach to divorce and custody issues. The focus is on improving parental communication such that parents are capable of effective dialogue

regarding their children's needs. Collaborative divorce and collaborative coparenting offer psychologists a unique opportunity to play an essential role in reducing adverse child and adolescent outcomes following parental divorce.

The current research needs to be replicated in an effort to better inform legal representatives as well as mental health professionals. Future research seeking consistency in measures used to operationalize level of parental conflict is indicated. It is further indicated that future research more accurately assess visitation patterns so that the relationship between time spent with the non-custodial parent and adolescent outcomes can be explored in more detail. Along these lines, greater variability in visitation pattern would add considerable value to the study of the effect of specific patterns on child and adolescent adjustment. Research on the effects of specific custody and visitation arrangements, as well as the effects for children and adolescents at different ages is warranted. It is very likely that there is a developmental component that is relevant to adjustment during and after parental divorce, and these relationships must be explored. Research utilizing cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs, as well as multiple samples and measures of conflict and child / adolescent distress would provide much needed insight into the influence of divorce on children and adolescents.

## APPENDIX A: PRQ Conflict Items

How would you describe the quality of communication (between you and the co-parent)?

1 = Terrible; Needs improvement

0 = Average; Better than average; Much better than average

What words best describe the communication (all that apply)?

1 point each: Cold, angry, sarcastic, negative, immature, threatening, bitter

0 points each: positive, helpful, cooperative, neutral, cordial, warm, open

Would you be willing to attend a course that would improve communication?

1 = No, nothing would help the situation

1 = No, but I think the co-parent should

0 = Yes, but I don't want to attend with the co-parent

0 = Yes, but it should be with the co-parent

0 = Yes, in whatever way is recommended

When you prepare your child to see or return to the co-parent, how often do you prepare the child by saying something positive about the other parent?

2 = Never

1 = Sometimes

0 = Almost always; Always

How often do you think the co-parent prepares your child to see you by saying something positive?

2 = Never

1 = Sometimes

0 = Almost always, Always

How often does your child tell you that the co-parent talks negatively about you when you are not around?

0 = Never

1 = Sometimes; Most of the time

2 = Almost always; Always

To what extent do you think the co-parent tries to help your relationship with your child(ren)?

1 = Never tries to help

0 = Sometimes tries to help; Is mostly helpful; Is almost always helpful; Is always helpful

To what extent do you think the co-parent tries to hurt your relationship with your child(ren)?

0 = Never tries to hurt

1 = Sometimes tries to hurt

2 = Always tries to hurt

#### 45NEGATIVE OUTCOMES OF DIVORCE

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Please describe how often your child hears you and the co-parent fight or argue with one another?

0 = Never; Almost never

1 = Regularly

2 = Often; Always

Please rate the co-parent on the following characteristics:

Honesty; Reliability / dependability; Gentle / not aggressive; Communication skills; Dedication to children; Flexibility; Involved in homework; Involved in activities; Nurturing / caregiving; Good role model

1 point for each Below Average

0 points for each Average or Above Average

How would you describe the level of conflict between you and the co-parent?

3 = Tremendous amount of conflict; High amount of conflict

2 = Average considering the situation

1 = Less than would be expected

0 = No conflict

How often have your children seen you verbally fight with one another?

3 = Almost every day

2 = Often, but not every day

1 = Sometimes

0 = Not very frequently; Never

Have your children seen you hit or push the co-parent?

3 = Three times or more

2 = Two times

1 = Once or twice

0 = Never

Have your children seen the co-parent hit or push you?

3 = Three times or more

2 = Two times

1 = Once or twice

0 = Never

Do you have an Order of Protection or other family offense petition against the co-parent?

1 = Yes

0 = No

Does the co-parent have an Order of Protection or other family offense petition against you?

1 = Yes

0 = No

Have the police ever been called to your house to resolve a family conflict?

46NEGATIVE OUTCOMES OF DIVORCE

46

3 = More than three times

2 = Two or three times

1 = Once or twice

0 = Never

When your child is in the care of the other parent, how would you describe the level of care he or she receives?

0 = Excellent; Above Average

1 = Adequate

2 = Below Average

3 = Poor / neglectful

Do you feel that there have been times when visitation has been used as a way of hurting the other parent?

0 = Never

1 = Once in a while

2 = Regularly

3 = Almost always; Always

## APPENDIX B: PRQ Negative Adolescent Outcome Items

How do you feel your child is being affected by the divorce / situation?

2 = Very negatively

1 = Negatively

0 = Not at all; Positively; Very Positively

Does your child suffer from any of the following:

Headaches

Stomach problems

Sleeping problems

Fears / phobias

Temper outbursts

Hyperactivity

Depression / sadness

Talk of suicide

Suicide attempt

Juvenile delinquency

School problems

Stealing

Lying

Overeating

Not eating enough

Aggression toward you

Aggression toward peers

Other peer problems

Shyness

Academic underachievement

Poor self-esteem

Lack of friends

Other

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