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Abstract

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Parental Separation and Children’s Behavioral/Emotional Problems: The Impact of Parental Representations and Family Conflict

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Keywords: Kindergarten Age; Parental Separation; Parental Representations; Family Conflict; Behavioral/Emotional Problems


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INTRODUCTION

Parental separation is rated as one of their most stressful life events by both parents and children (Davies & Cummings, 1994) and was found to strongly influence the quality of family relationships even two decades later (Ahrons, 2007). As family roles, relationships, and circumstances change children often tend to be depressed, anxious, angry, demanding and noncompliant, and experience a drop in school performance (Amato, 2001; Hetherington & Stanley Hagan, 1999). In this study, we examine whether parental separation, family conflict, and children’s parental representations are predictors of individual changes in children’s behavioral/emotional problems at kindergarten age and whether the adjustment of children who experienced parental separation differs according to the level of family conflict and to children’s representations of caregivers.

For kindergarten children, the family is a highly salient context for understanding psychopathological development. A wealth of evidence from cross-sectional and longitudinal studies indicates that parental separation as an important life event is associated with an increased rate of behavioral/emotional problems in children (Amato, 2001; Kelly, 2000). The greatest effects of divorce on child adjustment relate to behavioral problems. Effects on emotional symptoms (depression/anxiety) are far more inconsistent (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley Hagan, 1999). Just as important as the evidence of mean differences is the marked individual variation in children’s socio-emotional development among those experiencing a parental separation. Some children are severely affected by separation, while others seem to be relatively unaffected. Moreover, the effects of separation are not necessarily adverse. Children who move from a conflictual, abusive, or negligent family situation to a more harmonious one may show diminished problems following separation (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). This sheds light on new directions in research which seek to identify mediating and moderating risk and protective factors in the association between separation and child outcome (Amato et al., 1995; Cummings & Davies, 2002). As a potential moderator, marital conflict receives much empirical attention, and research has indicated that it is marital conflict rather than the break-up of the family that is primarily responsible for many of the problems seen in children whose parents separate (Kelly, 2000). However, current research on marital conflict also proposes that the effects on children are a function of children’s perceptions of conflict in relation to themselves and their families rather than simply reflecting the frequency or characteristics of conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Fincham, 1998). Thus, to understand the effects of parental separation and of marital conflict on children, exploring psychological response processes underlying children’s development and adjustment over time is of great importance. Here, children’s representations of family relationships play an important role.

Children’s representations have been conceptualized in terms of working models in attachment theory, and schemas or scripts in social cognitive approaches (e.g., Bretherton, 1990; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Common to these theoretical perspectives is the notion that children internalize important aspects of care-giving experiences, and that these mental structures influence children’s emotional and behavioral responses to new social encounters. The evaluation of children’s play narratives, elicited by story stems that reflect socioemotional dilemmas, has proved to be one way of gaining access to young children’s thoughts and feelings about emotionally significant relationships (Bretherton & Oppenheim, 2003). Evidence has emerged to suggest that children’s representations are affected by histories of
exposure to marital conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Shamir, Du Rocher Schudlich, and Cummings (2001) found that negative marital conflict strategies were predictive of more negative representations of family systems in 5–8-year-old children’s story-stem narratives. Grych, Wachsmuth Schlaefer, and Klockow (2002) showed that children who experienced extensive domestic violence showed significantly more negative representations of self and mothers, within more incoherent stories, than children without such negative experiences. Research also documents an association between children’s representations and their psychopathological development. Children who display a high level of negative representations and a low level of positive/coherent representations of caregivers in their play narratives after socioemotional dilemmas were found to show higher levels of behavioral/emotional problems and increased social impairment compared with other children (e.g., Oppenheim, Nir, Warren, & Emde, 1997b; Shields, Ryan, & Cicchetti, 2001). In a recent study on kindergarten children, Stadelmann, Perren, von Wyl, and von Klitzing (2007) showed that negative parental representations were associated with the development of conduct problems, whereas positive parental representations were associated with the development of prosocial behavior. Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, and McDonald (2000) were able to show that children’s evaluations of self-blame and threat mediated the association between interparental conflict and their own adjustment problems, specifically internalizing problems. Although studies have shown significant associations between family background, children’s cognitive-emotional processes and adjustment, and support the notion that children’s perceptions of the family background shape the impact of family events on aspects of self-functioning, much more research is needed on the interplay between these aspects if developmental pathways in children are to be better understood. Specifically, there is a need for studies to investigate young children’s cognitive-emotional processes as mediators or moderators of the impact of parental separation on their adjustment.

In the present study, we examine whether parental separation, family conflict, and children’s parental representations are predictors of individual changes in children’s behavioral/emotional problems at kindergarten age. We hypothesized that children from families where the parents had separated would show a greater increase in behavioral/emotional problems at kindergarten age than children of nonseparated families. Furthermore, we hypothesized that children from families with high levels of conflict and children who display many negative parental representations in their play narratives would show a greater increase in behavioral/emotional problems at kindergarten age. Specifically, we were interested in whether family conflict and children’s negative parental representations moderate the impact of parental separation on behavioral/emotional problems in kindergarten age. In the main analyses, we control for gender as various studies found gender differences in children’s representations (e.g., Clyman, 2003; von Klitzing, Kelsay, Emde, Robinson, & Schmitz, 2000) as well as in behavioral and emotional problems (Zahn-Waxler, Klimes Dougan, & Slattery, 2000).

### METHOD

#### Sample

One hundred and eighty-seven children (76 girls, 111 boys) participated in the study and were assessed at the ages of 5 and 6 years (age at first assessment: mean = 5.27, \(SD = 0.39\); second assessment: mean = 6.23, \(SD = 0.35\)). Ninety-three
Children were recruited through their kindergarten classes in the city of Basel. Kindergarten classes were selected from different city districts representing various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds in the city of Basel. After the kindergarten teacher had agreed to participate, parents were informed at a parents’ meeting and given written information on the study. Ninety-eight families agreed to participate (participation rate 74.2%). Another 64 children were part of our longitudinal study on family relationships that began when the mothers of these children were pregnant (Perren et al., 2003; Perren, von Wyl, Stadelmann, Bürgin, & von Klitzing, 2006). To increase the number of children with behavioral/emotional problems in the clinical range, we included a group of 30 children who had been referred to our child psychiatric outpatient unit for clinical evaluation and treatment. The referrals were generally initiated by the children’s teachers and/or parents, and followed behavioral problems (mostly dysregulated aggressive behavior and/or hyperactivity) or emotional symptoms (anxiety and/or depressive symptoms). Parents and children were asked whether they would be willing to participate in our study, and if they agreed they were assessed at intake into the clinic. For bivariate analyses all available data were used (N = 155–187). For longitudinal analyses, we only used complete datasets (N = 154).

The participating families were mainly Swiss-German, while 41 families (22%) had an immigrant background. In 94 families (51%) both parents had a higher education, in 43 families (24%) at least one of the parents had a higher education; in 46 families (25%) both parents had only received a basic education (9 years or less of schooling) or a professional qualification (vocational training). In 4 cases, we only had data on the mother (N = 2 had higher education and N = 2 were low educated).

Parents reported on parental separation (yes/no) and children’s age at separation. Thirty-three (18%) children (16 girls, 17 boys) experienced parental separation before the age of 5. Nineteen of these children (58%) lived with their mother, nine children (27%) lived with both parents (different households, shared custody), one child (3%) lived with its father, and four children (12%) lived in alternative settings such as with mother and stepfather, with the grandmother, or in a children’s home.

Families were only included into this group if parents remained separated from one another during the study interval. Children’s age at separation ranged from 5 months to 5 years of age. Behavioral/emotional problems, family conflict, and children’s parental representations were not significantly associated with children’s age at separation. Therefore, we did not control for this variable in our main analyses.

Comparing the community and clinical sample, we found that parents of children from the clinical sample had a significantly lower educational level than those of the “community” children (p ≤ .05). The two samples did not differ from each other in terms of migration background or parental separation. However, children in the clinical sample showed significantly higher levels of conduct problems, hyperactivity, and emotional symptoms at both ages, and experienced significantly more conflict in their families than children of the community sample (p ≤ .05). No sample differences were found in terms of children’s parental representations.

**Measures**

Parents, children, and teachers reported on children’s behavioral/emotional problems twice (age 5/6). Parents also reported on family conflict at the same ages. Children’s parental representations were assessed using a story-stem task (age 5/6).
All children were interviewed individually by a trained psychologist. Teachers and parents completed questionnaires within 4 weeks of the child interview.

**Behavioral/emotional problems (age 5/6)**

Parents and teachers completed the symptom scales of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1997). Children’s behavioral/emotional problems were assessed according to three scales: conduct problems (e.g., “often has temper tantrums or a hot temper”), hyperactivity/inattention (e.g., “restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long”), and emotional symptoms (e.g., “many worries, often seems worried”). Each scale consists of 5 items that are rated on a 3-point scale. Foreign-language speaking parents completed validated versions of the SDQ in their first language. Internal consistency was moderate to high (parents: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .57 - .79$; teachers: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .73 - .88$).

Children’s self-report of behavioral/emotional problems was assessed by means of a standardized puppet interview. The Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI, Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998) is carried out by means of two identical hand puppets that make two opposing statements on a topic, after which the child can give his/her own statement. The interview is videotaped and subsequently scored by independent raters. Each item is rated on a 7-point scale. Our interviewers were trained by the authors of the instrument. Interrater reliability was established first with the authors of the instrument, and then with the raters of the research group (average ICC = .97).

To link child reports of behavioral/emotional problems to parent and teacher reports, we aggregated the original BPI subscales. “Emotional symptoms” encompass depression, separation anxiety, and over-anxiety (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .69 - .74$, 20 items). “Conduct problems” encompass oppositionality/defiance and overt aggression to peers (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .64 - .74$, 13 items). “Hyperactivity/inattention” includes impulsivity plus a single item on inattention (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .58 - .59$, 7 items). The interviews were conducted in Swiss German.

As recommended by Kraemer et al. (2003) we aggregated child, parent, and teacher reports. This allows the integration of information on children’s characteristics from different perspectives and contexts. Previous analyses of the cross-sectional data showed that the aggregation of the three informants yielded reliable and valid information on children’s behavioral/emotional problems (Perren et al., 2006). In this study, cross-informant agreements (child, parents, and teachers) were moderate to high (intraclass correlations between .39 and .53). To combine child, parent, and teacher reports on behavioral/emotional problems, the average scores of each informant were first z-standardized and then averaged across informants (mean scores).

**Family conflict (age 5/6)**

Family conflict was assessed by parent reports using the subscale “conflict” of the German version of the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1981; Schnewind, Beckmann, & Hecht-Jackl, 1985). The subscale conflict describes the amount of anger and aggression expressed in the family (8 items, $\alpha = .76 - .79$). Items are rated on a 4-point scale.

We used the linear variables to analyze bivariate associations. For multivariate analyses, we combined longitudinal data on family conflict (age 5/6). We first calculated the mean of family conflict between the two time points. We then dichotomized this variable using the 75th percentile as cut-off criterion: low level of family
conflict < 75th percentile of the mean of age 5/6 — family conflict \( (N = 117) \); high level of family conflict ≥ 75th percentile of the mean of age 5/6 — family conflict \( (N = 38) \).

**Children’s parental representations in play narratives (age 5/6)**

The MacArthur Story-Stem Battery (MSSB, Bretherton & Oppenheim, 2003), designed for children from 3 to 7 years of age, uses standardized story stems to elicit children’s responses across a range of socioemotional dilemmas. All stems consist of a brief narrative introduced by the experimenter, and end with a dilemma. In this study, after the presentation of a warm-up story, each child was given eight story stems. Bretherton and Oppenheim (2003) outline detailed procedures for administering seven of the eight socio-emotional dilemmas (“hot soup,” “lost Barney,” “mother’s headache,” “three is a crowd,” “lost keys,” “bathroom shelf,” “exclusion”). The last stem was devised by the project group (“sandcastle”: a friend wants the child to join in aggravating a younger child; parents standing aside). Children’s responses to the story stems were videotaped.

Children’s narratives were coded for negative parental representations by an independent coder, using the MacArthur Narrative Coding Manual (Oppenheim, Emde, & Warren, 1997a; Robinson & Mantz-Simmons, 2003). Negative representations encompass harsh, punitive, rejecting, and ineffectual behavior of parental figures toward child figures. Parental representations were coded as present or absent in each story. Means were taken of the individual scores for each theme across all eight stories for each subject. Interrater reliability was established between the coder and the last author of the present study, who has been trained by the authors of the instrument \( (\kappa = .86) \).

For bivariate analyses, we used the linear variables. For multivariate analyses we combined longitudinal data on parental representations (age 5/6) and placed the children into two categories: None = child did not show negative parental representations in play narratives \( (N = 101) \). At least once = child showed negative parental representations at age 5 and/or at age 6 \( (N = 53) \). We decided to use this procedure because of distribution properties (highly skewed distribution of the variable at both ages).

**RESULTS**

First, we report descriptive results and bivariate associations between study variables. Second, we present results on multivariate analyses.

**Descriptive Results and Bivariate Associations Between Study Variables**

**Bivariate cross-sectional and longitudinal associations**

To analyze associations between family conflict, parental representations, and behavioral/emotional problems, we computed Pearson correlations coefficients (Table 1). Family conflict and children’s parental representations in play narratives were not significantly associated with each other, but both aspects showed significant correlations with behavioral/emotional problems. Family conflict was positively associated with conduct problems and emotional symptoms (age 5, 6, 5 with 6, 6 with 5) and with hyperactivity (age 5, 5 with 6). Negative parental representations were positively associated with conduct problems (age 5, 6, 5 with 6) and with hyperactivity (age 6). No significant associations were found between parental representations and emotional symptoms. Finally, behavioral/emotional problems showed significantly positive correlations with each other (age 5, 6, 5 with 6, 6 with 5).
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<td>2. Hyperactivity</td>
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<td>3. Emotional s.</td>
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<td>4. Conduct p.</td>
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<td>5. Hyperactivity</td>
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<td>6. Emotional s.</td>
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<td>7. Age 5</td>
<td>.277**</td>
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<td>.189*</td>
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<td>.241**</td>
<td>.643**</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Age 5</td>
<td>.196*</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>-.017</td>
<td>.298**</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>-.015</td>
<td>.078</td>
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<td>10. Age 6</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>-.071</td>
<td>.153*</td>
<td>.153**</td>
<td>-.084</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>-.028</td>
<td>.353**</td>
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*Note. **p < .01. *p < .05 (Pearson’s correlation coefficient, two-tailed).*
Stability

To analyze stability of family conflict, parental representations, and behavioral/emotional problems over 1 year, we computed Pearson correlations coefficients (Table 1). Family conflict showed high stability between age 5 and 6. Negative parental representations showed moderate stability between 5 and 6. Behavioral/emotional problems were also highly stable between 5 and 6.

Frequency of behavioral/emotional problems

Based on the SDQ norms (http://www.sdqinfo.com; Goodman, 1997), at the age of 5, 36% of children (N = 57) of the community sample (77% [N = 23] of the clinical sample) were in the clinical range on at least one of the symptom scales, according to parent and/or teacher reports. In detail, 21% of children (N = 33) of the community sample (20% [N = 6] of the clinical sample) had behavioral problems only (i.e., conduct problems and/or hyperactivity/inattention); 9% (N = 14) of the community sample (17% [N = 5] of the clinical sample) had emotional symptoms only; and 6% (N = 10) of the community sample (40% [N = 12] of the clinical sample) had both behavioral and emotional problems.

Group differences of separated and nonseparated families

To analyze group differences between separated and nonseparated families, we computed univariate variance analyses (see Table 2). Children who experienced parental separation showed significantly more emotional symptoms and, with a trend toward significance, more conduct problems at age 6 compared with children of nonseparated families. No group differences were found concerning behavioral/emotional problems at the age of 5. Furthermore, children of separated families showed a significantly higher level of negative parental representations in their play narratives at age 5, but no group differences were found concerning parental representations at the age of 6. In addition, parents of separated families reported significantly more family conflict compared with parents of nonseparated families when

<table>
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<td><strong>Symptoms age 5</strong></td>
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<td>Conduct problems</td>
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<td>Emotional symptoms</td>
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<td>Age 6</td>
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<td><strong>Negative parental representations</strong></td>
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<td>Age 5</td>
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<td>Age 6</td>
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children were 5 years old. Again, no group differences were found concerning family conflict at the age of 6.

Gender differences

To analyze gender differences, we calculated univariate variance analyses. At both ages boys showed higher levels of conduct problems (age 5: girls: $M = -0.23$, $SD = 0.59$, boys: $M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.75$; $F = 12.37$, $p = 0.001$; age 6: girls: $M = -0.24$, $SD = 0.57$, boys: $M = 0.18$, $SD = 0.75$; $F = 16.58$, $p = 0.000$) and of hyperactivity than girls (age 5: girls: $M = -0.16$, $SD = 0.73$, boys: $M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.77$; $F = 6.68$, $p = 0.011$; age 6: girls: $M = -0.23$, $SD = 0.58$, boys: $M = 0.17$, $SD = 0.74$; $F = 15.14$, $p = 0.000$). Girls and boys did not differ from each other in terms of emotional symptoms. In addition, boys presented significantly more negative parental representations in their play narratives than girls at the age of 6 (girls: $M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.05$, boys: $M = 0.06$, $SD = 0.10$; $F = 10.47$, $p = 0.001$). At the age of 5 this difference only showed a trend toward significance (girls: $M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.06$, boys: $M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.12$; $F = 3.03$, $p = 0.083$). No gender differences were found regarding family conflict.

Multivariate Analyses with Interaction Effects

To analyze the predictive value of parental separation, family conflict, and negative parental representations on changes of behavioral/emotional problems between the age of 5 and 6, and to test whether family conflict and negative parental representations have an impact on the strength of the effect of separation on behavioral/emotional problems, we computed General Linear Models with interaction effects (see Table 3). As explained in the methods, we categorized family conflict and negative parental representations (low vs. high levels of family conflict; no negative parental representations vs. child shows negative representations at least at one time point). Parental separation, family conflict, negative parental representations as main effects, and the interaction effects between parental separation and family conflict and between parental separation and negative parental representations were all analyzed as predictors of changes in behavioral/emotional problems between the ages of 5 and 6. Gender and behavioral/emotional problems at age 5 were included as control variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Conduct problems</th>
<th>Hyperactivity</th>
<th>Emotional symptoms</th>
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<td>Symptoms age 5</td>
<td>74.013</td>
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<td>70.059</td>
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<td>10.772</td>
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<td>Family conflict (F)</td>
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<td>Negative parental representation (N)</td>
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<td>0.284</td>
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<td>Parental separation (PS)</td>
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<td>2.107</td>
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<td>PS $\times$ F</td>
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<td>0.344</td>
<td>0.067</td>
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<tr>
<td>PS $\times$ N</td>
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Note: Conduct problems: $R^2 = 0.49$; hyperactivity: $R^2 = 0.59$; emotional symptoms: $R^2 = 0.41$. "www.FamilyProcess.org"
Concerning conduct problems, we found that the main effects of symptoms at age 5, gender (girls: $M = -0.20$, $SD = 0.58$, boys: $M = 0.17$, $SD = 0.75$), parental separation (nonseparated: $M = -0.04$, $SD = 0.65$, separated: $M = 0.24$, $SD = 0.84$), family conflict (low level: $M = -0.12$, $SD = 0.60$, high level: $M = 0.39$, $SD = 0.86$), and negative parental representations (none: $M = -0.06$, $SD = 0.66$; at least once: $M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.76$), were significant predictors of symptoms at the age of 6. In addition, we found a significant interaction effect between separation and negative parental representations in predicting conduct problems. As can be seen in Figure 1, children from families where the parents had separated who showed negative parental representations in their narratives also showed a significantly higher increase in conduct problems at the age of 6 compared with children of separated families without negative representations, and compared with children of nonseparated families.

Concerning hyperactivity, corresponding symptoms at the age of 5 and gender were significant predictors of symptoms at the age of 6. None of the other variables were found to be significant predictors.

Concerning emotional symptoms at the age of 6, symptoms at the age of 5 was the only predictor of symptoms 1 year later.

**DISCUSSION**

Our hypothesis that parental separation, family conflict, and children’s negative parental representations would predict a greater increase in behavioral/emotional problems at kindergarten age was partially supported. Our longitudinal study showed that all three of these aspects were risk factors for an increase in conduct problems during the kindergarten years. The effect of parental separation was particularly strong if children also had negative parental representations.

**Conduct Problems**

In support of our hypothesis, multivariate analyses showed that parental separation predicted higher levels of conduct problems of children at the age of 6, and explained an increase in conduct problems between 5 and 6. We did not find that this effect varied

![Figure 1. Conduct problems (age 5 and age 6) predicted by parental separation and negative parental representations (age 5/6).](Fam. Proc., Vol. 49, March, 2010)
according to the level of family conflict. This is partly in line with Morrison and Coiro (1999) and Cheng, Dunn, O’Connor, Golding, and Kingdom (2006), who showed that parental separation predicted an increase in behavioral/emotional problems in 4–9-year-old children over and above the effect of preseparation parental quarrels. Nonetheless, like Morrison and Coiro (1999), we found that family conflict is an additional significant predictor of an increase in conduct problems at kindergarten age.

In support of our hypothesis, negative representations (at age 5 and/or 6) turned out to be a further additional predictor of an increase in conduct problems between 5 and 6. Moreover, children’s representations also had an impact on the strength of the association between separation and conduct problems. Those children of separated parents who described the behavior of parental figures toward child figures in their play narratives as harsh, punitive, rejecting, or ineffectual had a significantly higher increase in conduct problems between the ages of 5 and 6 than did other children, while the absence of negative parental representations seems to be protective for children’s development after the experience of their parents’ separation. This result suggests that the quality of internal representations of relationships in the face of parental separation has a moderational impact on the development of conduct problems at an early state of development. According to social-cognitive models, children internalize important aspects of care-giving experiences, which guide their behavior in new social situations (Bretherton, 1990; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Thus, children’s accounts of parental behavior might be expected to correspond to their experiences within their own families (e.g., Grych et al., 2002; Shamir et al., 2001). Generally, children need parents who are warm, supportive, and responsive to their needs, who exert structured positive discipline (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998), and who manage conflict well, with the ability to build an interparental consensus to coparent their children effectively, not allowing children to get caught up in the parental acrimony (Ahrons, 2007; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Hetherington & Stanley Hagan, 1999). Such positive parenting might also have a positive impact on children’s internal representations of social conflict and on their behavioral adjustment following separation. In our study, children’s parental representations were significantly associated with parental separation but not with parents’ ratings of the amount or quality of family conflict. This result is not consistent with the findings of the studies mentioned above. On the one hand, family conflict, assessed by a questionnaire, may be a relatively imperfect measure of actual family relationships and parents’ reports on family conflict are subject to a possible “social desirability” effect and might not reflect actual family life. On the other hand, however, the result suggests that children’s representations are not simply a mirror of their actual family life. They also reflect the children’s own way of comprehending and coping with social situations. As such, they represent the at least partially independent emotional and cognitive processes of the child, and are markedly affected by the child’s gender (Oppenheim et al., 1997b). Representations might also be an expression of children’s competence in regulating their emotions when confronted with a stressful stimulus (Clyman, 2003). Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the as-if nature of play offers the child an opportunity to test behaviors and to act out aggressive impulses and wishes in a safe space (Marans, Dahl, Marans, & Cohen, 1993).

Hyperactivity/Inattention

None of our analyses pointed to separation as a risk factor for hyperactivity, and only in bivariate analyses did we find significant positive associations with family conflict and
negative parental representations. In multivariate analyses, gender and hyperactivity at age 5 were the only predictors for hyperactivity 1 year later. This might indicate on the importance of neurobiological explanations for hyperactivity disorder (Nigg & Casey, 2005). On the other hand, the results are not in line with studies of family context and hyperactivity, which show that parents of children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder experience higher levels of stress, are more likely to display negative behavior toward their children (DuPaul, McGoey, Eckert, & VanBrakle, 2001), and more often separate (Barkley, 1990) than parents of control children. Despite the different associations of conduct problems and hyperactivity in our study, it is important to recognize that there is a significant overlap between conduct problems and hyperactivity symptoms. It might therefore be that the associations of separation, negative parental representations, and family conflict with behavioral problems such as conduct problems and hyperactivity are not symptom specific.

**Emotional Symptoms**

In bivariate analyses, we found that children of separated parents and with high levels of conflict in their families showed more emotional symptoms than other children. But again, in multivariate analyses emotional symptoms at the age of 5 were the only predictor of symptoms 1 year later. Developmental research has indeed identified that cognitive-emotional and family environment risk factors have an impact on the origin and development of emotional symptoms in children (Zahn-Waxler et al., 2000; Zalsman, Brent, & Weersing, 2006). Nevertheless, the results are far more inconsistent compared with those of behavioral problems (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley Hagan, 1999; Oppenheim et al., 1997b; von Klitzing et al., 2000). One explanation for the observation that none of the family environment factors were relevant for emotional symptoms in our study is that emotional symptoms were less frequent and less variable compared with conduct problems. This might also reflect the problem that emotional symptoms are harder to detect than behavioral problems in young children. Moreover, despite “the hope that narrative methods will go beyond the external manifestation of children’s problems and provide an entrée to the internal experience of young children” (Oppenheim et al., 1997b, p. 291), it turned out to be difficult to detect narrative characteristics of emotional symptoms. In our study, children with emotional symptoms might have been less likely to use parental figures in their play narratives. Instead, performance aspects in narratives could be of special importance in research on emotional symptoms. In order to regulate negative feelings when confronted with conflict themes in story stems, children with depressive or anxiety symptoms might modify or avoid talking about certain things (Clyman, 2003; Stadelmann, 2006).

**Methodological Limitations and Strengths**

In this paper, we are interested in the impact of parental separation as an important life event on children’s socioemotional development. Parental separation is just one step in a series of family transitions that affect family relationships and children’s adjustment. Children’s family and life situations change during and after separation. The interactions between various individual, family, and extra-familial risk and protective factors that undermine or promote the well-being of children, produce diverse developmental trajectories (Hetherington & Stanley Hagan, 1999).
We focused on two possible risk factors—family conflict and children’s parental representations in the context of socioemotional dilemmas—and analyzed whether they have an impact on the strength of the association between separation and children’s adjustment. Because of our sample size, we did not take into account further details of the family or living situation (e.g., new partner, quantity/quality of contact of both parents after separation). Another limitation of this study concerns the assessment of family conflict. We did not control which family system parents focused on when answering the questionnaire. In separated families, this could have been the family system with a new partner.

We also found higher levels of negative representations and family conflict in separated families (compared with nonseparated families) only at the age of 5 but not at the age of 6. Even though this was an unexpected finding the result indicates that after a parental separation family relationships do not necessarily remain highly conflictual but can also ease and move toward a more harmonious situation (Amato et al., 1995).

On the other hand, our results showed significant differences in behavioral/emotional problems between separated and nonseparated families at the age of 6 but not at the age of 5 (even though there was stability in behavioral/emotional problems across ages). We might speculate whether this is an indication of a delayed effect, which has been frequently demonstrated in the divorce literature (e.g., Kelly, 2000).

So far, the majority of studies on children’s narratives have been conducted in community samples (Robinson, 2007). In this study, we included a subsample of 30 children who had been referred to our outpatient department by their parents and/or teachers. Children of this sample were assessed in our research department whereas children of the community sample were assessed in their kindergarten or at home. There were substantially more children with clinically relevant behavioral/emotional problems in the clinical subsample and families in this sample experienced a higher level of conflict. In contrast, negative parental representations did not differ in the referred and the nonreferred sample. We speculate that in the clinical setting, children might be more inhibited. To assess play narratives accurately in clinical settings—in comparison with research settings such as the kindergarten—children might need more emotional support in order to feel comfortable and free to narrate. On the other hand, the result might also be due to the large number of children in the nonreferred sample (36%) who also exhibited clinically relevant behavioral/emotional problems. Because of the different recruitment schemes of the samples we saw the need to control for study affiliation, but found that results remained the same.

Separation, family conflict, and children’s parental representations are not the only influences on children’s behavioral/emotional problems in kindergarten age. It is clear that behavioral/emotional problems are multidetermined and that a comprehensive account will include numerous biological as well as other socializing factors, such as parental psychopathology and parents’ educational level. In our study, we also found that behavioral/emotional problems at the age of 5 were always the strongest predictors for behavioral/emotional problems in the following year. One of these determinating factors, for which we also controlled, was the children’s gender. At both ages, boys showed more conduct problems and hyperactivity. Male gender was even able to account for an increase in hyperactivity and conduct problems between the ages of 5 and 6. Metaanalytic research has found modest evidence that boys are more strongly affected by their parents’ separation than girls (Amato, 2001). However, in longitudinal studies girls were found to be affected at an older age than...
boys (e.g., Oldehinkel, Ormel, Veenstra, De Winter, & Verhulst, 2008). It would have been important to investigate gender as a moderator in this study. However, our sample size was too small to include another interaction term.

Clinical Implications

Systematic insights into children’s ways of dealing with relevant themes and conflict in their play narratives, and the finding that the quality of caregiver representations contributed to a differential outcome in children of separated parents, can inform our psychotherapeutic techniques. Most families who require assistance in negotiating the divorce process respond to low-intensity interventions. The programs generally offer psychoeducation for parents and focus on specific communication, conflict-resolution, and parenting skills. Some of these programs have been shown to be effective on children’s adjustment as well as on the quality of parent-child relationships (e.g., Parent Management Training [PMT], Patterson, DeGarmo, & For-gatch, 2004; New Beginnings Program [NBP], Wolchik et al., 2000). However, evidence provided in this study underlines to practitioners the relevance of an early therapeutic engagement based on the complete family system, and the need to consider young children in their family therapeutic enactments, and to support the capacity of these young children to deal with family conflict in a constructive way. Grych (2005) notes that even though parents bear primary responsibility for managing postdivorce conflict, programs for children may be useful particularly if they help children to develop skills for coping with situations where they may be caught up in parental patterns of negative attribution and interparental conflict. Children’s programs are not as widespread as parent-focused programs, and focus mostly on school-age children. Sometimes they form part of a program that includes a group for parents (e.g., Wolchik et al., 2000), or may be school-based groups (e.g., Pedro-Carroll, 1997). Surprisingly, the dual-component programs have demonstrated little positive effect beyond that gained when only parents participate in the group (Wolchik et al., 2000). In contrast, the school-based Children of Divorce Intervention Program demonstrated both short- and long-term effects on children’s adjustment (Pedro-Carroll, 1997). Thus, a definite conclusion about the efficacy of child-oriented prevention programs cannot yet be drawn. Another example of a treatment which focuses on parents and children is the Integrative Family Therapy for Disputes involving Child Custody and Visitation (IFT-DCCV). This family-based approach provides intense therapy for high-conflict families who do not respond to low-intensity treatments, incorporating multiple therapy session formats, with a solution-oriented focus and drawing upon a wide range of intervention techniques such as psychoeducation, mediation, cognitive, and narrative techniques (Lebow & Rekart, 2007). The specific intervention strategies for children in this program are tailored to the children’s age. For young children the authors recommend the use of stories that enable feelings to be processed in fantasy as launching points for dialogue. Overall, our study underlines the relevance of approaches that integrate play and narration to promote mental health in young children who have experienced a parental separation.

REFERENCES


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