



Consequences of Maternal Post-divorce Dating Transitions for Children's Adjustment



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Introduction

- Empirical and theoretical research states that divorce is typically a difficult transition for families, particularly children (Amato, 2000; 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Lansford, 2009; Wang & Amato, 2000).
- Yet, parental post-divorce dating has been associated with facilitating families' post-divorce adjustment, particularly for mothers (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Langlais, Anderson, & Greene, 2016).
- Parents are likely to experience the following relationship transitions after divorce: a) entering a (serious or casual) dating relationship, b) exiting a dating relationship, c) initiating a subsequent dating relationship, or d) dating multiple partners simultaneously (Langlais, Anderson & Greene, 2015).
- There is evidence that these post-divorce dating transitions beneficially influence mothers' post-divorce well-being (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Langlais, Anderson, & Greene, 2016), but the influence of these transitions for children's adjustment has not been fully explored.
- Family systems theory provides theoretical support for whether or not dating transitions influence children's adjustment (Broderick, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).
- Based on this theory (Bowen, 1991; Broderick, 1993), post-divorce dating transitions may not affect children because, theoretically speaking, it cannot be assumed that the child has formed a "dyad" with his or her mother's dating partner.
- In some cases, a child may not even be aware that his or her mother is dating and/or in a romantic relationship, and thus has not been introduced to a dating partner (Anderson & Greene, 2005; 2011); the formation of dyads takes time and requires stability (Broderick, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), which may not occur during mothers' post-divorce dating.
- Therefore, the goal of this study is to extend those findings to examine how these post-divorce dating transitions influence children's externalizing, internalizing, and prosocial behaviors to determine if these transitions assist or hinder children's post-divorce adjustment.

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: Each of the following post-divorce dating transitions will not predict changes in children's internalizing, externalizing, and prosocial behaviors: mothers entering a new dating relationship, experiencing a dating breakup, entering a new subsequent dating relationship, and dating multiple partners simultaneously will not impact children's adjustment.
- Hypothesis 2: Relationship quality will be negatively associated with children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors, and positively associated with children's prosocial behaviors.

Measures

- **Dating Transitions.** Mothers reported their relationship status on each monthly survey for each partner they dated. Mothers selected one of the following options: 1 (Interested but not yet romantically involved), 2 (Never romantically involved, and now no longer interested), 3 (In a casual romantic relationship), 4 (In a serious romantic relationship), and 5 (Romantic relationship was casual or serious, but has ended). This information was encompassed in a discrete-time, person-period dataset, with each line of data corresponding to a monthly survey. A dichotomous variable signaled whether a mother began a relationship (variable = 1) and another variable measured the time in that relationship. When a mother was not in a relationship, the dichotomous variable and the time variable alternated back to zero. A similar approach, but different variables, signaled when mothers began or maintained serial and simultaneous dating relationships.
- **Dating breakup.** Mothers who broke up with a romantic partner responded with a 5 to the question previously described ("...relationship has ended"). The date that the breakup occurred triggered a dichotomous variable to alternate from a zero to one.
- **Relationship quality.** Mothers responded to the following item considering satisfaction with her dating partner, "All things considered, how happy or unhappy has the relationship with this person been this past month?" Response choices ranged from 1 (*Very Happy*) to 6 (*Very Unhappy*) and was reverse-scored for ease of interpretation (M = 3.35; SD = 2.52). Mothers reported their level of commitment by responding to the item, "How likely is it that you will have a long-lasting or permanent, romantic relationship with this person?" with response choices ranging from 1 (*Very Likely*) to 5 (*Very Unlikely*), which was reverse-scored for ease of interpretation (M = 2.63; SD = 1.58). Because these measures were highly correlated, $r(4228) = .94, p < .01$, they were summed together to provide a single measure of relationship quality (Range: 0 – 11; M = 5.98; SD = 4.10).
- **Children's behaviors.** Mothers answered 20 items that asked if children exhibited externalizing (6 items), internalizing (7 items), or prosocial (7 items) behaviors. Example items included, "In the PAST 24 HOURS has your child seemed to be happy or in a good mood?" (prosocial behavior) and "In the PAST 24 HOURS has your child been depressed or sad?" (internalizing behavior), with responses being yes (1) or no (0). Individual item means for children's behavior was .22 (SD = .25) for externalizing; .15 (SD = .20) for internalizing; and .85 (SD = .18) for prosocial behaviors (Cronbach's alpha = .63; .71; .64 respectively).

Analytic Plan

- To address study hypotheses, multi-level models were conducted using hierarchical modeling techniques (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Three models were conducted, with each model corresponding to a measure of children's post-divorce adjustment. For each model, length of time in the study was included at the within-person level to capture changes in time of independent variables. Additionally, an intercept and slope term were included that represented each post-divorce dating transition: relationship initiation, relationship dissolution, and subsequent dating relationship (serial or simultaneous dating relationship), an approach outlined by Singer and Willett (2003). We report AIC, BIC, and R^2 for model fit as described by Woltman and colleagues (2012).

Participants

- N = 316
- Children: Mean age = 7.77 years, 52% female
- Mothers: Mean age = 36.8 years, Range 21-53
- 23% receiving means-tested government assistance and 82% working at least part time
- Median length of separation = 6 months (range 0-103 months)



	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Income
64%	Caucasian	1.3% Doctoral degree	33.2% 0-35K
27%	Hispanic	7.8% Had an MA	32.9% 35-75K
9%	Black	28.5% Had a BA	33.9% 75K and above
		37.6% Some college	
		15.4% Completed HS	
		9.4% Less than HS	

Table 1. Comparisons of sample characteristics across different dating histories (N = 316).

	No Dating (N=49)		Monogamous Daters (N=145)		Serial Daters (N=65)		Simultaneous Daters (N=60)		Total (N=319)		F(2,318)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Number of diary entries	12.33 _a	9.25	12.38 _a	7.95	14.98 _a	7.79	21.32 _b	12.49	14.58	9.71	14.72**
Length of marriage ^a	132.00	72.94	111.70	63.53	129.01	61.74	132.52	63.99	122.26	65.21	2.39
Length of separation ^a	14.33 _{ab}	22.34	20.13 _a	24.70	9.78 _b	12.88	6.47 _b	7.01	14.56	20.62	8.31***
Mother's age	39.14 _a	7.06	35.71 _b	6.42	36.88 _{ab}	6.48	37.37 _{ab}	6.27	36.79	6.59	3.61*
Percent non-white	.39	.49	.41	.49	.37	.49	.22	.42	.36	.48	2.33
Education ^b	8.16	2.74	7.63	2.81	8.58	2.41	8.28	2.46	8.03	2.67	2.24
Income ^c	11.02 _{ab}	5.42	9.37 _a	5.41	11.88 _b	4.96	12.63 _b	5.18	10.75	5.42	6.88***
Number of children	2.00	.82	2.16	.96	1.94	.88	2.05	.79	2.07	.89	.37
Age of youngest child	6.82	2.47	6.01	2.87	6.26	2.52	5.98	3.03	6.18	2.78	1.17
Child's age	7.94	1.88	7.79	1.87	7.58	2.05	7.77	2.21	7.77	1.97	.32
Child's externalizing ^d	4.72	.45	4.84	.30	4.85	.24	4.84	.30	4.82	.32	1.78
Child's internalizing ^d	4.42	.83	4.60	.50	4.68	.38	4.59	.45	4.58	.53	2.24
Child's prosocial ^d	2.01	.65	1.87	.47	1.80	.43	1.93	.46	1.89	.49	1.95

Note. Means with no subscript in common differ at $p < .05$ using Bonferroni post hoc comparisons.

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

^a Measured in months

^b Measured on a scale of 1 (8th grade or less) to 13 (Advanced college degree, Doctoral)

^c Measured on a scale of 1 (Less than \$5,000 per year) to 17 (\$80,000 or more)

Procedures

- Data for this study comes from a multi-method, multi-informant longitudinal study of parental repartnering after divorce. Eligible families had an elementary-school aged child who resided with their mother at least 50% of each week.
- For the current study, any woman who filed for divorce over a period of 60 days were recruited for participation. Eligible participants completed a monthly survey once a month for 24 consecutive months. The mean number of surveys completed was 14.58 (Median = 13; SD = 9.71), and 91% of mothers completed at least three surveys. For each survey, mothers indicated whether or not they were dating, who they were dating, whether or not the dating relationship ended, and the quality of these relationships.

Results

Table 2. Examining dating transitions and relationship quality for children's adjustment (N = 316).

	Children's Adjustment Variables		
	Externalizing Behaviors	Internalizing Behaviors	Prosocial Behaviors
Intercept	.30 (.04)***	.19 (.03)***	.84 (.03)***
Maternal age	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)†
Race ^a	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.01)	-.03 (.02)*
Education ^b	.01 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Income ^c	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Length of marriage (years)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Length of separation (years)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)*	.00 (.00)
Number of children	.05 (.01)***	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Age of youngest child	.00 (.01)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Transition to cohabitation	.04 (.03)	.02 (.02)	-.03 (.02)†
Transition to remarriage	-.05 (.04)	-.02 (.02)	.02 (.03)
Child's age	-.02 (.01)**	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Child's gender	-.04 (.07)	-.04 (.05)	.08 (.05)
Child's age x gender	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Slope	-.03 (.01)***	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)†
Partnering Intercept	-.02 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.00 (.02)
Partnering Slope	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Relationship Quality	.00 (.00)	-.01 (.00)*	.00 (.00)
Post-partner Intercept	-.03 (.02)	-.03 (.02)†	-.02 (.01)
Post-partner Slope	.00 (.03)	.00 (.02)	.03 (.02)
Serial Dating Intercept	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)
Serial Dating Slope	.04 (.02)†	.03 (.03)	-.03 (.02)
Simultaneous Dating Intercept	.04 (.02)†	.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Simultaneous Dating Slope	-.07 (.09)	.02 (.06)	.00 (.03)
Model Fit			
AIC	-1042.322723	-2646.097013	-3762.759737
BIC	-1029.330859	-2633.105149	-3749.767873
R ²	.02	.01	.01

Note: Statistics are standardized beta coefficients and presented as $B(SD)$.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .10$.

^a Dichotomized (0 = white; 1 = non-white).

^b Measured on a scale of 1 (8th grade or less) to 13 (Advanced college degree, Doctoral).

^c Measured on a scale of 1 (Less than \$5,000 per year) to 17 (\$80,000 or more).

- **Results:** Based on the results, children's externalizing behaviors appear to decrease with time, but generally appear unrelated to mothers' post-divorce dating behaviors. Children's internalizing behaviors is negatively associated with the end of mothers' initial dating relationships, but are otherwise not related to post-divorce dating transitions. None of the predictor variables were associated with prosocial behaviors. In general, these models only explained between 1 and 2% of the variance in children's behaviors.

Discussion

- Based on study results, children's problem and prosocial behaviors do not appear to be directly impacted by mothers' post-divorce dating relationship transitions.
- These findings are supported by family systems theory (Bowen, 1991), where post-divorce dating transitions alone may not impact children's adjustment.
- Rather, what may be more meaningful is the rapport between children and their mothers' dating partners, which may be represented by the negative association between internalizing behaviors and relationship quality of dating relationships.
- Post-divorce dating relationship experiences have implications for maternal well-being (Langlais, Anderson, & Greene, 2015), but do not appear to influence children's adjustment, which provides helpful information for professionals when assisting families' post-divorce adjustment.

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