

## Parenting During Childhood Predicts Relationship Satisfaction in Young Adulthood: A Prospective Longitudinal Perspective

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**This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in**

Parade, S. H., Supple, A. J., & Helms, H. M. (2012). Parenting during childhood predicts relationship satisfaction in young adulthood: A prospective longitudinal perspective. *Marriage and Family Review*, 48, 150-169.

**as published in *Marriage and Family Review* 2012 [copyright Taylor & Francis], available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/01494929.2011.629078>.**

### **Abstract:**

Using three waves of data drawn from the National Survey of Families and Households (n = 438 young adult children) we examined the process by which parental warmth and harsh parenting during childhood influences children's romantic relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Harsh parenting was directly associated with children's relationship satisfaction, independently and in conjunction with parental warmth, whereas parental warmth was indirectly associated with relationship satisfaction through family cohesion during adolescence. Results were consistent across male and female young adults involved in married, dating, and cohabiting relationships. Findings from this prospective, longitudinal study coincide with previous research using adult children's retrospective reports of parenting behavior and highlight the importance of family of origin influences on romantic relationships in young adulthood.

**Keywords:** early adulthood | family of origin | parenthood | parenting style | relationships

### **Article:**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The development of close romantic ties is a central task of young adulthood (Erikson, 1963). Individuals who successfully establish close relationships during this time are thought to develop into highly functioning members of society who are psychologically and socially adept. Indeed, individuals who are involved in satisfying romantic relationships tend to report better physical and psychological adjustment than those who fail to establish these types of bonds (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007; Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2006; Wikrama, Lorenz, Conger, & Elder, 1997).

Early family experiences have long been recognized as important sources of influence in adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), and the importance of family of origin experiences in shaping the development of close relationships in young

adulthood has been underscored by scholars advocating a life span development approach (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). The current study extends previous research by using a prospective research design to consider parental reports of their own behavior during their young adult's childhood as predictors of offspring relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Moreover, because parenting during childhood is thought to lay the foundation for the emotional climate of the family in later childhood and adolescence (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999), family cohesion during adolescence was considered as a mediating mechanism.

### **Conceptualization and Literature Review**

Parental warmth (i.e., parental expression of affection and approval; Davidov & Grusec, 2006) and harsh parenting (i.e., parental expression of verbal and physical aggression; Erath, El-Sheikh, & Cummings, 2009) are thought to be relevant in the development of positive expectations for social interaction. Children reared in environments characterized by more warmth and less harsh parenting develop a more positive lens through which they view the world around them and come to expect that their interactions with others will be pleasant and enjoyable (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Individuals with positive expectations for their relationships may be more satisfied in their romantic relationships because they possess a more positive attribution bias, which is linked with romantic relationship satisfaction (Fincham, 2002).

Supporting this perspective, retrospective studies have documented that adults who are more satisfied in their romantic relationships tend to recall more warmth and less harsh parenting during childhood (Burns & Dunlop, 1998; Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2009; Truant, Herscovitch, & Lohrenz, 1987). Despite these significant findings, research that has relied on adult children's retrospective reports of parenting during childhood, rather than parents' reports of their own behavior, is problematic because it may be influenced by adult children's current emotional dispositions and states of mind regarding their childhood relationships, rather than actual parental behavior (Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993). With the exception of a limited number of studies following children from the early years of life to adulthood (Franz, McClelland, & Weinberger, 1991; Overbeek, Stattin, Vermulst, Ha, & Engels, 2007; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005), most prospective longitudinal studies examining links between parenting in the family of origin and offspring experiences in adult romantic relationships have considered parenting during adolescence rather than parenting in childhood as a predictor of relationship satisfaction in early and middle adulthood (e.g., Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Donnellan, Larson-Rife, & Conger, 2005). Given that experiences with caregivers in childhood are theoretically believed to be predictors of subsequent development and experiences in other close relationships across the life span (Berlin, Cassidy, & Appleyard, 2008; Bowlby, 1969; Sroufe et al., 2005), the absence of prospective studies that have examined the link between warmth and harsh parenting in childhood and relationship satisfaction during young adulthood poses a significant gap in research.

Two prospective studies support proposed links between warmth and harsh parenting during childhood and relationship satisfaction during young adulthood. First, parent-reported warmth when children were age 5 was positively associated with children's social accomplishment at age 41 (Franz et al., 1991). Although the longitudinal nature of Franz and colleagues' study is a considerable strength, results are limited because social accomplishment was a composite variable, the mean of a variety of indicators of social achievement including the development of close friendships, marital happiness, and the experience of becoming a parent. Therefore, the association between parental-reported warmth and relationship satisfaction specifically was not considered.

More recently, it was demonstrated that infant attachment security, theoretically stemming from experiences of parental warmth and harshness, is positively associated with romantic relationship satisfaction at age 21 (Sroufe et al., 2005). Most participants in Sroufe and colleagues' study were involved in dating relationships at the age of 21, limiting the generalizability of the results to individuals involved in cohabiting and marital relationships. Although these two studies provide support for the perspective that early family relationships are linked with romantic relationship satisfaction in young adulthood, the specific associations between warmth and harsh parenting in childhood and relationship satisfaction in young adulthood have yet to be empirically demonstrated.

Above and beyond main effects of warmth and harsh parenting during childhood on romantic relationship satisfaction in young adulthood, the two constructs may interact to predict relationship satisfaction. In the context of warm and affectively positive parent-child interactions, harsh parenting may be less likely to contribute to a negative lens through which children evaluate their close relationships. Indeed, parental warmth is postulated to moderate links between harsh parenting and child outcomes (Deater-Deckard & Dodge, 1997). Often referred to as the "warmth moderator effect," previous research has demonstrated that associations between harsh parenting and child behavior problems are less strong in the context of high parental warmth than they are in the context of low parental warmth (Deater-Deckard, Ivy, & Petrill, 2006; McKee, et al., 2007; McLoyd & Smith, 2002). To our knowledge no previous studies have examined the warmth moderator effect as it pertains to the effect of harsh parenting during childhood on experiences in close relationships in young adulthood. It is likely that the effect of harsh parenting on romantic relationship satisfaction in young adulthood is stronger in the context of low parental warmth than it is in the context of high parental warmth.

### **FAMILY COHESION AS A MEDIATING MECHANISM**

Although it is possible that warmth and harsh parenting directly influence romantic relationship satisfaction in young adulthood, most scholars acknowledge that this effect occurs through a variety of mediating mechanisms (Overbeek et al., 2007; Sroufe et al., 2005). For example, research has revealed that the affective quality of the parent-child relationship in childhood has an indirect influence on behavioral aspects of romantic relationships during young adulthood

through parent–child conflict in adolescence (Overbeek et al., 2007). An additional possible mechanism that has yet to be examined as a mediator of the link between parenting during childhood and experiences in romantic relationships during young adulthood is family cohesion during adolescence. Parenting characterized by warmth and less harsh behavior is thought to facilitate the development of highly cohesive relationships between family members (MacDonald, 1992). And, in the context of warm parent–child interactions, harsh parental behavior may be less likely to deter the formation of cohesive family relationships given the positive affective context in which the parental behavior occurs.

Family cohesion, characterized by support and emotional connectedness within the family (Barber & Buehler, 1996; Moos, 1974), may serve as a secure base from which children develop intimate relationships outside of the family. Individuals with a supportive emotional base stemming from higher levels of family cohesion may feel more comfortable disclosing personal feelings and sentiments in their romantic relationships, contributing to greater relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Thus, family cohesion in adolescence may serve as an important mediator of the link between warmth and harsh parenting in childhood and relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Although associations between warmth and harsh parenting in childhood and family cohesion in adolescence have yet to be examined, previous research demonstrating that physically abused children are reared in less cohesive family environments than children who are not abused (Williamson, Borduin, & Howe, 1991) provides support for this possibility. Furthermore, family cohesion during adolescence is positively associated with relationship satisfaction in young adulthood (Feldman, Gowan, & Fisher, 1998). Thus, it is possible that family cohesion serves as a mediating mechanism.

Taken together, theory and previous research highlight the influence of warmth and harsh parenting during childhood, both individually and in conjunction with one another, on romantic relationship satisfaction during young adulthood. Furthermore, family cohesion may serve as an important mediating mechanism in this association. In an effort to extend previous research and to achieve a deeper understanding of the processes by which warmth and harsh parenting influence adult children's evaluations of their current romantic relationships, we used three waves of data drawn from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). Use of the NSFH dataset allows us to make an important contribution to the literature because (1) the sample is more representative than the typical convenience sample of college students; (2) the data were collected using a prospective research design, thus eliminating issues surrounding the use of retrospective reports; and (3) the data include multiple informants, thus easing concerns about shared method variance. We submit the following hypotheses:

1. Young adults whose parents more frequently engaged in behaviors indicative of parental warmth and less frequently engaged in behaviors indicative of harsh parenting during childhood would report more satisfaction in their romantic relationships than young adults whose parents did not engage in these behaviors as frequently.

2. Parental warmth would moderate associations between harsh parenting in childhood and romantic relationship satisfaction in young adulthood.
3. Family cohesion during adolescence would partially mediate associations between warmth and harsh parenting in childhood and romantic relationship satisfaction in young adulthood.

Although experiences in the family of origin are thought to influence experiences in adult relationships similarly for men and women, there is some evidence that associations are stronger among women than men (Feldman et al., 1998; Holman & Birch, 2001). Gender differences in the prospective link between warmth and harsh parenting during childhood and relationship satisfaction in young adulthood have yet to be specifically examined; therefore we considered gender as a moderator variable.

Furthermore, because previous research has been conducted with relatively homogeneous samples with regard to relationship status (married, cohabiting, or dating relationships), the possibility that relationship status moderates associations between parenting during childhood and relationship satisfaction in young adulthood has not been previously considered. Given that cognitions and behaviors within close relationships are thought to be transferred from parents to romantic partners in a sequential fashion as individuals become more committed in their romantic relationships (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994), we hypothesized that family of origin experiences may be more salient to young adults who are in married and cohabiting relationships than those in dating relationships.

## **METHODS**

To examine the influence of warmth and harsh parenting during childhood on offspring romantic relationship satisfaction in young adulthood, we used data drawn from three waves of the NSFH (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988; Sweet & Bumpass, 1996; 2002). The NSFH is an appropriate dataset in which to examine the proposed hypotheses because it contains parents' reports of behaviors directed toward their children at time 1 (1987–1988), parent and child reports of family cohesion when children are adolescents at time 2 (1992–1994), and children's reports of their romantic relationship satisfaction during young adulthood at time 3 (2001–2003).

### **Sample**

Thirteen thousand seven families were recruited to participate in the NSFH at time 1. These families were representative of the United States at the time they were recruited, with an additional oversampling of racial minority families and families in which there were children of unmarried parents. Of the entire sample of families who participated in the NSFH, 5,420 primary respondent parents from families in which there was a child under the age of 18 responded to questions regarding specific behaviors they engaged in with their children. Of those parents with children under the age of 18 who completed the survey at time 1, 3,094 completed a second interview at time 2 to assess their perceptions of family cohesion. Also at time 2, focal children

who were between the ages of 10 and 17 at the time of the interview ( $n = 1,414$ ), responded to a set of questions about their perceptions of family cohesion.

Four hundred eighty-three of the focal children who participated in the NSFH as adolescents were involved in romantic relationships when they were young adults at time 3 and completed measures to assess satisfaction in their current romantic relationships. Thus, the final analytic sample ( $n = 483$ ) is a subset of the NSFH dataset, which was dependent on the child's age at time 1, the parent and child's participation at time 2, and the child's romantic relationship status at time 3. Primary respondent parents who were included in the final analytic sample were more likely to be married at time 1 ( $\chi^2(1) = 77.23, p < .01$ ), White ( $\chi^2(1) = 20.31, p < .01$ ), and younger than primary respondents in the full NSFH sample at time 1 ( $t(800) = 27.12, p < .01$ ).

Among the 483 participants who were in the final analytic sample, 61% of the focal children were female ( $n = 295$ ). On average, focal children were 8 years old at the time 1 interview (standard deviation [SD] = 2.10 years), 13 years old at the time 2 interview (SD = 2.24 years), and 23 years old at the time 3 interview (SD = 2.34 years). Ninety-three percent of focal children had received a high school degree and 25% had received a postsecondary degree or certificate by the time they had completed the time 3 interview.

Sixty-seven percent of primary respondent parents who reported on the behaviors they engaged in with their children at time 1 were female ( $n = 321$ ). At the time 1 assessment, primary respondent parents were on average 34 years of age (SD = 6.43 years) and 72% were married, 18% were divorced, 5% were never married, 4% were separated, and 1% were widowed. Most parents in the current sample identified themselves as White, non-Hispanic (81%), or Black (13%). Information regarding the child's race is not available in the NSFH dataset. Twenty-six percent of young adult children in the final analytic sample were married, 25% were involved in cohabiting relationships, and 49% were involved in dating relationships.

## **Measures**

### **PARENTING DURING CHILDHOOD**

Parents indicated the frequency with which they engaged in four specific behaviors with their children at time 1 on a four-point scale from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Consistent with Davidov and Grusec's (2006) conceptualization of parental warmth as the expression of affection and approval, parent reports of praise and hugs served as indicators of parental warmth. Likewise, consistent with the conceptualization of harsh parenting as the expression of verbal and physical aggression (Erath et al., 2009), parental reports of spanking and yelling served as indicators of harshness. Each item was treated as a separate manifest indicator of each parenting behavior. Higher scores indicated higher levels of engagement in the behavior by parents.

### **FAMILY COHESION**

To assess family cohesion during adolescence, parent primary respondents and adolescent-aged focal children each responded to five statements about their family, including “Our family works well as a team” and “Things are tense and stressful in our family,” at time 2. Parents responded to these statements on a five-point scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*) in a questionnaire, and children responded to these statements on a four-point scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 4 (*very true*) during an interview. Items were averaged separately for parents and children after reverse scoring appropriate items, such that high scores indicate higher levels of family cohesion during adolescence. Internal consistency reliability was .81 for parental reports of cohesion and .73 for child reports.

## **YOUNG ADULT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION**

To assess satisfaction in romantic relationships during young adulthood, focal children responded to four items during the time 3 interview. Participants were asked to indicate how happy they were with four aspects of their relationship: understanding they receive from their partner, the love and affection they receive from their partner, the amount of time they spend with their partner, and their sexual relationship. Participants responded to these four statements on a seven-point continuous scale from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 7 (*very happy*). Items were averaged such that higher scores indicate higher levels of satisfaction in young adult romantic relationships ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

To examine the process by which parenting during childhood influences children's relationship satisfaction in young adulthood, we conducted structural equation modeling using AMOS16 (Byrne, 2001). First, descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables of interest were conducted using SPSS (IBM; Armonk, NY). Second, parent gender, parental educational attainment, child age, and racial minority status were considered as covariates. Correlations showed that parent gender, parent education, or child age was not associated with relationship satisfaction in young adulthood; therefore, they were not treated as covariates in the substantive analyses as they can be ruled out as possible alternative explanations for relationship satisfaction. In contrast, children whose parents were racial minorities were less satisfied in their romantic relationships in young adulthood than children whose parents were White ( $t(121) = 1.20, p < .05$ ); therefore, minority status was included as a covariate in subsequent analyses.

After preliminary data analyses, we used structural equation modeling to test a baseline model in which all hypothesized main effects were examined simultaneously. Indicators of warmth (praise and hugs) and harsh parenting (yelling and spanking) were maintained as separate manifest indicators given that there was poor model fit when each set of behaviors were loaded onto latent factors representing warmth and harsh parenting and the model failed to converge due to misspecification when testing a latent interaction term for the warmth moderator model.

However, correlations were specified between the four parent behaviors. Parent and child reports of family cohesion were loaded onto a single latent factor. The full model simultaneously considered both direct and indirect associations from parenting during childhood to young adult relationship satisfaction. Pathways were specified between the independent variables (indicators of warmth and harsh parenting during childhood) and dependent variable (relationship satisfaction in young adulthood) to test the direct effects. Pathways were also specified between the independent variables and mediating variable (family cohesion) and between the mediating variable and dependent variable. The significance of the indirect mediated pathway was evaluated using bootstrapping procedures. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals for the significance of indirect effects were estimated in AMOS using bootstrapping procedures based on 2,000 samples.

In an effort to understand if results generalized to males and females and married, dating, and cohabiting young adults, we examined the potential moderating effects of child gender and relationship status using SEM multigroup analyses (Byrne, 2001). The first step in this procedure was to establish a well-fitting baseline model for the entire sample. Using this baseline model we next constrained the factor loadings to be equal across males and females and compared the fit of this constrained model with an unconstrained model in which the factor loadings were free to vary across males and females. This second step was carried out to establish metric invariance across gender. With metric invariance established, one can be confident that any subsequent differences across groups in structural paths are not a function of differences in measurement across groups (Byrne, 2001). Note there are only two relevant factor loadings in the baseline model, those representing paths from the family cohesion factor to parent and child reports of cohesion during adolescence. The final step in the multigroup analyses included a model that constrained the hypothesized structural pathways to be equal across men and women (while also constraining the factor loadings) and comparing this with the unconstrained model to test if structural pathways varied across men and women. If there was a significant change in chi-square between the constrained models and the unconstrained model, individual pathways were examined to determine where gender differences occurred. An identical procedure was followed for multigroup analyses based on relationship status (married, cohabiting, and dating relationships).

After establishing a well-fitting baseline model and measurement invariance across gender and relationship status (as well as a consideration of gender and relationship status as moderators of regression paths), we subsequently examined parental warmth as a moderator of the effect of harsh parenting on relationship satisfaction. Interaction terms (praise  $\times$  yell, praise  $\times$  spank, hug  $\times$  yell, hug  $\times$  spank) were added to the baseline model, and pathways were specified between the interaction terms and family cohesion and relationship satisfaction. Variables were mean centered before the construction of interaction terms. Significant interaction terms were probed using procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991), specifically by calculating simple slopes at each level of the moderator variable.



Full information maximum likelihood was used to account for missing data in all analyses. Less than 1% of data was missing overall. Model fit was evaluated using a variety of fit indices, including chi-square, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the normed fit index (NFI). A nonsignificant chi-square indicated excellent model fit; however, a significant chi-square was expected for models due to the large sample size (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2000). RMSEA values less than or equal to .05 indicated excellent model fit, whereas RMSEA values less than or equal to .08 indicated acceptable model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). CFI and NFI values greater than or equal to .95 indicated excellent model fit, whereas CFI and NFI values greater than or equal to .90 indicated acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables of interest are displayed in Table 1. Results of the baseline model are displayed in Table 2, and the reported fit statistics indicated that the baseline model demonstrated a good fit to these data (note that the baseline model is similar to the model presented in Figure 1 except that the latter includes a significant product term). Findings from the baseline model suggested that parent reports of yelling during childhood were negatively associated with young adults' romantic relationship satisfaction as a direct main effect. In contrast, parent reports of spanking and both indicators of parenting warmth, parent reports of praise and hugs, were not directly associated with young adults' relationship satisfaction.

[Figure 1 Omitted]

[Table 1 Omitted]

[Table 2 Omitted]

In the examination of the hypothesized mediated pathways, parent reports of praise and hugs during childhood were positively associated with family cohesion during adolescence, and family cohesion during adolescence was positively associated with relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Examination of indirect mediated pathways using bootstrapping procedures demonstrated that praise and hugs in childhood influenced relationship satisfaction in young adulthood through family cohesion in adolescence ( $B = .08$ , standard error [SE] = .05, 95% confidence interval [CI] = .02 to .21 for praise;  $B = .13$ , SE = .06, 95% CI = .04 to .28 for hugs). These findings suggest that young adults whose parents more frequently praised them or hugged them tended to have experienced more family cohesion during adolescence and, in turn, were more satisfied in their romantic relationships in young adulthood. In contrast, parent reports of yelling and spanking were not associated with family cohesion during adolescence and therefore did not exert an indirect effect on relationship satisfaction in young adulthood.

Examination of child gender as a moderator of the baseline model revealed no significant differences in the hypothesized pathways between female children and male children. First, the test of measurement invariance did not demonstrate a statistically significant difference in chi-square between the model in which the factor loadings across gender were constrained to be equal and a model in which the factor loadings were freely estimated ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .43$ , not significant [ns]). Second, the structural path coefficients were equal across gender ( $\Delta\chi^2(15) = 22.06$ , ns comparing the constrained to freely estimated model). Furthermore, examination of relationship status as a moderator of the path model revealed no significant differences in path coefficients between married, cohabiting, and dating young adults ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .01$ , ns comparing factor loadings across groups and  $\Delta\chi^2(15) = 12.98$ , ns comparing the constrained coefficients and loadings model to the model where parameters were freely estimated). These findings suggest that all associations were similar across child gender and relationship status.

The moderation model, which included interaction terms between the two indicators of harsh parenting and the two indicators of parenting warmth, demonstrated a poor fit to the data ( $\chi^2(35) = 449.43$ ,  $p < .00$ ; CFI = .39; NFI = .41; RMSEA = .16). Only one of the four interaction terms predicting relationship satisfaction in young adulthood (praise  $\times$  spank) was significant. None of the interaction terms predicting family cohesion during adolescence was significant. Nonsignificant interaction terms were removed from the model, and the final model, which demonstrated an excellent fit to the data, is displayed in Figure 1. Examination of simple slopes for the interaction term using procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991) demonstrated that among children whose parents never, seldom, or sometimes praised there was a significant negative association between spanking in childhood and relationship satisfaction in young adulthood ( $B = -.42$ ,  $-.30$ , and  $-.12$  respectively, all  $p < .01$ ). Among children whose parents often praised, spanking was not associated with relationship satisfaction ( $B = .08$ , ns).

In sum, both indicators of parental warmth, parent reports of praise and hugs in childhood, had an indirect influence on relationship satisfaction in young adulthood through family cohesion during adolescence. In contrast, both indicators of harsh parenting had direct effects on relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Parental reports of yelling during childhood were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction in young adulthood, whereas spanking during childhood was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction among children whose parents never, seldom, or sometimes praised. Results of the baseline model were consistent across child gender and romantic relationship status. The final model had an excellent fit to the data and explained 10% of the variance in relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Using Cohen's (1998) criteria to evaluate the strength of the standardized path coefficients such that .10 is considered a small effect, .30 a medium effect, and .50 a large effect, results of the final model demonstrated effect sizes that were generally small to moderate in strength.

## **DISCUSSION**

Using the NSFH dataset, the current study examined the process by which warmth and harsh parenting during childhood influences children's evaluations of their romantic relationships during young adulthood. Previous research has demonstrated that adult children's retrospective reports of the parenting they received during childhood are associated with romantic relationship satisfaction in adulthood (Burns & Dunlop, 1998; Truant et al., 1987); however, the current study builds on previous research by using a prospective research design. Four conceptually relevant parent-reported behaviors during childhood were considered as separate indicators of parental warmth and harshness, including parent reports of praise, hugs, spanking, and yelling. These parental behaviors were considered as predictors of relationship satisfaction independently and in conjunction with one another. Family cohesion during adolescence was considered as a mediator of the link between warmth and harsh parenting during childhood and young adults' relationship satisfaction. Child gender and romantic relationship status were examined as moderators of the hypothesized pathways to determine if the pattern of results varied across women and men and young adults who were in married, cohabiting, and dating relationships.

Consistent with expectations, structural equation modeling revealed that all four parent-reported behaviors predicted children's relationship satisfaction in young adulthood, albeit in different ways. Both indicators of warmth, parent reports of praise and hugs, had an indirect effect on relationship satisfaction in young adulthood through family cohesion during adolescence. Children whose parents praised or hugged them more frequently experienced more family cohesion during adolescence and subsequently were more satisfied in their romantic relationships during young adulthood. In contrast, both indicators of harsh parenting, parent reports of yelling and spanking, were directly associated with relationship satisfaction, although in the case of spanking associations with relationship satisfaction were more strongly negative when parents were also less warm (by less often praising the child). That is, children whose parents yelled at them more frequently were less satisfied in their romantic relationships during young adulthood. Children whose parents spanked them more frequently were less satisfied in their romantic relationships but only when parents reported that they never, seldom, or sometimes praised their children. Effect sizes for significant pathways were small to moderate in strength. The path model predicted 10% of the variance in relationship satisfaction in young adulthood.

Parental reported warmth during childhood contributed to both parents' and children's perceptions of a more cohesive family environment during adolescence, which subsequently influenced children's relationship satisfaction during young adulthood. This finding is not surprising given the perspective that parental warmth during childhood lays the foundation for emotional connectedness and family support in later years (MacDonald, 1992); however, the current study was the first to empirically demonstrate this association. It appears that a developmental history of warmth and cohesion in the family of origin sets the stage for young adults to be successful in their subsequent close relationships. The indirect effect demonstrated in the current study is consistent with previous work illustrating the continuity of experiences in

close relationships throughout childhood, adolescence, and into young adulthood (Collins, Hennighausen, Schmit, & Sroufe, 1997; Sroufe et al., 2005).

In contrast to the indirect effect of parental warmth, both indicators of harsh parenting during childhood, parental reports of yelling and spanking, had direct effects on relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Consistent with previous research linking parenting during childhood to experiences in adult romantic relationships, effect sizes were small to medium in strength (Franz et al., 1991; Sroufe et al., 2005). This finding is consistent with the perspective that early family relationships lay the foundation for experiences in adult relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Children whose parents more frequently yelled at them or spanked them may have developed the belief that others will respond to them in a negative manner. These young adults who experienced more parental yelling or spanking may have selected romantic partners who provided them with less emotional support, contributing to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Indeed, previous research has revealed that individuals select romantic partners who confirm their working models and beliefs about close relationships (Frazier, Byer, Fischer, Wright, & DeBord, 1996).

That parent reports of praise buffered children from the negative effect of spanking during childhood on relationship satisfaction in young adulthood was consistent with expectation. Among children whose parents often praised there was no effect of spanking on relationship satisfaction. It appears that the effect of spanking during childhood on relationship satisfaction in young adulthood is best understood when considering the context in which spanking occurred. Previous research has revealed that parental emotional supportiveness buffers children from the influence of spanking on increases in children's behavior problems over time (McLoyd & Smith, 2002); parental support in the moments immediately before, during, or immediately after the act of spanking appear to have a similar buffering effect on the association between spanking during childhood and relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Contrary to expectation, neither parental reports of praise or hugs buffered children from the negative effects of yelling on relationship satisfaction. Perhaps parental yelling exerted an effect on relationship satisfaction regardless of the context in which the yelling occurred because children who experienced more yelling developed more maladaptive problem-solving strategies that they carried forward into their adult relationships (Bryant & Conger, 2002).

Parent reports of yelling and spanking were not linked with family cohesion during adolescence, and, consequently, harsh parenting did not influence relationship satisfaction in young adulthood through this mediating mechanism. The robust effects of praise and hugs during childhood on family cohesion during adolescence support the possibility that parental warmth is likely the primary component in the construction of a cohesive family environment rather than more negative aspects of parenting experienced in childhood. Rather than influencing relationship satisfaction in young adulthood through family cohesion during adolescence, parental yelling may have contributed to the development of more negative strategies to resolve conflict with peers during childhood and adolescence and subsequently more negative strategies to resolve

conflict with romantic partners in young adulthood. These negative strategies to resolve romantic conflict may have contributed to lower levels of relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Supporting this possibility, infant attachment security has been found to influence relationship satisfaction in young adulthood through peer competence in childhood (Sroufe et al., 2005). Similarly, friendship quality during adolescence is linked with romantic conflict resolution skills in young adulthood (Linder & Collins, 2005), and conflict resolution skills are associated with relationship satisfaction (Bradbury & Karney, 1993). This alternative mediating mechanism should be considered in future research examining prospective associations between harsh parenting and relationship satisfaction.

Consistent with expectation and theory, warmth and harsh parenting influenced relationship satisfaction in young adulthood similarly for males and females. This finding is consistent with the perspective that early family relationships will have a lasting influence on children's development and experiences in subsequent relationships regardless of child gender (Bowlby, 1969). Despite this consistency with theory, the similar pattern of results across child gender contradicts evidence that early family relationships may be more salient to relationship satisfaction among women than among men (Holman & Birch, 2001). Previous research that detected gender differences used adult children's retrospective reports of their childhood relationships with parents rather than parents' self-reports. Women are generally more attentive to specific behaviors within relationships than are men (Acitelli, 1992; Sanford, 2005) and therefore may be more accurate in their recollections of parental behavior contributing to the gender differences detected in previous research.

Results were consistent across romantic relationship status as well. Parent reports of warmth and harsh parenting during childhood had a similar effect on relationship satisfaction in young adulthood for young adults who were in married, cohabiting, and dating relationships. Prospective studies examining associations between parenting during childhood and relationship satisfaction in young adulthood have been conducted with relatively homogeneous samples with regard to relationship status; therefore, to our knowledge this study was the first to empirically demonstrate this consistent pattern of results. That relationship status did not moderate associations between warmth and harsh parenting in childhood and relationship satisfaction in young adulthood extends previous research demonstrating that observed familial warmth during adolescence has a similar influence on observed warmth in romantic interactions in young adulthood for young adults in married versus cohabiting and dating relationships (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larson-Rife, 2008).

The final model explained 10% of the variance in relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. For studies where the goal is to predict as accurately as possible an outcome, this level of explained variance would be considered quite low. On the other hand, even 10% variance explained is remarkable because the current study used parent reports of their own behavior as well as a prospective longitudinal design. The temporal distance between parenting during childhood and relationship outcomes 10 to 15 years later, as well as the use of both parent and

child report, contributed to a conservative variance explained statistic. Much of the previous research examining links between parenting in the family of origin and children's experiences in their adult relationships drew on adult children's retrospective reports of parenting during childhood, which may contribute to an inflated variance explained statistic. Sroufe and colleagues (2005) reported a correlation of .32 ( $r^2 = .10$ ) between infant attachment security assessed using the strange situation in infancy and relationship satisfaction at age 21. As such, the variance explained in the current study is consistent with the Sroufe study and other previous research (Franz et al., 1991) using prospective research designs to examine links between parenting during childhood and experiences in young adult romantic relationships.

The current study makes an important contribution to the family and close relationships literature by using a prospective multi-informant design to examine the process by which warmth and harsh parenting influence relationship satisfaction during young adulthood. Despite this contribution, there are a number of important areas for future research. Although the current study draws on parental reports of their own behavior rather than adult children's retrospective reports, the current study is limited in that observational assessments of parental behavior are not available. That observed infant attachment security predicts relationship satisfaction in young adulthood supports the likelihood that similar results would arise from analyses using observational assessments of parenting (Sroufe et al., 2005). Similarly, because there are few items available in the NSFH dataset to assess warmth and harsh parenting during childhood, single-item indicators were used to assess these constructs. Future research should attempt to replicate results of the current study using observational assessments of parenting and more established measures of family cohesion and relationship satisfaction.

Furthermore, characteristics of the romantic partner should be considered in future research. Romantic partners are generally thought to influence one another (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), and it is quite possible that the family of origin experiences and personal qualities of one's romantic partner influence one's own relationship satisfaction as well. Therefore, future studies would benefit from a dyadic approach in the examination of family of origin influences on relationship satisfaction using methods, such as the actor-partner interdependence model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2005), to consider the childhood experiences of both members of the dyad jointly.

Finally, given evidence that some children are more susceptible to parenting and contextual influences on their development than are others (Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2007), future research should consider the role of child temperament in the links between parenting during childhood and relationship satisfaction in young adulthood. Regardless of these limitations, the current study fills a substantial gap in the literature by considering links between warmth and harsh parenting during childhood and offspring relationship satisfaction in young adulthood and underscores the importance of early family relationships for young adult's experiences in their romantic relationships.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households was funded by a grant (HD21009) from the Center for Population Research of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; and the second and third waves were funded jointly by this grant and a grant (AG10266) from the National Institute on Aging. The survey was designed and carried out at the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison under the direction of Larry Bumpass and James Sweet. The field work for the first two waves was done by the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University, and the third wave by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center.

## Notes

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Values in parentheses are standard errors.

Note:  $\chi^2(5) = 19.53, p < .00$ ; CFI = .95; NFI = .94; RMSEA = .08.

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