What Do We Know?
Persisting Post-Separation Parental Conflicts

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In the Province of Québec, more than 30% of children live, before the age of 10, in single-parent families, primarily because their parents have separated (Cyr, DiStephano, Lavoie and Chagnon, 2012; Juby, Marcil-Graton and Le Bourdais, 2005). Approximately 15 to 20% of these children experience adaptation difficulties following this family transition, a risk which is two times higher than among children from intact families (Bray, 1999; Saint-Jacques and Drapeau, 2009; Hetherington, Bridges and Insabella, 1998). Numerous scientific studies would seem to indicate however that the children's psychosocial adaptation difficulties are not so much explained by their parents' separation as by the resulting family processes and objective living conditions (Amato, Kane and James, 2011; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey and Stewart, 2001; Saint-Jacques and Drapreau, 2009). Conflicts and lack of cooperation between the parents are among the most powerful processes explaining the children's adaptation difficulties after a separation (Amato, 2001; Drapeau, Tremblay, Cyr, Godbout and Gagné, 2008; Kelly, 2012; Noller et al., 2008). What are the factors that are reputed to affect the level of conflict and cooperation between parents after a break-up? The present document looks at this question and provides a summary of the main factors associated with the quality of the separated parents' relationship.

The quality of the parents' relationship after the separation

The quality of the parents' relationship after their separation is a central factor in their children's adaptation to this transition. Various concepts are associated with relationship quality. Some researchers have referred to the notion of an alliance, that is an affective relationship that links the two separated parents. Despite their separation, this alliance can be characterized by affection, warmth, and a feeling of unity (Schoppe, Mangelsdorf and Frosch, 2001). Other researchers (Margolin, Gordis and John, 2001; Maccoby, Depner and Mnookin, 1990) have looked at the parental behaviour and attitudes that characterize the post-separation relationship, concentrating on communication and support or, on the other hand, animosity and conflict. The concept of coparenting, which refers to the interaction dynamics between two adults who may or may not share similar ideas about parenting are also associated with relationship quality (Drapeau et al., 2008; Dufresne and Provost, 2012).

Authors in this field generally propose a linear portrait of the relationship between the parents after the break-up; the level of conflict and, consequently,

the level of risk for the children progressively decreases over time (Emery, 1999; Fischer, De Graff and Kalmijn, 2005; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992). According to this model, time sooths the pain and anger related to the separation while allowing the ex-partners to grieve the end of their couple relationship. It would seem, however, that this general portrait does not entirely correspond to the reality of these situations. Those few authors who have examined this question have noted that certain trajectories, whether they be marked or not by conflict, remain quite stable, whereas others fluctuate over time (Drapeau, Gagné, Saint-Jacques, Lépine and Ivers, 2009; Graham, 1997; Tremblay, Drapeau, Robitaille, Piché, Gagné and Saint-Jacques, 2013). For example, one longitudinal study that focused on how separated parents' relationships evolved identified four trajectories, of which two involved the presence and maintenance of sizable conflicts several years after the separation (Drapeau et al., 2009). Accordingly, among a third of the families interviewed, the parents maintained a high level of conflict for several years after the relationship, a situation which represents an elevated risk for the children. The authors likewise noted that, among 10% of the families in the sample, the parents displayed a low level of conflict after the separation that then increased after the first year. Other studies have corroborated these results by clearly showing the diversity of the separated parents' relational structures, which do not always evolve in a positive direction.

Factors predicting the quality of the separated parents' relationship

Several factors are associated with the quality of the post-separation parental relationship. They are gathered here into six themes.

Family processes before the separation

The couple relationship, the way a family works, and the parent-child relationships before the separation help to partially explain the way in which parents cooperate after their separation.

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That being said, studies have above all focused on the influence of factors related to the couple relationship (Lamela and Figueiredo, 2011). In a study conducted with 62 parents, Lamela and Figueiredo (2011) showed, for instance, that a parent's representation of how the ex-partner resolved conflicts when they were together was a good predictor of the type of post-separation parental alliance. For example, parents who perceived that their ex-partner was capable of listening to their viewpoint and of respectfully expressing another viewpoint were more likely to develop a post-separation coparental relationship that was characterized by cooperation and respectful exchanges. These authors also pointed out that the parents' relationship dynamics were marked by a certain continuity despite the separation (Tremblay et al. 2013; Coysh, Johnston, Tschann, Wallerstein and Kline, 1989). Waller (2009) noted that parents who described their former couple relationship as "romantic" were more likely to support the other parent in their efforts to reduce the conflict level. Likewise, parents who stated that they were not very committed to each other before they broke up indicated that there was less support in their post-separation relationship (Kamp Dush, Kotila and Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). Furthermore, a deterioration in the relationship before the separation can predict a hostile break-up, a complete disengagement, and a lack of mutual support (Kamp Dush et al, 2011; Carlson, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn, 2008).

Contextual elements of the break-up

One noteworthy element that other studies have examined to understand the quality of the post-separation relationship was the context of the break-up, in particular the type of custody and conflicts over custody and child support. However, researchers who have looked at the specificity of parental relationships according to custody type have not all come to the same conclusions. Some researchers have found that parents in joint custody are more likely to manage their disagreements and support the other's parenting style (Luepnitz, 1982; Shiller, 1986). Other researchers have observed that this practice can reactivate conflicts associated with the couple's break-up given the need for communication that it presupposes (Johnston, Kline and Tschann, 1989). Work by Johnston, Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) highlighted the heterogeneity of the co-parenting profiles in the parents of children who were in joint custody and sole custody. While the parents in joint custody were more likely to cooperate and communicate than were parents who had the sole custody of their children, the fact that children were in joint custody did not ensure that there was a supportive co-parenting relationship that was free of conflict. Indeed, a third of these parents had a conflictual relationship with their ex-partner, while one out of five adopted a disengaged co-parenting style.

Authors have likewise noted that conflict between the parents due to custody arrangements and child support affects the quality of the parents' relationship with one other (Ahrons, 2007). Accordingly, the type of conflict resolution chosen by ex-partners influenced how long the conflict lasts. Parents who are involved in the mediation process tend to report a decrease in the conflict between them, whereas those who are involved in an adversarial process before the courts note an increase in the level of hostility (Kelly, 1993; Sbarra and Emery 2008). Moreover, these variations would seem to remain and even increase over time (Sbarra and Emery, 2008). It is nonetheless worth questioning the meaning

of this relationship. While the results seem to indicate that the choice of conflict resolution affects the quality of the co-parenting relationship, it might also be possible that the higher the level of parental conflict is, the more it tends to result in legal proceedings.

In the same vein, financial worries can constitute a source of stress that influences the quality of the relationships between family members, which would seem to be particularly true when child support is at the root of the conflict.

Parents' perception of the separation

Numerous studies have shown that the parents' satisfaction, their perception of the situation, and the meaning they give to events influences the quality of their relationship. Some authors notably point out that the resentment felt by parents when the separation occurs can foster post-separation conflict. Parents who have difficulty accepting the break-up might nurture conflicts over custody arrangements and child support in order to maintain a relationship with the other parent or have power over him/her (Sbarra and Emery, 2008). Similarly, Bonach and Sales (2002) showed that parents' ability to cope with their separation and overcome the ensuing negative feelings improved the quality of their mutual relationship, making it more supportive and less conflictual. These factors would seem to be better predictors of the quality of post-separation relationships than others associated, for example, with the parents' satisfaction with the financial or custody arrangements (Bonach, 2005).

The improvement of the coparental relationship would also seem to be related to the parents' degree of satisfaction with the situation (Maccoby et al., 1990). Accordingly, parents who have a positive perception of their coparental relationship communicate more than other parents do. Moreover, mothers who have a positive view of their post-separation coparenting, who believe that their family and friends are encouraging them to maintain a good relationship, and

who believe they have some control over their relationship with their ex-partner are more likely to positively communicate with the other parent (Ganong, Coleman, Markham and Rothrauff, 2011). Furthermore, fathers who believe they are receiving support from and are shown consideration for their parenting by their ex-partner are more likely to remain committed to this relationship, whereas non-resident fathers who feel their ex-partner is less accommodating about visits have more conflictual relationships (Madden-Derdich and Leonard, 2000; 2002).

Parental characteristics

Some of the parents' sociodemographic characteristics would seem to have a greater effect on the quality of the parents' mutual relationship. For example, the time passed since the divorce tends to reduce the ex-partners' animosity (Baum, 2003). Likewise, parents coming from a higher socioeconomic class (Madden-Derdich, Leonard and Christopher, 1999) and mothers with a higher level of education (Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992) would seem to have more positive post-separation parental relationships.

Some studies have likewise shown that one parent's attachment style influences the relationship with the other parent, since it is related to the parent's capacity to handle a situation and meet the challenges arising from the redefined parenting role. Accordingly, parents in a conflictual relationship seem to display an anxious-ambivalent form of attachment, whereas ex-partners who display disengaged coparenting characterized by few conflicts but also by little communication belong to the avoidant type (Roberston, Sabo and Wickel, 2011).

Certain marked personality traits in parents are reputed to influence the quality of the coparenting relationship. Most notably, parents who are narcissistic or who have a hard time self-differentiating are more involved in conflictual relationships (Baum and Shnit, 2003; Siegel and

Langford, 1998), quite possibly because they give priority to their own needs at the expense of their children's needs (Donner, 2006). Nonetheless, few studies have explored the influence that mental health problems might have on the quality of post-separation parental relationships (Cummings, Davies and Campbell, 2000; Downey and Coyne, 1990; Parke et al., 2004). The few authors who have examined this topic have suggested that parents who suffer from depression are less likely to support their children and to resolve their difficulties in a positive manner, which creates conflicts with the other parent who is not depressive (Cabrera, Shannon and La Taillade, 2009).

The children's individual characteristics

Age, the children's gender, and their adaptation difficulties can influence the relationship between the parents. Regarding the children's gender, there is a lack of consensus in the research results. Even though a few studies have reported that there is more support in families with male children (Bronte-Tinkew and Horowitz, 2010), gender was not found to be a source of significant variation in others (Maccoby, et al., 1990; Kamp Dush et al., 2011). As concerns the children's age, Maccoby, Depner and Mnookin (1990) observed that separated parents who had young children (under six years of age) were more likely to become involved in conflictual relationships, whereas parents of older children were more likely to drift apart. Moreover, these authors noted that the number of children seemed to have an impact on the level of conflict; the larger the number of children, the more the post-separation parental relationship was conflictual (Fishel and Scanzoni, 1989).

Finally, the children's adaptation problems, whether or not they are related to the separation, can sometimes be a source of stress and amplify conflicts between ex-partners (Sterrett, Jones, Forehand and Garai, 2009; Drapeau et al. 2009).

Elements related to post-separation family trajectories

Some elements related to post-separation family trajectories are also likely to influence the quality of the parents' mutual relationship. This is particularly the case when one of the two parents begins a new relationship. The new stepfamily can indeed change the expectations and commitment of ex-partners (Markham, Ganong and Coleman, 2007). New stepfamilies are associated with a decrease in the number of interactions between the parents, mutual support, and parental involvement, as well as a more negative attitude to the other parent and more conflictual interactions (Adamsons and Pasley, 2006; Ahrons and Wallisch, 1987; Buehler and Ryan, 1994; Christensen and Rettig, 1995). For some authors, this new transition has a greater effect on the parents' relationship when it is the

mother's marital status that changes. Bronte-Tinkew and Horowitz (2010) suggest that the arrival of a new partner negatively influences motivation of the mother to cooperate with her ex-partner, since the new partner gets involved with the children and becomes, to a certain extent, a substitute parent. This would particularly be the case when the parents have lower incomes (Litcher, Qian and Mellott, 2006). This result has not received unanimous support however, since at least one study (McGene and King, 2012) concluded that the father's commitment to the new relationship has a greater impact on the quality of the coparenting relationship than does the mother's new marital status.

Conclusion

The end of a couple relationship is not necessarily synonymous with the end of or a decrease in conflicts between the two ex-partners. American and Québec studies indicate that a third of the parents continue their conflictual relationships two years after separating. And this even though numerous studies have shown that conflict between the parents and lack of cooperation are among the top factors predicting adaptation difficulties in children after the separation (Drapeau et al., 2008). The present text identifies those factors which, in the present-day literature, are associated with the quality of the post-separation parental relationships. These factors comprise pre-separation family processes, the separation's contextual elements, the parents' perceptions, their socioeconomic characteristics, the children's individual characteristics, and the elements concerning the post-separation family trajectory.

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