

**Parent-child decision-making, curfew, and closeness
in single-parent, married, and remarried families**

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Demographic trends suggest that the family as a primary socialization environment will be multipally defined in the foreseeable future. Glick (1984) has estimated that as many as 59% of children born in the early eighties will spend at least one of their developing years in a single-parent family. In 1984 single-parent families represented one-fifth of all families with children under 18, a figure up 10% since 1970 (Norton & Glick, 1986). In addition, since many divorced parents remarry, estimates are that 9.6 million children are now living in remarried families (Furstenburg & Spanier, 1984) and, again, estimates are that 35% of all children growing up today will spend a part of their childhood in a blended family.

Given their prevalence, it seems important to understand how normative developmental tasks and transitions in the parent-child relationship are negotiated in different family structures.

Early adolescence is a time when parents and children begin to fine tune authority relationships as the child tests the waters of independence. Obtaining a new balance between dependence and detachment and redefining how decisions are made does not always occur without some strain in the parent-child relationship (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Hill, 1980; Steinberg, 1981). Does this normative shift in parent-child authority relations assume a different form in different family structures?

In 1979 Robert Weiss introduced a compelling thesis that the two-parent family was characterized by an "echelon" structure in which adults reinforced one another's rules and right to decide. In contrast, this echelon structure does not characterize the single-parent family and children in these homes are pulled into an earlier maturity, taking increased decision-making, personal chaperonage, and responsibility in the household.

This thesis has been tested but the results have not been altogether consistent. Fox and Inazu (1982) found that among white families adolescent girls played a greater confidant role with their mothers than their peers in two-parent families although the trend was not as strong in black families.

Likewise, Devall, Stoneman and Brody (1986) found that early adolescents in single-parent families played a greater confidant role although had no more domestic duties than their peers in two-parent homes. Finally, Dornbusch and his colleagues (Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf, & Gross, 1985) used national survey data collected between 1966 - 1970 to compare the balance of parent and adolescent decision-making in one and two parent families. They found that in one-parent families issues of clothing, curfew, choice of friends, and spending money were more often decided either independently by the child or jointly by parent and child. It was only in two parent families that adolescents reported that their parent exerted unique authority over such issues. These aggregate differences were even more interesting when analyzed separately for girls and boys. Daughters in two-parent homes were more likely than those in one-parent families to report high parental chaperonage while sons in female-headed families reported the most independence in decision-making. Finally, the authors report that this early independence in the single-parent family was also associated with tendencies towards delinquent behavior when SES was controlled. These analyses were done on data collected twenty years ago. Since the single-parent family has become more prevalent in the last twenty years generalizations of family process based on this population should be made with caution.

In the present study we tested the hypothesis that rules and decision-making and the quality of the parent-child relationship would differ as a function of child sex and family structure. The study was exploratory and we had three goals. First, to assess whether there were differences in the perceptions of parent-child conflict, child autonomy, and parental autocracy in parent or child reports. Second, we wanted to test the hypothesis of early independence and decreased parental chaperonage. Third, we wanted to assess differences in the closeness of the parent-child relationship.

Methods

The design differs from past work in several ways. First, we compare three different family structures -- single-parent mother-headed, two parent married and two-parent remarried families. Second, while other work has relied primarily on the perceptions of adolescents, we compare the reports of adolescents as well as those of mothers and fathers in different family forms. Finally, since the parent-child decision-making balance is expected to undergo certain changes during the early adolescent period, we use a short-term longitudinal design to assess change in the parent's and child's perceptions of conflict, child autonomy, and parental autocracy. Parents and young adolescents were asked about their perceptions of family decision-making in the fall and spring of the child's sixth grade year and in the fall and spring of their seventh grade year, after the child had moved to the junior high school environment.

Subjects

The young adolescent sample included 145 children from single parent (divorced or separated) mother headed families (86 girls and 59 boys); 808 (428 girls and 380 boys) in married families, and 92 (50 girls and 42 boys) from remarried families. Data on all four waves of data for parents is available for 67 divorced/separated mothers (39 daughters and 28 sons); 590 married mother/father pairs (226 daughters, 264 sons); 37 remarried mother/father pairs (22 daughters, 15 sons).

Measures

The level of child autonomy, parent autocracy, and parent-child conflict in decision-making was assessed with the Epstein and McPartland (1977) Family Decision Making (FDM) scale. A parallel set of items was constructed for parents based on this adolescent measure. One item, "My parents encourage me to give my ideas and opinions even if we might disagree" was

added to the original scale and another item dropped from the scale in analyses. Both parents and children answered the FDM items. Three constructs -- child autonomy, parent autocracy, and parent-child conflict -- were developed based on the face validity of items and the consistent strength of their zero-order correlation for parent and adolescent respondents. Items for each of the three constructs and the alpha reliability for parents and young adolescents at each wave of data collection are listed in the appendix.

Parental chaperonage was measured with several dichotomous (yes, no) items about curfew rules and consequences to infractions of such rules and with questions about early dating behavior. Young adolescents answered these items.

Parents' perceptions of the close/confidant character of their parent-child relationship consisted of the following two items measured as a parental expectation prior to junior high school and as a parental observation after the transition to junior high school:

At Wave I:

-- When my child reaches junior high school, I expect that s/he will be closer to me because we will share more adult interests.

-- When my child reaches junior high school, I expect that s/he will seek my advice more often.

At Wave III

--- Since my child has gone to junior high school, I notice that s/he is closer to me because we share more adult interests.

--- Since my child has gone to junior high school, I notice that s/he seeks my advice more often.

Alpha reliability for this scale is .73 at Wave I and .76 at Wave III.

Data Analysis

Each of the FDM scales and the parents' perceptions of the closeness of

their relationship with their young adolescent were assessed with a two (child gender) by three (family structure) repeated measures MANOVA with time of measurement as a within subjects factor. Separate manovas were done comparing the reports of single-parent mothers with parents in two-parent families: first with married and remarried mothers and then with married and remarried fathers. Mothers and fathers from two-parent families were included in analyses only when there were data from both parents.

Chi-square tests of independence were done on the curfew and dating items.

Results

Young adolescent perceptions of Family Decision Making

Fig.1 There was a linear decline in young adolescents' reports of autonomy from Wave 2 to Wave 4. ($E = 5.0$, $p = .007$). There was also a marginal effect of family structure across waves with young adolescents in married families reporting higher autonomy than their peers in single-parent or remarried families ($E = 2.52$, $p = .08$).

Fig.2 There was a time of measure x family structure x child gender interaction on reports of parent-child conflict. The reports of girls in single-parent families and boys in remarried families show a quadratic trend, increasing at Wave 2 and decreasing after the transition to junior high school (Waves 3 and 4). In contrast, perceptions of parent-child conflict decline for girls in remarried families at Wave 2 and steadily increase at Waves 3 and 4. Wave x gender x structure multivariate $E = 2.38$, $p = .027$; quadratic component univariate $E = 6.84$, $p = .001$. Figure 2a shows the effects of the between subjects factor, family structure on young adolescent's reports of parent-child conflict. Children in two-parent married families report less conflict than either of the other two family structure groups. $E = 3.69$, $p = .025$.

Fig.3 There was a marginal main effect of the between subjects factor, family structure, on young adolescents' perceptions of high parent control or autocratic rule-making. $E = 2.63$, $p = .073$. Children in remarried families reported the highest parent control averaged across all waves of measurement. The multivariate E for wave was significant ($E = 8.70$, $p = .0001$), showing a quadratic trend ($E = 20.44$, $p = .0001$) with all young adolescents reporting more parent control at Wave 2 (during the spring of sixth grade) and declining thereafter.

Comparisons of single-parent mothers' perceptions with fathers' and mothers' in two-parent married and remarried families

Fig.4 There was a significant wave effect ($E = 4.44$, $p = .004$) with parents' reports of parent-child conflict highest at Wave 1 and declining in a linear direction thereafter. As Fig. 4 shows, this trend is true for single-parent and remarried parents' reports but not for the married fathers' reports.

Fig. 5 There was a marginally significant F statistic for the between subjects factor, family structure, on parents' reports of child autonomy ($E = 2.88, p = .057$). Single-parent mothers reported that they allowed their young adolescent more autonomy than fathers from either of the two-parent family structures reported. Remarried fathers reported the lowest levels of autonomy across three times of measurement.

Fig. 6 Consistent with this pattern, remarried fathers reported the highest parent control in family decision-making while single-parent mothers reported the lowest.

Fig. 7 No between subjects effects were found for mothers' reports of parent-child conflict. A marginally significant interaction ($E = 2.09, p = .052$) of wave x family structure x child sex was found. Single-parent mothers report the highest conflict with sons and daughters at Wave 1, decreasing at subsequent waves whereas remarried mothers report more conflict with their sons after the transition to junior high school. Married and remarried mothers with daughters report the least conflict at each time point.

Fig. 8 There was also a wave x structure x child sex interaction for mothers' reports of the amount of autonomy they allow their child in decision-making. Multivariate $E = 2.97, p = .02$. The univariate linear component $E = 5.16$, is significant at .006. Married mothers report higher autonomy for their daughters at Wave 3 (after the transition to jr. high school) but a slight drop at Wave 4. Remarried mothers report increasing autonomy for their daughters over time but decreasing autonomy for their sons.

No between or within subjects factors reached significance on the dependent measure, mother's reports of high parent control.

Parents' perceptions of a close/confidant
parent child relationship

Fig. 10 The multivariate E for wave x gender x structure interaction was significant at $p = .03$. Single-parent mothers report that they are closer to their sons after the transition to junior high school than they had expected pre-transition. Remarried fathers also report this trend for daughters. However, remarried fathers' perceptions of how close they are to their sons drops precipitously after the transition to junior high.

Fig. 11 The between subjects factor of child sex significantly differentiates mothers' perceptions of the closeness of her relationship with her young adolescent. At both measurement times mothers of daughters expect to be closer to their daughters when the daughter goes to

junior high and observe that they are close to them after the transition to junior high. The exception to this pattern is the single-parent mothers with sons who report a closer/confidant role with their sons after the transition to junior high.

Young adolescents' reports:
consequences for curfew violations
and dating behavior

Tables 1 through 4

For the most part, chi-squared tests of independence reached only marginal significance on the items tapping parents' disciplinary practices when their son or daughter comes home late. As **Table 1** shows, daughters and sons in single-parent families are somewhat less likely to be asked to explain why they were late whereas daughters in two-parent married families are somewhat more likely to have to explain. However, this does not mean that there are no consequences to being late in a single-parent family. As **Table 2** shows, daughters and sons in these families are more likely to be grounded for being late as are sons and daughters in remarried families. It is only daughters in two-parent married families (those who reported that their parents asked them to explain their lateness) who are less likely to be grounded for being late. **Table 3** aggregates sons and daughters in the three family structures and shows that young adolescents are more likely to be grounded for being late in a single-parent or remarried family than in a married family. **Table 4** shows an interesting, albeit somewhat surprising, trend. Physical punishment for being late was the most extreme discipline technique listed for students and, as can be seen in the table, not many young adolescents endorse it. However, girls in single-parent and remarried families and boys in married families are the groups that more often report this practice. The chi-squared test of independence (17.26) for this practice reached significance at $p = .004$.

Table 5 With respect to early dating behavior, girls in single-parent families were more likely than their peers in married or remarried families to report that they were allowed to go out on a date alone with a boy. Chi-square stat. = 6.67 reached marginal significance, $p = .035$.

Table 6 Boys in single-parent families were also more likely to report that they were allowed to go out on dates alone but there was no significant chi-square test associated with family structure for boys' reports of early dating behavior.

Discussion

Discussion will focus on three issues:

1. That a different conclusion about decision-making practices in different family structures could be made if analyses were based on only one respondent in the family or on only one time measurement. That the mean differences in parent and young adolescent reports as a function of family structure, even when reaching statistical significance, are often less than a .10 difference in the means and that a "no difference" finding in family decision-making practices is as important as one that uncovers differences.
2. That boys in remarried families appear to be the most "at risk" group for negative changes in the parent-child relationship at early adolescence.
3. That there may be less parental restriction of girls' early dating in single-parent families, an issue that deserves further investigation.

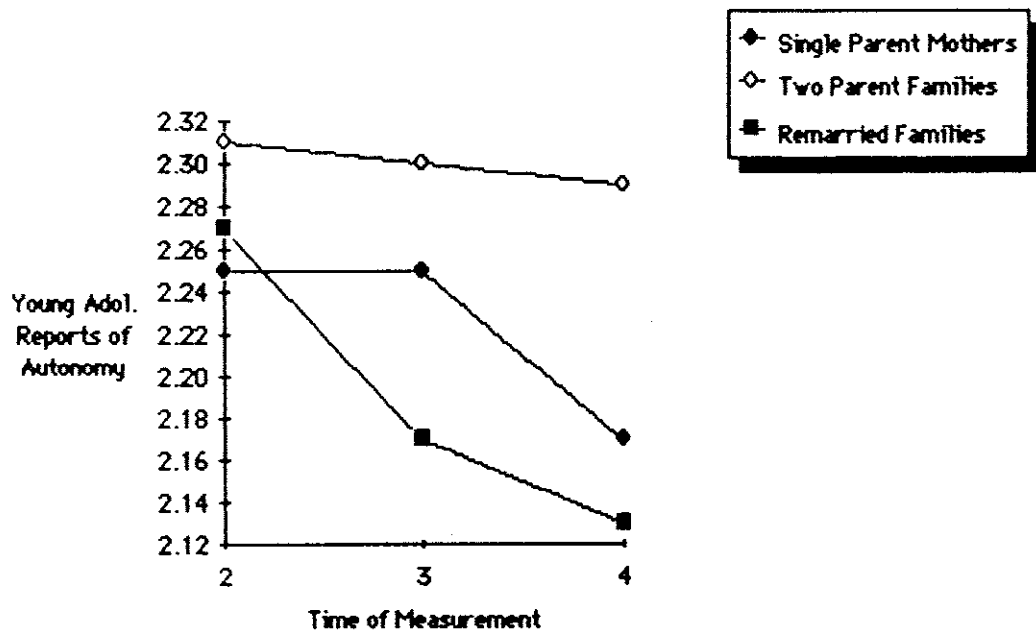


Figure 1. Young Adolescent's Reports of Autonomy in Family Decision Making by Family Structure At Three Times of Measurement

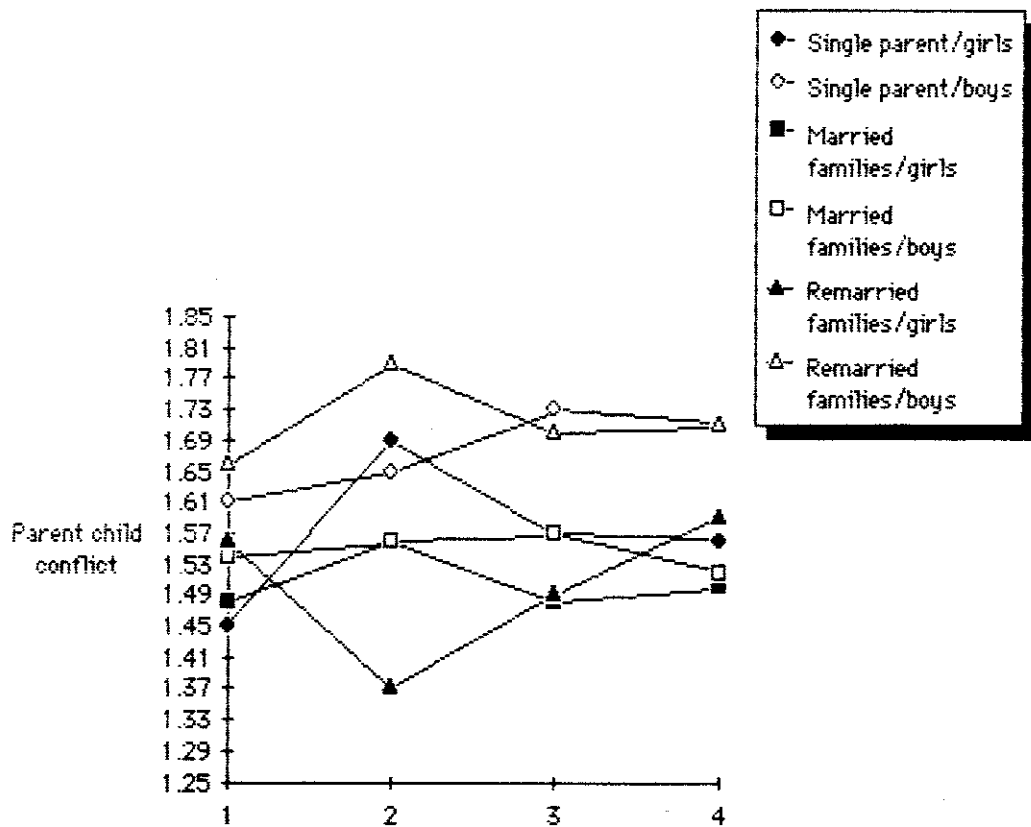


Fig. 2 Young adolescent reports of parent-child conflict by family structure and child sex at four measurement times

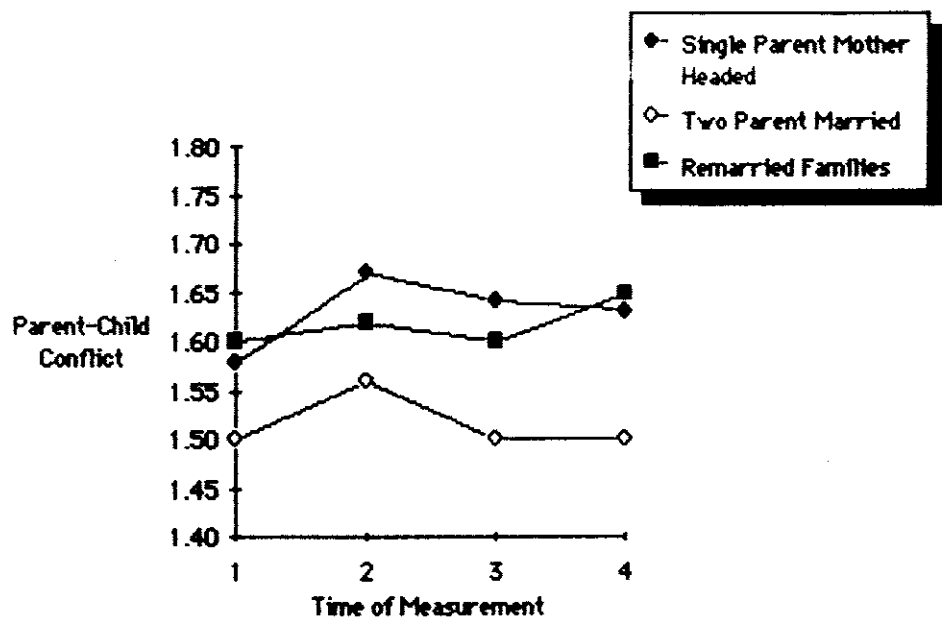


Figure 2. Main Effects of Family Structure on Young Adolescent's Reports of Mean Level of Parent Child Conflict

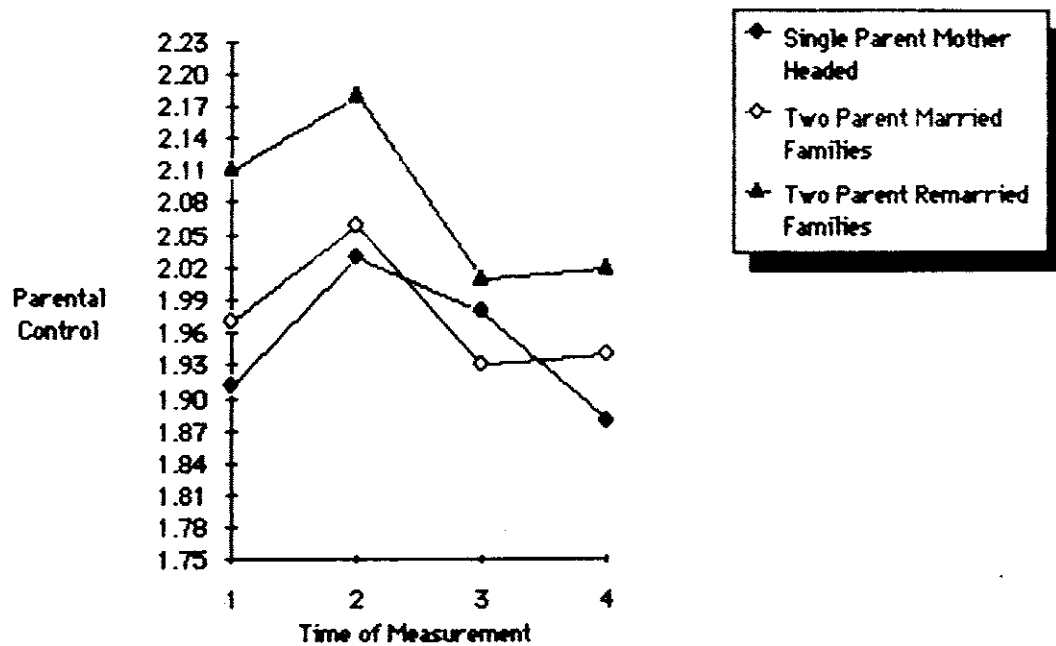


Figure 3. Young Adolescent's Perceptions of High Parent Control for Three Family Structures Across Four Times of Measurement

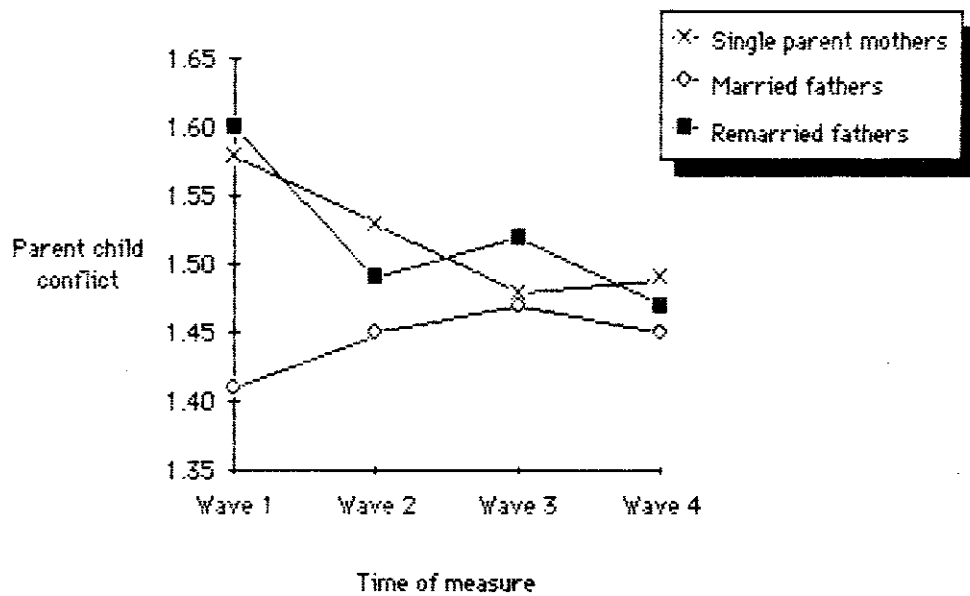


Fig 4. Parents' reports of parent child conflict by family structure at four times of measure. Single parent mothers compared to married and remarried fathers.

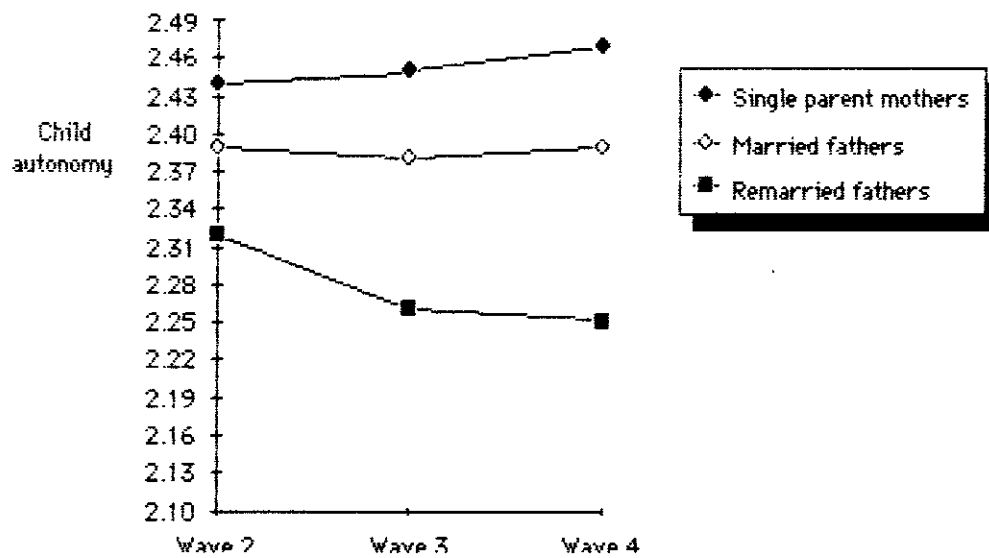


Fig 5. Parent perceptions of child autonomy for three family structures measured at three time points. Single parent mothers compared with married and remarried fathers.

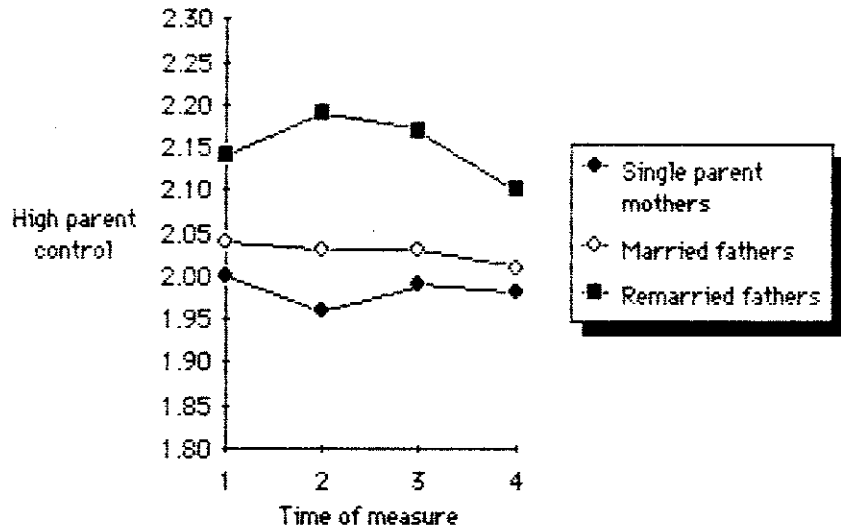


Fig. 6 Parents' reports of high parent control in family decision making measured at four time points. Single-parent mothers compared with married and remarried fathers.

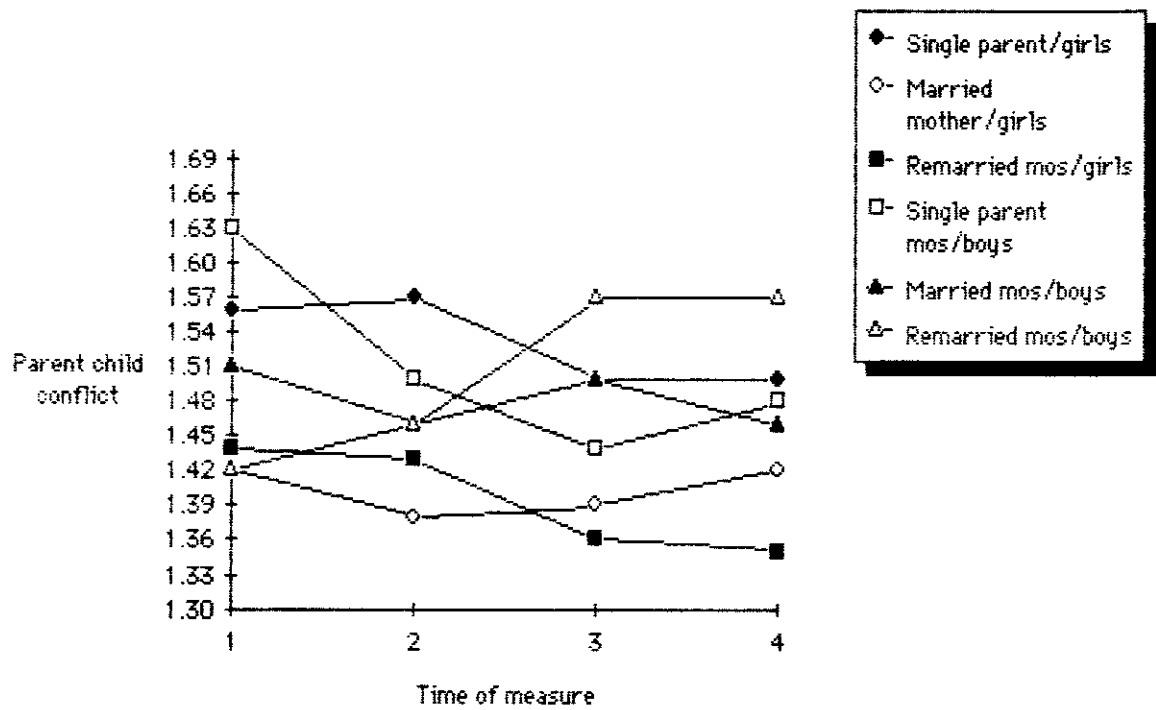


Fig. 7 Mothers' reports of conflict with early adolescent by family structure and child sex at four times of measurement.

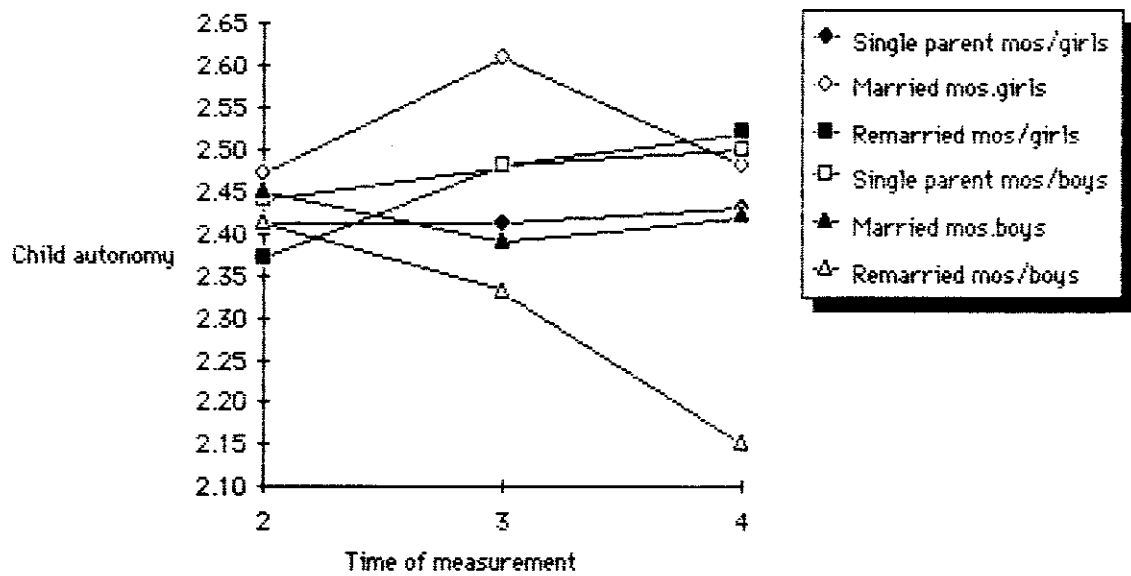


Figure 8. Mothers' reports of child autonomy in family decision making by child sex and family structure at three times of measurement.

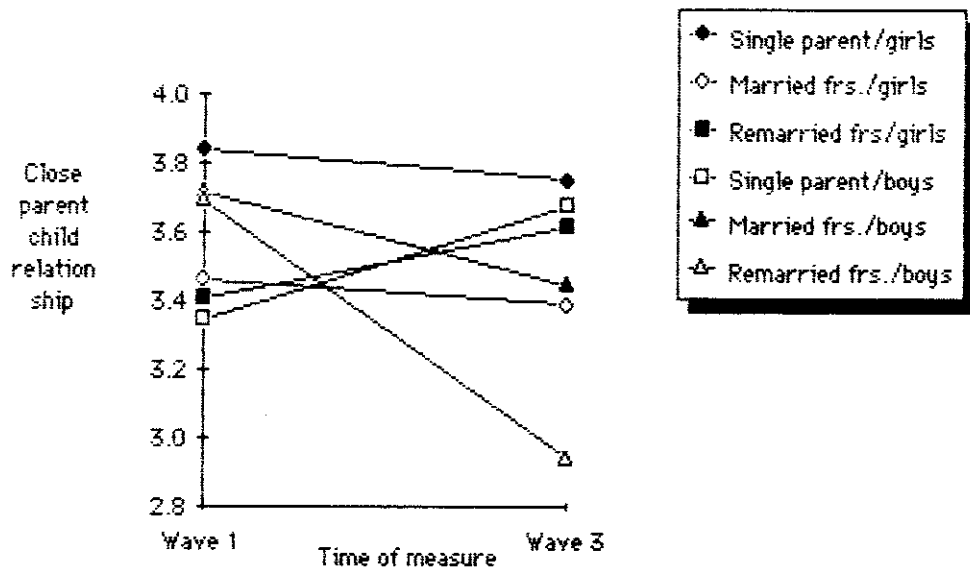


Figure 10. Parent perceptions of a close parent child relationship pre and post jr. high transition by family structure and child sex

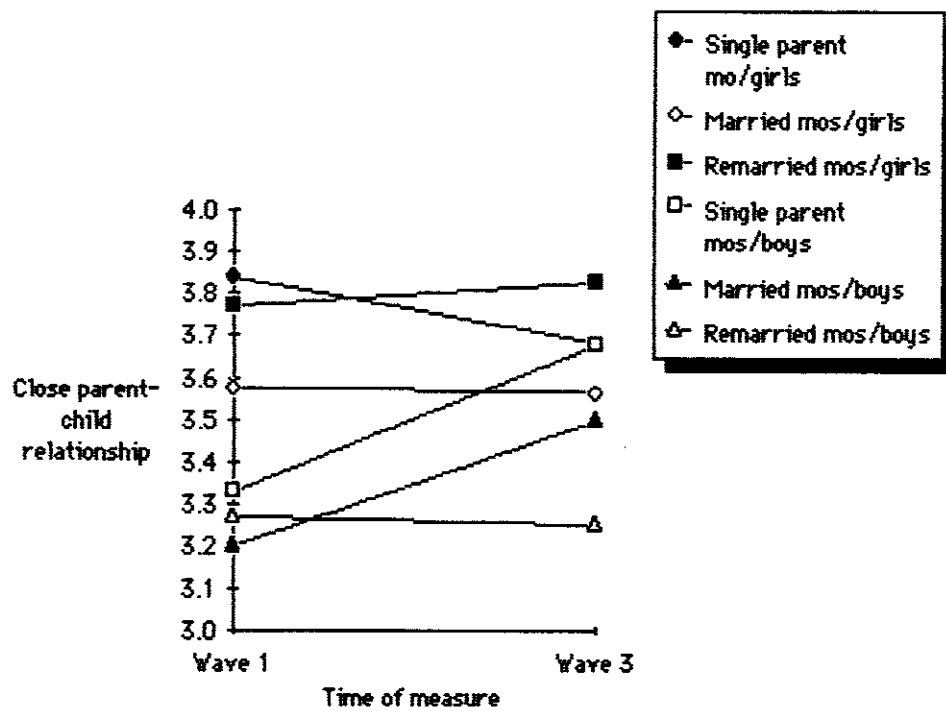


Fig. 11 Mothers' perceptions of the close/confidant quality of their parent-child relationship pre/post jr high school transition by family structure and sex of child

TABLE 1

Curfew infractions/consequences

"If you come home later than you're supposed to,
do your parents.....

Ask you to explain?" (1) yes

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Daughters			
Observed	80	513	43
Expected	85	494	43
Sons			
Observed	53	502	56
Expected	60	508	57

Ask you to explain?" (2) no

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Daughters			
Observed	25	97	10
Expected	20	116	10
Sons			
Observed	21	126	15
Expected	14	120	14
Chi-squared test of independence: 10.24 p = .068			

TABLE 2

Curfew rules/consequences

"If you come home later than you're supposed to,
do your parents....."

Ground you:" (1) yes

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Daughters			
Observed	30	135	19
Expected	27	156	14
Sons			
Observed	25	165	24
Expected	19	163	19

Ground you:" (2) no

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Daughters			
Observed	70	450	34
Expected	73	429	39
Sons			
Observed	47	448	46
Expected	53	450	51

Chi-squared test of independence: 11.2 p = .048

TABLE 3

Curfew rules/consequences

"If you come home later than you're supposed to,
do your parents.....

Ground you:" (1) yes

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Observed	55	300	43
Expected	46	319	33

Ground you:" (2) no

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Observed	117	898	80
Expected	126	879	90

Chi-squared test of independence: 8.42 p= .015

TABLE 4

Curfew rules/consequences

"If you come home later than you're supposed to,
do your parents.....

Punish you physically:" (1) yes

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Daughters			
Observed	10	22	7
Expected	7	40	3
Sons			
Observed	6	52	5
Expected	5	42	5

Punish you physically:" (2) no

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Daughters			
Observed	89	570	44
Expected	92	552	48
Sons			
Observed	67	566	65
Expected	68	576	65

Chi-squared test of independence: 17.26 p = .004

TABLE 5

Curfew rules/consequences

"Are you allowed to go out on a date with a boy alone?"

Girls (1) yes

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Observed	42	173	13
Expected	31	181	16

"Are you allowed to go out on a date with a boy alone?"

Girls no

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Observed	60	419	39
Expected	71	411	36

Chi-squared test of independence: 6.67 p= .035

TABLE 6

Curfew rules/consequences

"Are you allowed to go out on a date with a girl alone?"

Boys (1) yes

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Observed	56	407	45
Expected	52	410	46

"Are you allowed to go out on a date with a girl alone?"

Boys (2) no

	Single Parent Mother Headed Families	Two Parent Married Families	Two Parent Remarried Families
Observed	21	203	24
Expected	25	200	23
Chi-squared test of independence:	1.25	p = .53	