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The Family Context of Parenting in Children's Adaptation to Elementary School

Edited by

Philip A. Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan
University of California, Berkeley

Jennifer C. Ablow
University of Oregon

Vanessa Kahlen Johnson
West Chester University

Jeffrey R. Measelle
University of Oregon



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For our children by birth and by marriage:

*Joanna, Kennen, Dena, Tom, Jon,
Jennifer, Eli, Sam, Abby, and Noa.*

And for our grandchildren:

*Kailey, Kiegan, Alexandra, Jordyn,
Caitlin, Jamie, and Spencer.*

arrangements, fathers tend to become more involved with their children, but this appears to have different consequences for girls and boys.

We have argued here that it is necessary to go beyond the usual question of whether there are sex differences in children's and parents' sex-stereotypic behaviors to inquire about the potential risks and benefits associated with more and less sex-typed parent-child interactions. In this study, stereotyped interaction with fathers in the preschool period functioned as a protective factor with respect to nonstereotyped problem behavior, so that masculine-typed interactions with girls were associated with lower levels of aggression in school, whereas feminine-typed interactions with boys were associated with lower levels of aggression in boys. However, the same stereotyped interaction with fathers in the preschool period was a risk factor for sex-stereotyped problem behavior (depression for girls, aggression for boys) in kindergarten 1 year later.

This complex pattern supports a functionalist theoretical interpretation of risk-outcome paradigms. Risk, protection, and vulnerability do not inhere in specific variables, but rather in the network of connections among variables. In this case, during the transition to school period, sex-stereotyped father-child behavior during the preschool period functions as both a protective factor and a buffer with reference to internalizing and externalizing problems, with effects depending on the sex of the child.

6

Children's Self-Perceptions As a Link Between Family Relationship Quality and Social Adaptation to School

Jeffrey R. Measelle

As children enter kindergarten, their social adjustment is partially determined by the degree to which they can negotiate and maintain new relationships, become engaged rather than withdrawn from peer-group activities, and behave in prosocial rather than aggressive or antisocial ways (Barth & Parke, 1996; Ladd, 1996). Indeed, the success with which children negotiate the interpersonal challenges associated with school transition will have life-long implications for their mental health (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999), scholastic attainments (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1993; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997), and later social relationships (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997). Although it is clear that family affective relationship factors provide important contextual influences on children's social adjustment (Goodman, 2002; Sheeber, Hops, Alpert, Davis, & Andrews, 1997), little is known about the specific processes by which problematic or competent outcomes are established. Rather, findings show more generally that "bad environments" are associated with "bad outcomes" and "good environments" are associated with "good outcomes."

In this chapter, we focus on links between the emotional quality of multiple family relationships and children's social adaptation to kindergarten. Using data collected at two points in time, we examine the predictive power of the positive and negative emotional properties of children's preschool relationships with their mothers, fathers, and siblings in explaining variation in their social adjustment at the end of kindergarten. We pay special attention to how children's perceptions of the relationship between their parents en-

hance our understanding of these associations. We test the hypotheses that, in addition to their family backgrounds, characteristics of the children also shape their transition to school, and that children's perceptions of themselves as more or less socially competent and likeable individuals play a significant role in enhancing or reducing the likelihood of a successful start to school.

EARLY FAMILY PROCESSES AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

We know from the results reported in chapter 4, and from many other studies, that parent-child relationships characterized by high degrees of warmth contribute to children's competent behaviors with peers, whereas interactions defined primarily by negative affect or conflict between mothers and children contribute to children's aggressive or sad-withdrawn behavior at school (Cowan, Cowan, Schulz, & Heming, 1994; Parke & Buriel, 1998; Patterson & Reid, 1984). Children's participation in and feelings about their relationships with siblings also have implications for their early social development. Dunn and her colleagues (Dunn, 1996; Dunn, Slomkowski, & Beardsall, 1994) and Patterson (1986) showed that, when sibling relationships are characterized as amicable, children tend to have close friendships outside of the family (Dunn, 1996), whereas sibling relationships marked by hostility and aggression are associated with antisocial behavior toward peers (Patterson, 1986). Dunn et al. (1994) also found that, although the correlates of social competence change with age, the emotional characteristics of sibling relationships continue to be stable and consistent predictors of adjustment across early to middle childhood. Their conclusion underscores the importance of examining the early contribution of sibling relationships to children's social adjustment.

In addition to considering children's participatory role in parent-child and sibling relationships, it is important for children to take their perceptions of their parents' relationship as a couple into account. As shown by researchers interested in the emotional security hypothesis, it is precisely mother-father transactions in the presence of the child that have been identified as proximal stimuli with the potential to create disequilibrium and distress in the child (Ablow, 1997b; see also Cummings & Davies, 1994; Fincham, 1998). Conflict between parents that is expressed in front of children as they prepare to enter kindergarten may be especially salient to their adjustment in their first year of formal schooling.

Research on emotion in family life suggests that, although positive and negative affectivity in relationships overlap (Fincham, 1998; Watson & Clark, 1997), they appear to be relatively distinct emotional systems, with different implications for children's psychosocial development (Goldsmith & Campos, 1990; Tellegen, 1988; Watson & Clark, 1997). We examined the

possibility that the positive and negative emotional qualities of key family relationships in the preschool period make different contributions to understanding variation in children's social adjustment following their entrance to kindergarten.

YOUNG CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SELF-PERCEPTIONS

Increased attention has been paid to children's self-perceptions as markers, if not central determinants, of their school adjustment. Based on studies showing that self-perceptions in school-age children play an important role in the production of competent social behavior (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Harter, 1999), definitions of social adjustment have been expanded to include children's capacity to maintain positive perceptions of themselves (Ladd, 1996; Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998). For example, children who view themselves as socially competent and likeable tend to exhibit greater cooperation, less hostility, and smoother group entry skills than children with negative social self-perceptions (Crick & Ladd, 1993). However, most of the studies investigating links between children's self-perceptions and school adjustment have been conducted with children who have already begun their schooling. The possibility that children's preschool self-perceptions might act as antecedents to a successful transition to school is less well understood.

LINKING PRESCHOOL PROCESSES AND SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT THROUGH CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SELF-PERCEPTIONS

Despite evidence for connections between early family transactions and children's subsequent social adjustment, the process by which these links are created and maintained has not been established. One of the most compelling explanations for behavioral and emotional continuities across relationships comes from attachment theory, which posits that children construct mental representations of themselves as competent and likeable based on experiences in their primary attachment relationship(s), (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990), and that feeling positively about the self as worthy of being loved is a central dimension of attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Systematic studies reveal that, as their social networks expand, typically in conjunction with school entry, children's perceptions of themselves and others help to shape their interactions in new relationships (Bretherton et al., 1990).

Beyond attachment processes, much less is understood about the extent to which the emotional properties of other family relationships contribute to children's early self-perceptions, in part because assessments of multiple family relationships are rarely conducted within the same study. Yet, evidence that attachment is but one relational context in which children develop socially (Dunn, 1993; Hinde, 1995) suggests that children's early self-perceptions are likely to take shape in multiple family relationships. Indeed, both past (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) and current studies of symbolic interaction (e.g., reflective appraisal processes; Harter, 1999; Kenny, 1996) emphasize the contributions of "important others" (Mead, 1934) to children's perceptions and evaluations of themselves.

In addition to studying the contribution of the positive and negative emotional qualities of mother-child, father-child, coparenting, and sibling relationships to children's school adjustment, we also examined the unique and overlapping associations between children's family relationships and their social self-perceptions prior to the start of kindergarten. We explored the possibility that children's self-perceptions act as mechanisms that link their preschool family environment and later adaptation to school in two conceptually distinct ways. Following procedures recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986), we conducted exploratory analyses to see whether children's self-perceptions operate as mediators or moderators of the family-to-school connection. If they act as mediators, the effects of children's early family environment on their subsequent adjustment to school would be linked through their self-perceptions. For example, it may be that the connection between earlier negative family processes and children's later tendency toward antisocial behavior at school is accounted for by negative self-perceptions that develop within the context of aversive family relationships and are then manifested in other interpersonal situations outside of the family. If children's self-perceptions function as moderators, they might help to explain for whom coercive family environments are most and least disequilibrating. In other words, despite a punitive family environment, a positive self-perception might help keep some children from behaving in socially disruptive ways. Our analyses tested the hypothesis that mediators and moderators represent distinct psychological functions of children's perceptions of their competence and difficulties.

HYPOTHESES

1. We predicted that positive and negative emotional aspects of mother-child, father-child, the couple, and sibling relationships would be correlated with children's self-perceptions in the preschool period. In a more exploratory approach, we investigated whether each of these family relationships explained unique variance in children's self-perceptions.

2. We predicted that family relationship processes and children's self-perceptions in the preschool period would combine to explain variation in teacher-rated social competence, namely, internalizing and externalizing behavior in the classroom. Exploratory analyses investigated whether preschoolers' self-perceptions functioned as mediators or moderators of the links between family processes and their subsequent adaptation to school.

METHOD

Participants

For this study, a total of 71 target children and their families were drawn from the larger Schoolchildren and Their Families (SAF) Project. Because of our interest in measuring the contributions of multiple family relationships, only children with a younger sibling at the time of the preschool home visit were included. Data are presented for 38 boys and 33 girls at the preschool period (M age = 4.9, SD = .36). At the time the target children's self-perceptions were assessed, the mean age of the next youngest sibling was approximately 2.3 years (SD = .31).

Measures

Children's Self-Perceptions. The Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI; Ablow & Measelle, 1993) was used to measure children's academic and social self-perceptions. Here, we report on two of the original six scales from the BPI: (a) social competence, and (b) acceptance by peers, as characterized by the children. Social competence scores (five items) included the ability to engage effectively in social tasks, such as making friends, asserting oneself in a socially appropriate manner, and seeking engagement more than isolation, α = .65. Peer acceptance scores (eight items) included children's perception of themselves as liked and included by other children, and as not ignored, excluded, or rejected, α = .68. Because the scores on the two scales were correlated, $r(69) = .48, p < .001$, they were averaged to create a single measure of children's perceived social adjustment.

Measures of Relational Affect.

1. Parent-child interactions—In this study, the positive and negative emotional qualities of mother-child and father-child relationships were based on observational ratings of each parent's affect during the separate dyadic parent-child interactions (see chapter 2). A measure of positive paren-

tal affect was created by computing parents' mean scores on three scales: warmth, pleasure, and responsiveness, $\alpha = .84$. A measure of negative parental affect was created by computing parents' mean scores on two scales: anger and coldness, $\alpha = .87$.

2. Coparenting—As described in chapter 2, the behavior of spouses toward each other as coparents was observed during the 40-min family visit to our project playroom. Here we used scales describing coparenting warmth and conflict. These are behaviors observable not only by our project staff but also by the child.

3. Sibling relationships—Two sibling scales from the BPI Family Environment Interview were used to assess children's perceptions of their relationships with siblings. During this phase of the BPI, the oldest child in the family (the target child) was asked questions about his or her next youngest sibling. The BPI's sibling enjoyment scale (6 items, $\alpha = .68$) measures the positive emotional aspects of the sibling relationship. Items in this scale assess children's affection for ("I like my sister") and enjoyment of their sibling ("I like to play with my brother"), as well as their perception that their sibling likes them ("My sister likes me"). The gender reference in each of the BPI question stems was matched to the gender of each child's sibling. The BPI's sibling conflict and hostility scale (six items, $\alpha = .71$) measures the negative emotional aspects of the sibling relationship. Items in this scale assess perceived conflict ("My brother and I fight a lot"), hostility ("I tease my sister" or "I'm mean to my brother"), and dislike ("I don't like my brother") between the siblings.

Teachers' Ratings of Children's Competence and Adjustment. We used the Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory's (CABI) social competence scale, the internalizing-social isolation scale, and, to focus on aggression and not defiant behavior, we used a modification of the CABI's externalizing-aggressive factor, in which only the antisocial and hostile scales were included.

RESULTS

Overview

We found a significant association between preschool family processes and young students' developing sense of competence and acceptance in their relationships with peers. However, the nature of this connection differed, depending on (a) which family relationship was examined (marital, mother-child, father-child, sibling), (b) the specific emotional processes being considered (positive or negative emotion), and (c) whether the analyses adopted a subsystem (i.e., each relationship analyzed separately) or a family-systems

perspective (i.e., the overlapping and unique contributions among all relationships analyzed simultaneously).

When each relationship was considered independently, high levels of parental warmth and responsiveness while mothers or fathers worked and played with their children contributed to children's reports of more positive views of their own social adjustment. On the negative side, when mothers (but not fathers) expressed more anger and coldness during the preschool parent-child visit, children tended to describe themselves as less competent and less accepted by peers. It was also the case that, when parents demonstrated high conflict as a couple in front of their children, their sons or daughters held less positive views of their own social adjustment. However, when the emotional quality of each of the specific family relationships was analyzed simultaneously, as advocated by family systems researchers (e.g., Hinde, 1995), only mothers' negative affect, parents' conflict as a couple, and the interaction between conflict and warmth in the couple, emerged as independent predictors of children's perceptions of their own social adjustment before they entered kindergarten.

Descriptive Statistics

A series of two-way multivariate analyses of variance (child sex by sibling status) was conducted to test for differences in the primary measures between children in this subsample who have siblings and children in the larger study who did not have a sibling in the summer prior to kindergarten. Children did not differ on any variables according to their sibling status.

Prior to conducting the study's central analyses, we analyzed the data to see whether boys and girls differed in terms of mean levels or in the pattern of correlations among variables as a function of child sex. Table 6.1 presents the mean levels and standard deviations for the entire sample and for boys and girls separately. With the exception of teachers' ratings of children's antisocial behavior in kindergarten, the means in Table 6.1 were not significantly different. As in the larger sample described in chapters 2 and 3, teachers described boys as showing significantly more antisocial behaviors than girls, $F(1, 69) = 5.31, p < .05$. Using Fisher's r -to- z transformations, the pattern of intercorrelations among the variables in Table 6.1 was also analyzed for sex differences. When comparing the coefficients for boys and girls, the differences appeared neither systematic nor more frequent than would be expected by chance. Accordingly, this study's remaining analyses were conducted on the entire sample of boys and girls. Intercorrelations among the positive and negative aspects of each relationship were examined next to establish their degree of independence. Despite consistently high correlations, $M r(71) = -.51$; $range = -.43$ to $-.67, ps < .001$, the positive and negative emotional qualities of each relationship demonstrated a fair amount of independence. Within a

TABLE 6.1
Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

Variables	Whole Sample ^a		Girls ^b		Boys ^c	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Mother-Child						
Positive affect	3.69	.32	3.69	.30	3.76	.27
Negative affect	1.52	.49	1.49	.38	1.47	.46
Father-Child						
Positive affect	3.50	.44	3.50	.43	3.54	.44
Negative affect	1.57	.54	1.48	.50	1.58	.51
Coparenting						
Warmth	5.43	.92	5.55	.83	5.35	.98
Conflict	3.59	1.21	3.52	1.19	3.64	1.23
Sibling relationship						
Enjoyment	4.70	.93	4.71	.99	4.69	.90
Hostility	3.78	.94	3.84	1.02	3.74	.89
Child's self-perceived competence	4.78	1.04	4.66	1.13	4.86	1.00
Teacher						
Social competence*	3.09	.65	3.20	.65	3.01	.68
Antisocial behavior	1.50	.64	1.35	.51	1.61	.72
Sad withdrawn behavior	1.71	.72	1.69	.75	1.76	.69

Note. Despite similarities in the mean and standard deviation values, scores were derived with different measures and scaling. Italicized means indicate that boys and girls differed significantly.

^a*N* = 71. ^b*n* = 38. ^c*n* = 33.

**p* < .05.

given relationship (mother-child, father-child, mother-father, or siblings), anywhere from 57% to 77% of the variance in the measure of positive affect was unrelated to the variance in the measure of negative affect.

Correlations across relationships were examined next. Supporting a family-systems view (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1988) were a number of consistencies in positive or negative behavior across different family relationships, *M r*(69) = .25; range = .27 to .47. The question to be explored later in multivariate analyses is whether and how the family relationship variables combine and contribute uniquely to predictions of children's adaptation.

Relational Measures and Children's Social Self-Perceptions During the Preschool Period

Preliminary Correlational Analysis. The data presented in Table 6.2 suggest that there were a number of significant but low to moderate simple correlations between the emotional qualities of specific family relationships and

6. Children's Self-Perceptions and Social Adaptation

TABLE 6.2
Preschool Relational Variables and Children's Perceptions of Their Social Competence

Preschool Variables	Children's Perceived Social Competence During Preschool
Mother-Child	
1. Positive affect	.25*
2. Negative affect	-.33**
Father-Child	
3. Positive affect	.29*
4. Negative affect	-.03
Coparenting	
5. Warmth	.18
6. Conflict	-.37**
Sibling relationship	
7. Enjoyment	.11
8. Hostility	-.22

Note. Within a relationship, underscored coefficients indicate correlations that are significantly different (*p* < .05, two-tailed) when scores are compared using Fisher's *r*-to-*z* transformation.

p* < .05. *p* < .01, all correlations are two-tailed.

children's perceptions of their social competence during the preschool period. Mothers' demonstrations of more positive affect and less negative affect toward their children during their dyadic interactions, as we observed them in our project playroom prior to kindergarten, were related to children's tendency to see themselves as more socially skilled 1 year later. Fathers who demonstrated more warmth with their children tended to have preschoolers who perceived themselves as more socially competent, but there was no significant correlation between fathers' negative affect with their children and children's self-perceptions.

Furthermore, only coparenting conflict was associated with children's self-perceptions; when there was greater spousal conflict while working and playing with the child, the child viewed himself or herself as less socially competent prior to kindergarten, whereas warmth in the coparenting pair was not systematically related to children's self-perceptions. Finally, children's perceptions of enjoyment and hostility in their relationships with their siblings were not associated with their perceived social competence before they entered kindergarten.

Multivariate Regressions. The question to be addressed here is whether the separate correlations of positive or negative affect in the parent-child relationship with children's perceived social competence are unique and additive or overlapping (multicollinear). To reduce the potential for collinearity,

only family relationship measures that were significantly correlated with children's self-perception at the bivariate level were included in a hierarchical multiple regression. Mothers' positive and negative affect, fathers' positive affect, and coparenting conflict, were entered on Step 1 as a single block. In contrast with the simple correlations' explanation of up to 10% of the variance in children's self-perceptions (in Table 6.2), the combined predictors accounted for 24% of the variance in children's perceptions of their social competence before they entered kindergarten, $F(4, 65) = 4.25, p < .01$. From the significance of the betas, we infer that mothers' negative affect and conflict between the parents in the family interaction session emerged as unique predictors of the preschoolers' self-appraisals.

In a new set of three regression models, interaction terms constructed from the combination of positive and negative affect (e.g., coparenting warmth \times coparenting conflict), were each entered on Step 2 to test the hypothesis that positive affect helps to buffer children against the potentially harmful effects of negative interpersonal interactions. That is, if coparenting conflict is associated with negative outcomes only when coparenting warmth is low, but not when it is high, we could say that the warmth between the parents protected the child from the potentially harmful effects of their marital conflict.

Of the three interaction terms tested (fathers', mothers', and couples warmth and conflict), only the interaction between the coparenting warmth and conflict measures accounted for an additional 11% of the variance, $F(1, 64) = 5.09, p < .01$, in children's perceptions of their social adjustment. To determine the meaning of this interaction, we divided children into high and low groups based on a median split of their parents' warmth on the coparenting scales. Children's perceived social competence was then regressed on coparenting conflict. Consistent with a buffering hypothesis, we found that, at high levels of coparenting warmth, children's perception of their social competence remained stable even as coparenting conflict increased. By contrast, at low levels of parenting warmth, children's perception of their social competence was lower when there were high levels of conflict in the coparenting pair during the family visit to our laboratory playroom where the family interaction observations were made.

Relational Measures, Children's Self-Perceptions, and Adaptation to Kindergarten

Preliminary Correlational Analyses of Predictions Across Time. The analyses discussed earlier focused on the family correlates of children's self-perceptions during the preschool period. Here, we examine the extent to which preschool family processes and children's self-perceptions in the preschool period contributed to their social adaptation to school 1 year later, based on their kindergarten teachers' ratings of their social competence, anti-

social behavior, and socially withdrawn behavior. As can be seen in Table 6.3, when mothers and fathers exhibited higher levels of positive affect (pleasure, warmth, responsiveness) as they worked and played with their children in the preschool period, and when mothers exhibited lower levels of negative affect (anger and coldness) during that time, kindergarten teachers tended to rate their children as more socially competent (kind, fair, socially skilled, and perceptive) and less antisocial or hostile at the end of kindergarten. The same parent-child measures were not significant predictors of teachers' ratings of internalizing behaviors (sad, socially withdrawn).

Although coparenting warmth was unrelated to all three of the children's adaptation scales, higher coparenting conflict was modestly associated with teachers' views of children as exhibiting less social competence and more antisocial behavior toward peers. Interestingly, of all the family relationship measures, only children's reported level of enjoyment of their siblings was associated with teachers' ratings of sad-withdrawn behavior. Children who reported greater enjoyment of their sibling relationship during the preschool period were viewed by their teachers as exhibiting fewer internalizing problems and less antisocial behavior 1 year later. Children who reported more hostile feelings toward their siblings prior to entering kindergarten were characterized by their teachers as less socially competent and employing more externalizing behaviors at school.

The associations between children's perceived social competence and their teacher's ratings of their behavior were examined next. As predicted, chil-

TABLE 6.3
Preschool Relational Variables, Preschool Children's Perceptions
of Social Competence, and Kindergarten Teacher Ratings of Adjustment

Preschool Variables	Kindergarten Teachers' Spring Ratings		
	Withdrawn Behavior	Social Competence	Antisocial Behavior
Mother-Child			
Positive affect	-.08	.32**	-.30*
Negative affect	.04	-.36**	.26*
Father-Child			
Positive affect	-.15	.27*	-.25*
Negative affect	.12	-.16	.18
Coparenting			
Warmth	-.11	.03	-.04
Conflict	-.10	-.22	-.24*
Sibling relationship			
Enjoyment	-.27*	.16	-.25*
Hostility	.14	-.28*	.24*
Child's perceived social competence	-.32**	.35**	-.24*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, all correlations are two-tailed.

dren's preschool perceptions of their social competence as assessed in the BPI were related to their classroom behavior at the end of kindergarten. Preschoolers who viewed themselves as more socially competent before they entered school were rated by their teachers as more socially competent and less antisocial or sad-withdrawn at the end of kindergarten than preschoolers who had had less positive self-perceptions.

Multivariate Regressions. To examine the joint and unique contributions of the family relationship measures to children's kindergarten adaptation, teachers' CABI ratings of children's social competence, and their externalizing and internalizing behaviors, were regressed separately on the measures with which they had been significantly or moderately associated at the bivariate level in Table 6.3. Statistical interaction terms were also examined in these analyses but were eliminated because they failed to yield significant findings. To predict children's social competence, mothers' positive and negative affect and fathers' positive affect toward the child, conflict between the parents, and hostility between the siblings, were entered simultaneously as a block. Combined, these preschool family predictors accounted for 23% of the variance in teachers' ratings of the children's social competence at the end of kindergarten, $F(5, 64) = 3.84, p < .01$. Only parents' conflict in front of their children emerged as a significant, independent predictor, $\beta = -.26, p < .05$, of children's (lower) social competence scores following their entry to school.

To predict kindergarten teachers' ratings of antisocial behavior, the same five predictors were entered simultaneously as a block. Combined, these predictors accounted for a significant, albeit modest, 18% of the variance in kindergarten teachers' ratings of children's antisocial behavior, $F(5, 64) = 3.34, p < .01$. Again, only conflict between the parents in the presence of their child, $\beta = .25, p < .03$, provided an independent prediction of children's antisocial conduct in kindergarten. Finally, teachers' ratings of children's sad-withdrawn behavior were regressed on children's reports of sibling enjoyment in the preschool period. Lower BPI scores on sibling enjoyment, $\beta = -.27, p < .05$, accounted for a significant 8% of the variance in children's internalizing problems at the end of kindergarten, $F(1, 68) = 5.50, p < .05$.

These multivariate regression results indicate that family processes during the preschool period combine to explain significant portions of the variance in teachers' ratings of children's adjustment to the first year of elementary school. Because children's perceptions of their social adjustment were assessed during the summer prior to kindergarten, this score was entered into these models on a second step. As expected, children's perceptions of their own social competence prior to entering school, combined with the quality of the relationships we observed in their family, predicted aspects of their adjustment to kindergarten. When children's self-perception scores were en-

tered into these equations on the final step, they added unique independent variance to the prediction of teachers' ratings of social competence, $\Delta R^2 = 12\%$, $\beta = .37, p < .01$, and internalizing behaviors at the end of kindergarten, $\Delta R^2 = 10\%$, $\beta = -.32, p < .01$. By contrast, children's perceptions of their social competence did not significantly improve the predictability of externalizing behaviors in kindergarten.

Are Children's Self-Perceptions Mediators or Moderators of Preschool Family Environment to School Adaptation Linkages?

Thus far, these data describe connections across time between the emotional qualities of children's family relationships prior to making the transition to elementary school and their social adjustment in the first year of school. They also revealed links between children's self-perceptions and their social adjustment once in school. Is it possible that children's appraisals of their competence and acceptance by peers help to explain how preschool family processes predict school adaptation? That is, do children's self-perceptions function as mediators or moderators of the statistical association?

Mediation Effects. As recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986), we conducted tests of mediation through a series of regressions. Mediation is demonstrated when the variance in the dependent variable explained by the independent variable (the A-C correlation) is reduced after the mediator B, reflecting the B-C correlation, has been added as a control. First, the measure of children's preschool self-perceptions—the hypothesized mediator (B)—was regressed on each of the family relationship (A) variables in separate models (no. 1 equations in Table 6.4). Second, teachers' ratings of children's social adjustment to school—the outcome variables (C)—were regressed on the relational measures in separate equations (no. 2 equations in Table 6.4). Finally, in number 3 equations, each outcome variable (C) was regressed on the independent variable (A) and mediator (B). Prior to testing for mediation, a relation must be demonstrated among all three variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Accordingly, tests for mediation were restricted to the significant simple associations reported in Tables 6.2 and 6.3.

Of the mediation analyses conducted with the coparenting or sibling measures, none proved significant. However, when the maternal and paternal affect measures were examined in relation to children's social competence and antisocial behavior, a different picture emerged. These results are presented in Table 6.4. The first set of equations (no. 1 equations) confirmed that children's self-perceptions of social competence were associated with mothers' and fathers' positive affect and mothers' negative affect (A-B). The second set of equations (no. 2 equations) confirmed that teachers' ratings of children's

TABLE 6.4
Multiple Regression Tests for Mediation

Equation	Dependent Variable for Each Equation	Predictor(s) Entered	R ²	β
Mother-Child models				
1.	BPI-social competence	Mother-positive affect	.07*	.25*
2.	Teacher-social competence	Mother-positive affect	.08*	.28*
3.	Teacher-social competence	Mother-positive affect BPI-social competence	.03	.18 .42***
2.	Teacher-antisocial	Mother-positive affect	.09*	-.31*
3.	Teacher-antisocial	Mother-positive affect BPI-social competence	.05*	-.26* -.18
Mother-Child models				
1.	BPI-social competence	Mother-negative affect	.11**	-.33**
2.	Teacher-social competence	Mother-negative affect	.13**	-.36**
3.	Teacher-social competence	Mother-negative affect BPI-social competence	.04*	-.22* .39***
2.	Teacher-antisocial	Mother-negative affect	.07*	.26*
3.	Teacher-antisocial	Mother-negative affect BPI-social competence	.03	.20 -.19
Father-Child models				
1.	BPI-social competence	Father-positive affect	.06*	.23*
2.	Teacher-social competence	Father-positive affect	.07*	.27*
3.	Teacher-social competence	Father-positive affect BPI-social competence	.02	.16 .40***
2.	Teacher-antisocial	Father-positive affect	.06*	-.25*
3.	Teacher-antisocial	Father-positive affect BPI-social competence	.03	-.20 -.19

Note. $N = 69$. BPI = Berkeley Puppet Interview.

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

social competence and antisocial behavior were also predicted by mothers' and fathers' positive affect and mothers' negative affect (A-C). As shown in Table 6.4, the third set of equations (no. 3 equations) provided evidence that controlling for children's self-perceptions (B-C) led to a decrease in the portion of variance in the teachers' ratings accounted for by the relational measures (the A-C correlations). A mediation test created by entering the BPI measure of children's self-reported social competence into the regression on teacher ratings of social competence resulted in a decline from .08 to .03 (nonsignificant) of the R^2 explained by mothers' positive affect in the number 2 equations. Entering the BPI measure of social competence into the regression on teachers' ratings of antisocial behavior also resulted in a lowering of the R^2 explained by mothers' positive affect in the number 2 equations. Similarly, children's self-reports of social competence on the BPI mediated the connection between mothers' negative affect and teachers' ratings of social

competence, and between fathers' positive affect and teachers' ratings of both social competence and antisocial behavior.

In some cases, entering the hypothesized mediator reduced the strength of the connection between parents' behavior and children's outcome to nonsignificance; in other cases, the reduction was substantial, but parents' behavior remained a significant predictor. Over all, there was some reduction in variance explained by the hypothesized mediator in all seven statistical tests. These results suggest that children's perceptions of their own competence and difficulty at least partially mediated the links between the emotional quality of the parent-child relationship and children's social competence or antisocial tendencies at school. Mediation effects are consistent with the hypothesis that there may be a causal connection, with family processes affecting how children see themselves, and children's self-views functioning as one mechanism affecting how they approach peers in school.

Moderation Effects. Moderator effects examine whether a given variable (B) reduces or increases the connections between risks (A) and outcomes (C). To examine the possibility that children's self-perceptions moderate the family-to-school link, a series of hierarchical regressions was performed, following Baron and Kenny's recommendations (1986). All three kindergarten teacher-rated outcomes served as the dependent variable in separate regression models. In each model, a single relational measure (predictor) was entered in the equation first, followed by children's self-perceptions (moderator) on Step 2, and a two-way interaction term between the predictor and moderator on Step 3.

None of the models constructed to examine the potential role of children's self-perceptions as moderators of links between teachers' ratings and mother-child affect, father-child affect, or sibling affect, was significant. However, as shown in Table 6.5, children's self-perceptions during the preschool period moderated the relation between coparenting conflict and kindergarten teachers' ratings of social competence and antisocial behavior. The F -change resulting from adding the interaction between coparenting conflict and BPI social competence to the equation on Step 3 was statistically significant, $\Delta R^2 = 4\%$, F -change(1, 68) = 3.65, $p < .05$. As shown in Fig. 6.1, children in the high positive self-perception group (median split) exhibited greater social competence than children in the low positive self-perception group, regardless of the level of conflict we observed between their parents. The moderating effect was that in contrast to the association between high levels of parents' conflict in the preschool period and low social competence in kindergarten when children had more negative self-perceptions, there was no such association in the high-positive self-perception group. That is, positive self-perceptions may buffer children's competence in getting along with peers against the risks associated with parents' marital conflict.

TABLE 6.5
Hierarchical Multiple Regressions: Tests of Moderation

Step	Independent Variable Entered	R ²	R ² Δ	FΔ	β	F Equation
Dependent variable: Teacher-rated social competence						
1.	Coparent conflict	.04	.04	2.46+	-.23+	
2.	BPI-social competence	.28	.22	15.16***	.49***	
3.	Coparent conflict × BPI-social competence	.32	.04	3.65*	-.25*	9.83***
Dependent variable: Teacher-rated antisocial behavior						
1.	Coparent conflict	.05	.05	3.32+	.28+	
2.	BPI-social competence	.12	.07	5.69*	-.35*	
3.	Coparent conflict × BPI-social competence	.17	.05	3.20*	.25*	3.11*

Note. N = 69. BPI = Berkeley Puppet Interview.

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

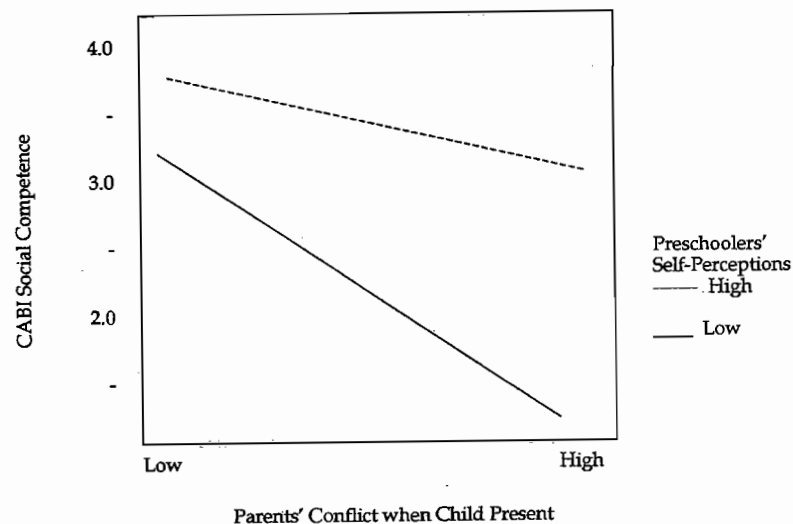


FIG. 6.1. Preschoolers' self-perceptions as a moderator of the relation between exposure to parents' conflict and classroom social competence as rated by kindergarten teachers.

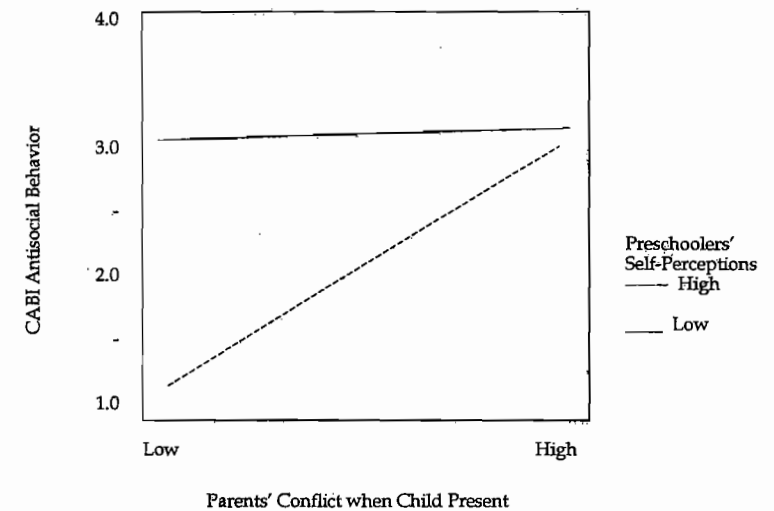


FIG. 6.2. Preschoolers' self-perceptions as a moderator of the relation between exposure to parents' conflict and classroom antisocial behavior as rated by kindergarten teachers.

It was more difficult to interpret children's self-perceptions as moderators of antisocial behavior. As illustrated in Fig. 6.2, at most levels of coparenting conflict, children with less positive self-perceptions exhibited more antisocial behavior than children with more positive views of themselves. However, in families with high coparenting conflict, children in both the high and low self-perception groups exhibited increasing levels of antisocial behavior until there were no differences between the groups of children. That is, high levels of conflict between the parents overrides the buffering effect of positive self-perceptions on children's antisocial behavior in kindergarten.

DISCUSSION

Family Processes and Children's Self-Perceptions in the Preschool Period

Mothers and Fathers. Why would mothers' negative affect but not their positive affect contribute uniquely to explaining variance in preschoolers' perceptions of their social adjustment? It could be that this is part of a general phenomenon in which negative emotion plays a greater role than positive emotion in affecting relationship quality and personal adaptation (Gottman,

1994). It could also be, of course, that the findings have something specific to do with mothers and preschool-age children. Typically, preschoolers' views of themselves are quite positive (Stipek, Recchia, & McClintic, 1992); processes like self-other comparison that can lead to normative declines in self-appraisal begin to appear later in middle childhood (Harter, 1999). The results we have presented here suggest that preschoolers' sense of themselves as competent social beings may be vulnerable to high levels of negativity from their mothers. Given that mothers in this study were observed as they attempted to guide their children through cognitively challenging tasks, it may be that some mothers' cold and angry affect is particularly palpable when they attempt to teach their children new skills. Perhaps, when preschoolers do not meet the challenge as quickly as their mothers' hope they will, and mothers show their irritation, the children sense this, conclude that they are not doing as well as they "should," and suffer the consequences in their sense of competence. This interpretation is consistent with social referencing studies, in which young children look to their mothers' reactions to judge the valence of their efforts (Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989). Even somewhat benign reactions such as a maternal frown have been shown to produce self-evaluative emotions such as shame in young children (Lewis, 1987; Stipek et al., 1992).

Still to be explained is why mothers' and not fathers' affective parenting was related uniquely to their children's early social self-perceptions. Typically, mothers are the parent figures who orchestrate preschoolers' peer relationships by arranging "play dates" and other social activities before their children become elementary school students (Ladd, 1996). If mother-child relationships are characterized by more negative affect, children could be deprived of the emotional support they need to feel competent in the face of new and challenging situations. The unique link between mothers' affect and children's perceived social competence may also reflect the fact that women tend to focus on interpersonal processes, whereas men appear to emphasize self-sufficiency and achievement over social dynamics (Cross & Madson, 1997). Fathers do make contributions to their preschoolers' social self-perceptions and other measures of adaptation as we have seen in chapters 4 and 5, and will see in other chapters of this volume.

Couples. Variation in children's perceptions of their competence with peers was also accounted for in part by the conflict parents engaged in with one another while they worked and played with their child. Numerous other studies have documented the adverse effects of conflict between the parents on children's adaptation (Cummings & Davies, 1994). The data here suggest that marital anger and competition may have an impact beyond the couple relationship and beyond the home by coloring children's views of themselves with peers. Parents who clash while trying to parent together are more likely

to implicate children in their verbal and nonverbal communication (McHale, 1997). Furthermore, if parents' disagreements are about the child, this might increase the probability that the child will extract negative information about himself or herself from the strain between the parents.

The significant moderating effect of coparenting warmth on coparenting conflict supports other research that suggests that not all interparental conflict is necessarily harmful to children (cf. Ablow, 1997a; Fincham, 1998; Gottman & Katz, 1989). Regardless of whether the parents' conflict was classified as high or low in intensity, children of parents who were warmer toward one another in their presence reported positive self-perceptions. By contrast, children of parents who exhibited high levels of conflict and showed little or no warmth tended to perceive themselves as less accepted by their peers and less socially competent overall.

Siblings. Contrary to expectation, sibling relationship quality, at least as reported by the first child in the family, was not significantly related to that child's perceptions of competence or acceptance by peers before they entered elementary school. This lack of association was somewhat surprising given that children's perceptions of their sibling relationships and their own strengths and weaknesses were both assessed with the BPI. Even at 4½ to 5½ years of age, children appeared to maintain relatively independent views of their sibling relationships and their competence with and acceptance by peers. The lack of association may be due to the fact that the participants in this study were the oldest children in their families, with siblings who were typically 2 to 3 years younger, many still babies or toddlers. Perhaps it is not until younger siblings develop greater behavioral and sociocognitive competencies of their own that they contribute significantly to the variance in their older brothers' and sisters' sense of themselves. These results are consistent with work by Dunn and her colleagues (Dunn, 1996; Dunn et al., 1994), who found that children's self-esteem is not related to sibling relationship qualities until after 10 years of age.

Preschool Predictors of Children's Social Adaptation to School

Family Relationships. As we expected, variations in the tone of children's family relationships prior to their entry to school contributed to explanations of variance in children's adaptation to the social demands of kindergarten. In this chapter, we focused on children's initial school adjustment according to kindergarten teachers' ratings of their social behaviors at school in the spring—namely their overall social competence, antisocial behavior, and socially withdrawn behavior.

Similar to the pattern with children's self-perceptions, each family relationship contributed differently to explaining variation in teachers' views of the children's social competence and adjustment, depending on the specific relationship and emotional process considered. When our staff observed mothers' and fathers' parenting as warm and positive in their separate interactions with the children prior to kindergarten, teachers rated the children as having higher levels of social competence and fewer signs of antisocial problem behaviors the next year in kindergarten. When mothers' parenting was characterized as negative and angry in the last preschool year, teachers rated the children as lower on social competence and higher on antisocial behaviors the next year. These findings are consistent with evidence indicating that during the transition to school, the emotional quality of parent-child relationships functions as support, stressor, or both, thereby exerting a positive or negative influence on children's capacity to adapt to school (Cowan et al., 1994; Ladd, 1996). This fits with Ladd's (1996) reasoning that early parent-child relationships that are more supportive than punitive enhance the likelihood that children will employ prosocial rather than antisocial behaviors when forming new peer relationships.

Contrary to expectation, the simple correlations in Table 6.3 revealed that warmth between the parents as they worked and played with their child was not directly related to children's self-reported social adjustment. Higher conflict between the parents was only modestly associated with lower levels of social competence and higher levels of antisocial behavior in kindergarten. These modest associations were surprising, given evidence documenting links between marital difficulties and children's maladjustment in older children (Fincham, 1998). Nevertheless, when each of the preschool dyadic parent-child and sibling relationship measures was entered simultaneously in multivariate regressions with coparenting affect, and all of the overlapping variance among these measures was statistically controlled, coparenting conflict was the only unique predictor of children's social competence and antisocial behavior 1 year later. It should be noted that our measures of coparenting affect were obtained while parents and children were involved in triadic interactions. It seems plausible that the effects of spouses' couple interaction processes on children are best detected in analytic strategies that simulate family-systems contexts (see chapter 10).

This finding illustrates another theme of the chapters in this volume. There are important links between method and substance in our field. What we find depends a great deal on how we measure constructs and especially how we think about and analyze the data. The reporting of simple correlations often obscures an underlying pattern that can only be revealed when we combine data from multiple domains. Almost every chapter in this volume finds associations between marital quality and children's outcomes, but they are not always simple and direct.

In contrast with the lack of association between children's self-assessments of their social competence and the emotional quality of their relationships with siblings in the preschool period (discussed earlier), their reports of the early quality of sibling relationships predicted the quality of their peer relationships 1 year later in kindergarten. Consistent with evidence that children's sibling relationships help to shape their behavior with peers (Dunn, 1996; Patterson, 1986), children who described their earlier sibling relationships as more enjoyable and less hostile were rated by their teachers as making a more successful adjustment to peers in kindergarten. Of particular interest was the fact that, of all of the family relationships examined in the analyses presented here, only children's reports of sibling enjoyment were predictive of less socially withdrawn behavior in the classroom. Thus, children's capacity to derive pleasure from their relationship with a younger brother or sister—and possibly the practice siblings afford in negotiating an ongoing relationship with another child—may contribute to their desire to play with and meet other children, and act as a buffer against being shy or withdrawn once they enter the larger world of school. Alternatively, according to a social information model, a history of positive sibling interactions is likely to shape children's expectations that other children will be enjoyable and fun to play with (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Children's Self-Perceptions. In this investigation, children's perceptions of their social competence and acceptance by peers, as assessed with the BPI, were combined to create a single measure of self-perceived social adjustment. A unique aspect of this measure was that it was assessed during the preschool period, a relatively understudied period of self development. As expected, children's earlier self-perceptions of their social abilities were significantly correlated with their kindergarten teachers' ratings of their social competence, antisocial behavior, and sad-withdrawn behavior with peers at school. Moreover, when entered into a multivariate equation with the family relationship measures, children's self-perceptions added significant, unique variance to the prediction of their socioemotional behavior in kindergarten.

Although similar associations have been reported for older school-age children (Eccles et al., 1993), evidence for the relevance of preschoolers' self-perceptions to their school adaptation is relatively new. Other investigators have argued that children's behavior patterns, especially those in the peer domain, are among the best predictors of long-term psychosocial adjustment (Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990; Ladd, 1990). Further, systematic studies of social-cognition suggest that children's self-perception processes play central roles in their interpretation of social cues and the production of the interpersonal behaviors that shape their socioemotional adjustment at school (Crick & Dodge, 1994). To date, most studies showing a positive link between perceived social competence and social adjustment have been limited to chil-

dren between the ages of 8 and 14 (Crick & Dodge, 1994). These findings extend this general connection downward to 4- to 5-year-old children.

In sum, these data are consistent with results of previous investigations that suggest that older children's negative social self-perceptions forecast, and may function as risk factors for, social maladjustment during elementary school. Data from this study suggest that children's negative views of self may be detectable as early as 4½ years old, before they embark on their school careers, a view that may be reflected in their teachers' assessments of their earliest school adaptation.

Children's Self-Perceptions as Mediators and Moderators of the Family-School Connection

The results of the analyses guided by Baron and Kenny's formulation (1986) provided evidence consistent with the hypothesis that children's self-perceptions function as mediators of relationships in which they are participants (parent-child), and as moderators of relationships in which they are primarily observers (the couple). Specifically, children's preschool self-perceptions acted as partial mediators of the links between the emotional qualities of their relationships with mothers and fathers and their social competence and antisocial behavior at school. Although coparenting and sibling relationships were also correlated with children's adaptation to kindergarten, only in the case of parent-child relationships did these self-perceptions link family processes with school outcomes. To the extent that we can interpret the connections as causal, the emotional quality of parent-child relationships may be affecting children's adaptation to school because they affect children's views of themselves, which, in turn, shape the way they approach other children in their classroom and on the playground.

By contrast, children's preschool social self-perceptions emerged as moderators of links between the parents' conflict with each other and children's actual social competence and antisocial behavior a year later in kindergarten. Graphs of these moderation effects suggest that children's positive social self-perceptions can protect them against the negative effects of conflict that children observe between their parents. It is also possible that children with more negative self-concepts are more vulnerable to their parents' conflict. In both cases, we can conclude that whether the parents' marital relationship affects the child depends in part on how the child evaluates his or her own characteristics.

How might we explain this differing role for children's self-perceptions, depending on whether they are participants in or observers of these key family relationships? As suggested earlier, children appear to extract information about themselves from direct interactions with their parents (see also Stipek et al., 1992). Mothers' and fathers' emotional expressions may be particularly

laden with judgments about the child during interactions that challenge both children's talents and parents' competency to guide and support them. The primacy of these relationships, as well as children's reliance on their parents for evaluative feedback, make the parent-child relationship a particularly salient context for the children's development of a sense of self. By contrast, the parents' relationship with each other, even if it involves conflict while they are interacting with their children, may not hold quite the same meaning for the children's appraisals of themselves.

That children's self-perceptions played a moderating role in the links between family factors and school outcomes is consistent with evidence that children's appraisals of their parents' conflict (e.g., perceived conflict intensity, threat, self-blame) help to specify its level of impact on their adaptation (Ablow, 1997a; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kerig, 1998). Children with less positive perceptions of themselves might be at increased risk of blaming themselves or feeling threatened by their parents' conflict. Their low self-esteem may leave them vulnerable to insecure working models of attachment, and the fear that they may lose their fighting parents through separation or divorce (Davies & Cummings, 1998). By contrast, children with more positive self-concepts may have the internal resources needed to discern that their parents' conflict is not necessarily about them.

The results from the mediation and moderation analyses must be viewed cautiously for several reasons. First, mediation requires that the independent variable be temporally and causally antecedent to the mediator, so that in this case, the relationship measures precede the children's self-perceptions. As mentioned, these conditions were assumed but could not be verified with these data. Second, when testing for moderation, Baron and Kenny (1986, p. 1176) suggested that it is "desirable that the moderator variable be uncorrelated with both the predictor and criterion to provide a clearly interpretable interaction term." In this case, as a moderator of the link between coparenting conflict and social adjustment, children's self-perceptions were associated with both variables. Finally, the use of a nonzero interaction term to detect moderation is problematic. Not only does the scaling of the independent and moderator variable affect the size of the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1991), but the use of different statistical methods on the same data (e.g., liner versus logistic versus log-linear models) can produce a significant interaction term with one but not another model. In other words, until replicated, reports of interactions should be viewed with caution.

The Lack of Connection With Internalizing Behavior

There was a surprising lack of connection of family relationship measures and self-perception measures with internalizing behavior. Simple correlations did show that children's self-perceptions and their perception of their rela-

tionship with their siblings showed low to moderate correlations with teachers' descriptions of shy, withdrawn, depressed behavior in the classroom. However, none of the mother-child, father-child, or coparenting variables assessed in the preschool period was directly connected with internalizing behavior at school 1 year later. Several possibilities require further investigation. First, it is possible that connections between these measures and internalizing emerge over time. Second, it may be, as we find in other chapters, that more global measures of parenting style that include both warmth and structure are needed to account for variations in shy, withdrawn, and sad behavior in school. Third, we return to the strategic decision to combine girls' and boys' subsamples because there were no significant differences in means or correlational patterns between them. Although the correlations did not occur more frequently than one would expect by chance, there is substantial evidence throughout this volume that there are some unique connections between family processes, especially the quality of mother-child relationships, and internalizing for girls. The sample of girls was too small to do the kind of mediator and moderator analyses reported here, so this issue needs to be resolved by replication studies with larger samples of girls.

CONCLUSIONS

Information from multiple family relationships can help to improve our understanding of the links between early family processes and children's early social adaptation to elementary school, especially their social competence and antisocial behavior. Different family relationships serve different functions in children's development, and unique contributions to understanding variations in adaptation to school come from the assessment of different family relationships within subsystem and family-systems analytical frameworks. Indeed, at the subsystem level, the affective qualities of the mother-child, father-child, sibling, and marital relationships each contributed differently to specific aspects of children's socioemotional development prior to and following their transition to elementary school. However, when these relationships were analyzed simultaneously, only the marital or coparenting relationship accounted for individual differences in children's social competence and externalizing behaviors at school, and only the sibling relationship accounted for variation in children's internalizing behaviors.

What is unique about this study is its inclusion of children's perceptions of their competence with and acceptance by peers before they enter elementary school. Two buffering effects were noteworthy. First, warmth between parents protected their children from the negative effects of marital conflict on the children's self-perceptions. And, children's positive self-perceptions pro-

tected them against the negative effects of marital conflict on social competence in the kindergarten classroom.

On the whole, the findings presented here offer a different view of young children's social self-perceptions than has been offered previously (see review by Harter, 1999). Rather than depicting young children's self-perceptions as uniformly positive and therefore less relevant to their behavioral adjustment, these results suggest that individual differences in the social self-perceptions children possess before they enter elementary school are linked to socially adaptive and maladaptive behaviors by the end of their first school year. Even preschoolers know something about themselves that seems to shape and predict their early development as students.