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# Relations of Parenting Quality, Interparental Conflict, and Overnights with Mental Health Problems of Children in Divorcing Families with High Legal Conflict

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## Relations of Parenting Quality, Interparental Conflict, and Overnights with Mental Health Problems of Children in Divorcing Families with High Legal Conflict

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### Abstract

The current study examined the associations between child mental health problems and the quality of maternal and paternal parenting, and how these associations were moderated by three contextual factors, quality of parenting by the other parent, interparental conflict, and the number of overnights parents had with the child. Data for the current study come from a sample of divorcing families who are in high legal conflict over developing or maintaining a parenting plan following divorce. Analyses revealed that the associations between child mental health problems and positive maternal and paternal parenting were moderated by the quality of parenting provided by the other parent and by the number of overnights children spent with parents, but not by the level of interparental conflict. When both parenting by the other parent and number of overnights were considered in the same model, only number of overnights moderated the relations between parenting and child behavior problems. The results support the proposition that the well-being of children in high conflict divorcing families is better when they spend adequate time with at least one parent who provides high quality parenting.

### Keywords

divorce; conflict; parenting time; overnights

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One of the most consequential issues facing families who are restructuring following divorce is how to apportion custody and parenting time between the divorcing parents. When parents themselves, the professionals assisting them (e.g., attorneys, mediators, custody evaluators), and the family court judges (who have the ultimate authority) consider this question, they do so under the guiding standard that prevails today, the best interest of the child (Fabricius, Braver, Diaz & Velez, 2010). Especially when the parents are experiencing substantial conflict, both generally and specifically in resolving the legal issues, the type of arrangement that will best promote the child's interest is far from apparent. The current paper presents findings on two questions that have significant implications for what is in the best interest of children in divorcing families who are in legal conflict over parenting time and custody issues: (a) What is the association between child well-being and the quality of parenting provided by mothers and fathers?; (b) How does the

association between the quality of parenting and child well-being differ as a function of the parenting provided by the other parent, level of interparental conflict, and the number of overnights the parents have with the child?

## Issues in the Family Court's Use of Psychological Research

The family courts often look to findings from the research literature to inform their practice, processes, and decisions (Schepard, 2004). Although the issue to be resolved is a legal one (i.e., what will be the nature of the legally binding parenting time and decision-making authority in the post-divorce family?), the best interest of the child standard necessarily requires weighing psychological issues (Schepard, 1994). Thus, findings from empirical research often play a critical role in shaping court practices and policies. For example, it has consistently been shown that the quality of parenting by both the mother and father are related to the well-being of children following divorce (e.g., Kelly & Emery, 2003; Sandler, Wolchik, Winslow, Mahrer, Moran & Weinstock, 2012). Thus, court-related parent-education programs teach the importance of both parents to the post-divorce adjustment of children (Braver, Salem, Pearson & DeLuse, 1996; Geasler & Blaisure, 1999).

However, research on the relations between parenting and child well-being rarely considers contextual factors that may condition the link between parenting and child well-being. There is considerable evidence in the parenting literature that contextual factors such as environmental stress, social isolation, and resources available to parents influence parenting (Cochran & Niego, 2002; Magnusson & Duncan, 2002; Wilson & Gottman, 2002). For divorced parents, three contextual factors that may be particularly important and of special interest to the court are the level of conflict between the parents, the quality of parenting provided by the other parent, and the amount of time the parent spends with the child. Divorces where there is high conflict between parents are of interest to the court because interparental conflict is likely to have direct negative consequences for the child (Cummings, Merrilees, & George, 2010; Johnston, 1994; Kelly, 2000). The relations between quality of parenting provided by each parent and the amount of parenting time with children's well-being is of critical interest to the court because when parents cannot reach an agreement on parenting arrangements following divorce, the court, as the ultimate adjudicator of time, considers the likely impact of time with each parent on the children. Although it is only a minority of cases where the court actually makes these decisions (i.e., 2 – 10%; Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Logan, Walker, Horvath & Leukefeld, 2003; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), courts have constructed an extensive number of services to help parents reach decisions concerning parenting arrangements (Schepard, 2004) and expends a disproportionate amount of resources on families who have difficulty reaching and keeping legal agreements (Pruett, Hogan-Bruen, & Jackson, 2000).

The current study investigates how contextual factors of parenting by the other parent, interparental conflict, and parenting time moderate the relations between quality of parenting by mothers and fathers and the well-being of children following divorce. To have maximum relevance to the population for which the court is called on to make decisions, this study investigated these issues in a sample of families who are in high legal conflict over parenting time and custody issues.

The investigation of how parenting by one parent conditions the relations between parenting by the other parent and child well-being in divorced families differs from the preponderance of literature on two parent families that investigates the impact of mothers and fathers on children while accounting for the effect of parenting by the other parent (Stolz, Barber & Olsen, 2005). In two parent families there is typically a correlation of .50 and .60 between parenting by mothers and fathers (Barber, Stolz, Olsen, Collins & Burchinal, 2005) so that

teasing out the relative impact of each is methodologically challenging (Stolz et al., 2005). However, following divorce the association between quality of parenting by mothers and fathers is small (e.g., Pearson  $r$  between mother and father parenting was .28 and .08 in studies by Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008, and Simons, Whitbeck, Beaman, & Conger, 1994). Thus, accounting for the common variance in the relations of parenting by mothers and fathers to child well-being is a less salient issue for divorced as compared to two parent families. The most important issues for divorced families concern the relations of parenting by each parent and child well-being and understanding what factors affect the relations between parenting of each parent and children's well-being.

### **Are the effects of parenting by mothers and fathers influenced by the quality of parenting provided by the other parent in high conflict divorced families?**

The presence of a high level of conflict changes the family context in which parenting occurs, which may impact the effects of parenting provided by the two parents. Sobolewski and Amato (2007) proposed that when there is a low level of conflict between parents, each parent contributes resources to their children and these resources have an additive impact. Under these conditions, positive parenting provided by each parent adds to the impact of parenting provided by the other parent. Consistent with this perspective, several studies have found that the quality of parenting by mothers and fathers had an independent, additive relation to child well-being even after accounting for the effect of quality of parenting by the other parent (e.g., Menning, 2006; Simons et al., 1994). Conversely, Sobolewski and Amato (2007) proposed that when there is high conflict between parents, a child being close to both parents creates an "emotional cost which may outweigh the benefits of having two close parent-child relationships" (pp. 1108). From this perspective, when there is a high level of interparental conflict, having a close relationship with both parents is likely to have no added benefit and may even have a negative effect as compared to having a close relationship with one parent only. Several studies have provided support for this model. In a 17-year longitudinal study, Sobolewski and Amato (2007) found that for adult children, who were raised in high conflict or divorced families, those who reported a close relationship with both parents did not have higher subjective well-being as compared to those who reported a positive relationship with only one parent. Sandler and colleagues (2008) found that for divorced families who had a high level of interparental conflict there was an interaction between mothers' and fathers' quality of parenting in predicting child internalizing problems. When there was low quality parenting from one parent (either the mother or the father), high quality of parenting from the other parent was related to lower child internalizing problems. However, when there was high quality parenting from one parent, the quality of parenting by the other parent was not related to child internalizing problems. They refer to this as a compensation effect, in which high quality parenting from either the mother or father can compensate for low quality parenting from the other parent in high conflict divorces. This effect was not found when there was low interparental conflict, where positive parenting by either the mother or father was more strongly related to child outcomes when there was more positive parenting by the other parent.

### **Are the effects of quality parenting different across levels of parenting time?**

The links between parenting time by the noncustodial parent and child well-being in high conflict divorces is a matter of dispute (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007), with some studies showing positive effects and other studies reporting negative effects (Fabricius et al., 2010). However, there is growing awareness that parenting time needs to be

studied in the context of the quality of parenting. Fabricius and colleagues (2010) proposed that parenting time by the noncustodial parent influences the quality of parenting, such that higher levels of parenting time lead to more parent-child transactions which in turn lead to higher quality parent-child relationships and higher levels of child well-being. An alternative possibility that has not previously been studied is that the association of parenting quality with child well-being differs according to the amount of time the parent spends with the child. According to this model the quality of the parent-child relationship would be more strongly related to child well-being when the parent has more time with the child as compared to when the parent has limited time with the child. The parenting time by quality of parenting interaction model would be gender neutral, applying to the impact of quality of parenting by both the mother, as well as the father.

## The Current Study

The current study adds to prior empirical literature on mother and father parenting following divorce (for a review see Sandler et al., 2012) by testing three contextual factors as moderators of the relations between mother and father parenting and the well-being of children, quality of parenting by the other parent, interparental conflict, and the number of overnights the child spends with the parent. The study was conducted with a sample of parents who are in high conflict over reaching a legal agreement on a post-divorce parenting plan, a population of particular interest to the family court.

## Method

### Participants

Data for the current study are from children's pre-test interviews collected as part of a randomized efficacy trial of a preventive intervention for high conflict divorcing families, the Family Transitions Guide (FTG) program (Braver, Sandler, Hita & Wheeler, 2013). The families who participated were those litigating parenting time or custody issues pursuant to divorce or separation, who were deemed by the judge in their case to be in high conflict in a court in a major metropolitan area in the southwest. Judges were free to use any criteria they saw fit to consider the parents as being in high conflict over reaching an agreement on a post-divorce parenting plan and to mandate such parents to attend a program intended to reduce their conflict. Although no single issue captures the range of disagreements, an overall characterization of these parents suggested by one experienced judge is that "they can't agree that the sky is blue." (C. Hyatt, personal communication, August 8, 2013). Parents were randomly assigned to attend one of two programs. One was the Parent Conflict Resolution (PCR) program, which involved didactic presentation, film, and discussion (Neff & Cooper, 2004). The second was the newly developed FTG program that used approaches from motivational interviewing to increase parents' motivation to decrease conflict and improve their quality of parenting. Both programs were designed to lower parents' conflict and encourage them to reach an agreement on their parenting plan. The results of the randomized trial are presented in a separate study (Braver, Sandler, Hita & Wheeler, 2013).

At the beginning of each program parents were recruited to complete pre-test surveys that "would be used to evaluate the court services". Although participation in the programs was mandated by the court, participation in the surveys was voluntary and they were paid a nominal sum for their participation. Parents viewed a video explanation of the voluntary nature of the surveys and were assured of confidentiality of their responses and provided their informed consent prior to being interviewed. Of eligible parents, 67% (728 parents from 536 families) completed the pre-test. Parents were also asked to give permission to telephone-interview their oldest child between the ages of 9 and 18. Of the 536 families in which at least one parent completed the pre-test, 405 (76%) had a child of this age. Parents

gave permission to interview 163 of these 405 children (40%). Of those children with parental permission, 87% (141) were successfully interviewed.

The 141 children who were interviewed at pre-test constitute the sample for the current study. At the time of the interview, children were an average of 13 years of age ( $SD = 2.63$ ), with 45% being female. Children spent on average 11.79 ( $SD = 9.18$ ) overnights with fathers and 17.19 ( $SD = 9.18$ ) with mothers. Mothers were on average 37 years old ( $SD = 5.56$ ) and fathers were 42 years old ( $SD = 7.97$ ). Ninety percent of parents were non-Hispanic European Americans, and on average had 14 years of education. On average, 84% of parents (86% of mothers, 83% of fathers) had been legally married to the child's other parent. Parents were on average separated from the child's other parent for 5 years (mothers:  $M = 59.46$  months,  $SD = 51.42$ ; fathers:  $M = 63.77$  months,  $SD = 48.97$ ) with 87% being post-decree (83% of mothers, 89% of fathers). Of the 141 families, 43% included participation by both parents, 21% only fathers, and 36% only mothers.

## Procedure

Trained interviewers conducted structured telephone interviews with children, with permission from the parent who had the legal right to grant permission to engage in the study. Children received a \$50 honorarium for completing the interviews. The Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University approved all study procedures.

## Measures

Children reported on demographic information including their age and gender.

**Overnights with parent**—Parental contact was assessed as child report of number of overnight stays in a month with mothers and fathers (i.e., “In the last month, about 30 days, about how many days did you sleep over at your mother’s/father’s house”). Only overnights with fathers was used in the analyses to prevent multicollinearity because overnights spent with mothers and fathers was nearly perfectly negatively correlated (Pearson  $r = -.95$ ) as youth report of days had to add up to 30 overnights with fathers and mothers.

*Child mental health problems* were assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998). Children reported on a subset of four of the five subscales of the 25-item SDQ that assess difficulties (i.e., 20 items; the emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, peer problems, and conduct problems subscales). A total mental health problems sum score was calculated based on these four subscales of the SDQ, which is a typical scoring type used with this questionnaire (i.e., five items of the prosocial behavior scale were not used). Children reported responses to all items (e.g., you are restless, you cannot stay still for long) using a 3-point scale (0 = *not true*, 1 = *somewhat true*, 2 = *certainly true*). Reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = .79$ ) for the scale. High scores represented high levels of child mental health problems.

*Interparental conflict* was assessed using the seven item conflict intensity subscale from the 51-item Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992). We chose the intensity subscale for this study as the best representation of children’s report of their exposure to conflict because it is distinct from the frequency subscale which we believe could be confounded with time children spend with the parents, and because it is distinct from the children’s interpretation of the conflict on the threat and self-blame subscales. With the current sample, a confirmatory factor analysis revealed the best fitting model included four items from the intensity subscale,  $\chi^2(2) = .31$ , *ns*, RMSEA = .00, SRMR = .01. A mean scale was calculated from items (e.g., “When your parents had an argument, they yelled a lot”) that were on a 3-point scale (1 = *false*, 2 = *sort of true*, 3 =

*true*) and reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = .68$ ). High scores represented high levels of interparental conflict.

*Mothers' and fathers' positive parenting* were assessed using the Children's Report of Parenting Behaviors Inventory (CRPBI; Schwarz, Barton-Henry, & Pruzinsky, 1985). Youth reported on the consistent discipline (11 items; e.g., "When your parent made a rule for you, she made sure it was followed") and acceptance (13 items; e.g., "Your parent cheered you up when you were sad") subscales of the 56-item CRPBI using a 5-point scale (1 = *almost never* to 5 = *almost always*). Positive parenting was also assessed using the 7-item Mattering scale (i.e., how much children felt that they *mattered* to each parent; e.g., "My parent really cares about me"). This measure was developed by Schenck, Braver, Wolchik, Saenz, Cookston, & Fabricius (2009) who adapted items by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) and Marshall (2001). Items were reported using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). These three scales were highly correlated, for mothers Pearson's  $r = .49 - .72$ , for fathers  $r = .68 - .83$ . Confirmatory factor analyses revealed that a second-order factor model best fit the data (after dropping two items from the acceptance scale; mothers:  $\chi^2(432) = 796.94, p < .05, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .07$ ; fathers:  $\chi^2(431) = 847.26, p < .05, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .06$ ) and further supported the creation of a composite scale of the three parenting scales. Use of a composite positive parenting score is consistent with prior research on post-divorce parenting by mothers and fathers (e.g., Sandler et al., 2008; Simons et al., 1994), and composite parenting scores have repeatedly been correlated with child mental health problems (Sandler et al., 2012). The composite scale was created by taking the mean of the standardized scales for mothers and fathers, respectively. The composite scale had exceptional reliability ( $\alpha = .96$  for both mothers and fathers). High scores represented high levels of positive parenting.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Correlations and descriptive statistics for all measures are presented in Table 1. As can be seen for children's reports of positive parenting by the mother and father, the more positively youth perceived the parenting by one of their parents the less positively they perceived parenting by the other parent. High levels of interparental conflict were related to low levels of positive parenting by both the mother and the father. A high level of overnights with fathers was related to low levels of interparental conflict and mothers' positive parenting, but was related to high levels of fathers' parenting. A high level of overnights with mothers was related to high levels of interparental conflict and maternal positive parenting, but related to low levels of fathers' positive parenting.

### Parenting by the Other Parent and Interparental Conflict as Moderators of the Effects of Positive Maternal and Paternal Parenting

To examine the association between the quality of parenting by the mother or the father and child mental health problems as moderated by parenting quality by the other parent and interparental conflict, we conducted a series of path analyses using Mplus 6.12 (Muthén & Muthén, 2008-2010; Figure 1). In the main effects' model (Model 1), mothers' and fathers' positive parenting were included as the independent variables, child mental health problems the dependent variable, interparental conflict, child gender, and overnights with fathers as controls (because each of these has been related to child behavior problems in previous research; e.g., Cummings et al., 2010; Amato & Rezac, 1994). In the other parent and conflict interaction model (Model 2), interaction terms were added to the main effects model (Model 1) to test the moderating role of parenting by the other parent and interparental conflict (i.e., maternal  $\times$  paternal parenting, maternal parenting  $\times$  interparental conflict,

paternal parenting  $\times$  interparental conflict, and the three-way; see Figure 1) with child gender and overnights as controls. In the other parent and overnights interaction model (Model 3), interaction terms were added to the main effects model (Model 1) to test the moderating role of parenting by the other parent and overnights (i.e., maternal  $\times$  paternal parenting, maternal parenting  $\times$  overnights, paternal parenting  $\times$  overnights, and the three-way; see Figure 2) with child gender and interparental conflict as controls. The final interaction models included controls, main effects, moderators, and significant interactions because retaining interactions that are not significant contributes to an increase in standard errors (Aiken & West, 1991).

All variables were centered to reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991), and all of the exogenous variables were allowed to correlate. Follow-up analyses for significant interactions were first conducted as outlined by Aiken and West (1991) using the simple slopes technique in which we chose conditional values of the moderator at low ( $-1$  *SD* from the mean), mean, and high ( $+1$  *SD* from the mean) conditions. We also used regions of significance, also known as the Johnson-Neyman technique, to evaluate the interactions (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). This method defines regions of significance on the moderator and represents the range of moderator values at which the simple slope of the outcome on the predictor is significantly different from zero at an alpha of .05. We included this additional method of probing to add to our understanding of the interaction effects. Full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation with auxiliary variables (i.e., child age, daily contact with mothers and fathers) was used in all models to improve estimation under conditions of missing data (i.e., include variables that are correlated with missingness; in the current study, Enders, 2010; children reported on parenting only when they had contact with parents,  $n = 138$  mothers and 132 fathers).

Table 2 shows the regression models which tested the main and interaction effects of quality of parenting by the mother and father in predicting child mental health problems. The effect of maternal and paternal parenting indicated that high levels of both maternal and paternal positive parenting were associated with low levels of child mental health problems (Table 2, Model 1). The interaction between maternal and paternal parenting was also significant, indicating that the effect of maternal and paternal parenting on child mental health problems differed as a function of parenting by the other parent (Table 2, Model 2). In order to visually present how mother and father parenting moderated the relations of positive parenting by the other parent on child behavior problems, two figures are presented. As shown in Figure 3, with mothers' positive parenting as the moderator, high levels of paternal positive parenting were related to low levels of child mental health problems under conditions of both low,  $\beta = -3.51, p < .05$ , and medium (i.e., mean),  $\beta = -1.83, p < .05$ , maternal positive parenting, but not under conditions of high maternal positive parenting,  $\beta = -.14, ns$ . The region of significance on the moderator of maternal positive parenting ranged from .33 to 3.08, indicating that any given simple slope outside this range was statistically significant. Given that the centered maternal positive parenting ranges from about  $-2.71$  to  $1.08$ , this indicates that high levels of fathers' positive parenting was related to low levels of child mental health problems for moderate to low values of maternal positive parenting. As displayed in Figure 4, this same pattern can be seen for fathers' positive parenting as the moderator of mothers' positive parenting, with high levels of mothers' positive parenting related to low levels of child mental health problems under conditions of both low,  $\beta = -3.95, p < .05$ , and medium,  $\beta = -2.20, p < .05$ , paternal positive parenting, but not under conditions of high paternal positive parenting,  $\beta = -.45, ns$ . The region of significance (simple slopes significant *outside* this region of paternal positive parenting) was less than .47 and greater than 4.33 (paternal positive parenting in the centered metric ranges from  $-2.66$  to  $1.05$ ) indicating that the effects of mother's positive parenting on child problem behaviors was significant for moderate to low values of paternal positive parenting. Neither

the two-way mother parenting  $\times$  conflict nor father parenting  $\times$  conflict nor the three-way mother parenting  $\times$  father parenting  $\times$  conflict interactions were significant, and thus were dropped from the final model.

### Parental Overnights as a Moderator of Maternal and Paternal Parenting

To examine the moderating role of parents' overnights (Figure 2), we conducted path analyses as described previously by adding interaction terms to the main effects model (Model 3; i.e., maternal parenting  $\times$  father overnights, paternal parenting  $\times$  father overnights, and the three-way maternal parenting  $\times$  paternal parenting  $\times$  father overnights) and including child gender and interparental conflict as controls. The interactions between maternal and paternal parenting with mothers' and fathers' overnights, respectively, were significant (Table 2, Model 3). The three-way interaction term was not significant and thus was dropped from the final model. Follow-up analyses of simple slopes revealed that high levels of *paternal* positive parenting was related to low levels of child behavior under conditions of both high ( $M = 20.97$  overnights;  $\beta = -4.00$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and mean ( $M = 11.79$  nights;  $\beta = -2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) overnights with fathers, but not under conditions of low overnights with fathers ( $M = 2.61$  nights;  $\beta = -.31$ , *ns*; Figure 5). The region of significance (simple slopes significant *outside* this region of overnights with fathers) was less than  $-23.36$  and greater than  $-4.97$ . Father overnights in the centered metric range from  $-11.79$  to  $18.21$  and indicated that high levels of father positive parenting was related to low levels of child mental health problems at medium to high levels of overnights. In the raw metric the effect of fathers' positive parenting and child problem behaviors would be significant starting at approximately 6.82 father overnights per month and greater. Follow-up analyses for *maternal* positive parenting revealed that high levels of mothers' positive parenting was related to low levels of child mental health problems under conditions of both low overnights with fathers ( $M = 2.61$  nights;  $\beta = -1.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and mean ( $M = 11.79$  nights;  $\beta = -2.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ) overnights with fathers, but not under conditions of high overnights with father ( $M = 20.97$  overnights;  $\beta = -4.82$ , *ns*; Figure 6). The region of significance (simple slopes significant *outside* this region of overnights with fathers) was less than 8.72 and greater than 32.74 in the centered metric. In the raw metric the positive effect of mothers' parenting on child mental health problems would be significant from approximately 0 to 20.51 overnights with fathers. Given the near perfect negative correlation between mother and father overnights this would correspond to approximately 9.49 maternal overnights or more per month.

### Discussion

The findings from this study provide evidence that the contextual factors of parenting by the other parent and the number of child overnights moderate the relations between quality of parenting by mothers and fathers and mental health problems of children in this high-conflict divorce sample. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings and the limitations of the study are discussed below.

The finding that the relations between maternal and paternal quality of parenting and children's mental health problems is moderated by the quality of parenting by the other parent extends findings from prior studies (Sandler et al., 2008; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007) to a critical population of divorcing families who are in high legal conflict over parenting time and custody issues. The three studies differ markedly in the characteristics of the samples, the research design, and the measures of conflict. Sobolewski and Amato (2007) used data from a longitudinal study of marital stability of a nationally representative sample of *married* spouses and assessed conflict as the presence of divorce or of marital discord among parents who remained married over the course of the study. Sandler and colleagues

(2008) examined a general sample of divorced parents and found that the more children perceived the parenting by one parent to be positive the weaker was the relation between parenting by the other parent and child mental health problems. In the current study, the sample consisted of children of divorcing parents for whom the judge overseeing their custody and parenting time case determined that they were experiencing high conflict. The interaction between parenting by mother and father in the current study is of the same form as that found in Sandler and colleagues (2008). However, in the current study the interaction is found in the overall sample, rather than being conditioned by the level of conflict as reported by the child. Theoretically this may be because parents who are in high legal conflict engage in the same processes (e.g. putting children in the middle of conflicts; Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991) as the subset of families where children report high conflict that make it difficult for children to benefit from positive parenting by both parents.

An alternative theoretical perspective is that the lessened impact of the second parent may simply reflect the lack of time the second parent spends with the child. In Model 3, which included the significant father overnight  $\times$  parenting interactions, the mother parenting  $\times$  father parenting interaction was no longer significant. Both the mother parenting and father parenting interactions with parent overnights were significant and the analysis of simple slopes showed the same pattern across gender. As predicted, when the parent had fewer overnights with the child the relations between positive parenting and child mental health problems was not significant, but when the parent had more overnights, the relation between positive parenting by that parent and low levels of child mental health problems was significant.

The finding that the associations between quality of parenting and child mental health problems varies as a function of the number of overnight visits is not surprising. After all, it seems intuitive that a parent needs substantial time with the child for the relationship to be of much benefit (Kelly, 2007; Lamb, Sternberg & Thompson, 1997; Fabricius et al., 2010). However, to our knowledge this is the first study to test a time  $\times$  quality of parenting interaction for children from divorcing families. Prior literature has focused on the direct relations between parenting time of the non-residential father and child well-being (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) or on the indirect effects of time on child well-being, as mediated by indices of the quality of parenting (e.g., Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz & Braver, 2012). Although the current study was primarily interested in parental time as a moderator of the relations between quality of parenting and child mental health problems, the overnight  $\times$  parenting quality interaction could also be interpreted as quality of parenting moderating the relations between parenting time and child mental health. Future research on parenting time should account for the possibility that the effects of parenting time differs as a function of parenting quality.

It is important to note that the overnights  $\times$  positive parenting interaction holds both for positive parenting by the mother and by the father. Because the two are almost perfectly negatively correlated more overnights with one equals less overnights with the other. Although the minimum number of overnights where positive parenting relates to lower child mental health problems is higher for mothers than for fathers, we know of no test of the significance of the difference between regions of significance so that we cannot say whether these gender differences are reliable. We propose therefore that a reasonable policy concerning parenting time would allow positive parenting sufficient time to benefit children and that would ensure gender equity in parenting time. A parenting plan that would satisfy both these conditions would be to set the *minimum* number of overnight visits for the non-residential parent of either gender at the higher number of overnights found for mothers in

this study, 9.49 nights per month or approximately a 30% - 70% distribution of overnights between parents.

It is important to note that this interaction does *not* indicate that more time is directly related to better outcomes for children. Rather, when parents have sufficient time the quality of their parenting determines whether their influence leads to low or high levels of child mental health problems. Stated differently, high levels of overnight visits are only beneficial when positive parenting is provided by the mother or father. The highest levels of child mental health problems are seen when children have high levels of overnights but a poor relationship with the parent. The policy implication of this finding is that parents who are found to be providing poor parenting should not be guaranteed the minimum of 30% overnights recommended above. The clinical implication is that clinicians need to help parents understand that even in high conflict divorces the quality of parenting they provide and the amount of overnights can have an important effect on their children's mental health.

These findings must be interpreted with full understanding of the study limitations. First, the measures of parental overnights and of positive parenting cannot be said to be comprehensive or unbiased assessments of the broader constructs of parenting time or parenting quality. Methodologically, the measures are based on the self-report of children on all variables. Thus, the results need to be interpreted as indicating the associations between the child's perception of positive parenting by both parents and their own mental health problems. Also, parental overnights is not a comprehensive measure of parenting time, which should also consider the duration of visits, regularity of visits, and overall amount of time (e.g., Fabicius et al., 2012; Smyth, 2004). Similarly, a single comprehensive measure of positive parenting was used based on a second-order factor analysis of children's reports of acceptance, consistent discipline, and mattering. Although the current study was not designed to tease out specific effects of different dimensions of parenting, the broader parenting literature has found support for unique effects of dimensions of support, behavioral control, and psychological control on different aspects of child well-being (Barber et al., 2005). Future research should investigate these specific dimensions of parenting by mothers and fathers following divorce.

Second, the sample only included children who were nine years old or older, and the effects might be different for younger children. Third, although the sample has particular relevance for the courts because it consists of children whose parents were judged by the court to be in high conflict, data was obtained from less than 40% of the sample (mostly because the majority of parents declined to give us permission to contact their children), so unknown selection factors may bias the results. The fourth limitation is that this is a cross-sectional study with a relatively modest sample size of dynamic processes which may well change over time. Longitudinal research is needed to replicate these findings and to study the trajectories of quality of parenting, conflict, and parental contact over time.

The final limitation of this study, and all other studies of factors that influence child well-being following divorce, is that the influence of the variables on each other and the influence of multiple other variables have not been included. For example, research has found that both amount of time and level of interparental conflict can influence the quality of parenting (e.g., Sandler et al., 2012). Similarly, quality of parenting, parenting time, and interparental conflict can be influenced in complex ways by economic conditions, mental health and substance abuse problems of the parents, remarriage, and the children's own behavior (Braver & Lamb, 2012). More complex prospective longitudinal models are needed to study the dynamic processes by which these processes influence each other and child well-being over time following divorce.

Despite these limitations, this study has significant implications for court policies and practices. Although they are a distinct minority of divorces, parents who are in conflict over developing a post-divorce parenting plan present the court with the difficult issue of deciding what division of parenting time is in the best interest of the child. Findings from the current study suggest that the court consider the complex interplay between parenting time and parenting quality. First, courts need to consider allocating sufficient parenting time so that parents may have an impact on the child. Based on the current findings and the importance of gender equity in parenting time decisions, we have proposed that parenting plans provide a minimum of 30% overnights for parents who are providing good quality parenting, which is considerably higher than the number of overnights in the most common parenting plan for the non-residential parent (Kelly, 2007). As noted above, more research is needed using larger samples, more comprehensive measures of parenting quality and time and conflict and longitudinal designs to better calculate overall parenting time, particularly under conditions of high conflict. The second major implication is that time is not an unmitigated good. Time simply enables a parent to impact their children. Given sufficient time with the child mothers and fathers can potentially have either positive or detrimental effects on their children, depending on the quality of their parenting. The court needs to consider quality of parenting by both the mother and the father, and custody evaluations should routinely assess quality of parenting.

The current paper advances our understanding of contextual factors that moderate the relations between positive parenting by mothers and fathers and the well-being of children in divorcing families in high legal conflict over parenting time and custody issues. Although prior research has established that the quality of parenting of both mothers and fathers is related to well-being of children following divorce, the current findings indicate the importance of parental overnights as moderators of those relations. The court is faced with making difficult decisions in complicated situations for families who are in high conflict over reaching agreement on post-divorce parenting plans. Future research on the complex patterns of influence of parenting time, parenting quality and conflict are needed to strengthen social science input into these decisions.

## Acknowledgments

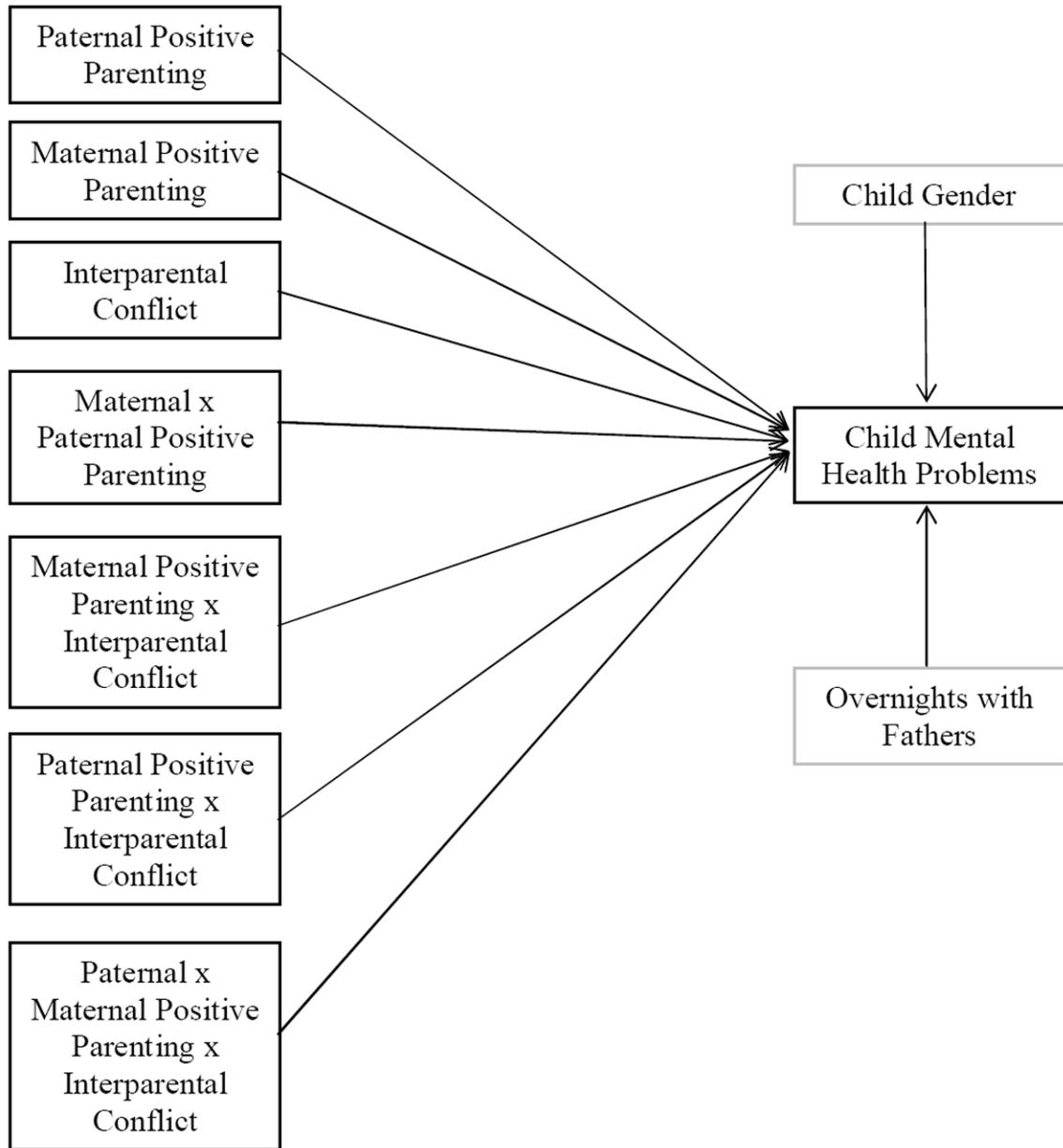
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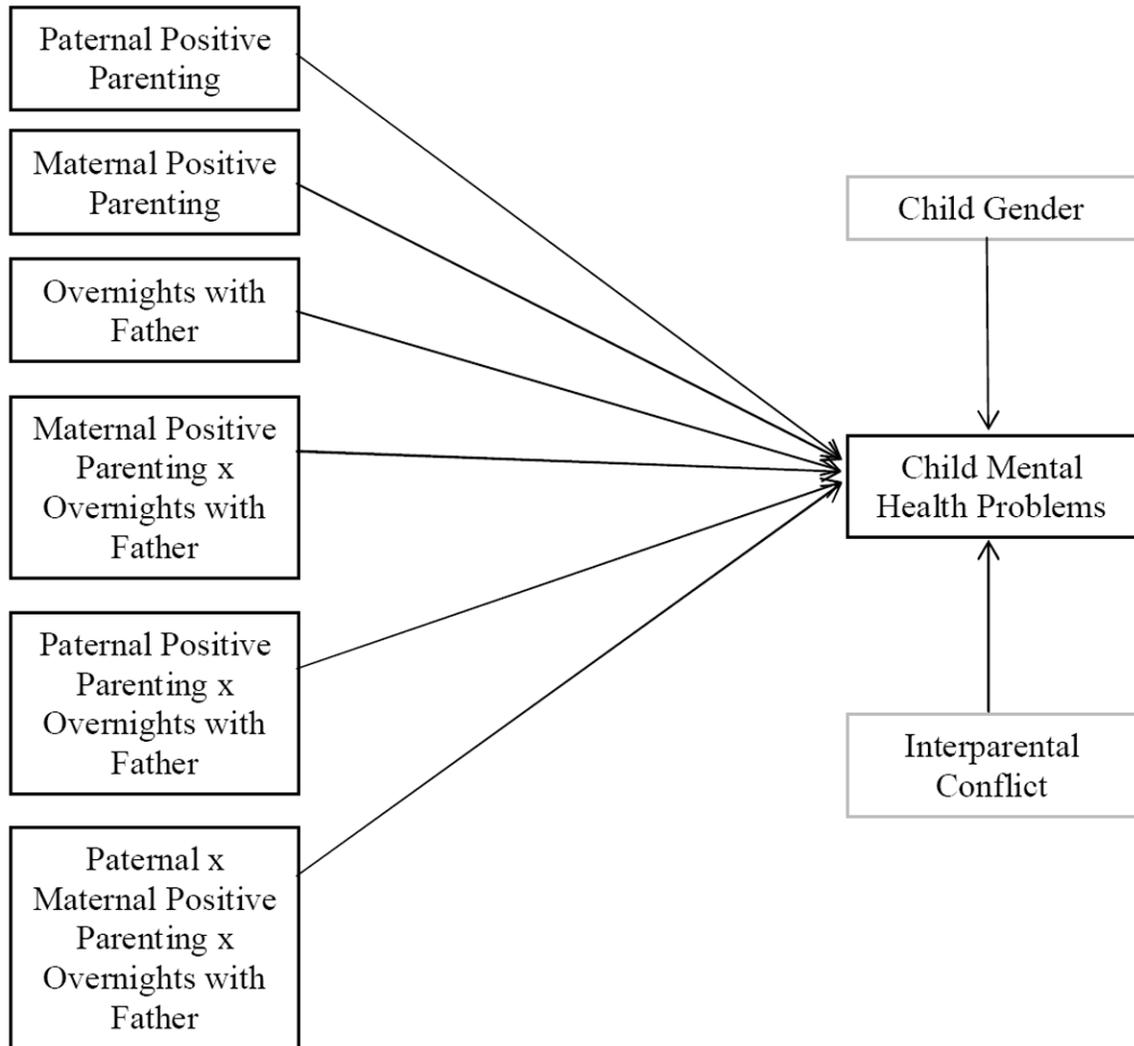
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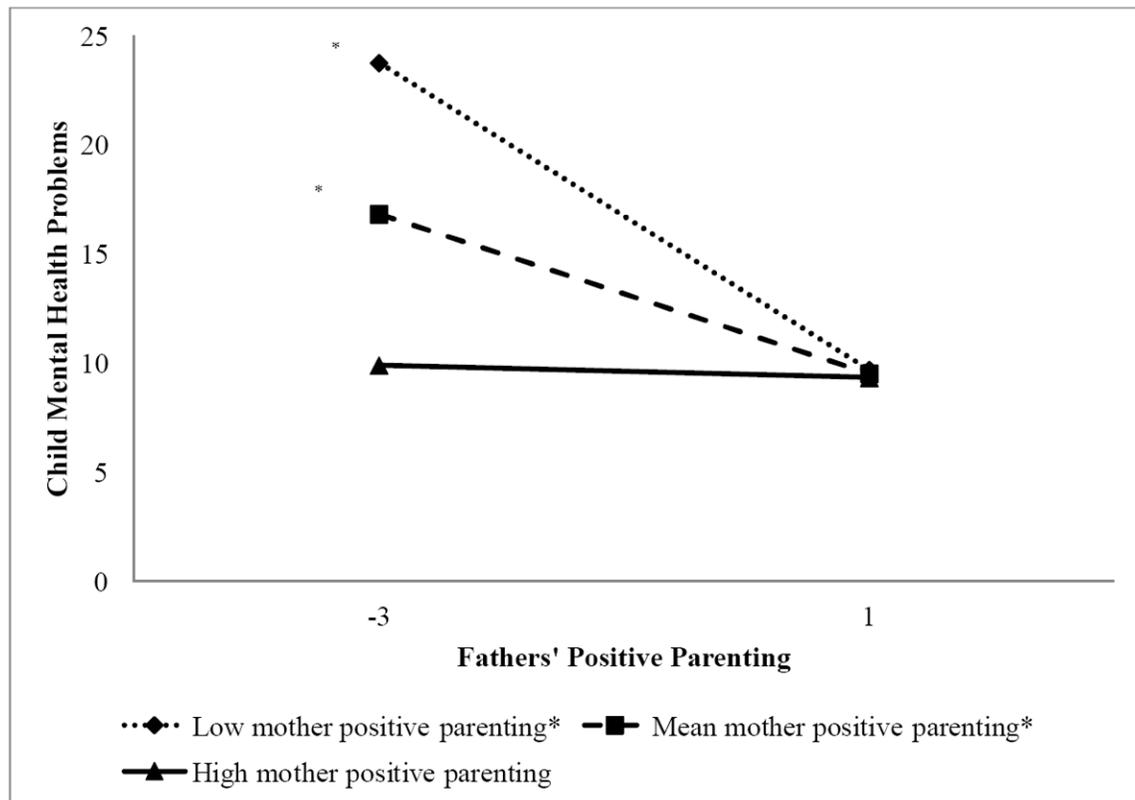


**Figure 1.**

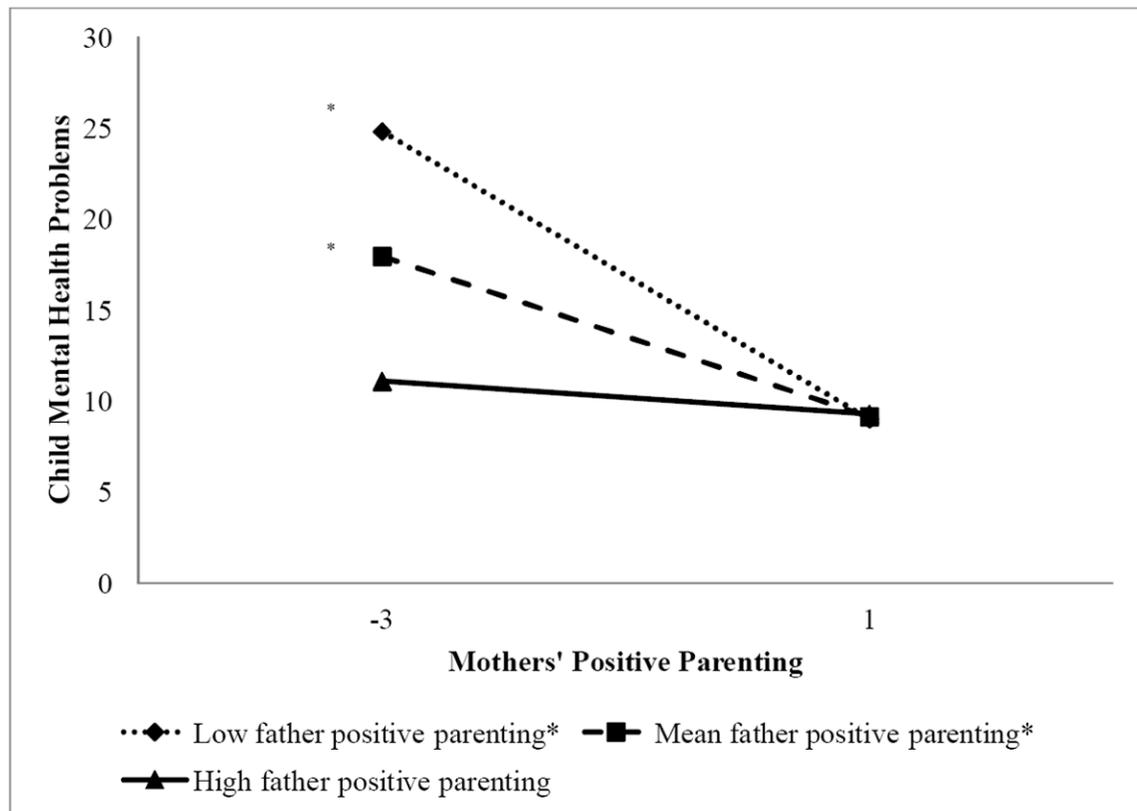
Conceptual model of the effects of mother and father parenting on child mental health problems with parenting and interparental conflict as moderators, controlling for child gender and overnights with father. Correlations among exogenous variables are not illustrated in the figure for simplification purposes.



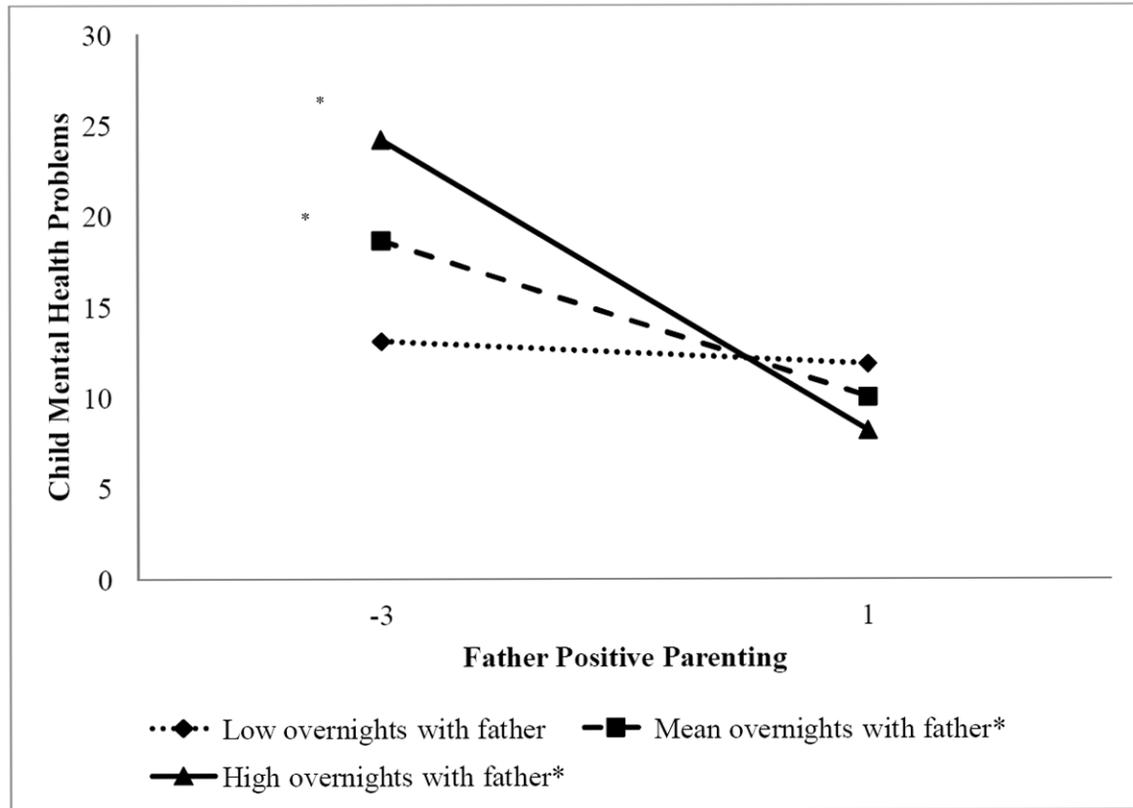
**Figure 2.** Conceptual model of the effects of mother and father parenting on child mental health problems with overnights with father as a moderator, controlling for child gender and interparental conflict. Correlations among exogenous variables are not illustrated in the figure for simplification purposes.



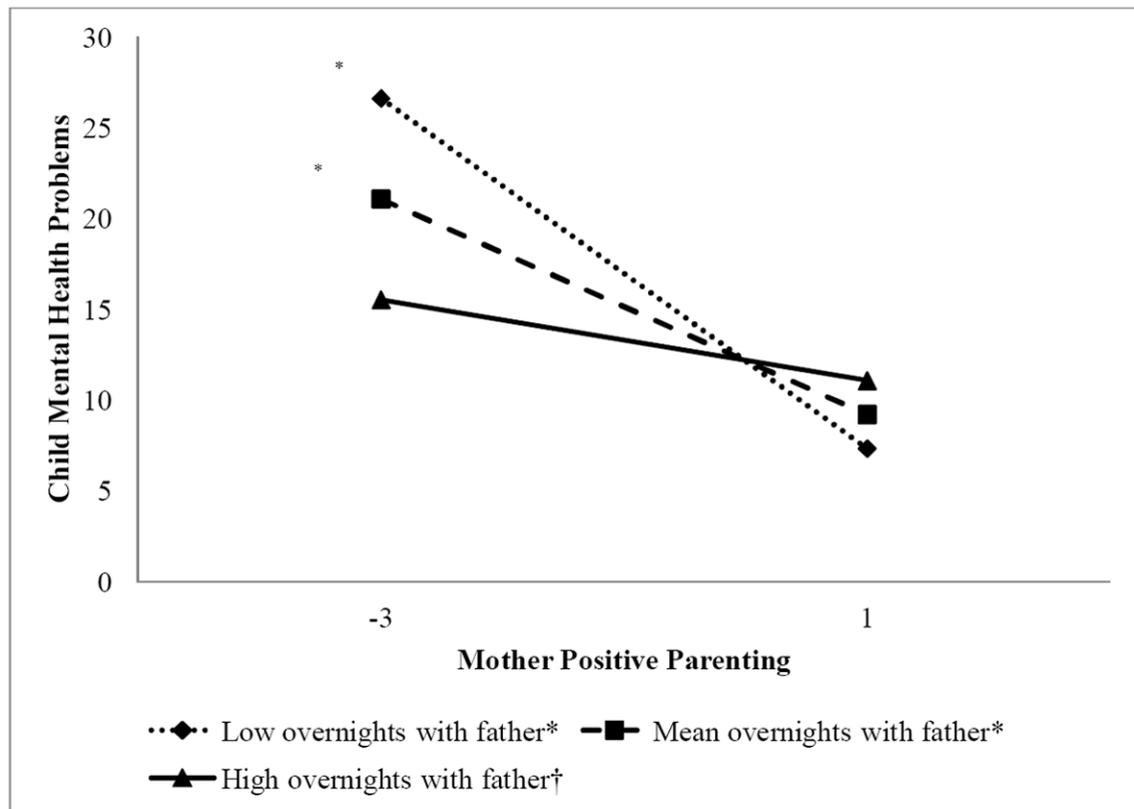
**Figure 3.** Child Mental Health Problems on Fathers' Positive Parenting at Low (-1 *SD*), Moderate, & High (+1 *SD*) Maternal Positive Parenting. Region of significance (simple slopes significant *outside* this region) = .33 to 3.08;  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 4.** Child Mental Health Problems on Mother's Positive Parenting at Low (-1 *SD*), Moderate, & High (+1 *SD*) Paternal Positive Parenting. Region of significance (simple slopes significant *outside* this region) = .47 to 4.33;  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 5.** Child Mental Health Problems on Father's Positive Parenting at Low (-1 *SD*), Moderate, & High (+1 *SD*) Fathers' Overnights. Region of significance (simple slopes significant *outside* this region) = -23.36 to -4.97;  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 6.** Child Mental Health Problems on Mother's Positive Parenting at Low ( $-1$   $SD$ ), Moderate, & High ( $+1$   $SD$ ) Fathers' Overnights. Region of significance (simple slopes significant *outside* this region) = 8.7224 to 32.74;  $p < .05$ .

**Table 1**

Correlations and descriptive statistics of study variables (N = 141 families)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Child gender	-	.09	-.12	-.04	.03	.02	-.05
2. Child mental health problems		-	-.24**	-.14	.12	.00	.02
3. Maternal positive parenting composite <sup>1</sup>			-	-.18*	-.15 <sup>†</sup>	-.33***	.29***
4. Paternal positive parenting composite <sup>1</sup>				-	-.35***	.36***	-.34***
5. Interparental conflict					-	-.28***	.30***
6. Paternal overnights per month						-	-.95***
7. Maternal overnights per month <sup>2</sup>							-
<i>M</i>	1.44	11.08	.00	.00	2.38	11.79	17.19
<i>SD</i>	.50	5.77	.85	.89	.49	9.18	9.18
<i>Min-Max</i>	1-2	0-29	-2.7-1.09	-2.66-1.05	1-3	0-30	0-30

Note. Gender coded as: 1 = male, 2 = female.

<sup>1</sup> Composite scale was created from the mean of the standardized scales of acceptance, consistent discipline, and mattering.

<sup>2</sup> Maternal overnights included here for descriptive purposes; not included in other analyses.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**  
 Summary of Regression Models Predicting Child Mental Health Problems (N = 141 families)

Variable	Model 1: Main Effects		Model 2: Parenting and Interparental Interactions		Model 3: Parents' Overnights Interactions	
	B	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Child gender	.65	.94	.59	.92	.26	.86
Fathers' overnights	-.02	.06	-.01	.06	.00	.05
Interparental conflict	.10	1.08	.29	1.06	-.61	.99
Mothers' positive parenting	-1.82**	.62	-2.20***	.62	-2.97***	.65
Fathers' positive parenting	-1.10 <sup>†</sup>	.61	-1.83**	.65	-2.16***	.58
Paternal × maternal parenting			1.96**	.76	-	-
Paternal parenting × interparental conflict			-	-	-	-
Maternal parenting × interparental conflict			-	-	-	-
Maternal parenting × paternal parenting × interparental conflict			-	-	-	-
Paternal parenting × fathers' overnights			-	-	-.20***	.06
Maternal parenting × fathers' overnights					.20**	.06
Maternal parenting × paternal parenting × fathers' overnights					-	-
R <sup>2</sup>	.09*		.14*		.26***	
R <sup>2</sup> change			.05		.17	

Note. *b* = unstandardized coefficients. Model 1 Wald test (equivalent to *F* test for overall regression): 13.95 (5), *p* < .05. Model 2 Wald test: 24.382 (6), *p* < .001. Model 3 Wald test: 48.48 (7), *p* < .001. Nonsignificant interactions were dropped from the final models (Aiken & West, 1991) as indicated by dashes above.

<sup>†</sup> *p* < .10.

\* *p* < .05.

\*\* *p* < .01.

\*\*\* *p* < .001.