

Family-School Relations and School Adjustment of Children with Divorced Mothers: Testing Epstein's Parent Involvement Theory

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Abstract : The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of family-school relations on children's school adjustment with divorced mothers. Subcategories of the family-school relations were family participation in decision making, family help for schools, learning activities at home, school help for families, and school-home communication adopted from Epstein's parent involvement theory. Sub categories of children's school adjustment were delinquent behavior and academic achievement. The sample of this study included 3,367 children from first to fifth grade who lived either in a two-parent or one-parent home. Among them, 411 children with divorced mothers were analyzed. Independent t-test, Pearson's correlations, stepwise regression analysis were all conducted. Findings suggested that children with divorced mothers showed higher delinquency and lower academic achievement than children in intact families. Sub categories of family involvement and school involvement were correlated in divorced families. Children's delinquency was predicted by three of the family-school relation factors, which were school-home communication, family help for schools, and school help for families. Children's academic achievement was predicted by all factors.

Key Words : family-school relations, school adjustment, delinquency, academic achievement, children of divorced mothers

I. Introduction

Every year, the rate of divorce is increasing. From 2003 to 2005 in the U.S., marriages per 1000 people decreased steeply from 8.0 to 7.4 whereas divorces decreased rather gently from 3.9 to 3.7 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005). After parent's divorce, most children reside with their mother in a single-parent home (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Politicians, educators, the press, mental health workers, and researchers are in great concern about the high rate of divorce and children living in single-parent families (Hetherington & Stanley-

Hagan, 1999). An accumulation of research results show that the optimal child-rearing environment occurs in families with two married parents who are biologically related to their children.

Researches on relations of divorce and children's adjustment have demonstrated contrary results. Some investigators have reported that children are not overly distressed by parental separation (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980) and that they suffer no serious damage in long-term emotional development (Bernard & Nesbitt, 1981). However, a large number of research has found problems with children's adjustment after parental divorce. Several studies have reported that adults who

experienced parental divorce in childhood, have poor psychological adjustment, lower socioeconomic attainment, and greater marital instability than adults reared in intact families (Amato, & Keith, 1991). Recently, Sohn (2004) has analyzed longitudinal U.K. data. In his study, children who had experienced marital conflict had more emotional, health and social problems such as homelessness when they became adolescents or young adults.

Children of divorced families not only have social and emotional issues, but also school related problems, such as behavioral problems and delinquency (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Hetherington, 1989). Compared to their peers in intact families, adolescents in divorced families are two to three times likely to drop out of school, become pregnant in their teens, or engage in antisocial and delinquent behavior (Amato & Keith, 1991).

The intellectual functioning and achievement of children from one-parent families have been of nearly as much concern as the children's social and emotional development. Researchers have found that children from one-parent families have lower academic achievement and lower school grades than those from two-parent families (Guidubaldi & Cleminshaw, 1985; Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, & Lightel, 1986; Shinn, 1978). Differences between the two groups may be due to the low economic status of divorced families. However, even with maternal education and other relevant variables controlled, children in single mother families had lower fourth-grade language achievement and lower third-grade teacher ratings of productivity (Kinard & Reinherz, 1986). In other research, investigators have also stated that academic differences between children in one- and two-parent families are lessened but still persist even when the effects of social class are taken into account (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, & McLoughlin, 1983).

Although studies on children's social, emotional, behavioral adjustment and academic achievement indicate that parental divorce is associated with a two

to threefold increase in risk for adjustment problems, it is important to note that the majority of children's negative outcome could be repaired (Emery, 1988; Simons & Associates, 1996). In fact, most children of divorce do eventually become socially competent and function within the normal range of adjustment (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Mekos, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1996).

The question is what kind of factors buffer children's adjustment within a school context. Most psychological researchers agree that family environment is the most critical factor that effects adjustment of children dealing with divorce. Among family environment, the quality of parenting is also directly correlated with children's adjustment (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Petit, Bates, & Dodge, 1997). Parents who show positive affect (Biringen & Robinson, 1991), child-centeredness (Gest, Neeman, Hubbard, Masten, & Tellegen, 1993), and positive reinforcement (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992) are likely to have children who cope better with the negative impact of divorce. It is important to note that these results show the relationship between children functioning in a school context and parent's parenting skills in a family context. Connecting the family environment and children's adjustment in a school context is a common strategy in social science literature in order to better understand divorced children's adjustment.

However, we have to note the fact that parents' direct involvement in school context may also alter children's school performance especially delinquency and academic achievement. Effective parent involvement in school has been identified as a critical factor in students' academic success (Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, Miller-Johnson, 2000; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2000). Furthermore, many educators today are in agreement with a 'partnership' model based on the belief that the school-home relationship is not just a parent's one-sided involvement in school but 'bidirectional' in nature (Epstein, 1996), which is the main focus of this study.

There are eight parent involvement models;

Gordon's Systems Approach, Systems Development Corporation (SDC) study, Berger's Role Categories, Chavkin and Williams' Parent Involvement Roles, Honig's Early Childhood Education Model, Jones' Levels of Parent Involvement, Epstein's Typologies, and Language Minority Parents' Involvement approach (Lunenberg & Irby, 2002). Some of these models such as Berger's Role Categories and Gordon's Systems Approach are similar. However, the models differ in how school/community and parents collaborate in order to improve children's adjustment. Such differences in definitions and measurements of parent involvement make it difficult to assess cumulative knowledge across different studies.

From the models, this study has adopted Epstein's model which is a popularized typology of parent involvement or "partnership" activities. Epstein (1996) identified six types of parental involvement: 1) school help for families, 2) school-home communication, 3) family help for schools, 4) involvement in learning activities at home, 5) involvement in governance, decision making, and advocacy and 6) collaboration and exchanges with the community. Among those types, collaboration and exchanges with the community indicate relations between family and the community, not between family and school. Thus from Epstein's model, this study adopted five parental involvement types that directly indicate family and school involvement.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether family-school relations (family participation in decision making, family help for schools, learning activities at home, school help for families, school-home communication) influence children's school adjustment (delinquency, academic achievement) or not, especially focusing on children with divorced mothers. First, this study attempts to contribute to the existing literature of divorced children's adjustment by comparing school adjustment of children living in intact families with that of children living in divorced families. Second, among the children with divorced mothers, this study will examine how family

involvement and school involvement are related to each other. Third, this study will examine whether or not family-school relations buffer children's delinquency and academic achievement. The research questions are as follows:

1. Are there any differences in children's school adjustment (delinquency, academic achievement) according to marital status?
2. Are there relations between family involvement and school involvement of divorced mothers?
3. How do family-school relations influence children's school adjustment (delinquency, academic achievement)?

II. Method

1. Data and sample

The present study used the Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey (PFI-NHES: 2003), which was conducted by Westat from January 2 through April 13, 2003. The PFI-NHES: 2003 file includes data from interviews completed with parents of 12,426 children and youth from kindergarten through 12th grade who were residing in the United States. For the present study, cases that had missing values for independent and dependent variables were removed from the analysis. The target sample consisted of children from first to fifth grade who lived in a family with both their birth mother and father or who lived in a divorced family with only their birth mother. For the first research question, 3,367 children were analyzed. Among them, 411 children and their divorced mothers were analyzed for the second and third question.

<Table 1> describes the characteristics of those sampled. It shows that there were approximately equal numbers of first grades (20.6%), second grades (21.1%), third grades (19.3%), fourth grades (18.9%) and fifth grades (20.1%). The proportions of males (49.9%) and females (50.1%) were also approximately

<Table 1> Characteristics of Samples
(N=3367)

Characteristic		Frequency	%
Child			
grade	first	694	20.6
	second	712	21.1
	third	650	19.3
	fourth	635	18.9
	fifth	676	20.1
gender	male	1717	51.0
	female	1650	49.0
race/ ethnicity	White, non-hispanic	2100	62.4
	Black, non-hispanic	280	8.3
	Hispanic	772	22.9
	other	215	6.4
Parent			
mother's educational level	lower than high school	378	34.2
	high school graduate or equivalent	1484	21.1
	college graduate	1177	35.0
	graduate or professional school	328	9.7
	total house income	\$ 25,000 or less	715
\$25,001-\$50,000		794	23.5
\$50,001-\$75,000		807	24.0
over \$75,001		1151	34.2
marital status	married	2956	87.8
	divorced or separated	411	12.2

the same. Children's race and ethnicities were as follows; White non-Hispanic (62.4%), Black non-Hispanic (8.3%), Hispanic (22.9%) and others (6.4%). The proportions of the mother's educational level were as follows: 34.2% lower than high school, 21.1% graduated high school, 35% graduated college or university and 9.7% graduated with an advanced degree. The proportions of the total house income were as follows: 18.3% earned less than \$25,000, 13.5% \$25,001 from \$50,000, 24% \$50,001 from \$75,000 and 34.2% more than \$75,000. 87.8% of children were living with their birth mother and father and 12.2% were living with their divorced birth mother only.

2. Variables

1) Family-School Relations

As shown in the <Table 2>, family-school relations are categorized by family involvement and school involvement. Subcategories of family involvement are family participation in decision making, family help for schools, and learning activities at home. Sub category of school involvement is school help for families and school-home communication. Family participation in decision making was measured by 3 items indicating parents participating in governance, decision making, and advocacy at school. Family help for schools was measured by 5 items which indicates involvement in school of parent and other family members. Learning activities at home were measured by 5 items which indicate parent or any other adults helping with children's homework at home. School help for families was measured by 7 items which indicates how the school or teachers provided useful information such as child development, parenting skills, and influenced learning conditions at home. School-home communication was measured by 3 items which indicates active communications between school and family.

The type of scale for measuring school help for families was Likert-type, which ranges from 1) does it very well to 4) doesn't do it at all. For the analysis, variables were reversely coded to make higher score indicate school giving more information to families. The scale of school-home communication, participation in decision making, family help for schools, and learning activities at home was dichotomic, meaning 1) for yes and 2) for no. The total score range of each variables was 0 to number of items. Thus, the higher the total scores, the higher the involvement of the school or family.

2) Children's School Adjustment

As shown in the <Table 3>, children's delinquency and academic achievement are the dependent variables in this study. Children's delinquency is measured by 6

<Table 2> Descriptions of independent variables; Family-School Relations

Variables	Descriptions
Family involvement	participation in decision making 3 items indicating parents participating in governance, decision making, and advocacy Ex) Do you have a say in decisions about child's placement in particular classes? 1)Yes 2) No
	family help for schools 5 items indicating involvement in school of parent and other family members Ex) Have you or any other members in your household participated in fundraising for the school? 1) Yes 2) No
	learning activities at home 5 items indicating parent or any other family members helped with child's homework
School involvement	school help for families 7 items indicating schools helping to improve parents' understanding of child development, parenting skills, and the conditions at home for learning. Ex) Would you say your child's school does help you understand what other children at your child's age are like; 1) Does it very well ~ 4) Doesn't do it at all
	school-home communication 3 items indicating the basic obligations of schools to improve the communications from school to home and from home to school about school programs and students' progress, including the use of letters, memos, report cards, newsletters, conferences, and other mechanisms. Ex) Have any of your child's teachers or school sent you personal notes or E-mails specifically about your child? 1)Yes 2) No

<Table 3> Descriptions of dependent variables; Children's School Adjustment

Variables	Description
Delinquency	6 items indicating school's contact with any family members about children's behavior problem, school work, whether children has repeated any grades, had out-of-school suspension, in-school suspension, ever been expelled.
Academic achievement	One of 2 items indicating children's average grade or ratings across all subjects

items which shows whether or not children had high levels of behavior problems at school. Children's academic achievement was extracted from one of the two items. One item shows children's average school grade such as 'A', 'B', 'C' or 'D' while the other item shows children's ratings as 'excellent', 'above average', 'average', 'below average' or 'failing'. The type of scale for measuring children's delinquency was dichotomic, meaning 1) yes 2) no. For the analysis, variables were computed by adding up the numbers of 1) yes. The total score range of this variable was 0 to 6; a higher score meaning the children had higher behavior problems at school. The range of children's

academic achievement was from 1 to 4; A's or excellent=1, B's or above average=2 C's or average=3, D's or below average or failing=4. For the analysis, this variable was reversely coded, which makes a higher score meaning child's better performance at school.

3. Analysis

The data was analyzed by frequency, percentiles, means, standard deviation, independent sample t-test, Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analysis using SPSS 12.0 statistical package.

III. Results

1. Difference in Children's School Adjustment according to Parent's Marital Status

To explore the differences in children's school adjustment between children of intact and divorced families, the mean scores of children's delinquency and academic achievement of each group were compared by using an independent sample t-test.

As shown in <Table 4>, the delinquency in children of divorced mothers (M=.82) was significantly higher than that of intact families (M=.44, p<.001). Academic achievement in children of divorced mothers (M=3.11) was significantly lower than that of intact families (M=3.31, p<.001). As a result, children who were living with their divorced mother, had a higher rate of delinquency and lower academic achievement.

2. Correlations between Family Involvement and School Involvement of Divorced Mothers

To explore the correlations between family involvement and school involvement of divorced mothers, the mean scores of family involvement and school involvement were analyzed by using Pearson's correlation.

As shown in <Table 5>, school help for families was significantly correlated to family participation in decision making (r=.21, p<.01) and family help for schools (r=.18, p<.01). School-home communication was significantly correlated to family participation in decision making (r=.20, p<.01), family help for schools (r=.18, p<.01) and school help for families (r=.23, p<.01). However, family members' helping children's homework had no significant correlation with any other variables.

<Table 4> T-test : Children's School Adjustment according to parent's marital status (N=3367)

Variables	Groups	N	M	SD	t-value
Delinquency	Intact	2956	.44	.73	-9.29***
	Divorced	411	.82	1.04	
Academic achievement	Intact	2956	3.31	.80	4.36***
	Divorced	411	3.11	.88	

*** p<.001

<Table 5> Pearson's Correlation : Family Involvement and School Involvement (N=411)

	Family Involvement			School Involvement	
	1	2	3	4	5
1. participation in decision making					
2. family help for schools	.08				
3. learning activities at home	-.02	.07			
4. school help for families	.21**	.18**	.06		
5. school-home communication	.20**	.18**	.06	.23**	

** p<.01

3. Relative power of Family-School Relations to Children's School Adjustment

1) Relative power of Family-School Relations to Children's Delinquency

To explore the influence of family-school relations (family participation in decision making, family help for schools, learning activities at home, school help for families, and school-home communication) on divorced children's delinquency, stepwise multiple regression analysis was done.

Before doing the regression analysis, the residual analysis was operated through the Durbin-Watson coefficient in the process of regression diagnostics. As a result, the Durbin-Watson coefficient was close to 2.061, the self-relationship among residuals did not exist, which means that the regression model was adequate for this study. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to examine possible multicollinearity problems among the independent variables. The VIF ranged from 1.000 to 1.077 in regression models and no problems were discovered.

According to <Table 6>, the order of the relative power that affected children's delinquency was school-home communication ($\beta=.39$), family help for schools ($\beta=.20$) and school help for families ($\beta=.10$). Total factors predicted 16% of the variance. School-home communication was the most influential variable predicting children's delinquency since 11% could be explained. Therefore, children's delinquency could be lowered if school and home communication was less,

family members volunteered more at school activities, and schools provided more information to families.

2) Relative Power of Family-School Relations to Children's Academic Achievement

To explore the influence of family-school relations (family participation in decision making, family help for schools, learning activities at home, school help for families, and school-home communication) on divorced children's academic achievement, stepwise multiple regression analysis was done.

Before doing the regression analysis, the residual analysis was operated through the Durbin-Watson coefficient in the process of regression diagnostics. As a result, the Durbin-Watson coefficient was close to 1.913, the self-relationship among residual did not exist, which means that the regression model was adequate for this study. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to examine possible multicollinearity problems among the independent variables. The VIF ranged from 1.000 to 1.077 in regression models and no problems were discovered.

According to <Table 7>, the order of the relative power that affected children's academic achievement was family help for schools ($\beta=.20$), participation in decision making ($\beta=.15$), school help for families ($\beta=.17$), school-home communication ($\beta=.13$) and learning activities at home ($\beta=.11$). Total factors predicted 10% of the variance. Family help for schools was the most influential variable predicting children's academic achievement since 3% could be explained. Therefore, children's academic achievement could be

<Table 6> Regression Analysis: Family-School Relation to Children's Delinquency

(N=411)

		B	S.E	β	t	R ² (step)
Family involvement	family help for schools	-.16	.04	-.20	-4.24***	.04(2)
	school help for families	-.02	.01	-.10	-2.10*	.01(3)
School involvement	school-home Communication	.47	.06	.39	8.19***	.11(1)
	Constant			.92		
	R ²			.16		
	F value			4.36		

*** p<.001, *p<.05

<Table 7> Regression Analysis: Family-school Relation to Children's Academic Achievement (N=411)

		B	S.E	β	t	R ² (step)
Family involvement	participation in decision making	-16	.05	-.15	- 3.00**	.02(2)
	family help for schools	.14	.03	.20	4.03***	.03(1)
	learning activities at home	-.11	.05	-.11	- 2.20*	.01(5)
School involvement	school help for families	.03	.01	.17	3.40**	.02(3)
	school-home communication	-14	.05	-.13	- 2.70**	.02(4)
	Constant				2.76	
	R ²				.10	
	F value				4.85	

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, *p<.05

higher if families volunteered more at school activities, participated less in school decision making and did less learning activities at home. Also, children's academic achievement was predicted by school involvement, which indicates that greater school help for families would result in children receiving higher grades and greater school-home communication predicts lower grades.

IV. Discussion

Generally, divorced families have a low socio-economic status. Moreover, female headed families and their children are at greater risk than any other family structure. It is critical to find out the influential factors that would enhance positive adjustments of children with divorced mother.

The main purpose of this study is to identify the influence of family-school relations on children's school adjustment. Specifically, this study is designed to examine family-school relations (family participation in decision making, family help for schools, learning activities at home, school help for families, school-home communication) and children's school adjustment including delinquent behaviors and school grades as academic achievement.

First, children living with their divorced mother had higher rates of delinquency and lower academic

achievements. This result is consistent with existing research studying children of divorce. Literature on children of divorced families have higher school related problems such as behavioral problems and delinquency (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Hetherington, 1989). Also Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1982) stated that children of one-parent families obtain significantly lower scores on standardized measures of intellectual capacity and school grade.

Second, there was a direct correlation between family and school involvement in divorced mother headed families. When schools provided more information to families, families participated more in decision making and families volunteered more in school, there was a significant reduction in student truancy. When school-home communication was high, families participated more in decision making, families volunteered more to help schools and schools also provided more information. The result proves that family involvement and school involvement is bidirectional as Epstein (1996) has stated. The result of this study has proved that families lead by a divorced mother, their involvement can be enhanced if the school gives more information and the school makes a concerned effort to communicate. Moreover, well planned activities can increase parent involvement among hard to reach families, including single-parent families (Epstein, 2001).

Third, children's delinquency was predicted by three of the factors, which were school-home communication, family help for schools and school help for families. Among the variables, school-home communication was the most influential variable in predicting children's delinquency. We could assume that school-home communication is mostly used to report children's delinquent behavior. However, when family members volunteer in school and when the school helps families to guide the children, children's delinquent behavior decreases. This is consistent with other research on family and community involvement which demonstrated that students whose parents and significant other adults are actively involved are more likely to be successful in school (Sanders, Allen-Jones, Abel, 2002). Thus, even though a majority of children of divorced mothers may show higher delinquency rates, this can be diminished by involvement of the school and the family.

Fourth, children's academic achievement was predicted by all the factors. Family involvement predicted children's academic achievement which indicates that it could be higher if families volunteered more at school activities, participated less in school decision making and did more less learning activities at home. Children's academic achievement was predicted by school involvement, which indicates that when schools gives more information to families, children's grades are higher and when school-home communication increased, children's grades are lower. Thus, schools providing information and family volunteering enhances children's academic achievement, on the other hand, family participation in decision making, school-home communication and more learning activities at home make children's grades lower. Negative effect of school-home communication on academic achievement can be explained in relation to its positive effect on delinquency. We can assume that school-home communication is not used to report children's progress, but rather used to report problematic issues. Parent's involvement in learning activities at home has

negative effect on children's academic achievement. It is probable that parent's helping homework might disturb children's development of autonomy, that as a result children get lower school grades. However, in order to prove this hypothesis clearly, further experiment-designed research including mediating variables such as children's academic autonomy is required.

Although this study has produced some useful insights of family-school relations and children's school adjustment, there are two study limitations. First, because we do not have longitudinal data in our subjects, the proposed time-ordered effects need to be viewed with caution. Additionally, in US society, race and ethnicity factors might distort the results of the study. However, we could not control race and ethnicity because then the sample size would become too small to analyze statistically. Thus due to the sample size, this study has limitations on examining whether race or ethnicity moderated any of the relations studied.

Despite these limitations, the present findings offer some insight into how children's school adjustment is affected by family-school relations. First, this study shows that family involvement in school context is closely related to school involvement. Second, family-school relations are another protective factor for children's school adjustment especially for children with divorced mothers. Third, children's poor adjustment at school could be solved not only by parent's involvement but also by school involvement. Thus, our findings show that the adverse effects of family risk could be diminished when families and schools work as a partnership to enhance children's school adjustment.

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