

**The Effect of Divorce on Adolescents'
Attachment to their Non-resident Fathers**

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The purpose of this study was to examine the post-divorce attachment security of adolescents to their mothers and non-resident fathers. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) was used to compare the attachment security of adolescents from intact homes to those from divorced homes. The data gathered indicate that adolescents from divorced homes reported statistically significant differences in attachment security with their fathers overall and specifically in the areas of trust and communication measured by the IPPA. Therefore, the findings indicate that divorce affects attachment security negatively. No statistically significant gender differences concerning the attachment security of male and female adolescents from divorced homes for either mother or father were found. Two theoretical models (the theory of mattering and the reflective functioning of parents) are discussed as guidelines to assist policy makers in addressing problems in attachment security for children from divorced homes.

Keywords: attachment security, divorce, adolescents, non-resident fathers, Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, theory of mattering, reflective functioning of parents.

Die doel van hierdie studie was om adolessente se geborgenheid aan hul moeders en nie-residensiële vaders ná egskeiding te ondersoek. Die Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) is as 'n meetinstrument gebruik om die geborge sekuriteit van adolessente uit intakte en geskeide huisgesinne te vergelyk. Die data toon dat adolessente uit geskeide gesinne statisties beduidende verskille in geborgenheid teenoor hul vaders in die algemeen gerapporteer het en spesifiek in die areas van vertroue en kommunikasie soos gemeet deur die IPPA. Die resultate toon derhalwe dat egskeiding 'n negatiewe impak het op geborge sekuriteit. Geen statisties beduidende geslagsverskille tussen die geborge sekuriteit van manlike en vroulike adolessente uit geskeide gesinne vir moeders of vaders is gevind nie. Twee teoretiese modelle (tersaaklikheidsteorie en die reflektiewe funksie van ouers) word bespreek as riglyne vir beleidsverbetering van geborge sekuriteit vir kinders uit geskeide huisgesinne.

Sleutelwoorde: geborge sekuriteit, egskeiding, adolessente, nie-residensiële vaders, Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, tersaaklikheidsteorie, reflektiewe funksie van ouers.

Fifty years since its inception, attachment theory remains an actively developing field, and currently researchers are increasingly describing issues of attachment as they relate to child custody and the courts (Rutter, Kreppner, & Sonuga-Barke, 2009; Shore & McIntosh, 2011; Siegel & McIntosh, 2011). The importance of continued attachment relationships between parents and children and the increased focus on the quality of parent-child relationships after divorce are possibly attributable to a sea change in how children are currently viewed and dealt with in legal processes (Moloney, 2009; Wilson, 2006). Children's experiences of and views on parental divorce and involvement in post-divorce decision making are also advocated increasingly to ensure meaningful relationships with both parents after their divorce (Trinder, 2009). Central to the focus on attachment processes in family law, is the understanding that variation in the quality of caregiving by a parent, such as emotional availability, acceptance, responsiveness and sensitivity, particularly during times of distress, will predictably lead to different secure or insecure attachment behaviour in children (Pascuzzo, Cyr, & Moss, 2013; Schmidt, Cuttress, Lang, Lewandowski, & Rawana, 2007). With this view in mind, family courts increasingly focus on attachment processes, essentially advocating that continued post-divorce contact between non-residential parents and children will foster attachment relationships that are more secure. However, there remains a paucity of work by attachment researchers who review the field by specifically focusing on the long-term impact of divorce on attachment relationships between parents and their offspring (Main, Hesse, & Hesse, 2011). This may be somewhat surprising since divorce, by definition, creates disruptions in attachment relationships, and non-residential parenting invariably affects attachment, as continued contact and involvement are prerequisites for developing secure attachments (Shore & McIntosh, 2011).

Attachment theory, initially developed by Bowlby (1988) and buttressed by considerable evidence from several decades of research, posits the parent-child relationship as the foundation of intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning across the life span (Kruk, 2010). It hypothesises a biologically based need from infancy to form close affectionate bonds and proposes that the quality of the child's experiences with attachment figures plays a central role in self-regulation and resilience, essentially providing children with internal working models (IWMs) to cope with adverse life experiences such as parental separation and divorce (Goodsell & Meldrum, 2010). According to Bowlby (1988), internal working models are formed through everyday interactions with caregivers. Differences in the quality of affective bonds between child and parent correspond to individual differences in the internal working models of self and others. Secure attachments foster the development of models in which others are viewed as available and trustworthy, while the self is conceptualised as worthy of love, care and attention. Insecure attachments result in internal working models of the self as unworthy and unlovable, while others are considered as unavailable and/or unreliable. These patterns remain moderately stable over long periods of time, and internal working models are viewed as the main source of continuity between attachment in infancy and adolescence and adulthood (Pace, Martini, & Zavattini, 2011).

The central tenet of attachment theory is that disruptions of the attachment bond can produce an innate fear response in children, leaving them vulnerable to psychological disorders (Bowlby, 1988). Accordingly, it may be predicted that parental divorce and the associated conflict that frequently occurs might adversely affect the formation and maintenance of secure and close attachment relationships between a child and his or her non-residential parent. While attachment research mostly has emphasised the importance of secure attachment for infants and young children, the relevance of attachment

relationships for well-being during adolescence is also receiving increased theoretical attention (Bretherton, Seligman, Solomon, Crowell, & McIntosh, 2011). Given the fact that most children continue to reside with their maternal caregivers after divorce, there is a growing body of literature specifically focusing on attachment relationships between children and their fathers after divorce (Grossman, Grossman, Kindler, & Zimmermann, 2008; Lee, Borelli, & West, 2011; Pascuzzo et al., 2013). Early versions of attachment theory placed fathers in an ambiguous position within families. The primary attachment figure was considered to be the mother, with the father's position considered secondary and culturally variable. Since 1980, however, a great deal of research has been focusing specifically on understanding children's attachments to both mothers and fathers (Goodsell & Meldrum, 2010; Kruk, 2010). Current attachment research confirms that fathers exhibit a higher threshold for infant distress, encourage exploration and risk-taking by engaging with young children in games, and provide important attachment-driven directions for older children in social play and bonding through shared interests and activities (Bretherton, Lambert, & Golby, 2005; Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2007; Newland, Coyl, & Freeman, 2008; Paquette, 2004).

In addition to this, recent advances in the study of the neuroscience of attachment emphasise the centrality of the attachment relationship to human brain development. Seminal work emphasises that attachment experiences "shape the way neurons are connecting up to each other in the early years of life, from birth on" (Siegel & McIntosh, 2011, p. 514). Furthermore, it is now a well-established notion that attachment relationships continue to develop and prosper across the life span of the child, even in the context of divorce (Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). Attachment relationships are not interchangeable, implying that the specific and unique bond with each parent can never be replaced, even in the context of divorce and the emergence of possible stepparents. As

such, Sroufe and McIntosh (2011) indicate that attachment is a gradual building process and that children form attachment relationships with their parents that are built on their own terms. Grossman et al. (2008) further suggest a broadening of the term “attachment” to related terms that may better access post-divorce child-father relationships, such as “sensitivity”, “involvement” and “interactions” (p. 860). Furthermore, Bretherton et al. (2011) point out that the quality of the parent-child bond essentially promotes secure attachments, and that the actual amount of time that children spend with non-residential parents is of less importance. Rather, it is the “predictable access to a caregiving relationship that has shared presence, shared activity, shared recognition, shared positive affect” (Bretherton et al., 2011, p. 541) that results in positive attachment formations. With the emphasis on shared parental responsibility and continuity of care by both parents after divorce, the question still remains: To what extent does divorce affect attachment relationships between non-residential parents and their children in the years following marital dissolution?

Method

Purpose and Aim of Research

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the influence of parental divorce on adolescents’ perceptions of the quality of parent-child attachments. The study was conceived to assess the perceptions of the positive and negative affective/cognitive dimensions of adolescents’ attachment relationships with both parents, and to investigate whether these figures serve as sources of psychological security specifically after parental divorce. Furthermore, it was deemed necessary to investigate the difference between attachments to maternal and paternal figures and to determine whether parental divorce

affects the security of male and female adolescents' attachment to parental figures differently.

Data Gathering

The data used to answer the questions came from participants at five secondary schools within the area of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. Written permission was obtained from the principals of all the schools prior to commencing with the research. The children received consent forms to obtain permission from their parents to participate in the study. The schools were randomly chosen to provide a representative sample of all the population groups, i.e. white, coloured, black or Asian. One of the schools represents learners from an above-average socio-economic demographic (private Jewish schooling) population, while the remaining four schools accommodate children from middle to lower socio-economic demographic populations. The representative percentages of participants from the five different schools were respectively 20,5% (middle/lower socio-economic inner-city school), 28,7% (middle socio-economic suburban school), 17,3% (upper socio-economic suburban school), 19,3% (private school), and 14,2% (middle/lower class inner-city school).

Participants

The participants in this study were school-attending adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 years. The data were collected in the classroom setting, and participants were told that the questionnaires were anonymous and confidential, so they could feel free to respond sincerely to the questions. The median age of the participants was 16 years. The median age of the group instead of the mean age is reported because the age of the respondents did not follow a normal distribution, and 24 of the respondents did not indicate their ages. In this sample, 290 research participants indicated that they were from

intact families, and 86 participants indicated that their parents were divorced. The majority of participants from divorce homes indicated that they were in the primary residential care of their mothers (N=61), while 19 participants from divorce homes indicated that they primarily resided with their fathers. A further four participants from divorce homes indicated that they were residing with their extended family. Of the remaining two participants from the divorce group, one participant did not indicate a specific residential agreement and one participant indicated a living arrangement with both mother and father despite parental divorce. Of the 61 children from divorce homes in maternal care, the majority reported regular direct and indirect contact with their non-resident fathers, ranging from daily contact to bi-weekly, weekly, once a week and every second weekend, every second weekend and every holiday with no significant differences in the reported contact between boys and girls.

Measuring Instruments

The adolescents completed the following questionnaires during the investigation:

Biographical information: The adolescents recorded their age, gender, position in the family and ethnic group on a self-compiled biographical questionnaire. They also reported whether their parents were married, divorced or separated. If they indicated that their parents were divorced, they were asked to comment on how long their parents had been divorced (from a period of 1 year to 4 years and more) and whether their respective parents were remarried, living with a partner or single.

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA): The IPPA is a self-report questionnaire that was developed by Armsden and Greenberg (1987) specifically for teenagers to assess their relationship with both their parents and peers. In this study, the

focus was to assess adolescents' perceptions of their attachment to their parents, and they were not required to complete the section on attachment to peers. The aim was to establish whether parental divorce adversely affected the attachment relationships of the children with their non-residential fathers, and if so, what particular aspects of the attachment relationship were affected adversely. This is not atypical practice, as Johnson, Ketring, and Abshire (2003) and Vignoli and Mallet (2004) used the parents-only form of the IPPA previously in other studies to measure attachment to parents only. The IPPA has been demonstrated to be a valid measure of attachment for the developmental periods of mid- to late adolescence (Gullone & Robinson, 2005) and is used increasingly in international research (Pace et al., 2011). There are 28 items assessing parent attachment, and respondents are required to rate the degree to which each item is true for them on a five-point scale ranging from "almost always true or always true" to "almost never or never true". This instrument consists of an overall score for attachment security as well as three subscale scores: trust (i.e. "I trust my mother/father"); communication (i.e. "I tell my mother/father about my problems and troubles"), and alienation (i.e. "I get upset a lot more than my mother/father knows about"). The Trust Scale specifically measures the degree of mutual understanding and respect in the attachment relationship. The Communication Scale assesses the extent and quality of spoken communication, and the Alienation Scale assesses feelings of anger and interpersonal alienation. Pace, et al. (2011, p. 84) also indicate that the trust scale can be interpreted in terms of "parental understanding and respect and mutual trust", the communication scale in terms of the "extent and quality of verbal communication", and the alienation scale in terms of "feelings of alienation and isolation from parents". Even though the IPPA does not allow for the classification of attachment styles, Vivona (2000) indicates that the three sub-scales can be used to assess individual differences according to the following attachment categories:

- a) Secure attachment, when both trust and communication levels are medium or high and the alienation level is medium or low. Alienation scores should always be lower than those for trust and communication.
- b) Insecure-avoidant attachment, when the trust level is medium or low, the communication level is low and the alienation score is high.
- c) Insecure-ambivalent attachment, when the trust level is medium or low and the communication and alienation scores are medium or high.

In their psychometric investigation of the IPPA, Arnsden and Greenberg (1987) found significant inter-correlations between all the subscales. Specifically, trust and communication were found to correlate positively ($r= 0,76$). In contrast, the alienation subscale inversely correlated with the communication ($r= -0,70$) and trust ($r= -0,76$) scales. Pace et al. (2011) investigated the factor structure of the IPPA with a sample of 1059 Italian adolescents and confirmed the reliability of the IPPA as initially established by Arnsden and Greenberg (1987). South African researchers such as Schultheiss (2005) and Williams (2005) also applied the IPPA successfully.

Statistical Analysis

The data were analysed statistically using SAS Version 9.2. Descriptive statistics, namely frequencies and percentages, were used for the categorical data. To compare the frequencies and percentages of the different marital groups, analytical statistics, namely p-values, were calculated to indicate significant differences between the groups. The p-values were for the Signed Rank Test or the Kruskal-Wallis Test. A significance level of 0.05 was used.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study will be presented next. Table 1 reflects the comparative findings concerning attachment relationships of participants with their mothers and fathers in three groups of adolescents who were from married, divorced or separated homes respectively. The results are presented in terms of the four scales of the IPPA: trust, communication, alienation and total attachment security.

Table 1

Median scores (inter-quartile range) for each IPPA scale (N=291)¹

IPPA SCALE	Father	Mother	p-value
Trust	39 (31-45) N=290	42 (36-47) N=291	□0.0001*
Communication	32 (25-39) N=290	36 (29-43) N=291	□0.0001*
Alienation	29 (22-34) N=289	29 (24-35) N=289	0.2737
Total Attachment Security	96 (81-114) N=290	105 (89-122) N=291	□0.0001*

* If p □0.05 there is a significant different between the two groups (Signed Rank Test)

The results of Table 1 provide an overview of the attachment security of the entire group of adolescents, regardless of parental marital status. It indicates that security of attachment to fathers is compromised significantly in the areas of trust and communication; hence, the total attachment security score is affected negatively. The results on the IPPA in this study suggest that, overall, adolescents reported greater security of attachment to their mothers

¹ N does not always equal 291 as responses were included in the sample only when the data collected was an aspect that could be assessed. For example, some of the adolescents did not respond to all of the items.

than to their fathers. In fact, the results point to insecure-avoidant attachment to fathers in adolescents who reported that they were from divorced families. This is problematic, as Howard and Medway (2004) reported that insecurely attached adolescents display difficulties in two areas of self-regulation (one of the cornerstones of attachment theory) i.e. (i) attention orientation (task-orientated, avoidant and emotion-orientated strategies); and (ii) social support-seeking. As such, the authors reported that, in comparison with insecure adolescents, secure adolescents' stressful life episodes (such as divorce) led to an increase in parent-child communication and a decrease in strategies centred on negative avoidance (e.g. drug and/or alcohol abuse). Armsden and Greenberg (1987) also found that securely attached adolescents used more social support-seeking strategies than did their insecure peers.

Even though it is not possible to draw inferences regarding the causes of the attachment patterns found in this study, a number of confounding factors need to be considered. Firstly, divorce may have affected the adolescents' overall perspective of their attachment security to parents. Adolescents' perceived attachment to parents has been associated with a range of indices of well-being, including self-esteem, life satisfaction, mental health and the quality of peer relationships (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Woodward, Fergusson, & Belsky, 2000). Findings from longitudinal studies indicate that children from divorced families reported feeling less affection for their parents, spending less time with them in adulthood and engaging in fewer intergenerational exchanges of assistance compared to adults from intact families (Amato & Booth, 1996; Booth & Amato, 1995). Collectively, it seems as if parental divorce, regardless of the quality of the relationship with non-residential fathers, has a negative effect on parent-child relations over the course of life.

In conjunction with the stress of having to cope with parental divorce, the results in this study may also point to the fact that adolescence is a particularly difficult time to assess the perceived attachments of children to their parents. As Pace et al. (2011) indicate, “adolescence is a peculiar period in the life cycle: on the one hand, developments and changes in internal working models distance adolescents from their parental figures and allow them to form an adult identity, but on the other hand, these changes will depend on the adolescent’s personal history of attachment relationships” (p. 83). In their study on attachment relationship with fathers, Pace et al. (2011) also found that “16-year old adolescents showed an overall global score of attachment security towards their fathers that was lower than for younger and older participants” (p. 87). These authors did not have a reasonable explanation for their results and as such did not discuss this finding. This would be a valuable aspect to address in future research in this area. Table 2 presents the median scores for each of the IPPA scales for adolescents’ attachment relationship with both parents by marital status.

Table 2

Median scores (inter-quartile range) for each IPPA scale by marital status

Parental Figure	IPPA Scale	Married	Divorced	p-value
Father	Trust	39 (32-45) N=227	35 (21-42) N=63	0.0019*
	Communication	32 (26-39) N=227	29 (23-39) N=63	□0.0078*
	Alienation	29 (23-34) N=226	29 (20-33) N=63	0.3703
	Total Attachment Security	100 (84-115) N=290	91(66-112) N=63	□0.0118*
Mother	Trust	41 (35-47) N=227	42 (38-48) N=64	0.1746

Communication	35 (28-41) N=227	39.5 (30-44) N=64	0.0633
Alienation	29 (23-35) N=225	31 (24-35.5) N=64	0.4995
Total Attachment Security	104 (88-120) N=290	111 (94.5-126) N=64	0.0887

* If $p \leq 0.05$, there is a significant difference between the two groups (Kruskal Wallis Test)

The results in Table 2 reveal the presence of clear negative associations between parental divorce and attachment to fathers. Literature on parental divorce and its effect on adolescent attachment suggests that age may be a confounding aspect in interpreting results on the IPPA, with the age of 16 indicated in two studies as particularly difficult to obtain positive outcomes on attachment towards parents. The abovementioned study by Pace et al. (2011) confirms the results in an earlier study by Woodward et al. (2000) on adolescent attachment after parental divorce in New Zealand. Both studies indicate that the younger children are at the time of first separation, the worse their attachment relationships and relationship perceptions towards their parents are likely to be at ages 15 and 16, with these “associations being similar for both males and females” (Woodward et al., 2000, p. 168). The authors postulate that parental divorce places children at risk of lower levels of attachment to their parents. They further state that the results from their longitudinal study reveal that “at age 15 children exposed to parental separation perceived themselves as less closely attached to their parents than children who were not exposed to parental divorce. At age 16 – again, in comparison to children whose parents had not separated – they tended to view their parents as having been less caring and more restrictive toward them in childhood. These results suggest that parental divorce may have a detrimental effect on children’s evaluations of both their mothers’ and fathers’ concern for them and also on the

quality of parent-child attachment relations” (Woodward et al., 2000, p. 170). In this study of South African children, the negative evaluations of attachment to mothers were not noted, and it seems as if divorce has a more devastating impact on attachment relationships with fathers. The results in Table 3 provide an overview of the perceived attachment relationships of adolescents with their non-resident fathers from divorced families by gender.

Table 3

Median scores (inter-quartile range) for each IPPA scale by gender (N=63)²

Parental Figure	IPPA Scale	Boys (N=27)	Girls (N=36)	p-value
Father	Trust	36 (29-43) N=27	35.5 (20.5-41) N=36	0.5216
	Communication	30 (22-40) N=27	26.5 (22-33.5) N=36	0.4180
	Alienation	30 (26-33)	24.5 (19-31.5) N=36	0.9295
	Total Attachment Security	96 (73-118) N=27	86.5 (64-104.5) N=36	0.6683
Mother	Trust	44 (39-48) N=27	42 (37-48) N=36	0.4161
	Communication	40 (32-44) N=27	38 (29-44) N=36	0.5180
	Alienation	32 (26-34) N=27	30 (23-37) N=36	0.1244
	Total Attachment Security	111 (98-126) N=27	111 (90-126) N=36	0.2432

If $p \geq 0.05$, there is no significant difference between the two groups (Kruskal Wallis Test)

² Two participants from the divorce group did not complete the IPPA questions relating to father attachment.

Evident from the results in Table 3, is that the male and female participants from divorce homes did not report statistically significant differences with regard to their attachments to either parent. The aim here was to investigate whether boys and girls perceived their attachment relationships with their parents differently after divorce, given the widespread assertion in early research that boys are more vulnerable than girls are to the effects of divorce (Woodward et al., 2000). However, more recent research on the effect of divorce and the gender of children clearly indicates that boys and girls are equally disadvantaged when faced with the breakdown of a family (Benbassat & Priel, 2012; Dykas, Ziv, & Cassidy, 2008; Pascuzzo et al., 2013; Stamps Mitchell, Booth, & King, 2009). Hence, the results of the current study, based on gender, are in line with international studies on attachment relationships after divorce.

The conflicting results obtained in research on attachment relationships during adolescence mirror the complexities of the process of attachment formation during this critical developmental phase. In this regard, Pascuzzo et al. (2013) point out that attachment needs during adolescence can be met in the absence of proximity to parents when peers are able to provide support and encouragement in facing developmental challenges. Zeifman and Hazan (2008) found in their study that, even though peer attachment is important, parents were found to be the primary sources of separation distress and preferred bases of security for children between the ages of 6 and 17, although there was an increased preference to seek out peers more than parents for comfort and emotional support between the ages of 8 and 14. However, this trend does not seem to be true for children affected by divorce, as Kilmann, Carranza, and Vendemia (2006) pointed out in their longitudinal study of the attachment patterns of college women from intact vs. divorce families. Their findings suggest that parental divorce during adolescence resulted in insecure attachment relationships in adulthood and consistent ratings of both parents as

more absent, distant and demanding than those in intact families. Their results also indicate that children of divorce consistently rated their peers as primary sources of support (from adolescence onwards), given their negative perceptions of parental characteristics. Grossman et al. (2008) concluded on findings from a 22-year longitudinal study on the effect of divorce on attachment relationships that the “quality and predictive power of the father-child and child-mother attachment relationships derive from different sets of early social experiences, and consequently should be assessed differently” (p. 861). Similarly, Freeman, Newland and Coyl (2010) indicate in their editorial on new directions in father attachment research on divorce that context is critical in explaining variance in the quality of father attachment and related child outcomes for children affected by divorce. They conclude, “To be sure, the nature of a child’s tie to his/her father has evolved within complex social ecologies in which father attachment is a single stand connected to many. The search for commonalities in father attachment is most likely to be found at the level of interactions and indirect effects” (Freeman et al., 2010, p. 6).

Conclusions

The findings of this study are of particular importance when investigating the perceived attachment relationship of adolescents to their non-residential parents. It begs the question as to why divorce particularly affects father-child attachment. Literature suggests that, because of parental separation, some adolescents disengage earlier from the family, which in turn creates exposure to psychological dysfunction (Castillo, Welch, & Sarver, 2011). While adolescence is typically thought of as a time during which parent-child relationships become less important, with increased focus on peer relationships, most adolescents wish and need to maintain their parents as “attachment figures in reserve” (Brown, McBride, Shin, & Bost, 2007, p. 199), continuing to seek parental support and

comfort during times of distress. However, the degree to which adolescents use their parents as secure attachment figures will depend on the adolescent's personal history of attachment relationships (Allen & Land, 2008). Gullone and Robinson (2005) point out that, during adolescence, males typically report more positive attachments to their parents than do females, who generally report more positive attachments to their peers when compared with males. Overall, the results in this study suggest that adolescents from divorce homes reported slightly higher levels of security of attachment to their mothers, but no significant differences between male and female adolescents were reported in their attachment relationships to either mother or father. Of significance in this study is the significant difference in attachment security between adolescents from intact homes, as opposed to those from divorce homes.

From the results obtained in this study, it seems as if current legal remedies as envisaged by the Children's Act No 38 of 2005 (2006) and increased calls by advocacy groups aimed at fathers to invest more time and resources in the lives of their children after divorce, i.e. increased father involvement, seem to have a limited effect on the attachment security of their children. Evident from this study is that, even in the face of children spending time with their non-residential fathers and non-residential fathers investing resources in the lives of their children, divorce still has an adverse effect on attachment security. Increased understanding of parenting behaviours that drive and promote development of attachment between father and child seems an essential next step to suggest possible intervention strategies in assisting family law practitioners – judges, lawyers, mediators and mental health practitioners alike – to make recommendations to address the difficulties in attachment security between adolescents and their non-residential fathers. However, as Brown et al. (2007) point out, this task presents some unique challenges associated with the interactive nature of family processes after divorce.

Kelly (2007) rejects the notion that the family dissolves, ending spousal and parent-child relationships, after divorce. On the contrary, there is increasing recognition of the fact that the divorce family is still a family, albeit a family where redefined relationships have to be renegotiated carefully. The moderating influences of fathers', mothers', and children's interactions create differences in family contexts that may contribute to varying father-child interactions. In the context of divorce, it is well documented that the nature of the relationship between non-residential fathers and their children is influenced by a number of internal/psychological factors and external/contextual influences (Kruk, 2010). A number of recent studies have documented how the connection between fathering and children's attachment security is moderated by maternal involvement (Cabrera et al., 2007), the degree and quality of co-parenting after divorce (Caldera & Lindsey, 2006) and fathering behaviour in particular (Flouri, 2010). Brown et al. (2007) propose that security of attachment between father and child is best accounted for by differentiating between father involvement and fathering quality. Father involvement per se, i.e. the amount of time and/or resources invested in children after divorce, is not tantamount to fathering quality. For example, Sroufe and McIntosh (2011) state that the emphasis on the amount of time fathers spend with their non-resident children creates the hazard of fathers trying to make up for lost time by way of leisure activities. However, it is evident from attachment research that a "tremendous attachment relationship" (Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011, p. 472) is facilitated only through regular, ongoing and supportive interactions between fathers and their children. Similarly, Brown et al. (2007) indicate that father-child attachment relationships are less dependent on time and the more critical aspect is *what* fathers do with the time they spend with their children.

To facilitate meaningful relationships between both parents and children after divorce, two theoretical frameworks, developed within the framework of attachment

theory, deserve special attention, namely the “theory of mattering” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) and the “reflective functioning” of parents (Benbassat & Priel, 2012). Both views emphasise that the perception of how much children “matter” to their parents and how much parents are capable of reflecting on the experiences of their children are critical for children to develop a sense of being adequately parented – regardless of marital status. The interactive nature of both theories are of importance, as they emphasise Flouri’s (2010) view that both parents and children simultaneously influence adjustment and continuing attachment processes after divorce. As such, mattering is not only important for children, but also for parents. In support of this notion, research by Schenck et al. (2009) indicates that mattering to one’s children not only encourages non-residential fathers to remain involved in the lives of their children, but for children a sense of mattering to parents is negatively related to internalising and externalising problems (Marshall, 2004), and positively related to self-esteem and self-concept (Marshall, 2001). The “reflective function” of parents and children, i.e. the capacity to reflect on one’s own mental experiences and those of others, is also critical in understanding attachment processes during adolescence. Parental reflective functioning is expressed in aspects such as involvement, warmth and control and is associated with positive adjustment of adolescents after divorce (Barber, Stolz, & Olson, 2005; Heider, Matschinger, Bernert, Alonso, & Angermeyer, 2006). Although not tested in this study, it is interesting to speculate about the mechanisms of mattering and the reflective capacity of parents and children in relation to attachment security. Sroufe and McIntosh (2011) liken the building of attachment security to the building of a house. Hence, the early mother-infant foundations for secure attachment may “set the boundaries of what the house can become. But many different foundations can allow you to build a good enough house” (p. 465). They point out that early attachment security provides the foundation for the building of a hierarchy of further

attachment relationships, but that the formation of early attachment relationships (or lack thereof) is not destiny. Early attachment experiences do not get erased, but are “interpreted in the light of subsequent events” (Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011, p. 465). This provides some sense of hope for the children of divorced parents. If parents are more aware of their respective roles in terms of making sure that their children are aware that they matter, and if they can reflect on their own behaviour and the behaviour of their ex-spouses and growing children, they may still facilitate the building of trust and communication relationships with their adolescent and adult children. What is evident, though, is that intervention strategies focused only on mothers or only on fathers to support adjustment after divorce may not be beneficial for children in the long run. A more integrative approach to adjustment and specifically the fostering of more secure attachment relationships after divorce should include psycho-education programmes that aim to educate all divorcing parents and children regarding the importance of not only spending time with children, but providing children with a sense of a psychological parent (Krampe, 2009) who is available and accessible, regardless of residential status.

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution for several reasons. Notably, this was a relatively small sample, and the results may not be generalised to all adolescents with non-residential fathers. In addition, the extent to which associations exist between the timing of parental divorce and later attachment and bonding relations were not addressed in this study. As such, possible confounding effects such as early mother-child attachment, interparental conflict and children’s behavioural problems may also have had an adverse effect on the results obtained in this study. Finally, the results represent only the views of the adolescents, and a richer understanding of attachment relationships may have been found if data had also been collected from maternal caregivers and non-residential fathers.

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