

## MARITAL QUALITY AND PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS



### Components of Relationship Strengths in Married-Couple Families

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#### OVERVIEW

Due to sharp increases in the divorce rate and the increasing numbers of unmarried couples cohabitating in the United States, numerous research studies have examined the effects of marital dissolution on children. However, in 2006 nearly 50 million children were living with two, married parents, about two-thirds of all children in the country.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this research brief is to explain the relationship context of adolescents who live in married couple families. Specifically, we assess the marital quality of the adolescents' biological parents (and step-parents) by examining how supportive and conflict behaviors combine within the couple relationship. We also examine how support and conflict operate in parent-adolescent relationships. These separate measures of couple and parent-adolescent relationships are then combine to form new categories that describe the relationship context within which adolescents transition into young adulthood

The overall goal of the research is to determine whether marital quality and parent-adolescent relationships are associated with particular outcomes for adolescents. This analysis is unique in that it relies on the perceptions of parent marital and parent-adolescent relationship quality from the adolescents' perspective. Additionally, this study uses a nationally representative data set to examine these couple and parent-adolescent relationships.

Our research team used the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort, a nationally representative survey of adolescents, to conduct a latent class analysis and determine the class structures for adolescent perceptions of parent marital quality. The following four classes emerged:

- High support low conflict;
- High support high conflict;
- Low support low conflict; and
- Low support high conflict

In addition, we conducted latent growth class analyses to determine the structure for adolescent perceptions of their relationship with their parents. This was a two stage process. First, both mother-adolescent and father-adolescent relationships were examined. From this analysis, four

classes for the mother-adolescent and for the father-adolescent relationship also emerged:

- Sustained high quality relationship with mother/father over time;
- High quality relationship with mother/father that worsens over time;
- Low quality relationship with mother/father that improves over time; and
- Sustained low quality relationship with mother/father over time.

In the second step of the examination of parent-adolescent relationships, the four classes for mothers and the four classes for fathers were combined forming a new set of distinct groups:

- Sustained high quality relationships with both parents over time;
- Sustained high quality relationships only with the mothers over time;
- Sustained high quality relationships only with the fathers over time; and
- Sustained low quality relationships with both parents over time.

Lastly, the parent marital quality classes were combined with the parent-adolescent relationship classes to form the groups used in the analysis to determine whether marital quality and parent-adolescent relationships are associated with particular outcomes for adolescents. The six combined parent marital quality and parent-adolescent relationship quality groups are:

- Group 1: High marital quality and good relationships with both parents - 48% of sample
- Group 2: High marital quality and a good relationship with one parent - 12% of sample
- Group 3: High support and high conflict marital quality and a good relationship with one or both parents - 18% of sample
- Group 4: Low marital quality and a good relationship with one or both parents - 14% of sample
- Group 5: High marital quality and bad relationships with both parents - 4% of sample
- Group 6: Low marital quality and bad relationships with both parents - 4% of sample.

This brief describes these classes in detail, as well as the methodology and analyses used to obtain the results, and the potential implications for the findings.

## **MARITAL QUALITY**

Research on marital quality has addressed both supportive behaviors and conflict behaviors. Supportive marital behaviors include actions such as being willing to compromise, providing encouragement, and expressing affection. Marital conflict behaviors include actions such as criticizing and placing blame, and expressions of anger such as yelling and screaming. Research has linked low marital conflict in parents to child outcomes such as lower levels of anxiety,<sup>2</sup> less depression,<sup>3</sup> and fewer conduct problems.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, researchers have found that marital conflict predicts more permissive child attitudes about divorce and cohabitation.<sup>5, 6</sup>

## **PARENT-ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP QUALITY**

Research on parent-adolescent relationship has also focused on support and conflict as two primary components of relationship quality. Supportive behaviors between parents and their children include actions such as praise and encouragement, and conflict behaviors include actions such as criticism and placing blame. Parent-child relationships characterized by low conflict have been linked to varied child outcomes, including lower levels of anxiety<sup>7</sup> and depression,<sup>8, 9</sup> higher levels of self-esteem,<sup>10</sup> and lower

incidences of substance use<sup>11</sup> and conduct problems.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, parent support is associated with less depression,<sup>13</sup> substance use,<sup>14</sup> and delinquent<sup>15</sup> behavior and is positively related to better mental well-being in children.<sup>16</sup>

## **ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF AND THE METHODOLOGY USED**

This project used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort (NLSY-97), which is a nationally representative sample of 8,209 adolescents, ages 12-16 in 1997, who are being surveyed over time. The survey is primarily sponsored by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor, with support from additional federal agencies, including the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). It collects data on a broad array of child and family interactions and relationships, as well as adolescent behaviors. We limited our sample to 3,316 respondents who were 12 to 14 years old in December 1996 and whose parents were married at the time of the interview.

**Parent-adolescent agreement.** Given that the ultimate goal of this project is to examine the association between adolescent perceptions of marital quality and parent-adolescent relationships and adolescent and youth development, we used adolescent perceptions in our analyses. However, to test the similarity of parent versus adolescent reports, we performed preliminary analyses to assess the overlap in parent and adolescent agreement on parent marital quality. Specifically, we performed a latent class analysis on adolescent perceptions of six mother-to-father behaviors and six father-to-mother behaviors. We also included six parent report indicators of relationship quality in the analysis. The parent report variables combined mother and father perceptions on a number of relationship behaviors, including compromise, affection, encouragement, screaming, using insults, and blame placement.

The latent class analysis yielded four profiles. The majority of cases (52%) were characterized by adolescent and parent agreement that the marriage was high quality. Specifically, they agreed that the couples enjoyed high support and low conflict. In 23% of cases, the youth reported *slightly* lower parent marital quality than did the parents. In 8 % of the cases, both parents and adolescents reported low marital quality. The remaining 17% of cases indicated a greater discrepancy between parent and adolescent report, with youth reporting high parent marital quality, and parents reporting low marital quality. In sum, the vast majority of cases (83%), exhibited good parent-adolescent agreement.

**Parent marital quality profiles.** Next, to construct the marital quality profiles, we examined adolescent perceptions of the levels of support and conflict that characterized their parent's marital relationship. Adolescents were asked to report on both the father's behaviors towards the mother and the mother's behaviors towards the fathers. Three supportive behaviors included willingness to compromise, expression of affection, and expression of encouragement. Three conflict behaviors included screaming, criticism, and a tendency to place blame on the other person.

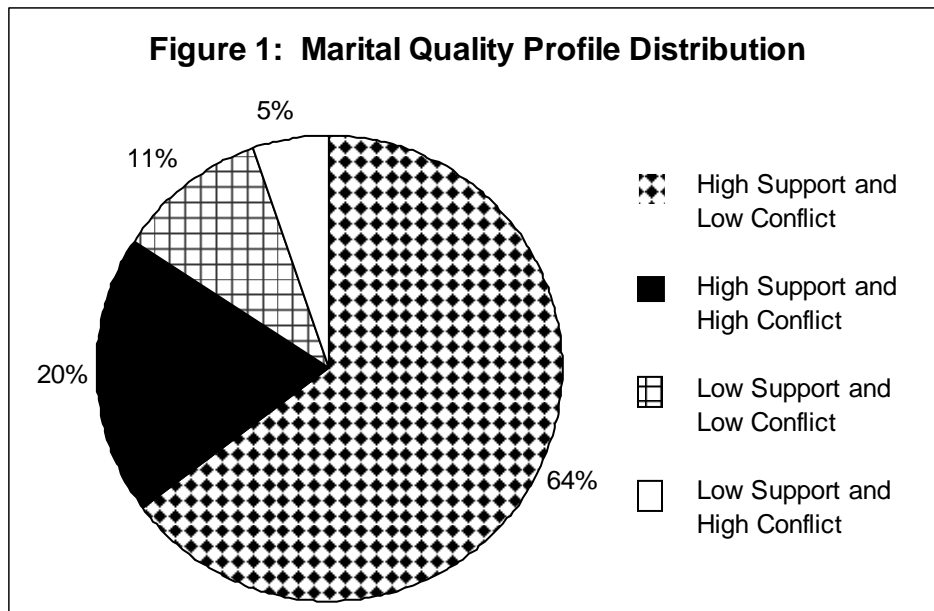
We conducted a latent class analysis in order to determine the marital relationship profiles within the sample. Latent class analysis is a statistical technique for examining relationships in data. Latent class analysis identifies a set of mutually exclusive latent classes that account for the distribution of cases occurring within a cross tabulation of discrete variables.<sup>17</sup> For the latent class analysis, we examined the associations between 12 marital quality variables. The 12 variables included six variables addressing adolescent report of mothers' behaviors towards the fathers and six variables addressing adolescent report of fathers' behaviors towards the mothers. All analyses included a basic set of covariates that include other marital characteristics, family characteristics, environment characteristics, and adolescent characteristics.

**Parent-adolescent relationship quality profiles.** In order to assess the quality of the parent-adolescent relationships, we examined adolescent perceptions of their relationships with their mothers and their relationships with their fathers. Respondents were asked to report on the following seven items: admiration for the parent, the degree to which he or she enjoys spending time with the parent, frequency of praise received from the parent, frequency of criticism from the parent, frequency of help from the parent, reliability of the parent, and frequency of blame placed on the respondent by the parent.

We then conducted latent growth class analyses on three composite mother-adolescent relationship scores and separately for three composite father-adolescent relationship scores. The scores include a measure of the parent-adolescent relationship from each of the following years: 1997, 1998, and 1999. Latent growth class analysis identifies profiles of growth over time for a set of variables. These analyses were conducted independently for the mother-adolescent relationship and then for the father-adolescent relationship. All analyses included a basic set of covariates that include marital characteristics, family characteristics, environment characteristics, and adolescent characteristics.

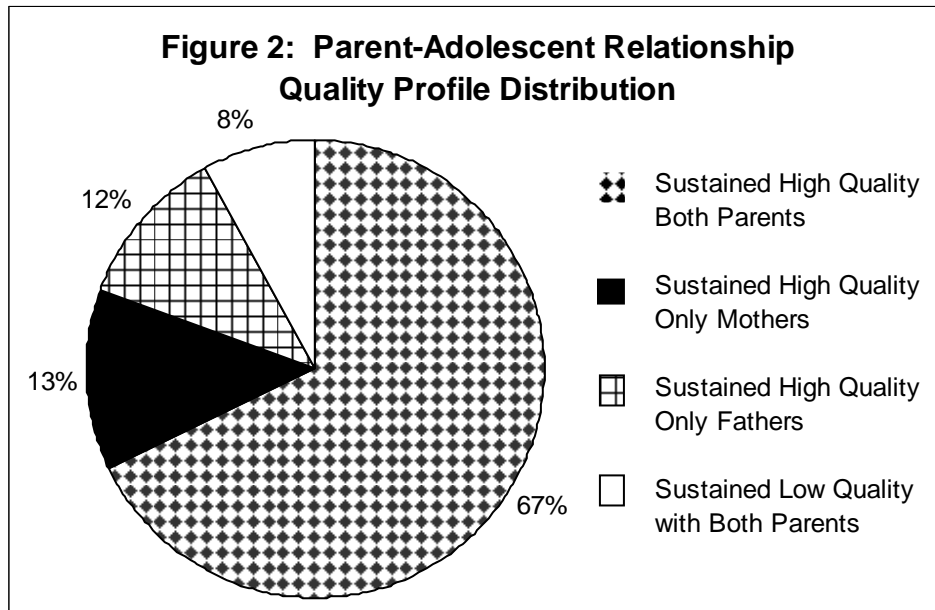
## FINDINGS

**Parent marital quality profiles.** The majority of adolescents in our sample (64%) reported that their parents' marital quality was characterized by high levels of supportive behaviors and low levels of conflict behaviors. About 20% of adolescents reported high levels of support but also high levels of conflict in their parents' marriages. The third largest proportion of adolescents (11%) reported that their parents' marriages were characterized by low levels of support and low levels of conflict. Finally, a small proportion of the adolescents in our sample (5%) reported high levels of conflict and low levels of support in their parents' marriages. See Figure 1.



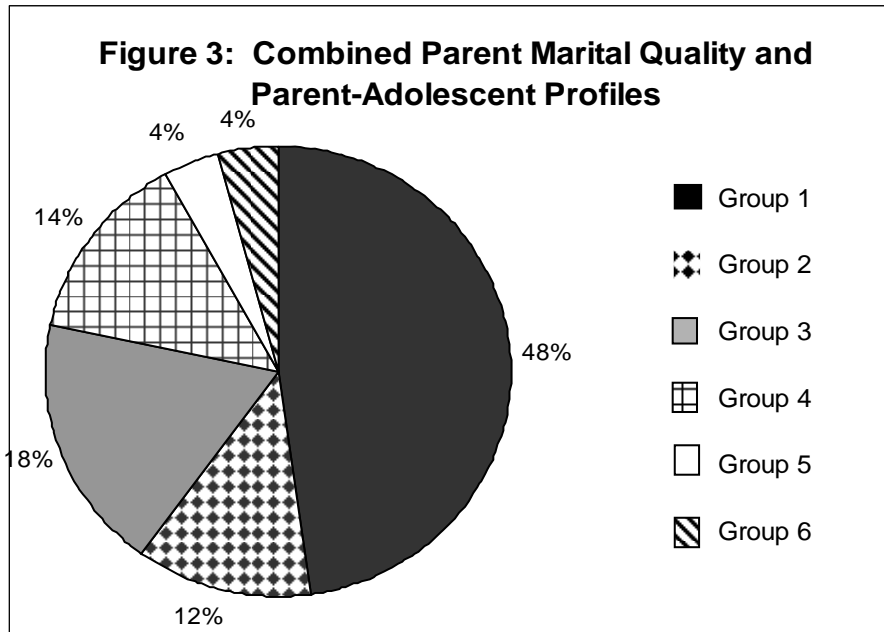
**Parent-adolescent relationship quality profiles.** Our latent growth profile analysis yielded 4 profiles for each parent-adolescent relationship: 1) sustained high quality relationship with parent over time; 2) high quality relationship with parent that worsens over time; 3) low quality relationship with parent that improves over time; 4) sustained low quality relationship with parent over time.

Combining the mother-adolescent and father-adolescent profiles yielded four new groups. The majority of adolescents in our sample (68%) reported that they had sustained high quality relationships, characterized by high levels of support and low levels of conflict, with both parents throughout early adolescence. Roughly 13% of adolescents reported sustained high quality relationships only with their mothers, and about 11% reported sustained high quality relationships only with their fathers. A small proportion of adolescents (8%) reported sustained low quality relationships with both of their parents throughout their early adolescence. The parent-adolescent relationship quality profiles are presented graphically in Figure 2.



**Combining the parent marital quality profiles and the parent-adolescent relationship quality groups.** To examine how the parent marital quality profiles and the parent-adolescent relationship quality interact, we examined how they overlapped. Six distinct groups were evident from this examination: 1) High marital quality and good relationships with both parents (48% of sample); 2) High marital quality and a good relationship with only one parent (12% of sample); 3) High support and high conflict marital quality and a good relationship with at least one parent (18% of sample); 4) Low marital quality and a good relationship with at least one parent (14% of sample); 5) High marital quality and bad relationships with both parents (4% of sample); and 6) Low marital quality and bad relationships with both parents (4% of sample). See Figure 3.

These combine marital quality/parent-adolescent relationship groups were used in the analyses predicting to adolescent and young adult outcomes. Please see a related brief from this project entitled “*Marital Quality and Parent-Adolescent Relationships: Effects on Adolescent and Young Adult Well-Being*” for a summary of these findings. The brief can be found at: <http://aspe.hhs/hsp/08/RelationshipStrengths/Well-Being>.



## CONCLUSIONS

Our findings suggest that the majority of adolescents (about 64%) in married couple families perceive their parents' marital quality to be high, and only a small proportion (about 5%) report low parent marital quality. Furthermore, a majority of adolescents (about 68%) also report sustained high quality relationships with both parents throughout early adolescence. Again, the smallest proportion of adolescents (8%) fell into the most negative group, which was characterized by sustained low quality relationships with both parents over time. We found this result to be remarkable given that much of the extant research about teen/parent behaviors portrays the teen years at home as troubled and problematic. Clearly, more research is needed about how parents create and sustain these types of relationships.

Our findings that positive marital relationships and sustained positive parent-adolescent relationships are seemingly the most common type in married-couple families suggests that researchers might begin to place more of a focus on examining how these positive factors function in families. In subsequent analyses, we explore how these indicators of marital quality and parent-adolescent relationship quality predict child well-being in middle adolescence and early adulthood. Findings from this sample of families could be informative to those individuals attempting to enhance positive child outcomes by building family relationships.

## PROJECT INFORMATION

This brief was produced as part of a series of reports and briefs on the effects of marital quality and parent adolescent relationships on outcomes for adolescents and young adults. The entire series can be found at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/RelationshipStrengths/>. This report can be found at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/RelationshipStrengths/Components>. The series was prepared under the direction of Linda Mellgren under ASPE contract HHSP23320045020XI06, Task Order #3 with NORC and Child Trends. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of ASPE or DHHS.

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