

LINKING MARITAL AND PARENTING QUALITY  
IN PARENTS OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS

by

Megan L. Sheldon

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Approved:

---

Lisa K. Boyce, Ph.D.  
Major Professor

---

Randall Jones, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Megan Oka, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Mark McLellan, Ph.D.  
Vice President for Research and  
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

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**ABSTRACT**

Linking Marital and Parenting Quality in Parents of Early Adolescents

by

Megan L. Sheldon, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2015

Major Professor: Dr. Lisa Boyce

Department: Family, Consumer, and Human Development

The purpose of the current study was to examine predictors of parents' perceptions of their relationship quality and commitment to their marriages, as well as the associations among these marital quality indicators and their perceived parenting quality. This study also moved beyond father and mother perceptions of their parenting quality to include their early adolescent children's perception of their parenting quality. Data for this study were taken from the Flourishing Families Project, from which 300 mothers and fathers were selected based on their family structure, as well as their early adolescent children (mean age = 11.21,  $SD = .95$ ). Correlational analyses revealed small associations between household income and depression connected with marital quality and commitment. Marital quality and commitment were highly and positively associated for both mothers and fathers. Reports of parental involvement and parent-child connectedness were also positively associated for mothers and fathers. The more that mothers and fathers were involved with their early adolescent children, the more likely

they were to experience higher marital commitment. Fathers who felt connected to their adolescents were also more likely to rate their marital quality more highly than fathers who felt less connected to their adolescents. Adolescent perceptions of high father involvement were more likely when fathers reported higher marital quality and commitment. Examining parenting quality from these multiple perspectives may have valuable implications for teaching extension and community classes on marital, parenting, and adolescent development topics. Implications for research and practical use of these findings are discussed.

(134 pages)

**PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

Linking Marital and Parenting Quality in Parents of Early Adolescents

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Parents have a great influence on the lives of their children, even as children develop into adolescents seeking independent identity. Families may find the transition of their children into adolescence difficult as they renegotiate their parenting strategies to allow for their children's growing desire for independence. Because marital quality has been found to be related to parenting outcomes, the link between the parental and marital roles of a married couple becomes important to understand during the transition of their children into adolescents.

The present study uses the Inventory of Father (Parent) Involvement, Social Connectedness Scale, Quality Marriage Index, Couple Commitment Inventory, and Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression scale (CES-D). In order to more fully understand how marital quality is linked to parenting quality, this study focused on families that had married parents with early adolescent children.

The study had three main goals: (1) to examine predictors of parents' perceptions of their marital quality and commitment, (2) to examine the associations among marital quality indicators and perceived parenting quality, and (3) to include early adolescent children's, mothers,' and fathers' perceptions of parenting quality. These findings could be used to identify family process or dysfunction.

The results of this study indicate that mothers and fathers who have higher household income and fewer depressive symptoms are more likely to have higher quality and more committed marriages than mothers and fathers with lower household incomes and more depressive symptoms. Mothers and fathers who were involved with their early adolescent children reported higher marital commitment than those who were less involved. Fathers who felt connected to their adolescent were also more likely to rate their marital quality more highly than fathers who felt less connected. Adolescent perceptions of high father involvement were more likely when fathers reported high marital quality and commitment. Examining parenting quality from these multiple perspectives may have valuable implications for teaching extension and community classes on marital, parenting, and adolescent development topics.

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# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The current study used the Flourishing Families Project data to examine predictors of parents' perceptions of their relationship quality and commitment to their marriages, as well as the associations among these marital quality indicators and their perceived parenting quality. This study moved beyond father and mother perceptions of their parenting quality to include their early adolescent children's perception of their parenting quality. Thus, mothers', fathers', and children's perceptions of mothers' and fathers' parenting quality were examined. Examining parenting quality from these multiple perspectives may have valuable implications for teaching extension and community classes on marital, parenting, and adolescent development topics. Viewing these topics from multiple perspectives can be a key to identifying the source of dysfunction, especially when reports of parenting quality are different from each perspective (Guion, Mrug, & Windle, 2009). In the current study, parenting quality was identified in the constructs of parent-child connectedness and parental involvement, both of which are crucial to adolescent development and family functioning outcomes.

### **Parenting Quality**

Many families face relational and parenting challenges as their children transition from late childhood into early adolescence (Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007), as adolescents engage in the difficult balance between their psychological need for guidance

and autonomy. Whiteman and colleagues (2007) indicated that parents feel the struggle of their early adolescent to balance these two developmental needs and are often at a loss as to parenting at this stage. However, most families navigate these necessary challenges with success (Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008; Steinberg, 2001). No matter the source of particular issues that arise in the transition to adolescence, the development of each early adolescent impacts the family system as a whole, especially the marital and parenting subsystems.

Parent-adolescent relationships are important for adolescent adaptation to their fast-paced development (Beveridge & Berg, 2007). Specifically, parental involvement and connection with the adolescent work together in promoting appropriate developmental outcomes (Hart, 1988). There are relatively few studies that examine parenting from multiple family member perspectives including the mother, father, and adolescent (Hair et al., 2009; Mikelson, 2008). The effects of parenting behaviors often depend on how they are interpreted by their children; however, little is known about how children perceive their parents' rearing behaviors (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2006). Furthermore, one parent's perceptions of the other parent's parenting are not commonly assessed (Mikelson, 2008). These multiple assessment of three family members on one construct not only takes into account the systemic view of the family relationships, but also may help identify sources of dysfunction.

## **Marital Quality**

Marital quality is specifically related to parenting outcomes (Hudson & Miller, 2012; Shek, 2000). For example, the degree to which parents support each other in their parenting has been found to mediate the association between marital quality and parenting quality (Lamela & Figueiredo, 2011; Margolin, Gordis, & Oliver, 2004). Men in particular may have more difficulty maintaining boundaries between the parent-child and marital subsystems than women (Coley & Morris, 2002) in that they may experience more spillover of negative emotion from the marital subsystem into the parental subsystem. The connection between the marital and parenting relationships may help identify points of intervention for two-parent families and their early adolescent children who may be facing challenges within their family system.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

Systems theory is the basis of the overwhelming majority of research on the connection between the parenting and marital dyadic relationships. The family can be seen as similar to a biological system with roles, boundaries, and subsystems. Family Systems framework indicates that balanced levels of flexibility (coping with change) and cohesion (emotional bonding) make for a more healthy family dynamic (Olson, 2000). This need of the family to negotiate levels of separateness and togetherness is especially apparent during the children's transition to adolescence when their main developmental task is to form a personal identity apart from the family while remaining an active member of the family. Family Systems framework also suggests that two-person

subsystems, or dyads, not only influence the members within the subsystem, but also the other subsystems in the family (Buswell, Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Hawkins, 2012). Much of the research focuses on only one subsystem at a time, such as parent-child, mother-father, or husband-wife, in spite of the fact that family members can belong to multiple subsystems at once. Because of the influence subsystems can have on each other, it is important to also do research comparing subsystems simultaneously (Buswell et al., 2012; Whiteman et al., 2007). The current study was guided by the Family Systems Framework and examined the association among perceptions of marital quality and parenting quality from the fathers/husbands, mothers/wives, and children's perspectives. Parenting adolescents in their developmental transition is an interesting focus because family systems theory purports that changes in individuals "reverberate throughout the system, leading to new family patterns" (Kan et al., 2008, p. 468). This indicates that associations found at the adolescent's transition into adolescence may not match with patterns found in families with younger children. Kan et al. (2008) also reflects the systems framework that families are in a perpetual balancing act in which periods of transition are where changes may echo through the whole system (Minuchin, 1985). A systems framework aids in studying the interaction between the marital and parental dyadic subsystems during their adolescent's transition into adolescence.

Whiteman et al. (2007) outlined two hypotheses relating the commonly found increase in negativity between the developing adolescent and her or his parents. The relationship compensation hypothesis postulates that some parents may turn towards each other in times of parenting difficulty, strengthening the marital subsystem. Another

hypothesis, social contagion, asserts that the negativity in the parent-child relationship also has the potential to spill over into the other family subsystems (Pedro, Ribeiro, & Shelton, 2012; Whiteman et al., 2007). In these hypotheses, it may be the ability, or lack thereof, of the parents to turn towards each other in the marital dyad that protects the family from increased negative affect and communication in their children's transition to adolescence. These two hypotheses also assume that the negativity in the parent-adolescent relationship is powerful enough to spillover in the family system.

Spillover, compensatory, and crossover effects indicate that that the transfer of affect and/or behaviors can take place across subsystems within one person and, at the same time, between parents (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). Family members exert a reciprocal influence on one another (Cox & Paley, 1997), yet little is known about the variables that may explain potential spillover effects between spouses across the marital and parent-adolescent subsystems (Larson & Almeida, 1999; Pedro et al., 2012).

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) also predicts reciprocal associations in parenting. Parents may emulate the parenting behavior they see in their spouse. This emulation may lead to approval and reinforcement by the spouse and an understanding of how the early adolescent will respond in the future. Poor marital quality may lead spouses to notice less of the parenting of their spouse, or to believe that their spouse is not a good model of parenting behavior to be emulated (Schofield et al., 2009). Fewer current studies indicate that mothers are more skilled parents and have more power over the parenting of the couple's children (Belsky, 1981; Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley,



Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). This is noted less often in current research (Lamb, 2010), perhaps indicating a shift in cultural expectations for fathers to be more involved or simply taking note of the parenting skills fathers have always contributed.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In accordance with theory-based predictions and previous findings, the current study examined Wave I of the Flourishing Families Project data for a connection between parenting quality and marital quality in parents of adolescents. The literature review begins with research about the importance of parenting in the lives of early adolescent children, followed by a review of the literature that uses multiple informants in their methodology, including mothers, fathers, and their early adolescent children, and concludes with a review of literature that connects marital quality as a predictor of parenting quality. Each part of the literature review will be taken from a Systemic perspective, as this is the framework used most frequently in existing research on the topics at hand, and was the most logical link for the constructs in the current study.

#### **Importance of Parenting Adolescents**

##### **Context of the Parent-Child Relationship**

Most studies and theories focus on the increase of negative affect in adolescence (Cui & Donnellan, 2009; McGue, Elkins, Walden, & Iacono, 2005). Although most families manage their children's transition to adolescence smoothly (Beveridge & Berg, 2007), parent-child conflict peaks during early adolescence (Montemayor, 1983; Whiteman et al., 2007). Children spend significantly less time with their parents during the transition into adolescence (e.g., Russell & Russell, 1987), marking a transition and renegotiation of the parent-child relationship (Padilla-Walker, Fraser, & Harper, 2012).

Pubertal development is also associated with a disruption in the parent-child relationship (Whiteman et al., 2007), not only because of negative affect, but also because of the adolescent's desire for increased autonomy. These changes may be the result of the early adolescent's exertion of independence (e.g., Kan et al., 2008), disbelief in their need for guidance, or generally high levels of negative affect (Beveridge & Berg, 2007).

Whiteman et al. (2007) indicated that, during the transition to adolescence, parents may begin to feel less competent in the face of their early adolescent's changing moods and interests. But these transitions are most likely normative, temporary, and developmentally necessary to help teens learn social skills in the family context (see Kan et al., 2008; Steinberg, 2001). No matter the source of or particular issues that arise in the transition to adolescence, the development of each early adolescent impacts the family system as a whole, especially the marital and parenting subsystems.

Parents can provide support as adolescents seek to balance their desire for autonomy with their lingering need for adult guidance (Scholte, van Lieshout, & van Aken, 2001). Parental affection and involvement becomes more discreet and decreases in frequency during an adolescent's transition to adolescence as the adolescent begins their quest for independence (Crouter & Head, 2002; Montemayor, 1983), but this change is important for the emotional health of the early adolescent.

Beveridge and Berg (2007) discussed that parent-adolescent relationships are important for adolescent adaptation to their fast-paced development physically (Dorn et al., 2003), emotionally (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), socially (Padilla-Walker, Carlo, Christensen, & Yorgason, 2012), and cognitively (Luna, Padmanabhan, & O'Hearn,

2010). Parental control characterized by warmth and guidance is consistently related to positive adolescent outcomes (Barber, 1997; Baumrind, 1993; Beveridge & Berg, 2007) including prosocial behavior (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). Adolescent children seek more experiences and influences outside the family system in their search for identity, and some families are better than others at creating a new balance of rules and boundaries to allow for identity exploration than others (Kan et al., 2008).

Existing studies provide strong evidence of a connection between parenting behaviors and positive early adolescent outcomes. However, some theorists believe that the influence of parenting behaviors pale in comparison to the influence of the genes passed on (e.g., Scarr, 1992) or the socialization that occurs in an early adolescent's peer relationships (Steinberg, 1995). These theorists detail additional sources of influence on the complexities of human development, but it is hard to say which one is most influential (Bornstein, 2005). Adolescent temperament has been found in some studies to be a better predictor of adolescent outcomes than parenting behaviors or styles (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009; Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shepard, 2005). However, the present study will focus on what contribution parenting imparts to adolescent development apart from other influences. The connection between individual outcomes in families provides insight into family functioning, which often has implications for interventions in the family.

### **Protective Factor**

**Externalizing problems.** Parenting has a strong effect on the lives of adolescent children, whether it is helping children reach their full potential or impeding the

fulfillment of their developmental needs (Steinberg, 2001). Positive parenting practices, such as creating emotional connection and being involved, can protect adolescents by decreasing their risk of experiencing internalizing and externalizing problems (Natarajan, 2013). Aspects of positive parenting have been negatively related with adolescent externalizing risk involvement (Yang et al., 2007) such as under-age drinking (Danielsson, Romelsjö, & Tengström, 2011), early sexual behavior (Deptula, Henry, & Schoeny, 2010; Jordahl & Lohman, 2009), aggression behaviors (Williford & DePaolis, 2012), smoking (Mahabee-Gittens, Xiao, Gordon, & Khoury, 2013), drug use (Parsai, Marsiglia, & Kulis, 2010; Schlauch, Levitt, Connell, & Kaufman, 2013), antisocial behavior (Connell, Cook, Aklin, Vanderploeg, & Brex, 2011), bullying (Baldry & Farrington, 2005; Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012), and low school achievement (Terrett, O'Connor, Hawkins, Sanson, & Smart, 2012).

**Internalizing problems.** Furthermore, parenting can protect against common internalizing issues such as adolescent suicidal behavior (Cheng et al., 2009), poor mental health (Wille, Bettge, & Ravens-Sieberer, 2008), depressed mood (Costello, Swendsen, Rose, & Dierker, 2008; Piko, Kovacs, & Fitzpatrick, 2009), and psychological distress (Myklestad, Røysamb, & Tambs, 2012). Parents can have influence over early adolescent children, particularly in diminishing adolescent risk of involvement in externalizing risky behaviors and internalizing psychological issues. Family relationships can be the primary environment where adolescent children are taught certain social and cultural expectations for their behavior, especially when parents strive to be involved and connected with their adolescents.

## **Connectedness**

Healthy parent-child relationships involve balancing connectedness with autonomy (Beveridge & Berg, 2007; Burke, Brennan, & Cann, 2012). “Social connectedness is not merely group belongingness, attachment, social support, or lack of loneliness, but is when people are interconnected and mutually dependent on each other” (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997, p. 19; see also Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001). Identifying shared interests and using social skills draw people together and help them feel connected (Lee et al., 2001). Adolescent’s relationships with their parents can feel emotionally and psychologically connected (Dollahite et al., 1997) when there is parent-child communication (Reis & Youniss, 2004), especially about the adolescent’s peers and activities outside the home (Crouter & Head, 2002; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Connectedness is also commonly identified as a factor in the concept of authoritative parenting (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012) and secure attachment (Bretherton, 2010), which often is shown to predict a plethora of positive early adolescent outcomes (Baumrind, 1993). Parent-adolescent connectedness begins with the attachment bond through caring for the early adolescent’s needs (Ainsworth, 1979).

To identify a definition of the connectedness construct, we can also look to existing measures. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2006) used a measure of parental emotional support in which the items included parental behaviors, such as understanding the early adolescent’s problems, being a confidant, giving love and affection, giving time and attention, and teaching about life. Each of these items are specific behaviors that may induce feelings of parent-child connectedness, indicating that emotional support may be a

main factor in this construct. Cole and McPherson (1993) used the cohesion subscale of the Family Environment Scales (FES) in their study of family subsystem relationship quality. Their construct of parent-child cohesion may be synonymous with connectedness because their measure used words like “togetherness” and “support” that are also used in research describing connectedness. In a study by Birkeland, Melkevik, Holsen, and Wold (2012), the parent-child relationship was measured with items describing parental behaviors such as understanding, encouraging, cohesiveness, and enjoying together time. Again, these behaviors are echoed in studies of connectedness. Existing research may be less specific about connectedness behaviors parents engage in with their early adolescent, and more about the resulting feelings felt by both the parent and their adolescent (see FACES II, Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979; Adolescent-Rearing Questionnaire, Paterson & Sanson, 1999). These feelings that we collectively call connection are important because they are often linked to positive adolescent outcomes. Children generally feel closer to their same-gendered parent and closer to mothers than their fathers overall (Steinberg & Silk, 2002; Tsai, Telzer, & Fuligni, 2012).

Families often see a decline in parent-child connectedness when children enter adolescence and begin the developmental task of seeking autonomy and identity apart from their parents (Beveridge & Berg, 2007; Tsai et al., 2012). Adolescents may perceive less emotional connection, support, and warmth from their parents as they enter adolescence (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000; McGue et al., 2005). Frustration in parent-adolescent relationships may threaten connectedness, leading to adolescent externalizing behavior problems (Beveridge & Berg, 2007). Steinberg and Silk (2002)

countered this idea, stating that the general population does not encounter adolescent detachment and severe family strain during this developmental period; these issues may occur mostly in families with troubled youth. Thus, the heightened conflict between parents and their adolescent children does not necessarily predict negative outcomes for their relationship (Grotevant & Cooper, 1998; Silverberg, Tennenbaum, & Jacob, 1992).

Grotevant and Cooper (1998) discussed individuation in adolescence as the balance between connectedness and individuality. They identified how Baumrind's parenting style defined as authoritative allows for power to flow back and forth between parent and early adolescent as the parent respects the early adolescent's individual viewpoints and characteristics. They were also influenced by applying attachment theory to parent-child relationships, where a secure attachment allows the early adolescent to feel confident in their exploration of the world because of their connected relationship with their parent. To add empirical evidence to this theoretical connection between family connectedness and adolescent identity formation, Grotevant and Cooper did a study in 1998. They found that parents who provide opportunities to explore and express themselves assertively had early adolescent children who were better able to explore their identity. These opportunities included discussions with parents, as well as mutually resolving disagreements. Adolescent individuation and family connectedness are connected both theoretically and empirically.

Research often shows that parenting behaviors directly impact and point to adolescent behavioral and internal outcomes (Padilla-Walker, Hardy, & Christensen, 2011b). Specifically, Day and Padilla-Walker (2009) found father-adolescent



connectedness was associated with lower adolescent internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Fosco, Stormshak, Dishion, & Winter, 2012), as well as depressive symptoms (Cole & McPherson, 1993). Connectedness with both mothers and fathers has also been shown to be positively associated with adolescents' prosocial behavior (Padilla-Walker et al., 2011, 2012), adjustment and well-being (Barber, 1997), and greater educational progress and career options (Woolley & Bowen, 2007) while protecting adolescents from risk-taking (Resnick et al., 1997), and antisocial behaviors (Stolz, Barber, & Olsen, 2005). Adolescents who do not feel particularly connected are more likely than their peers to develop behavior problems (Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Conner, 1994; Hauser, Powers, & Noam, 1991). This perceived lack of parental emotional support may lead to a higher risk of later adult depression (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2006) and drug use (Knight, Broome, Cross, & Simpson, 1998). These outcomes are well represented in the research in connection with many different types of specific parenting behaviors. It is important that these outcomes are also associated with the more subtle feelings of connection in a parent-child relationship, that are less observable, but still important to the success of family relationships and adolescent development.

The feelings of an intimate bond between parent and adolescent may foster an environment in which early adolescents learn to seek similar feelings of closeness in their relationships with people outside of the family system. Parental connectedness, often called warmth, is thought to increase a sense of security and trust in the parent-child relationship (Scott, Briskman, Woolgar, Humayun, & O'Connor, 2011). Subsequently,

these strong parent-child bonds may lead to adolescents feeling connected to others and being more approachable themselves (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009; Lee et al., 2001). In this way, consistent emotional parent-child connectedness helps adolescents learn social skills (Stolz et al., 2005). All of these positive outcomes are not only a product of feeling close to the parent, but may also be reciprocal in nature, encouraging parents to re-engage time and time again with their early adolescent children in rewarding and close relationships.

### **Involvement**

Parenting not only includes the emotional connections felt, but also the observable and specific behaviors in which parents engage with their early adolescents. Buswell et al. (2012) defined parental involvement as a combination of supervision, clear expectations, and consistent discipline (Beveridge & Berg, 2007), and proactive parenting (Pettit, Keiley, Laird, Bates, & Dodge, 2007). Involvement also includes emotional connection, nurturance, and affection during day-to-day caregiving (Buswell et al., 2012). Parents may be involved in many roles such as teacher, guider, provider, example, and disciplinarian (Marks & Palkovitz, 2004). These roles and traits indicate a parent who is accessible and feels responsibility to participate in their early adolescent's upbringing (Buswell et al., 2012). Involvement is a broad construct that can include many types of behaviors that may change in frequency and type as children develop.

For example, parental involvement in children's education is relatively high in elementary school, but drops significantly in middle and high school (Zill & Nord, 1994). Orthner et al. (2009) theorized that this decrease in involvement was often premature, in

that it did not match the adolescent's desired (higher) amount of parental guidance. This may leave teens feeling overwhelmed by the independence given them all at once.

Orthner et al. suggested that one solution to this issue, besides awareness, was that both parents should be involved, when possible, with their adolescent children so the children felt there is more support available, and so parents felt a better balance of shared parental duties.

**Adolescent outcomes.** Active parental involvement in adolescence consistently leads to positive outcomes (Beveridge & Berg, 2007), especially for adolescent identity development (Schwartz, 2008). Using Flourishing Families Project (FFP) data, Day and Padilla-Walker (2009) found that when one parent's involvement was low, the other parent's higher involvement helped to decrease the likelihood of early adolescent internalizing behaviors (see also Stolz et al., 2005). The same study found that father, but not mother, involvement was related to lower adolescent externalizing behaviors (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009). Parental involvement increases positive adolescent outcomes such as cognitive development (Carlo, Knight, McGinley, & Hayes, 2011), problem-solving (Hops, Tildesley, Lichtenstein, Ary, & Sherman, 1990), social skills (Pettit et al., 2007), and school success. School success is also reciprocally a predictor of positive parent-child relationship (Orthner et al., 2009). Nomaguchi and Milkie (2006) cited that parental involvement by monitoring is related to less risk of high school dropout and fewer delinquent behaviors (Pettit et al., 2007), less aggressive behavior, and delay of drug and alcohol use (Kosterman, Hawkins, Guo, Catalano, & Abbott, 2000). Poorly monitored adolescents tend to be more antisocial (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984), use illicit

drugs (Flannery, Vazsonyi, Torquati, & Fridrich, 1994), have poor school achievement (White & Kaufman, 1997), and more risky sexual practices (DiClemente et al., 2001). Baumrind (1991) found average parenting levels led to average behavior in boys, but higher internalizing behaviors in girls, indicating that daughters may need more highly involved parents than sons.

**Parent gender.** Parent gender can also influence adolescent outcomes. For example, mother involvement increases prosocial behaviors and hope in adolescent children, but this association is not significant for father involvement (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009). Pedro et al. (2012) noted that many studies focus on mother report of mothering, and lack father reporting their own fathering. This not only leaves the research at large with a lack of father perspectives, but also can distort the view of the couple relationship between two married parents. Mothering and fathering, as Day and Padilla-Walker (2009) found, are not necessarily or always correlated with each other. Mothers and fathers both matter for adolescent emotional and behavioral outcomes in unique ways even after accounting for the overlap in their parenting (Steinberg & Silk, 2002; Stolz et al., 2005). Parenting behaviors exhibited by mothers and fathers independently influence adolescent development (Stolz et al., 2005). For example, fathering may protect more against negative behaviors, while mothering may increase positive behaviors in general (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009; see also Chen, 2013). Mothers and fathers may approach the parenting of adolescent children differently (Steinberg & Silk, 2002) as mothers report overall higher levels of connection and involvement than fathers (Lee et al., 2001; Padilla-Walker et al., 2011).

Mother and father involvement are associated with each other (Chen, 2013) and parental involvement is central to both fathering and mothering (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009; Lamb, Pleck, & Levine, 1985). However, father and mother involvement occurs in different ways. Fathers have become more involved with their children in the home over time (Buswell et al., 2012; Marks & Palkovitz, 2004), which is a positive trend since direct adolescent care has been shown to be the context where fathering is most salient (Pleck, Masciadrelli, & Lamb, 2004). Interestingly, fathers employed full-time are more likely to be *more* highly involved with their children than fathers employed part-time. Mothers are more involved in socialization activities, while fathers engage more in play activities (Bretherton, 2010; Schoppe-Sullivan, Schermerhorn, & Cummings, 2007) and may even influence mothers to be more playful with their adolescent children (Chen, 2013).

### **Connection and Involvement: Where They Intersect**

In general, connection is more indicative of an emotional connection between parent and child, while involvement indicates actual behaviors parents participate in with their child. These two constructs tap into two different dimensions of parenting quality, but connection and involvement have been linked in a study by Day and Padilla-Walker (2009) using the Flourishing Families Project (FFP) data set. They found that parent-adolescent connectedness is correlated with parental involvement for both mothers and fathers. Reciprocally, early adolescents with low internalizing and externalizing behavior problems may encourage parents to feel not only more connected to but also be more involved (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009). In another study using the same data set, they

concluded that parents who allow their adolescent a high level of autonomy may be less connected to their adolescents, but this risk is tempered when parents balance autonomy-granting with clear boundaries and parental involvement (Padilla-Walker, Christensen, & Day, 2011a). In this way, parental involvement and connection with the adolescent child *work together* in promoting appropriate developmental outcomes, such as moral reasoning in interactions with peers (Hart, 1988), and helpfulness towards parents (Eberly & Montemayor, 1999). A warmly connected and involved style of parenting is often conceptualized as the parenting style that helps parents form a secure attachment with their adolescent from infancy even into adolescence (Scott et al., 2011). High parenting stress is linked to both less responsive and less involved parenting (Deater-Deckard, 1998), again indicating that these constructs are linked.

Dollahite et al. (1997) found that fathers specifically feel connected to their children especially when engaged in play and learning activities. Their findings suggested that stable emotional connection is maintained between adolescents and their parents through a combination of shared activities, expressions of support, affection (Barber, 1997; Dollahite et al., 1997; Stolz et al., 2005), warmth (Padilla-Walker et al., 2011b, 2012) and responsiveness (Baumrind, 1993). Although their study focused only on the fathers in the parental dyad, this finding demonstrates how parental connectedness and involvement are linked behaviors. They theorized about the concept of “generative fathering,” where a father responds readily (connected) and consistently (involved) to an adolescent’s developmental needs over time to generate trust from the adolescent (Dollahite et al., 1997). Steinberg and Silk (2002) conceptualized that most modern

researchers readily accept the adolescent search for autonomy and identity, while realizing that this is most successful when teens have strong emotional bonds with their parents. In this way, parents can actively participate in helping their adolescent children in forming an identity that includes their family relationships.

Schachter and Ventura (2008) conducted interviews among parents and teachers who interact with teens in the Israeli Orthodox Jewish community. They used 20 narrative interviews to show how parental connection and interaction with their teens combine in their concept of “identity agents,” or adults who care about and take a deliberate hand in helping the early adolescent formulate his or her own identity. Parental identity agents care about the adolescent, and show their warmth by involving themselves in helping the teen define their personal identity based on the contextual factors to which they allow their early adolescent to be exposed. The identity agent parent’s interaction with their teen is driven by a warm and connected relationship with the early adolescent, without which the adolescent would be less inclined to follow such guidance. This study speaks to the inquiry of how much influence parents can have on the identity development of their children. Identity agents have an agenda, implicitly believe that they can make a difference in whom their adolescent will choose to become, and act as gatekeepers to which contextual systems their adolescent are exposed. This may make the identity agent the most powerful of all contextual influences on adolescents during identity formation because “sheltered” children will see less options to choose from in an Ericksonian identity moratorium. Schachter and Ventura discussed how family processes foster both autonomy and connection regarding identity when the identity agent is the

parent. This is because the family is not only the main source of culture proliferation, but also can be supportive to teens in whatever individual identity they pursue (Stolz et al., 2005).

### **Multiple Informant Perspectives in Measurement**

There are relatively few studies that examine parenting from multiple family member perspectives including the mother, father, and adolescent (Mikelson, 2008). Adolescent report (Amato, 1987; Hofferth, Forry, & Peters, 2010) and mother report of parenting are common methods in the field (Treutler & Epkins, 2003), even within the same study (e.g., Guion et al., 2009). However, they are usually reporting on separate constructs, or only comparing adolescent and parent (or teacher, peer, etc.) report of the adolescent's behavior (Sentse & Laird, 2010).

Adolescents are cognitively able to understand parenting behaviors enough to report on them (Milkie, Simon, & Powell, 1997). The effect of parenting behaviors has been found to depend on how they are interpreted by the adolescent; however, little is known about how children perceive their parents' rearing behaviors (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2006). Although adolescents may not always provide the most accurate reports of parenting (Taber, 2010), researchers take time to study adolescent's perceptions of parenting in an effort to understand their subjective experiences. Children often carry these perceptions into adulthood (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2006) to later influence their psychological well-being (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002). Including the adolescent's report of parenting can be as informative of family process as it is of parenting quality.



Parenting is not only an act of behavior towards an adolescent; it must also be received by the adolescent. The adolescent's view of mother and father parenting is important because it indicates specific things about the adolescent's reception of parenting. In studies examining mother and adolescent reports on a measure of mother's parenting, it is clear that mother and adolescent reports on the same measure (communication) were correlated, perhaps indicating that mother perceptions are in tune with their adolescent's perception of parenting received (Forehand, Miller, Dutra, & Chance, 1997). Lansford et al. (2010) found that adolescent perception of parenting as non-normative greatly influenced the effect of harsh discipline on the adolescent. In other words, when an adolescent rated harsh discipline as high, but also common in the local community, the adolescent was less affected by the harsh discipline than children who perceived this intensity of discipline to not be a cultural norm. This supports the idea that adolescent perceptions and reception of parenting is just as important as the type of parenting delivered. Lansford et al. (2010) also compared mother and adolescent perceptions of mother's discipline and found, like Amato (1987), the perspectives to be significantly, but not highly correlated. When parent and adolescent perceptions of parenting are different or not highly correlated, it may be due to the presence of psychologically disordered thinking (Renk, 2005). The studies reviewed here did not discuss why this may be, or what we learn about adolescent perceptions of parenting from this finding, a common hole in the discussions of the studies reviewed here. Each of these studies mainly involves a comparison of mother and adolescent reports of mothering or parenting at large. Few studies collect or describe comparisons of father and

adolescent reports on a measure of father's parenting, let alone an older adolescent's report. The studies that take into account adolescent perspective of parenting and compare it with parent perspective of parenting often do not discuss the comparison in depth (e.g., Rescorla et al., 2013), but focus on one perspective and its correlation with, for example, an adolescent outcome (e.g., Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009), instead of a parenting outcome. In comparing parents' and children's perceptions of parenting across world cultures, Rescorla et al. (2013) found that discrepancy in reporting is often not on content, but on amount of a problem that both acknowledge is present. This may be consistent with theories of teen development where teens are resistant to authority or do not see a problem to be as severe as their parents see it, and vice versa.

Cole and McPherson (1993) surveyed 107 high school-aged adolescents and their mothers and fathers on the Conflict, Cohesion, and Expressiveness subscales of the Family Environment Scales (FES). They examined the relationship between poor parent-child relationship and adolescent depression using multiple family member informants in their methodology. They found that father-adolescent conflict and cohesion more significantly predicted adolescent depression than the other two dyads assessed. However, mother reports of family relationships were more valid than fathers and adolescent reports, indicating that perhaps mothers have the most comprehensive and accurate view of the family compared to other family members, especially adolescents. This study was one of very few that examines parenting, or in this case, a broader parent-child relationship, from three perspectives: mother, father, and adolescent child.

Some studies do compare mother and adolescent reports of parenting on the same measure (Lewis, Casey, Brandt, Shands, & Zahlis, 2006), but it is even more rare in the research to study father, mother, and adolescent reports all on the same measure of parenting (e.g., Bogels & van Melick, 2004; Gaylord, Kitzmann, & Coleman, 2003; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010; Krevans & Gibbs, 1996). When all three reporters are surveyed, it is often on the measures of the adolescent's behavior and not of parenting (e.g., Hughes & Gullone, 2010; Treutler & Epkins, 2003). This methodology is often criticized because these three reporters rarely have convergent validity on measures of parenting (Guion et al., 2009; Taber, 2010), leaving researcher conclusions unclear on whose report is the most accurate of the two or three available, or doubting the ability of reporters to give accurate information (Shelton & Frick, 1996; Taber, 2010). However, because these measures truly only assess perceptions of parenting with the inherent bias of the participant, the discrepancies in reporting can be helpful in assessing family functioning and are often correlated with or predict psychological dysfunction in parents and children (Guion et al., 2009). Discrepancies are, therefore, less of a limitation of the methodology and may be more of a predictor of family and individual outcomes.

Most measures of parenting are assessed through mother and father self-report (Phares, Fields, & Kamboukos, 2009), and one parent's perceptions of the other parent's parenting are not commonly assessed. Some studies that obtain separate mother and father self-reports of parenting average the two scores together (Trudeau, Mason, Randall, Spoth, & Ralston, 2012), but there is value in analyzing mother and father reports separately (e.g., Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009). Many studies using mother reports

of father parenting include non-residential fathers, leading to an undermined view of fathering, as mothers consistently underreport father involvement (Coley & Morris, 2002). Furthermore, studies focused on only father reports of mothering are almost non-existent and rarely the sole measures collected, while some studies use only mother report of parenting as a single perspective to make conclusions and find connections to adolescent outcomes (e.g., Forehand et al., 1997). This may happen because only mothers are asked, or because women are more likely to participate fully in research studies. This may also be, in part, because fathers and fathering have been arbitrarily neglected in the research before the present decade (Treutler & Epkins, 2003).

Rating one's partner on scales of parenting takes into account the Systemic view of the couple relationship as a simultaneous co-parenting relationship. The few available studies where both parents rate both themselves and each other on parenting behavior demonstrate the added benefits to understanding family process and adolescent behaviors (Lee, Lansford, Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 2012). Although their methodology is rare, a study by Deater-Deckard, Scarr, McCartney, and Eisenberg (1994) had fathers rate their own and their wives' level of separation anxiety from their young children. They compared the ratings from the father because they expected fathers to underestimate mother's separation anxiety so that it better matched their own levels, indicating that fathers perceive themselves as more highly involved and thus more susceptible to separation anxiety than mothers. Using a multiple perspective methodology of family processes such as parenting is not only more methodologically sound, but also may inform researchers more than a single perspective. Deater-Deckard et al. (1994) also

indicated that comparing father report of his own and his spouse's emotional experience of parenting gave insight into his perceptions of family gender roles. Furthermore, father perceptions of wife emotions about parenting are a better predictor of his own emotions, perhaps because he is projecting his own feelings about parenting that he is not willing to admit onto his wife. This reveals his perceptions of what is socially acceptable in a father's parenting compared to mothering. In this way, the implications of similarities and differences among perceptions of parenting can give insight into not only perceptions of parenting itself, but also family dynamics that influence parenting, such as gender role expectations. This lends itself to the ability to intervene with parenting issues from multiple standpoints.

Some studies include mother report of father parenting in residential father families in comparison to nonresidential father families. For example, Coley and Morris (2002) addressed the lack of father reports of their own involvement in parenting practices and the low validity in using only mother reports of paternal involvement. They also sought predictors of father involvement using a sample of mainly low SES residential and nonresidential fathers paired with the adolescent's mother. Consistent with past research, mothers reported consistently lower levels of father involvement than fathers' report of themselves. Residential fathers were rated higher on scales of involvement by mothers than nonresidential fathers. Furthermore, the higher the level of father involvement reported by the couple, the higher the discrepancy between their scores. This may indicate that mothers consistently underrate father involvement so that it does not match their own levels. Older couples also had a larger discrepancy in scores

than younger couples. The majority of children in the families surveyed were young, between the ages of 2 to 4 years, and so father involvement in families with adolescents may look different or even perhaps more complex than we see in this study. The children were not asked to participate in evaluations of their father's involvement level, and father involvement was not compared to mother involvement levels. A limitation of the study was the measure used to quantify father involvement. There were only six questions asked, most were asked about frequency of father involvement, two were about co-parenting quality while none of the questions surveyed the *quality* of father interactions with their children. This may have more to do with a poor conceptualization of the construct than the psychometrics of the measure itself. The sample assessed consisted mostly of fathers who were highly involved so this study may not apply to less involved fathers. This study sought to take father's assessment of their own parenting into greater consideration.

McCoy, Cummings, and Davies (2009) measured warm parenting using mother and father reports on the Parental Acceptance – Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ) about themselves and their partner at the second of three waves. They surveyed 235 families with children ages 5 to 7 years old on measures of marital conflict, warm parenting, and adolescent prosocial behavior in this longitudinal study examining parental warmth as a moderator of the effect of marital conflict on adolescent prosocial behavior. They found a positive relationship between adolescent functioning (represented by prosocial behavior) and constructive marital conflict. Adolescent prosocial behavior and constructive marital conflict at time 1 was also associated positively with and predicted

warm parenting at time 2. Adolescent emotional security and warm parenting at time 2 were positively related to adolescent prosocial behavior at time 3. One of the main limitations of this study was their lack of adolescent-report data on the measures of parenting, leaving it unclear if the children perceived the parenting the same as was reported by their parents. It was also unfortunate that this study did not discuss the collected mother and father reports of warm parenting. They did not discuss if the scores from mother and father were combined into one score, if the scores were correlated, or how these two separate scores compared to the other constructs measured. This brings into question why they would collect data about parent perceptions of their own and their partner's parenting if they did not integrate those perceptions into the model tested.

These studies illustrate the importance of multiple perspectives. Mainly, taking into account adolescent perspective of parenting may be a more accurate picture of the parenting "received" by the adolescent and the family influence that the adolescent will carry into their adulthood. Using father report of his own and the mother's parenting is an underused methodology and undermines the validity of father reporting. When both parents are represented in reporting on their own and their partner's parenting, the methodology comes into stronger alignment with theory, specifically a systems framework where each subsystem and member influences the others. Discrepancies in reporting are not necessarily the fault of the method, but may provide insights into family relationship dynamics and children's reception of the parenting given. The practice of obtaining multiple perspectives on parenting behavior seems to be lacking in general from current research. The current study takes advantage of the Flourishing Families

Project data's methodological strength in the parental involvement measure which takes into account three perspectives of each parent's parenting: self, partner, and adolescent.

### **Predictors of Parenting**

Contextual sources of stress and support have an influence on parenting (Belsky, 1981), such as demographics, depression, and marital quality.

**Demographics.** A few demographic factors have been shown to interact with parents' ability to be highly involved and connected with their children. Woolley and Bowen (2007) indicated that parents who are less educated are less likely to have social capital, such as acute social skills, to pass on to their children. Parent social-economic status (SES) may predict changes in parenting over time; specifically, both short- and long-term economic strain contributes to a decrease in parenting quality (Leyendecker, Harwood, Comparini, & Yalçinkaya, 2005; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Financial strain especially, decreases parents' emotional energy, leaving them to be less warm, less responsive, more depressed, and more hostile (McLoyd, 1998). Ethnicity is mainly connected with parenting styles and less with particular practices. Specifically, authoritative parenting is most prevalently connected with positive parenting and adolescent outcomes, but is consistently less commonly seen in among African-American, Asian-American, and Latin-American parents compared to European-American parents (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). However, not all studies find demographic relations to parenting outcomes: Kan et al. (2008) found that parent education, income, marital duration, and age at transition to parenthood were associated with neither marital quality nor co-parenting quality.



**Depression.** Parental depression has consistently been found to negatively impact parenting and increase family stress (Asbury, Dunn, Pike, & Plomin, 2003). Depression is also more consistently found in parents with lower marital quality and poorer parental functioning (Kiernan & Huerta, 2008; Pendry & Adam, 2007), perhaps because they feel less connected (Lee et al., 2001). Depression occurs in parents facing financial strain, impacting both the parenting quality and spousal perception of partner support. Conversely, spousal support helped buffer parents from the effects of financial stress better than any other relationship (Simons, Lorenz, Wu, & Conger, 1993). Positive family functioning and adolescent temperament often buffer parents and their marriage from the effects of a spouse's depression (Beveridge & Berg, 2007). Maternal depression is more common (Tiet et al., 2001) and more likely to impact adolescent stress and wellbeing only if it is severe enough to negatively impact parenting or marital quality (Pendry & Adam, 2007). Parents and their younger children are more susceptible to negative effects on their relationship due to depression (Giallo, Treyvaud, Cooklin, & Wade, 2013; Skinner & Pocock, 2010), but less often researched is the effects of depression on adolescent children and marital outcomes of parents with depression. Treutler and Epkins (2003) pointed out that studies examining the effects of depression on marital and parenting constructs often measured general psychological symptoms and not the presence of a clinical level of major depressive disorder (MDD) or similar depressive disorder. This distinction is important for identifying the potential effects that depression can have on the family overtime because symptomology may not be as severe or last as

long as a clinical level of MDD. Furthermore, parents and families of those being treated because of an actual MDD diagnosis may also have different outcomes overtime.

**Marital quality.** One contextual factor in families, especially where the parents are married to each other, is couple and/or marital quality. Two hypotheses seek to examine the effects of marital quality on parental involvement. The compensatory hypothesis posits that parents seek to compensate for the unmet needs in their marital relationship by drawing closer to their children, making it possible to be involved and connected parents while having poor quality marriages (Erel & Burman, 1995). The crossover hypothesis indicates that negative feelings in spouses' marital relationships can be mirrored in their relationships with their children. The example that Pedro et al. (2012) gave of this situation is "when a husband's withdrawal from marital interactions leads to a mother's rejection of the adolescent" (p. 512). Whiteman et al. (2007) pointed out the lack of literature on the effects of adolescent development on marital quality, mainly because the research tends to focus on the parent-child relationship in connection to development.

### **Connecting Marital and Parenting Quality**

Parenting styles and practices are consistently linked to adolescent outcomes in the current literature. Factors that influence parenting quality are many and may include issues within the family system, such as the marital relationship, parents' individual characteristics, and adolescent individual characteristics. Marital quality specifically is related to parenting outcomes (Hudson & Miller, 2012; Shek, 2000). Positive and stable

marital relationships are often linked to healthy parent-child relationships, while poor marital quality may be associated with poorer parenting practices (Amato, 2007; Pedro et al., 2012). However, parent-child connectedness protects adolescents from the negative effects of marital conflict (Lindsey, Chambers, Frabutt, & Mackinnon-Lewis, 2009).

Marital dissatisfaction may lead parents to be less emotionally responsive with their teens (Nelson, O'Brien, Blankson, Calkins, & Keane, 2009), while spousal forgiveness predicts a stronger parenting alliance (Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009).

The transition from childhood to adolescence is a particularly interesting time to measure marital and parenting perspectives because parents and spouses may begin to find a need to renegotiate the parent-child relationship with an adolescent seeking more independence from family influence. The view that the marital relationship may spillover into, or is influenced by, the parenting relationship (and vice versa) is theoretically consistent with the family systems theory metaphor, as well as broadly related to the ecological family theory (Lindsey et al., 2009). Parenting and marital quality are somewhat interdependent constructs because they are not only correlated in the research, but also theorized in the concept of spillover from one dyad to the family system (McClain, 2011). The research on the spillover between the marital and parenting subsystems is significant but minimal, and often focuses on correlating marital conflict with negative parenting practices, as opposed to the spillover of positive marital feelings into the parent-child relationship. Margolin et al. (2004) pointed out that stress theory suggests that marital aggression should be linked to negative mood in the parenting relationship. They also indicate that, from a systems framework, spillover between two

subsystems would ideally not happen because the boundaries between the two should be clearly defined. However, because the marital and parental subsystems involve the same two people, the boundaries may be theoretically clear but unclear in practice.

Simply being married does not correlate with high parenting quality, so it is the actual quality of the marriage that counts (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008). Basic adolescent care, especially those things parents do to care for children's survival needs, are often not dependent on marital status. Parenting behaviors required to raise a teen, such as conflict resolution, may require a stronger co-parenting union than was needed during childhood, which is often dependent on a couple's relationship quality (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005).

### **Predictors of Marriage Quality**

Pubertal development impacts parents' marital quality evaluations, especially for mothers (Whiteman et al., 2007). Parents at this time may begin to feel decreased parenting competence in the face of mounting changes in their relationship with their developing teenager, and these feelings of incompetence may carry over into evaluations of their marital quality. Whiteman et al. (2007) indicated a lack of research in married couple families with adolescent children because of an emphasis in the research at large on transitions into marriage, parenthood, and divorce. Parents who stay married into the time of their children's adolescence may be married longer and are older than most couples studied in the current research.

So far, findings on marital quality from the Flourishing Families Project data set indicate that couple commitment, sacrifice, and religiousness (Day & Acock, 2013), as

well as wife sexual satisfaction (Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, & Gangamma, 2012) are characteristics that contribute to strong marriages. Furthermore, measures of husband and wife reported relationship quality is stable overtime (Whiting, 2012). These findings are descriptive of the marital relationship, but are limited to only two constructs within the marital subsystem (commitment and relationship quality). What has not been considered in this sample, and is inconclusive in the current literature, is if marital satisfaction is connected with relationships and roles in the larger family context, such as the parenting dyad. Parenting is a combination of complex behaviors and relationships, especially when the parents are married and have more than one adolescent, making the link between the complex marital relationship and similarly complex network of parenting behaviors intriguing.

**Couple commitment.** Commitment theory (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) defines commitment as a lack of desire for and seeking of alternative partners. Couple commitment is a main indicator of partner and family stability overtime, and parental involvement is often a symbolic expression of that commitment to spouse and family (McClain, 2011). Religion often promotes commitment as a desirable virtue, and so commitment to religion is sometimes found to positively mediate levels of couple commitment (Day & Acock, 2013). When a couple chooses to be committed to each other, they may also argue less, and vice versa (Day & Acock, 2013). Couple commitment seems to be most relevant for fathers. When a man perceives his wife to think highly of him and be committed to their relationship, he is a more involved father than men whose wives do not think highly of them (Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002).

Marriage may be linked to increased investment in adolescent-rearing because of the formal and legal commitments involved (Berger et al., 2008).

**Depression.** Mental health often impacts spousal ability to engage in an emotionally secure marital bond. Depression moderates the effect spousal support can have on parenting quality (Simons et al., 1993). This indicates that even a high quality marriage will not be directly correlated with high quality parenting if one or both parents are depressed. Depression may be more likely to occur in the context of an unsatisfying marriage (Pendry & Adam, 2007). Depression and low marital quality were more strongly linked for mothers than fathers (Herr, Hammen, & Brennan, 2007). This indicates that women's marriages may suffer more when they are depressed than men. However, marriage does decrease the likelihood of a depressive episode for women, indicating that the social support found in marriage protects married women from reaching emotional lows (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine, 2003).

**Marital conflict.** High marital conflict may be the antithesis of marital quality. Pendry and Adam (2007) defined poor marital quality as having low levels of couple satisfaction, frequent conflict, and infrequent use of calm discussion to solve disagreements. Couple relationship quality between married and unmarried mothers and fathers is also directly related to parenting behaviors, such as involvement, especially for fathers (Carlson, Pilkauskas, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2011). Specifically, Krishnakumar and Buehler's (2000) meta-analytic review pointed out that marital hostility was associated with the use of more harsh discipline and less acceptance in their parenting of adolescents. The parental behaviors suffer, and the resulting parent-

adolescent relationship and attachment seems to dwindle in the presence of marital conflict (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Furthermore, conflict between the two parents on parenting issues is negatively correlated with parent-adolescent relationship quality and parental attachment to their adolescent (Azam & Hanif, 2011). These findings indicate that the topic of conflict, whether it is a marital issue or childrearing issue, does not matter so much as the amount or intensity of the marital conflict that adolescents are exposed to in the family context. The resulting increased risk of insecure attachment may lead to indifferent parenting (El-Sheikh & Elmore-Staton, 2004), especially during the transitional periods of adolescent development (Papini & Roggman, 1993). In a reciprocal relationship between the constructs, this may be because adolescents begin to notice the parental conflict and understand the implications of a high conflict relationship, leading them to mistrust their relationship with their parent. In this way, parenting behaviors often act as a mediator to link marital conflict and the subsequent negative adolescent outcomes (Kitzmann, 2000). Parental warmth has been shown to mediate the relationship between marital conflict and negative adolescent outcomes (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007). In contrast, marital conflict is associated with poorer parenting practices towards teens than younger children (Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006), including the tendency to grant less psychological autonomy to their adolescents (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Frosch & Mangelsdorf, 2001; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007). This may be a more serious problem for adolescents than for younger children because of the adolescent's developmental task of establishing autonomy.

Emery (1982) hypothesized that marital conflict may be correlated with poor parenting practices, and especially disrupted discipline strategies, because parents are preoccupied and distracted (see also Malik & Rohner, 2012). Couples in high conflict marriages may react by withdrawing from interactions with their children instead of engaging in further hostility (Richmond & Stocker, 2008), but withdrawal is reciprocally related to poorer relationship quality because of its ineffectiveness as a coping mechanism (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). In a study by Cui and Conger (2008), marital distress on its own had only a small effect on adolescent outcomes unless it was combined with parenting characterized by both high hostility and low warmth, suggesting that perhaps only extremely low parenting quality might be associated with negative adolescent outcomes. Parents who are experiencing spillover of hostility in their marriage into the relationship with their children may be in a cognitive state of self-absorbed distraction. This limits parents' ability to look outward to feel the empathy needed in a connected parent-child relationship (Margolin et al., 2004; Schofield et al., 2009).

**Marital conflict and gender.** Marital conflict seems to lead to different parental behaviors in mothers when compared to fathers. Mothers in high-conflict marriages especially may become more withdrawn from their children and other relationships, while fathers may be more overtly rejecting and coercive with the children (Lindahl & Malik, 1999). Studies examining the link between the marital and parenting dyads do not always emphasize gender comparisons, because they may group parenting together or simply not examine findings for gender differences (e.g., Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005).



Kerig (1995) proposed that parents in an unstable marriage can still move their focus to their adolescent's needs instead of their marital problems to form a unified co-parenting alliance, whether they are married or not. Minuchin (1985), however, theorized that this is a type of triangulation that may only provide temporary relief from the stress of a poor quality marital subsystem that may still spillover into the parent-child relationship. Parental over-sensitivity to marital and co-parental conflict may mediate this relationship (Sturge-Apple, Davies, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 2009). Parents who are highly sensitive to conflict may be more easily disrupted in their parenting than a parent who feels competent in navigating family disagreements or more securely attached to those with whom they find themselves in conflict. This may indicate feeling confident in conflict resolution skills is more effective for parents than decreasing the amount of conflicts occurring. This is especially true for parents of adolescents. As teens develop, they have the cognitive ability to debate and think critically about the world around them. Sensitive parents may feel that this is too contentious, but parents who understand this developmental stage may be able to more effectively engage with their adolescent. Men in particular may have more difficulty maintaining boundaries between the parent-child and marital subsystems than women (Coley & Morris, 2002). Most research on parental gender differences finds that fathers' parenting is more affected by marital quality than mothers (Minuchin, 1985; Morrill, Hines, Mahmood, & Cordova, 2010), but not all affirm this trend (Malik & Rohner, 2012; Ponnet, et al., 2012). However, fathers' marital quality often is a better predictor of his parenting than mother reports of marital quality (Shek, 2000). Fathers' parenting role may be less clearly scripted by social

conventions than mothers', leaving fathers more vulnerable to levels of marital quality (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Women also may be better able to differentiate their spousal from their parenting roles. This ability to maintain boundaries between relationships may limit spillover effects (Thompson & Walker, 1989). For example, Almeida, Wethington, and Chandler (1999) found the father-adolescent relationship to be more linked to couple relationship quality than the mother-adolescent relationship. These past findings may even highlight the role of maternal marital satisfaction in fathering quality. For example, one study found that father parenting quality is influenced by the mother's feelings of marital quality, and vice versa (Ponnet et al., 2012). This demonstrates the complexity of the connection between the marital and parenting dyads. De Luccie (1995) has suggested that the dominant caretakers, often mothers, are the gatekeepers of their children, and may have control over the type and frequency of father parenting behavior. This may lead to a positive association between maternal marital satisfaction and paternal involvement.

So far, these studies have focused on negative dimensions of the marital and parent-child relationships and did not examine the positive dimensions (Cui & Conger, 2008; Kerig, 1995). If marital conflict is associated with diminished parenting behaviors, is high marital quality associated with positive parenting quality? An absence of positive marital behaviors, such as forgiveness, may not be as destructive as the presence of negative behaviors, such as hostility (Gordon et al., 2009), influencing the strength of statistical associations between marital quality and parenting outcomes. Associations between positive parenting and higher quality marriage do exist (Margolin et al., 2004),

but it is unclear if these associations are as significant as connections between negative parenting and low marital quality.

### **Marriage Quality and Adolescent Outcomes**

Marital quality has been linked directly to adolescent outcomes, even after accounting for parenting quality (Hudson & Miller, 2012; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007). Children who see their caretakers express love and support for each other, and who are well cared for, may have more social capital, increasing their competence in other relationships, and their academic endeavors (Gallagher & Waite, 2000; Orthner et al., 2009), and identity exploration (Orthner et al., 2009).

In contrast, children are more likely to suffer from internalizing emotional problems in the context of both poor marital quality and parenting (Pendry & Adam, 2007). Children whose parents are aggressive frequently may begin to anticipate this conflict, causing chronic stress in reaction to parental interactions (Pendry & Adam, 2007). Parents in marital discord may convey the strain in the marital relationship by turning to their children for support, a situation commonly referred to as parentification because the adolescent assumes the role of parent to their parent. This may foster an approach-avoidance attachment for the adolescent (Byng-Hall, 2002; Peris, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Emery, 2008) because the adolescent wants to please their parent and connect with them, yet is overwhelmed by the parent's efforts to make that connection. When the marital relationship becomes unstable or reaches dissolution, a pre-existing and strongly connected parent-child relationship has been shown to protect the adolescent from delinquency (Videon, 2002).

It is difficult to determine directionality in existing studies of parental and marital quality linkage because of the lack of longitudinal data. However, in one of the scarce longitudinal studies, Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2007) demonstrated that parenting mediated the association between marital conflict and negative adolescent outcomes. Similarly, Ha, Overbeek, Vermulst, and Engels (2009) found that children of parents with high marital quality reported low internalizing behaviors the next year. These parents were also less likely to exert psychological control over time. Gerard et al. (2006) demonstrated that marital conflict of parents of children 5 to 11 years old was related to lower parent-adolescent relationship quality 5 years later. Spillover is often thought to be temporal in nature and calls for a longitudinal methodological approach in the research, but it may also be reciprocal and non-temporal (Margolin et al., 2004).

### **Summary**

Parenting has been strongly connected to adolescent outcomes. Studying the strength of parenting when children are entering adolescence is important because the challenges of forming personal identity and autonomy from one's parents are different from the developmental tasks of childhood of forming attachment and trust in one's parents. The facets of parenting an adolescent that best coincide with these challenges are parent-child connectedness and parental involvement. Although both mothers and fathers approach these tasks of parenting differently, both parents' ability to engage with their adolescents emotionally and socially are linked to positive outcomes for adolescent and parental well-being. Parents who are married are simultaneously trying to maintain

relationships with their children and their spouses. The intersection of these two relationships seems to influence how well parents are able to thrive in each relationship. Marital quality has been linked to parenting quality in the literature and may be a predictor of parenting quality, especially for fathers. Demographics and the presence of depressive symptoms may influence the strength of association between the quality of parent-child and spousal relationships.

The main contributions to the research made by the present study were to explore the strength of association between marital and parenting quality based on the presence of positive functioning (parent-child connectedness and marital commitment) in contrast to a focus on problems like conflict and aggression. Focusing on how family subsystems are linked in positive ways can provide insight into the complexity of adding roles and developmental challenges to the existing marital subsystem. This study used the perspectives of each family member (mother, father, and adolescent) to explore the strength of association between the constructs and the family perspectives. Differences and similarities among the perspectives were not seen as methodological weaknesses, but as insight into family functioning and which members' perceptions are the best predictors of such. The opportunity to take three perspectives of parenting into account instead of just one or two provides insight into parenting and its predictors from a family systems perspective.

For the present study, I examined, first, which demographics (i.e., age, education, household income, and marital duration) predict husband and wife perceptions of the quality of their marriage and commitment to each other. Next, I examined if father and

mother perceptions of their marital quality and commitment were associated with their perceptions of their parenting quality (represented by the constructs of parental involvement and parent-child connectedness). Finally, I examined if early adolescent perceptions of father and mother parenting quality was associated with mother and father perceptions of their marital quality and commitment. I also examined the data to determine if there were differences between mother, father, and early adolescent perceptions of mother and father connectedness and involvement. The specific research questions of the present study follow.

### **Research Questions**

1. What demographic (i.e., age, education, household income, and marital duration) or mental health characteristics (i.e., depression) are associated with mothers' perception of their relationship quality and commitment in their marriages?
2. What demographic (i.e., age, education, household income, and marital duration) or mental health characteristics (i.e., depression) are associated with fathers' perception of their relationship quality and commitment in their marriages?
3. Are mothers' perception of relationship quality and commitment in their marriages associated with their perceptions of their parenting connectedness and involvement?
4. Are fathers' perception of relationship quality and commitment in their marriages associated with their perceptions of their parenting connectedness and involvement?

5. Are adolescent children's perceptions of their mothers' connectedness and involvement related to mothers' perceptions of their relationship quality and commitment in their marriages?
6. Are adolescent children's perceptions of their fathers' connectedness and involvement related to fathers' perceptions of their relationship quality and commitment in their marriages?
7. Are there significant differences between mother, father, and adolescent child perceptions of mother and father involvement?

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

In the current study, I used an extant data set from Wave I of the Flourishing Families Project (FFP). The general purpose of this project was to demonstrate how family processes impact children's social development in the transition from early adolescence into adulthood. The working hypothesis of the project was that effective family processes will facilitate adolescent development over time. In this chapter, I discuss specific details of the research design, the research sample participants, procedures, measures used, and my plan for analyzing the data obtained.

#### **Design**

The FFP is a longitudinal study that examined 500 families in a northwestern state using survey and observational data. The families were examined each summer over 5 consecutive years, from 2007 to 2011. This is a descriptive, correlational study using data from Wave I (2007). This is a cross-sectional study using the data from only the families that included adolescent children with married parents. No single-parent or cohabiting parent families were examined so I could specifically examine marital quality and not general relationship quality.



## Procedures

Families participating in the FFP were randomly selected from a large northwestern city and the surrounding suburban and rural areas using a purchased national telephone survey database (Polk Directories/InfoUSA). The FFP also collected data on an additional sample of about 200 families in a central Utah city that were not included in the current study because of concerns about homogeneity. Family eligibility was based on the presence of an early adolescent between the ages of 10 and 14 years and if they lived in randomly selected census tracts based on racial and financial stratification reports of the local school districts. Eligible families were sent a letter inviting them to participate in the study, which were followed up by phone calls and home visits to obtain participant consent and to set up appointments to complete the survey questionnaires and video-taped observations in the families' homes. There was a 61% response rate as 423 of the 692 eligible families agreed to participate. To increase the sample size, 77 more participants were purposefully recruited to increase sample diversity, resulting in a total sample of 500 families. Families who chose not to participate did so because of their concerns about privacy or being too busy to complete the surveys. Trained undergraduate interviewers administered the written questionnaires, directed the video-taped family interviews, and screened surveys for missing or unclear answers. The questionnaires took each participant about one and a half hours to complete, and the videoed interviews took about 1 hour to complete. The videos and the coded data from the videos were not used in the current study.

Approval for the original study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Brigham Young University, and for the current study from the IRB at Utah State University. According to IRB protocol, anonymity was maintained by not using names as identifying information in connection with the data.

### **Sample**

Although the original sample consisted of 500 families, there were 353 married or cohabiting parent families and their adolescent children. For this study, the sample consisted of only 300 married families with biological children, eliminating families with cohabiting parents, step-parents, or adopted children, because these were not well represented in this sample and may have different outcomes than families whose parents are legally married and whose children are not adopted. The final sample of all married, two-parent families, after removing 21 cohabiting, 15 step-, and 11 adoptive families, included 300 each of mothers ( $m = 43.54$  years,  $SD = 4.93$ ), fathers ( $m = 45.46$  years,  $SD = 5.66$ ), and their early adolescent children ( $m = 11.21$  years,  $SD = .95$ , range = 9-14 years). Almost half of the sample was female (49%). Eleven percent of mothers and fathers had been divorced and remarried at least once. Eighty-eight percent of fathers, 83% of mothers, and 81% of children were European American. Five percent of fathers, 4% of mothers, and 3% of children were African American, and the remaining participants were multiethnic or from other ethnic groups. Seventy percent of mothers and 72% of fathers had a bachelor's degree or higher level of education. Eighty percent of families earned more than \$50,000 per year ( $m = \$85,301.45$ ,  $SD = 65612.74$ ) and less

than 1% of mothers and of fathers reporting being unemployed. Eighty-nine percent of these married couples had never been divorced or remarried. Almost all couples had been married for ten years or more ( $m = 18.10$ ,  $SD = 4.08$ ). The married couple families in this sample differ from the single-parent families in that the married couple families were more likely to be European American, have a college degree, and earn more than \$50,000 a year or to be unemployed, and less likely to be divorced.

Table 1

Characteristic	Mothers		Fathers		Children	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Parent and Adolescent Demographics</i>						
<i>Parent age</i>						
31-35	19	6.4	9	2.9		
36-40	69	22.9	45	14.9		
41-45	111	37.1	111	37.0		
46-50	73	24.3	74	24.6		
51-55	27	17.1	44	14.6		
56-62	1	0.3	16	5.3		
Missing	0	0	1	0.3		
<i>Adolescent age</i>						
9					2	0.7
10					68	22.7
11					129	43.0
12					70	23.3
13					29	9.7
14					2	0.7
<i>Ethnicity</i>						
European American	250	83.3	264	88.0	244	81.3
African American	12	4.0	14	4.7	8	2.7
Hispanic	8	2.7	1	0.3	2	0.7
Asian American	15	5.0	5	1.7	9	3.0
Other	5	1.7	6	2.0	3	1.0
Multi-ethnic	10	3.3	8	2.7	27	9.0
Missing	0	0	2	0.7	7	2.3

(table continues)

Characteristic	Mothers		Fathers		Children	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Education</b>						
Less than high school	3	1.0	1	0.3		
High school	13	4.3	17	5.7		
Some college	62	20.7	57	19.0		
Associate's	11	3.7	9	3.0		
Bachelor's	125	41.7	121	40.3		
Master's degree	64	21.3	55	18.3		
Advanced degree	22	7.3	38	12.7		
Missing	0	0	2	0.3		
<b>Marital duration<sup>a</sup></b>						
7-10	2	0.7				
11-15	86	28.6				
16-20	142	47.2				
21-25	56	18.6				
26-30+	14	4.6				
<b>Annual household income<sup>b</sup></b>						
\$0-\$20,000	2	0.7				
\$20,001- \$40,000	23	7.7				
\$40,001- \$60,000	77	25.7				
\$60,001- \$80,000	70	23.3				
\$80,001- \$100,000	60	20.0				
\$100,001- \$120,000	28	9.3				
\$120,001- \$140,000	10	3.3				
\$140,001- \$160,000	8	2.7				
\$160,001+	16	5.3				
Missing	6	2.0				

<sup>a</sup> As reported by mothers.

<sup>b</sup> Averaged reports of mothers and fathers.

## Instruments

The instruments in this study were self-report, pen-and-paper questionnaires administered to each mother, father, and adolescent in their home at the same time. The current study examined the responses on five of the measures (described below),

including the Inventory of Father (Parent) Involvement, Social Connectedness Scale, Quality Marriage Index, Couple Commitment Inventory, and Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression scale (CES-D). It is important to note that each of these measures were modified from their original versions to be shortened for the sake of survey length and respecting time restraints of participants. The total score for each measure reflects the average of the responses, except for the scores on the Quality Marriage Index and the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scales, which are summed because of variation of scales lengths within those measures. Example questions are provided for each of the main scales. Four main demographic variables of age, education, household income, and marital duration were examined in the current study.

### **Demographics**

Parent and adolescent age, parent level of education, household income, and marital duration were examined in the current study for correlations with the independent variables. Age was reported in a fill-in-the-blank question format for parents, and reported originally as a birth date for children by the parents. Mothers and fathers reported their own age, in years. Mother's report of adolescent age, in years, was used in the current study because the mothers had less missing data, indicating they knew the adolescent's exact age and birth date more often than fathers. Parents reported their own level of education by choosing one of seven options: Less than High School, High School, Some college, Associates, Bachelors, Masters, or Advanced Degree (JD, Ph.D., PsyD, etc.). Because so few participants were in the "less than high school" ( $n = 1$ ) and "associates" ( $n = 11$ ) categories, we combined the "less than high school" participant with those who had only

a high school education, and combined those with an associate's degree with those who answered "some college." Household income was reported as monthly income combined with their partner and after taxes. The response was an open-ended, fill-in-the-blank section reported separately by mothers and fathers. The responses showed a high level of congruence and low, although significant, correlation. Partner reports were compared and some responses were divided by 12 (months) in the cases where it appeared that annual income had been reported instead of monthly income. When one spouse did not report income at all, the other spouse's response was used. When both partners responded, their reports were averaged to give equal representation to each partner. This averaged monthly income report was then multiplied by 12 (months) to create an annual family household income report. Marital duration was examined with an open-ended, fill-in-the-blank question "If you are in a relationship/ marriage currently, how many years have you been together?," and was reported in years.

Family structure was reported in three questions about marital status, and was used in the current study to determine which families had two married parents with a biological adolescent participating in the study. All single-parent families were eliminated from the study, as well as two parent families that reported themselves as being separated or cohabiting, and married parent families that were extended family caregivers, or stepfamilies.

### **Parental Involvement Scale**

Parental involvement with their adolescent child was measured with eight items from the Inventory of Father Involvement (Bradford et al., 2002), with responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale of frequency ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). The original measure consisted of 43 items, of which only eight were selected to shorten the length of

the survey. The original measure's scale sought to identify how well parents thought they did on each item, while this modified version measured frequency. Mothers and fathers responded to this questionnaire once for themselves and once again to describe their perceptions of their partners' involvement. Example questions included "How often do you (your spouse) help your adolescent with homework?" and "read books or magazines with your adolescent?" Higher scores indicated more mother or father involvement in the children's lives. The shortened scale had an overall scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha coefficient) of .62 for mothers about themselves, .75 for mothers about fathers, .76 for fathers about themselves, and .66 for fathers about mothers in the sample in the current study. The original study calculated reliability coefficients only for fathers reporting on their own involvement on a much lengthier survey, so no coefficients are available for comparison from the original study.

Parental involvement was also measured from the participating adolescent's perspective, reported separately about mothers and fathers. The adolescent report used the same eight items selected from the Inventory for Father Involvement (Bradford et al., 2002), with responses ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Again, higher scores indicate more mother or father involvement in the adolescent's life. Item wording was simplified to accommodate a fourth grade reading level. Reliability (Cronbach's alpha coefficient) was found to be .74 for adolescent about mother, and .77 for adolescent about father in the current study. Children did not report on parent involvement in the original study, so no reliability coefficients are available from that study for comparison.

### **Parent-Child Connectedness**

Parent feelings of social and emotional connection with their children was assessed using a revised Social Connectedness Scale (Lee et al., 2001). This measure used nine of the most relevant items from the original 20-item measure. Responses were on a six point Likert-type scale of agreement ranging from 1 (disagree) to 6 (agree). Items included statements such as “I feel distant from my adolescent” and “I feel like an outsider with my adolescent.” Higher scores were associated with higher perceived levels of connection between the parent and their adolescent. For this sample, reliability (Cronbach’s alpha coefficient) was found to be .77 for mothers, and .86 for fathers in the current study. Items 1, 2, 3, 5, and 9 must be reverse coded so that higher scores indicate higher levels of parents’ perceived connectedness with their adolescent. It is important to note that the parent versions of the connectedness scale have parents only report on their own parenting and not that of their spouse, as with the parental involvement scale. The scale used for this study was 9 items out of the original 20, which were reworded to be specific to the parent-child relationship. Thus, reliability coefficients from the original study cannot be compared.

Children’s feelings of social and emotional connection with each of their parents were measured using six items on a revised Social Connectedness Scale (Lee et al., 2001). Responses were on a Likert-type scale of agreement ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater parent-child connectedness. Items included statements such as “even though I am very close to my parent, I feel I can be myself” and “I am comfortable with some degree of conflict with my parent.” Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha coefficient) was calculated to be .66 for



children's ratings of mothers, and .67 for children's rating of fathers in the current study. The original study was not used for children, so reliability coefficients are not available for comparison (Lee et al., 2001). It is important to note that the wording of the adolescent scale items differs from that of the parent version and there are three less items on the adolescent version. This may make these two scores somewhat less comparable. than if they were the same.

### **Couple Relationship Quality**

Overall marital quality was measured on a five-item revised version of the Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). The original measure included 20 items. Both spouses responded on a six-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree). Sample items include "My relationship with my partner makes me happy" and "My relationship with my partner is very stable." Higher scores indicate perceptions of better marital quality. Reliability (Cronbach's alpha coefficient) has been found to be .95 in the original study (Berg, Trost, Schneider, & Allison, 2001). Reliability for this sample indicated a Cronbach's alpha of .96 for mothers and .96 for fathers. The sixth question of this scale is a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 10 (*perfectly happy*), rating one's happiness in the current relationship. The middle responses are the average level of happiness that most people experience in a relationship, so high responses indicate extreme joy and low responses indicate extreme unhappiness. Because this Likert-type scale is longer than the six-point scale used for the first five questions, responses on the sixth question were divided by 0.6 so the scores on the ten-point would not be weighted higher than those on

the six-point scale. All six responses were then averaged together for a final score of marital relationship quality.

### **Couple Commitment**

Couple commitment related to satisfaction was measured with 10 total items, 6 items taken from the original 60 items on the Couple Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Responses were based on a 7-point Likert-type scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Sample questions included, “Giving something up for my partner is frequently not worth the trouble,” and “I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now.” Four of the six original items from the Satisfaction with Sacrifice sub-subscale also measure couple sacrifice. Higher scores indicated higher commitment and willingness to sacrifice for one’s partner, after reverse coding questions 4, 5, 6, and 7. Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) for the original measure was found based on two subscales, and was not calculated for the measure overall (Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, & Markman, 2006). For this sample, reliability was found to be .82 for mothers and .85 for fathers.

### **Depression**

Depressive symptoms were measured using 11 items from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression scale (CES-D, Radloff, 1977), based on a three-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 3 (most of the time). Questions included “I felt depressed” and “I could not get going.” Two items were reverse coded so that higher scores indicate higher level and frequency of depressive symptoms. In the original study

by Radloff (1977), a summed score of 16 out of 60 possible in the 20 question survey was used as a cut-off to indicate which participants should be referred for further screening for clinical levels of depression and treatment. In the current study, there were only 11 items and 33 possible points on a summed scale, so a cutoff of between 6 and 9 points would be the appropriate ratio to indicate participants who may have a clinical level of depression, not just depressive symptoms. However, this cutoff was not effective with the current sample because of their apparent low rate of clinical depression. It was determined that a cutoff would not be used for the current study and the measure would simply be summed, with higher scores indicating higher rates of depressive symptoms, but not necessarily clinical levels. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were .85 in the general population and .90 in the clinical population (Radloff, 1977). For the current sample, reliability was found to be .79 for mothers and .77 for fathers.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

There was minimal missing data in this data set (less than ten responses per variable); one of the reasons I chose this particular data set for this study. Missing data was handled by using listwise deletion. In the following discussion of the findings, I refer to correlation coefficients around .10 (ranging from .00 to .29) as “small,” those around .30 (ranging from .30 to .49) as “moderate,” and .50 or above as “large,” according to the interpretations of effect sizes set by Cohen (1988) for research in the social sciences. On average, the associations found in the current study were in the direction predicted, including the pairs of constructs representing marital quality and parenting quality. This may indicate that these pairings truly are tapping into the ideas which they were meant to represent.

#### Measure Descriptives

On average, parents and early adolescent children rated themselves and each other fairly high on the constructs measured, as can be seen in Table 2. In the context of these measures, “fairly high” indicates that the mean response was within two points of the total or highest score available on each measure, as can be compared in Table 2. I use this terminology because most of the scales were worded so that participants rated their agreement with statements instead of frequency, and so forth. The exception is for the scale of involvement where the scale measured frequency. Specifically, mothers and fathers rated their marital commitment, as well as their marital quality, fairly high on

average. Both measures had a fairly low amount of variability among participant responses. There was a wide range of variability in mother and father reports of depressive symptoms. Adolescent children reported their levels of connection with their mothers and fathers to be fairly high, but not as high as mothers and fathers reported their level of connectedness to be with their adolescent children. Finally, parents and early adolescent children rated both mothers and fathers as being involved “often,” on average. The high averages and relatively small standard deviation suggest that both parenting measures had a fairly low amount of variability.

Table 2

*Measure Means and Standard Deviations for the Current Sample*

Measure	Mean	Total points	SD
Mother marital commitment	5.84	7	.75
Father marital commitment	5.99	7	.75
Mother marital quality	5.07	6	.90
Father martial quality	5.07	6	.91
Mother depression	14.74	33	2.98
Father depression	14.64	33	2.98
Child report of mother-child connectedness	4.15	6	.52
Child report of father-child connectedness	4.09	6	.54
Mother-child connectedness	5.53	6	.53
Father-child connectedness	5.36	6	.67
Mother involvement	4.33	5	.44
Mother report of father involvement	4.09	5	.56
Father involvement	4.08	5	.53
Father report of mother involvement	4.31	5	.45
Child report of mother involvement	4.23	5	.54
Child report of father involvement	4.11	5	.61

### Research Question 1

The first research question, “What demographic (i.e., age, education, household income, and marital duration) or mental health characteristics (i.e., depression) are associated with mothers’ perception of their relationship quality and commitment in their marriages?” was analyzed with responses to the demographic questions as well as from the scales measuring marital quality and marital commitment using Pearson’s correlations. Spearman’s rho correlational tests were used to examine the correlation among the education variable and the marital measures and demographic variables because of their non-ratio nature. Results from these analyses are shown in Table 3.

The largest correlation was between mother’s marital commitment and their relationship quality ( $r = .62, p \leq .001$ ) suggesting that mothers who reported high levels of commitment in their marriage also reported their relationship to be high quality. The correlation between mothers’ marital commitment and depression was small and negative ( $r = -.18, p = .002$ ) suggesting that mothers reporting more depressive symptoms were more likely to report less marital commitment than mothers reporting fewer depressive symptoms. No other demographic variables were associated with mothers’ marital commitment. Mothers’ marital relationship quality was negatively correlated with depression ( $r = -.29, p \leq .001$ ), and positively correlated with household income ( $r = .15, p = .012$ ) suggesting that mothers with fewer depressive symptoms and higher income were more likely to report higher relationship quality than those with more depressive symptoms and less income. No other demographic variables were associated with mother’s marital relationship quality.

Table 3

*Correlations among Mother Demographics and Relationship Quality and Commitment*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	-					
2. Income	.19**	-				
3. Marital commitment	-.08	.09	-			
4. Marital quality	-.06	.15*	.62**	-		
5. Depression	-.16**	-.15**	-.18**	-.29**	-	
6. Marital duration	.42**	.11	.03	.04	-.06	-
7. Education	.28**	.31**	-.04	-.02	-.07	.10

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

There were several significant relations among the demographic variables reported by mothers. The strongest of these associations was the positive correlations between age and marital duration ( $r = .42, p \leq .001$ ), as well as age and education level ( $r = .28, p \leq .001$ ). Small but positive correlations were found between household income and the demographic variables of education level ( $r = .25, p \leq .001$ ) and age ( $r = .19, p = .001$ ). The correlations between depression and age ( $r = -.16, p = .006$ ) and depression and household income ( $r = -.15, p = .010$ ) were small and negative.

### Research Question 2

The second research question, “What demographic (i.e., age, education, household income, and marital duration) or mental health characteristics (i.e., depression) are associated with fathers’ perception of their relationship quality and commitment in their marriages?” was answered using Pearson’s correlations among the demographic variables as well as from the scales measuring marital quality and marital commitment as reported by fathers in the sample. Spearman’s rho correlational tests were used to

examine the correlation among the education variable and the marital measures and demographic variables. Results from these analyses are shown in Table 4.

Similar to the finding for mothers, the largest correlation among fathers' marital variables was between fathers' reported commitment and relationship quality ( $r = .62, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that fathers who reported high levels of commitment in their marriage also reported their relationship to be high quality. Father reports of marital commitment had a small but significant correlation with their demographic reports of household income ( $r = .12, p = .045$ ), and depression ( $r = -.29, p \leq .001$ ). This suggests that fathers with more depressive symptoms also reported lower levels of marital commitment while fathers reporting higher income were more likely to report higher marital commitment. Father reports of their own marital quality also had small, but significant correlation with their demographic reports of household income ( $r = .15, p = .012$ ), and a moderate negative correlation with depression ( $r = -.42, p \leq .001$ ). This indicated that fathers who reported higher marital quality also reported higher household income while fathers with more depressive symptoms reported lower levels of marital quality.

There were several significant relations among the demographic variables reported by fathers. Father reports of education level had a moderate correlation with the demographic variables of household income ( $r = .33, p \leq .001$ ), as well as a small correlation with depression ( $r = -.12, p = .048$ ) and marital duration ( $r = .12, p = .037$ ). Father's reports of depression had a small and negative correlation with household income ( $r = -.15, p = .048$ ) and father age was moderately and positively correlated with marital duration ( $r = .34, p \leq .001$ ).



Table 4

*Correlations among Father Demographics and Relationship Quality and Commitment*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	-					
2. Income	.11	-				
3. Marital commitment	-.10	.12*	-			
4. Marital quality	-.09	.15**	.62**	-		
5. Depression	-.01	-.15*	-.29**	-.424**	-	
6. Marital duration	.34**	.11	-.06	-.023	-.02	-
7. Education	.10	.33**	.05	-.003	-.12*	.12*

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

### Research Question 3

The third research question, “Are mothers’ perception of relationship quality and commitment in their marriages associated with their perceptions of their parenting connectedness and involvement?,” was examined using Pearson’s correlations among mother reports on the two parenting and two marital scales. Results from these analyses are shown in Table 5.

It is important to first note that mother connectedness and involvement were moderately and positively correlated ( $r = .31, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that mothers who reported higher levels of parent-child connectedness also reported higher levels of parental involvement. And, as previously reported, mother’s marital commitment and their relationship quality had a large and positive correlation ( $r = .62, p \leq .001$ ). Mother’s parental involvement had a small and positive correlation with marital commitment ( $r =$

Table 5

*Correlation among Mother Involvement and Connectedness with Marital Commitment and Quality*

Measure	1	2	3
1. Mother involvement	-		
2. Mother connectedness	.31**	-	
3. Marital commitment	.23**	.18**	-
4. Marital quality	.17**	.19**	.62**

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

.23,  $p \leq .001$ ) and marital quality ( $r = .17$ ,  $p = .005$ ), suggesting that mothers who report higher levels of parental involvement also reported higher levels of marital commitment and marital quality. Similarly, mother's parent-child connectedness had a small and positive correlation with mother reports of their own marital commitment ( $r = .18$ ,  $p = .002$ ), and marital quality ( $r = .19$ ,  $p = .002$ ), suggesting that mothers who report higher levels of parent-child connectedness also reported higher levels of marital commitment and marital quality.

#### Research Question 4

The fourth research question, "Are fathers' perception of relationship quality and commitment in their marriages associated with their perceptions of their parenting connectedness and involvement?," was examined using Pearson's correlations among father reports on the two parenting and two marital scales. Results from these analyses are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

*Correlation among Father Involvement and Connectedness with Marital Commitment and Quality*

Measure	1	2	3
1. Father involvement	-		
2. Father connectedness	.50**	-	
3. Marital commitment	.12*	.32**	-
4. Marital quality	.15**	.34**	.62**

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

It is important to first note that father connectedness and involvement were moderately and positively correlated ( $r = .50, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that fathers who reported higher levels of parent-child connectedness also reported higher levels of parental involvement. And, as previously reported, father's marital commitment and their relationship quality had a large and positive correlation ( $r = .62, p \leq .001$ ). Father's parental involvement had a small and positive correlation with marital commitment ( $r = .17, p = .004$ ) and marital quality ( $r = .15, p = .010$ ), suggesting that fathers who reported higher levels of parental involvement also reported higher levels of marital commitment and marital quality. Father's parent-child connectedness had a moderate and positive correlation with father reports of their own marital commitment ( $r = .32, p \leq .001$ ), and marital quality ( $r = .34, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that fathers who reported higher levels of parent-child connectedness also reported higher levels of marital commitment and marital quality.

### Research Question 5

The fifth research question, “Are children’s perceptions of their mothers’ connectedness and involvement related to mothers’ perceptions of their relationship quality and commitment in their marriages?”, was examined using Pearson’s correlations among early adolescent child perceptions of mother’s parenting and mother reports of marital quality and commitment. Results from these analyses are shown in Table 7.

Adolescent perceptions of mother involvement were moderately and positively correlated with early adolescent perceptions of mother’s parent-child connectedness ( $r = .43, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that adolescents who perceive higher levels of mother involvement also reported higher levels of their mother’s parent-child connectedness. Adolescent perceptions of mother involvement also had a small but positive correlation with mother report of their own marital quality ( $r = .16, p = .007$ ), but was not correlated with mother’s marital commitment. This suggests that adolescents who reported higher levels of mother involvement had mothers who reported higher levels of marital quality. There were no strong or significant correlations between early adolescent child perceptions of mother’s parent-child connectedness and mother’s marital quality and commitment.

Because there was a range of ages of early adolescent children included in the study (range = 9-14 years), there was a concern that the Pearson bivariate correlations among marital quality and adolescent perceptions of parenting may not account for maturation of the early adolescent. To see if there was a maturation effect, I examined the regression scatterplots for the association between mother and father marital quality and

Table 7

*Correlations among Adolescent Perceptions of Parenting and Mother Marital Quality*

Measure	1	2
1. Adolescent report of mother involvement	-	
2. Adolescent report of mother connectedness	.43**	-
3. Mother marital commitment	.06	-.06
4. Mother marital quality	.16**	.06

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

their associations with adolescent perceptions of parenting. The regression scatterplots were primarily linear, thus the results of the Pearson bivariate correlational tests for the research questions involving adolescent perception of parenting variables were deemed appropriate.

### Research Question 6

The sixth research question, “Are children’s perceptions of their fathers’ connectedness and involvement related to fathers’ perceptions of their relationship quality and commitment in their marriages?,” was examined using Pearson’s correlations among early adolescent perceptions of father’s parenting and father reports of marital quality and commitment. Results from these analyses are shown in Table 8.

Early adolescent perceptions of father involvement had a large and positive correlation with early adolescent perceptions of father connectedness ( $r = .51, p \leq .001$ ), as well as small but positive correlations with father reports of marital commitment ( $r = .21, p \leq .001$ ) and father reports of marital quality ( $r = .17, p = .003$ ). This suggests that adolescents who reported higher father involvement also reported higher levels of father-

Table 8

*Correlations among Adolescent Perceptions of Parenting and Father Marital Quality*

Measure	1	2
1. Adolescent report of father involvement	-	
2. Adolescent report of father connectedness	.51**	-
3. Father marital commitment	.21**	-.04
4. Father marital quality	.17**	.12*

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

adolescent connectedness. This also suggests that adolescents who reported higher father involvement also had fathers who reported higher levels of marital commitment and quality. Adolescent perceptions of father's parent-child connectedness had a small but negative correlation with father reports of his marital quality ( $r = .12, p = .049$ ), suggesting that adolescents who reported higher levels of connectedness with their fathers had fathers who reported higher levels of marital quality. There was no significant correlation between adolescent perceptions of father connectedness and father report of marital commitment.

### Research Question 7

The seventh research question, "Are there significant differences between mother, father, and adolescent perceptions of mother and father involvement?," was examined using paired-samples  $t$  tests among mother, father, and early adolescent perceptions of mother and father involvement.

There was not a significant difference between mean scores for father perceptions of mother involvement ( $m = 4.30, SD = .45$ ) and mother perceptions of her own involvement ( $m = 4.34, SD = .44$ );  $t(297) = -.98, p = .330$ . These results suggest that

mothers and fathers agree about levels of mother involvement. There was a significant difference between mean scores for adolescent perceptions of mother involvement ( $m = 4.23, SD = .55$ ) and mother perceptions of her own involvement ( $m = 4.33, SD = .44$ );  $t(298) = -2.99, p = .003$ . These results suggest that mothers and adolescents do not agree about levels of mother involvement. There was not a significant difference between mean scores for mother perceptions of father involvement ( $m = 4.09, SD = .56$ ) and father perceptions of his own involvement ( $m = 4.08, SD = .53$ );  $t(297) = .26, p = .799$ . These results suggest that mothers and fathers agree about levels of father involvement. There was not a significant difference between mean scores for adolescent perceptions of father involvement ( $m = 4.12, SD = .61$ ) and father perceptions of his own involvement ( $m = 4.08, SD = .53$ );  $t(297) = .95, p = .345$ . These results suggest that adolescents and fathers agree about levels of father involvement.

Additional analyses were run on the correlations among the different reports of mother and father involvement using Pearson's bivariate correlations. This was done mainly to examine the nature of children and mother's disagreement about reports of mother involvement. Father perceptions of mother involvement were moderately and positively correlated with mother perceptions of her own involvement ( $r = .35, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that mothers who rated themselves as having a higher level of parental involvement also had husbands that rated their wives higher in parental involvement. Adolescent perceptions of mother involvement had a small and positive correlation with mother perceptions of her own involvement ( $r = .27, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting adolescents who rated their mothers as being higher in parental involvement also had mothers who

rated themselves as being higher in parental involvement. Mother perceptions of father involvement were moderately and positively correlated with father perceptions of his own involvement ( $r = .44, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that mothers who rated their husbands as being higher in parental involvement also had husbands who rated themselves as being higher in parental involvement. Adolescent perceptions of father involvement were moderately and positively correlated with father perceptions of his own involvement ( $r = .34, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that adolescents who rated their fathers as being higher in parental involvement also had fathers who rated themselves as higher in parental involvement.

There were other noteworthy correlations among family reports of parental involvement. The largest correlation was between adolescent perceptions of mother involvement and adolescent perceptions of father involvement ( $r = .82, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that adolescents who rated their mothers higher in parental involvement also rated their fathers higher in parental involvement. There was also a large correlation between mother reports of her own parental involvement and her reports of father's parent involvement ( $r = .56, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that mothers who rated themselves higher in involvement also rated their husbands higher in parental involvement. Father parental involvement and father reports of mother involvement also had a large and positive correlation ( $r = .56, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that fathers who rated themselves higher in involvement also rated their wives higher in parental involvement. Lastly, mother reports of father involvement were moderately and positively correlated with adolescent reports of father involvement ( $r = .38, p \leq .001$ ), suggesting that mothers and



Table 9

*Correlations among Perceptions of Parental Involvement*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Mother involvement	-				
2. Mother perception of father involvement	.56**	-			
3. Father involvement	.24**	.44**	-		
4. Father perception of mother involvement	.35**	.14*	.56**	-	
5. Adolescent perception of mother involvement	.27**	.22**	.22**	.26**	-
6. Adolescent perception of father involvement	.22**	.37**	.34**	.20**	.82**

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

adolescents agree about levels of father involvement. All other correlations among mother, father, and adolescents reports of parental involvement were positive, but small.

### Summary

In general, the participants rated themselves and their family members high on measures of parenting connection and involvement, as well as marital quality and commitment. The demographics that influenced the marital quality and commitment of mothers and fathers included a negative relationship with depression and positive relationship with household income. The only exception was that mothers' commitment was not influenced by household income. In examining the relationships between parenting and marital measures, both mothers and fathers had moderate correlations between these two family relationships. Not only did mother and father perceptions of their marital quality correlate with perceptions of their own parenting, but also with their children's perceptions of their parenting for both connection and involvement. The

exception was that child perceptions of father connectedness did not correlate with father's marital commitment. Finally, results indicated that mothers, fathers, and children agreed about level of involvement in a comparison of the three family perceptions of mother and father parenting involvement. The exception was that results indicated mothers and children did not agree about level of mother involvement, in that children rated their mothers lower than mothers rated themselves. These findings about family perceptions of parenting were the most intriguing of the study and will be discussed in further depth in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to explore the associations among marital quality and parenting quality and move beyond father and mother perceptions of their parenting quality to include their adolescent's perception of their parenting quality. Data was analyzed from married-parent families with an early adolescent child who responded to surveys regarding their demographics, parental involvement, parent-child connectedness, marital quality, and marital commitment.

The following discussion addresses findings connected with the seven research questions. This chapter then discusses the possible implications of the findings, as well as limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research. In addition, I discuss practical implications for intervention and community education concerning parenting topics.

#### **Research Questions**

##### **Research Questions 1 and 2**

The focus of the first and second research questions was to identify demographic predictors of marital quality and commitment. I hypothesized that marital duration would be positively related and depression will be negatively related to relationship quality, but not necessarily relationship commitment for mothers and fathers. Results suggested that mothers and fathers who reported high levels of commitment in their marriage also reported their relationship to be high quality. The findings may indicate that quality and

commitment are reciprocal aspects of the marital relationship. Mother and father marital quality were associated with depression and household income, but not with other demographic variables, including marital duration, education level, or age. These demographics are often associated with marital quality and commitment in the literature (see McLoyd, 1998; Simons et al., 1993; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). The lack of association in this study may be due to the homogenous sample, especially in the case of education level. Perhaps by the time children enter adolescence or a couple has been married longer than a decade, family processes become well established and a family finds balance, making the detriment or benefit of age, marital duration, or education level less important.

**Depression.** Mothers and fathers reporting fewer depressive symptoms were more likely to report higher marital quality and commitment than those reporting more depressive symptoms. This indicates that depressive symptoms, even at a non-clinical level, may have a negative influence on marital quality, as well as feelings of commitment to the marital relationship. This association is supported by some existing literature (Pendry & Adam, 2007) but is not well researched in a nonclinical population, thus contributing to a gap in the current literature about the effects of depression on marital quality. The literature indicates that depression among parents is more common in mothers than fathers (Tiet et al., 2001) and thus more likely to impact wellbeing in relationships and induce spillover effects. However, the results of this study indicate that father depression had a strong negative association with marital quality and commitment, indicating that the impact on wellbeing and spillover into the marital and parenting

relationships can happen with fathers and not only mothers. Furthermore, this indicates that fathers' marital quality may suffer more when they are depressed than mothers. The discrepancy in the results of the current study and previous research may be because being married does decrease the likelihood of a depressive episode for women, indicating that the social support found in marriage protects married women from depressive symptoms more than men (Cairney et al., 2003). The current sample had low levels of depressive symptoms (see Table 7), but few were without any symptoms at all. The original scale used to measure depression has a cut off of 16 out of 60 points to indicate that a person is at risk for depression (Radloff, 1977). To use that ratio on the shortened version of the scale used in this study would indicate that a score of 9 would indicate risk of depression. The mean score for this study was about 14 out of 33 for men and women, indicating a moderate level of depression in this sample, with a negative skew in the distribution towards the side of less depression than the population at large.

In this study, the association between depression and marital quality might have been stronger for mothers or even fathers in a sample with a greater range of depressive symptoms. Parents with lower marital quality and poorer parental functioning are more often those who suffer from depression (Kiernan & Huerta, 2008; Pendry & Adam, 2007). Spouses may also be more depressed when they do not feel effective, loved, or fulfilled in their marital relationships, perhaps because they feel less connected (Lee et al., 2001).

**Household income.** Results indicate that parents with higher income were more likely to report higher marital quality than those with lower income. This may indicate

that couples with greater financial resources may experience less relational or financial stress and, therefore, report greater marital quality. Men and women may also feel that income level is an external indicator of marital quality (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001). Cherlin (2004) reported that couples often prefer to be economically established before they believe they are ready to enter into marriage. This may carry into concepts of marital satisfaction and perceptions of quality. Furthermore, conflict and arguments over financial issues have been linked to lower marital quality (Simons et al., 1993). Although high annual household income is not necessarily associated with fewer arguments about money (Dew, Britt, & Huston, 2012), it may be the feeling of financial stability, at any income level, that may decrease couple arguments specifically about money, contributing to their marital stability (McLoyd, 1998). Additionally, the results of the current study indicate that fathers with higher household income were more likely to report higher marital commitment. This may indicate that fathers making more money feel they can be more committed to their marriages, or that men who are more committed to their marriages tend to bring in more income. Men with more income may also feel more committed to their marriages because they honor the work their wives do for the family, such as working alongside their husband, putting him through school, or raising the children in the home.

#### **Research Questions 3 and 4**

The focus of the third and fourth research questions was to examine the relation between marital quality and parenting quality for mothers and fathers. I hypothesized that mothers' and fathers' perception of relationship quality and commitment in their

marriages would be associated with their perceptions of their parenting connectedness and involvement. Results suggested that parents who reported higher levels of marital commitment and marital quality also reported higher levels of parental involvement and connectedness. This indicates that mothers and fathers with high parenting quality also experience high quality marriages, which is supported by the literature (Amato, 2007; Pedro et al., 2012). This may be because these men and women have the relationship skills to help them attain and maintain high quality family relationships with their adolescent child and spouse. Feeling dissatisfied with experiences of low marital quality may lead parents to be less emotionally responsive to their adolescent children (Nelson et al., 2009). Similarities in parenting by mothers and fathers are moderated by marital quality over time (Schofield et al., 2009). The association between marital and parenting quality may also indicate that positive spillover, as opposed to negative spillover from conflict, may exist between the marital and parental subsystems (McClain, 2011). In this way, the two subsystems of which father and mothers are a part may be theoretically and practically interdependent. The research on and application of Systems framework to spillover between these two subsystems is minimal, and indications that positive feelings and experiences can spillover from one subsystem to the other are almost unheard of. This may be because the majority of the existing literature focuses on negative spillover and marital conflict instead of commitment and happiness in marriage (Cui & Conger, 2008).

These results not only indicate that high parental quality is linked with high marital quality, but also that low parental quality is linked with low marital quality. This

may occur when dissimilarity in parenting behaviors leads spouses to focus on and even aggravate the differences in their marital relationship (Kan et al., 2008). Social learning theory may predict that poor marital quality may lead a parent to believe that their spouse is not a good model of parenting behavior to be emulated (Bandura, 1977; Schofield et al., 2009).

The literature indicates that spillover of emotions from the marital to the parental subsystem may be more common for fathers than for mothers (Coley & Morris, 2002) because they have a more difficult time separating the two subsystems of which they are a part (Minuchin, 1985; Morrill et al., 2010). However, the current study indicates that fathers and mothers may both experience spillover between their marital and parental subsystems. The spillover between marital quality and parental connectedness may be more frequent or intense for fathers than for mothers. In this way, fathers' parental involvement is associated with marital quality about the same as mothers,' as has been found by other research in this field (Malik & Rohner, 2012; Ponnet et al., 2012).

The strongest association among the marital and parenting constructs for mothers was between marital commitment and parental involvement. This association was still small but may indicate that engaging in the daily childcare activities reflects her commitment to her family and spouse, even though those activities are not always enjoyable or connecting for her. The associations among the marital and parenting constructs for fathers indicate small effect sizes for ratings of father involvement, but moderate effect sizes for ratings of father connectedness. This may indicate that the satisfaction a father contrives from a high quality marriage may make him feel more



effective as a father, and more supported by his wife in his efforts to connect with their early adolescent child.

Not all studies examining the correlation between marital and parenting quality find these two constructs to be positively or directly linked (Erel & Burman, 1995; Ponnet et al., 2012). For example, Nangle, Kelley, Fals-Stewart, and Levant (2003) found a negative correlation between father-reported marital quality and parental involvement. Warm and involved parenting may help children self-regulate regardless of marital quality (Pendry & Adam, 2007). These inconsistent findings may be due to differences in methodology, age of sample's children, other demographic differences, or the use of measures covering different aspects of the complex constructs of marital quality and parenting behavior.

Mothers and fathers who reported higher levels of parent-child connectedness also reported higher levels of parental involvement. This may indicate that parents who feel connected with their early adolescents find it easier to engage with them on a daily basis. Parents who strive to be involved in their adolescent's lives may also experience the bond that is formed in the small everyday moments of connection through shared activities and service to their family. Although I did not examine child characteristics in this study beyond basic demographic variables, some studies suggest that parents are more willing to engage with children who have easier temperaments (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2005), thus enhancing the importance of the potential threat of negative affect associated with adolescence to the parent-child relationship.

### **Research Questions 5 and 6**

The focus of the fifth and sixth research questions was to examine the relation between marital quality and the adolescent child's perspective of parenting quality. This is important because it assumes and implies that early adolescent reports of parenting are just as valid as parent reports of parenting, but that the association may be of a different strength and indicate different outcomes. I hypothesized that early adolescent perceptions of maternal connectedness and involvement would be correlated with maternal reports of their marital quality and commitment, but that this same association with father reports of marital quality would not be statistically significant. Results suggest that early adolescents who reported higher levels of mother and father involvement had parents who reported higher levels of marital quality. The literature indicates concern that the adolescent years may be filled with negative affect, especially towards parents, and the parent incapacity to handle this emotional rollercoaster (Beveridge & Berg, 2007; Whiteman et al., 2007). The current study also indicates that adolescent children are still connected with their parents at this age, and that this perception of high quality parenting is associated with their parents' high marital quality, just like parent perceptions of their own parenting quality are related to their marital quality. This finding may support the suggestion that adolescent perceptions of parenting are a valid perspective to take into consideration when examining family functioning in relation to parenting. Additionally, early adolescents who reported higher father involvement also had fathers who reported higher levels of marital commitment, but this was not true for mothers. Adolescents who feel they have highly involved fathers may have fathers who feel that direct involvement

is the best way to parent their children. Perhaps fathers who invest time and effort to engage in activities with their early adolescents may also invest time and effort in their marriages as a sign of commitment to their spouse and family. Men and women may approach parenting of adolescents differently because of gender and role differences (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). For example, research often points to father involvement and play as the main type of parenting, as opposed to emotional connection alone, with which fathers show commitment to their relationships with their family (Dollahite et al., 1997). This finding provides insight into the father-child relationship from a methodological viewpoint, since few studies compare father and adolescent child reports of father parenting. Fathers who feel they make great efforts to be involved in the life of their early adolescent child also have children who see and accept their father's efforts to engage in play and childcare activities. This may indicate that early adolescent children seek this type of attention from their fathers more than only emotional connectedness.

Early adolescents who perceive higher levels of mother and father involvement also reported higher levels of connectedness with their parents. The moderate to large association between the adolescent's perceptions of the two parenting measures suggests a reciprocal relationship, as was suggested by Padilla-Walker et al. (2012) in their longitudinal analysis of the same dataset. This study adds to the previous study by examining the additional perspectives and comparison of parenting from mothers and fathers. Parents and adolescent children who feel connected will be drawn to spend more time together including daily activities; parents and adolescents who spend time together

may also have more opportunity to connect emotionally than families who do not spend quality time together.

### **Research Question 7**

The focus of the seventh research question was to determine if mothers, fathers, and early adolescents agreed about levels of parental involvement. Gaining three viewpoints for maternal and paternal involvement is an attempt to reflect a systemic view of the family, where parents reported on their own parenting, their spouse's parenting, and early adolescents reported on each of their parents. Each report represents a subsystem in the family: parent-self, mother-father, mother-child, and father-child. My hypotheses that there would be significant differences between mother and early adolescent reports of maternal involvement, but no differences between father and early adolescent perceptions were supported by the findings. Interestingly, mother and father reports of their own and each other's involvement were not significantly different. The only relationship in which there was disagreement was between early adolescents and their mothers about levels of maternal involvement, but the difference was very small. Mothers and fathers agreed about levels of mother and father involvement when comparing their own and each other's parenting. This is an interesting finding and may be characteristic of a sample that, overall, had high marital quality and parenting quality. Mother and father agreement in reporting on their own and each other's parental involvement may indicate that couples with high marital quality and commitment are highly aware of the parenting involvement of their spouse, especially because these are

behaviors that are easy to observe and can be part of family routines and rituals, such as reading together before bed time or doing homework together.

Early adolescent children and fathers agreed about levels of father involvement. This may indicate that fathers and adolescents are highly aware of when and how they spend time together, perhaps because their one-on-one involvement occurs less often than the adolescent's involvement with the mother. Fathers may make daily activities more special, and place a premium on face-time with their children. The literature comparing father and adolescent reports of fathering are scarce, so there is little to compare this finding to. But research does indicate that the effect of parenting behaviors has been found to depend on how they are interpreted by the child (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2006).

Mothers and early adolescent children did not agree about levels of mother involvement as hypothesized. However, additional correlational tests indicate that early adolescent children still rate their mothers fairly high on involvement, just not as high as mothers rated themselves. Mothers and early adolescents don't disagree about mother involvement on opposite ends of the spectrum; their reports are still going in the same direction, just not on the same level. Lansford et al. (2010) and Amato (1987) found mother and early adolescent perspectives of mother's parenting, specifically discipline, to be significantly but not highly associated. The discrepancy in the current finding and that of the research may lie in the construct measured. Perhaps mothers and adolescents agree about discipline strategies, but are less clear on levels of involvement. It is interesting that mothers and children do not agree about frequency of involvement on this scale because it was an inventory of specific behaviors and not a measure of feelings of involvement.

The discrepancy may be more on the mother's part in this study; mothers may have over-reported their level of involvement because they feel busy and that their lives are highly wrapped up in their daily acts of caring for their adolescent children. The adolescent may have a more accurate report of involvement because they are less biased towards their responses, trying to make themselves look better or give themselves the credit they do not feel they receive from others for their efforts.

Furthermore, when parents and their children differ in perceptions of an interaction, it may be due to psychologically disordered thinking (Renk, 2005), or indicate a bias in reporting that represents more of what the respondent thinks they *should* report more than what is actually true. In this case, mothers may over-report involvement because they feel it is an important part of their role as a mother to be highly involved. Early adolescents may report more accurately because they are less aware of this role demand, or they may even under-report in an effort to claim independence from their parents by not confessing that they still read with their mother or enjoy when their mother comes to their sports games.

The use of this methodology adds to the scarce body of literature that uses three family member reporters on the same measure, especially a measure of parenting, as opposed to the adolescent's behavior, as is more common (e.g., Hughes & Gullone, 2010; Treutler & Epkins, 2003). This methodology is often criticized because these three reporters rarely agree (Guion et al., 2009; Taber, 2010). The current study indicates that reporters can agree, and that a disagreement in reporting, as found here with mothers and adolescent children, is not necessarily a question of whose report is most accurate (Taber,

2010). Self-report survey data can only measure perceptions that participants hold, along with their biases, so discrepancies or similarities in reports can be indicative of family functioning.

### **Limitations**

The limitations that had the greatest potential impact on the quality of the study findings and ability to effectively answer the research questions include the homogenous nature of the sample and the correlational nature of the methods. Causation or directional relations cannot be implied, since neither an experimental nor a longitudinal method was employed. In relationship research, I cannot assign a family to have “poor marital quality,” for example, so an experimental design was inappropriate for the current study. I chose not to use the longitudinal potential of the dataset because I wanted to focus on early adolescent children. Later waves of data surveyed children who would be considered older than “early adolescence.” This was also an exploratory study because marital and parenting quality are not often examined in families with children who are specifically in early adolescence. This study answers the preliminary question of if there was a general association among reports of parenting as children transition into adolescence. Because there is an association, these findings can now be compared to associations in families of older adolescents to examine change over time.

The sample in the current study was highly homogenous, over 80% of participant families were mostly white, wealthy, and well educated. The dataset was chosen because of the high quality of data, including very little missing data, and focus on positive family

outcomes. In selecting out only the married-parent families with biological children, I intentionally limited the generalizability to a specific family structure, and in the western state from which the sample was taken, this family structure is more common in a specific set of demographic characteristics. The sample used still had a normal distribution for each demographic characteristic, but higher than the general population in America. This study was not meant to be generalized to families with single or divorced parents, but future research may seek to replicate findings in a more racially or financially diverse population.

The third limitation of this study was the skew in the measures for this population. Namely, there were high means for mothers and fathers on the measures of marital quality and commitment, high means for all perspectives for measures of parenting connectedness and involvement, and low means for mothers and fathers for the measure of depression. So not only is this a generally “happy” population, but also a sample of what seem to be well-functioning families. This limits the generalizability of the study, especially the main concept that family members agree about parenting. This may only be true, and obvious, for well-functioning families. This study is not necessarily applicable to a clinical level population. However, it was not meant to be applicable to clinical populations.

The fourth and final limitation of this study was the use of survey data, because human participants are inherently biased by nature. Participants often display a social desirability bias when reporting about themselves in surveys, reporting higher levels of socially positive behaviors and reporting lower levels of behaviors viewed as negative.



However, by taking into account multiple perspectives on many of the measures in this study, the comparison of reports brings validity to the individual perspectives, thus limiting the effect of reporter bias. Future research may want to correct for this reported bias by using observational data on similar constructs.

In addition to issues with bias, the measures used in this particular study were shortened for the sake of survey length for the participants. The drawback to shortening and revising the measures from their original form is the general decrease in the alpha coefficients found in the current study when compared to the original measures. This may affect the generalizability of the study because the measures may not be measuring exactly the same constructs when some of the questions were taken out of the original measures or some of the wording was modified. This can be avoided in studies using original data, but is one con to using an existing dataset.

### **Future Directions**

Future research studying the connection between the marital and parenting subsystems may examine the change across waves in this or other data sets for consistency of associations among marital and parenting constructs. Examining the change in parenting and marriages over the span of their child's development can help practitioners pick points of intervention or foci of prevention. Perhaps understanding when low points in the trajectory of marital or parenting quality are will help practitioners know when families need external support.

The low association among the parenting and marital values may be because there were distinct groups in the sample that did not have high parental quality link with high marital quality. Future research could explore if there are groups in this sample that have high parenting quality but low marital quality, high marital quality but low parenting quality, or low marital and parenting quality. It would also be interesting to note the associations of these groupings with the demographic variables used in the current study or associations with other family variables such as adolescent outcomes or parenting styles. Identifying characteristics of these groupings could be helpful in identifying risk factors for families, or could help explore why parents stay married when they experience low marital quality or why they engage in ineffective parenting behaviors.

The low association among the parenting and marital values may also be because there may be a mediating factor such as co-parenting. Co-parenting is the parents' ability to collaborate and support *each other* in their parenting efforts (Morrill et al., 2010). Weissman and Cohen (1985, pp. 1224-45) define four attributes of positive parenting alliance where each parent: (1) invests in the child, (2) values the other parent's parenting, (3) values the other parent's involvement in the child's life, and (4) wish for communication with each other about childrearing issues. Because each aspect involves joint effort and mutual respect, it connects the ability of one parent to raise an adolescent with the need to rely on a parenting partner, who is typically the spouse in cases of married-parent families. This alliance may be the missing factor in the correlation between marital and parenting qualities. Longitudinal studies indicate that co-parenting is a better predictor of the future of the couple relationship than marital quality is of

parenting quality (Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004). Co-parenting alliance has been found to mediate the association between marital quality and parenting quality (Lamela & Figueiredo, 2011; Margolin et al., 2004). In a study by Gordon et al. (2009) the data indicated that husbands' forgiveness strongly predicted wives' parenting alliance and vice versa, regardless of the level of marital satisfaction. Malik and Rohner (2012) also found a similar reciprocal prediction between husbands and wives. This is a unique contribution of the mediating factor of the co-parenting alliance-- it has stronger predictive qualities than marital quality for parenting and adolescent outcomes. Empirical support of the co-parenting alliance construct indicates that the relationship between parents is separate from the marital and parent-child relationships, as well as important for marital, parenting, and adolescent outcomes. Co-parenting frameworks suggest that triangulation and (dis)agreement about childrearing may be two additional dimensions of family functioning which may be relevant to the link between parenting and marital quality (Feinberg, 2003; Kan et al., 2008).

Because the association between the marital and parenting subsystems was only small to moderate, this sample may show an ability to actually maintain boundaries between relationships to limit spillover effects (Thompson & Walker, 1989). It would be interesting to explore if a stronger association between the marital and parenting subsystems is actually associated with less healthy outcomes, perhaps indicating an enmeshed family style.

Because this study did not examine the effects of the association between marital quality and parenting quality on early adolescent child outcomes, it would be a natural

next step for the research as well. It would be interesting and important to examine if adolescent perceptions of parenting mediate parental quality and adolescent outcomes. These perceptions may also vary as a function of child gender, which this study did not examine.

### **Implications for Practice**

The connection between the marital and parental subsystems is well supported by theory, current literature, and the study at hand. This may have some implications for future research, intervention, and prevention applications. Interventions made at the parenting and co-parenting levels may help families with marital problems *and* negative adolescent behavioral outcomes.

In essence, parenting interventions could have the potential to contribute to both marital satisfaction and to each partner's parenting practices, in effect "killing two birds with one stone" (Morrill et al., 2010). Co-parenting interventions could benefit highly conflicted couples who may be more willing to receive help with their parenting for the good of the children than they would be to seek marital interventions for themselves.

In a community or Extension parenting class, the instructor could first help parents identify any spillover in their own families and even the effects of that spillover. Identifying the current situation as well as goals and values will help parents cognitively tailor the class to their own personal needs. For parents, educators, or other community members attending who are not currently in couple relationships, the principle of spillover can be applied to the parent's relationship with the adolescent's grandparents, or

anyone who supports the parent in raising their children. Being aware of parenting weaknesses and strengths may help parents better understand their personal tendencies to be sensitive to conflict in their families. Sturge-Apple et al. (2009) have suggested that this sensitivity is a balance that must be kept in order to not feel overwhelmed by conflict in one relationship and subsequently allowing that to influence their behavior in other relationships. Feeling overwhelmed is a topic that may be discussed commonly in existing parenting and marital community classes. This discussion can be informed by research findings of the effects of feeling overwhelmed and how to mediate or prevent those feelings through parenting and marital relationship strategies found in existing curricula.

Connecting the marital and parenting behaviors also points to the social cognitive theoretical perspective that children learn by their parent's example (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). Not only is conflict in marriage connected with poor parenting quality and adolescent outcomes, overt conflict left unresolved teaches children of all ages inappropriate ways to deal with disagreement in interpersonal relationships (Azam & Hanif, 2011).

It is important to note that Steinberg and Silk (2002) suggested that the general population may not encounter high family strain during this developmental transition. Difficulties in parenting may be more likely to occur in families of youth with severe internalizing or externalizing issues. Extension, community, or non-profit interventionists may not be where parents of adolescents with severe issues turn to, and the current study did not specifically examine families with high levels of internalizing or externalizing

issues. But no matter the severity of issues within the family, a supportive, strengths-based, spillover-sensitive curriculum may benefit parents' relationships with their spouse and their children as they navigate difficult issues.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the association between marital and parenting quality from a systemic viewpoint. The methods and sample of this study were used in an effort to examine positive family interactions as opposed to the negative constructs often found in the current literature (Cui & Conger, 2008; Kerig, 1995). This study also examined families during the transition of their children from childhood to adolescence, as this may be a time when the parent-child relationship may begin to change or be renegotiated (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012).

This study has shown that marital quality and commitment are associated with parenting involvement and connectedness. Results also indicated that mothers' marital commitment and parental involvement were moderately associated while father marital quality was moderately associated with father-child connectedness, indicating possible gender differences in approaches to parenting and marital relationships. Mothers and early adolescent children did not agree about levels of mother involvement.

The use of multiple perspectives of parenting adds to gaps in the literature, especially in considering each perspective as valid and insightful in its own right. These comparisons are often not discussed in the current literature in depth (e.g., Rescorla et al., 2013), and are limited to focusing on only mother or adolescent perspectives. The results

of this study suggest that these multiple viewpoints could inform family systems interventions. Taken together these results suggest adolescent perceptions of parenting may be a valid perspective to take into consideration when examining family functioning in relation to parenting. Few studies compare father and adolescent child reports of father parenting, so the comparison in this study is especially enlightening. Additionally, the association between marital and parenting quality may also indicate that positive spillover may exist between the marital and parental subsystems, as opposed to negative spillover on which the majority of the existing literature focuses.

The major limitations of this study were that no directionality could be indicated by correlational nature of the methods, as well as the homogenous nature of the sample. However, the information gained from this correlational study can be used to develop targeted interventions aimed at both marital and parenting curriculums to include information about both marital and parental subsystems, since they are linked.

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