

Parental Supervision and Family Structure: Effects on Adolescent Problem Behaviors

Jeffrey T. Cookston

ABSTRACT. Single-mother, single-father, and intact families from homes ranging from low to high supervision are compared to determine the effects of family structure and parent supervision on adolescent alcohol use, illicit drug use, and delinquency. Using adolescent self-reports, scores were derived for adolescent problem behaviors and rates of supervision by resident parent(s). Results indicate that supervision was lowest for single-father homes, was slightly higher in single-mother homes, and was highest in intact families. Results also indicate that alcohol and drug behaviors, as well as delinquency rates, were highest in single-father homes. Finally, an interaction between supervision levels and the sex of the participant indicates that for adolescent females low and medium levels of supervision serve to protect the adolescent female from problem behavior involvement while males evidenced higher levels of problem behaviors in both medium and low supervision groups. Consideration of the roles played by nonresidential parent involvement, parental supervision, and parent-child relationship quality in understanding problem behaviors occurring within various family structures are discussed. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]

KEYWORDS. Adolescence, parental supervision, family structure, single-parent, problem behavior, delinquency

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In 1992, approximately 24% of children were living in single-parent homes while in 1960 only 9% of children lived in single-parent homes (Demo, 1992). Strikingly, in 1960 the majority of children living in single-parent homes were doing so because one of their parents had died. Today, however, children live in single-parent homes because of divorce, separation, or the fact that their parents were never married (Demo, 1992).

For children born in the 1980s, at least half are expected to live at some point in a single-parent home (Castro, Martin, & Bumpass, 1989). While 85% of children living in single-parent homes today reside with their mothers, the proportion of father-headed homes is increasing faster than that of mother-headed homes (Eggebeen, Snyder, & Manning, 1996; Meyer & Garasky, 1993). In terms of providing custodial support, it appears that fathers are taking a more active role in the lives of their children. Given that family structure today is unpredictable, one has to question whether the effects on children are equally unpredictable. With more than half of first marriages and two-thirds of second marriages expected to end in divorce, the effects of family structure on children deserve investigation.

Three of the most serious health-related concerns for adolescents today include delinquency, illicit substance abuse, and drinking behaviors (Ketterlinus, Lamb, & Nitz, 1994). Not only are these concerns relevant because they can threaten the life of the adolescent, but they are also concerns because early entry into problem behaviors and/or chronic problem behaviors can have consequences for school achievement and psychosocial adjustment. For this paper, delinquency, illicit substance abuse, and drinking behaviors will be considered separately.

Involvement in problem behaviors appears to be related cross-sectionally to age and longitudinally to development (Jessor & Jessor, 1977), making adolescence an ideal time to investigate. Adolescents grouped as heavy drinkers based on self-report data are more likely to also indicate problems at school, use of other drugs, and a higher rate of deviant behaviors (Barnes, 1984). Having the opportunity to engage in problem behaviors also plays a role in the acquisition of those behaviors. Adolescents are more likely to develop problematic behavior patterns when the opportunities to engage in those behaviors are repeatedly made available through a lack of parental intervention (Gottfredson & Hirshi, 1995). This issue of opportunity to engage in problem behavior deserves further consideration.

Family structure, while more static a consideration than opportunity, also appears to be related to problem behavior acquisition. In one sample of over 5,000 12-17 year-old students, subjects from father-absent homes were found to be more likely to exhibit conduct disorders than children from intact families (Goldstein, 1984). Adolescents from single-mother homes were more at risk for experimentation with various illicit substances than those from intact families (Turner, Irwin, & Millstein, 1991). Adolescents from single-parent homes are also more likely to repeatedly use alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs (Selnow, 1987). The relation of single-parent homes to the acquisition of problem behaviors appears to generalize beyond the environment of the single-parent home. In fact, the proportion of single-parent homes in a community appears to be related to the amount of problem behavior involvement for the girls of that community (Simons, Johnson, Beaman, & Conger, 1996). However, it is spurious to conclude that the mere presence of single-parent families in a community is causing an increase in problem behavior. Rather, it may be that something about the community (e.g., poverty, financial stress) or the parenting is influencing both the number of single-parent families and adolescent problem behaviors.

Regardless of the amount of research indicating there are negative consequences for single-parent families, there is a growing body of literature indicating that there are positive effects of being a resident in a single-parent home. Most importantly, adolescents living in single-parent families as a result of divorce or separation typically fare better than adolescents living in intact families with high levels of conflict. It appears that it is more important to have a harmonious home environment than one that has an intact two-parent status characterized by high levels of conflict. One study found that single-parent family status was not related cross-sectionally to delinquency for African American and Caucasian students in the 1st, 4th, and 7th grades (Peeples & Loeber, 1994). Therefore, although adolescents in single-parent families are at risk for the development of problem behavior syndromes, this pattern of problem behavior acquisition has yet to be explained adequately. In fact, the isolation of a single process variable within single-parent homes has yet to be identified to explain why adolescents in single-parent families are at a higher risk for the acquisition of problem behaviors. The identification of such a process could prove useful in developing interventions targeted at protecting

adolescents in single-parent families from the risks that potentially threaten them.

Simply taking into consideration an adolescent's family structure in estimating the potential for the development of problem behavior syndromes assumes a "deficit" view of single-parent homes (Morrison, 1995). In other words, such a position makes the assumption that single-parent homes lack some quality that can be accounted for in intact families. However, some adolescents from intact families experience difficulties across the life cycle without experiencing a divorce (Gonzalez, Field, Lasko, Harding, Yando, & Bendell, 1995). It appears important then to consider components related to family functioning which might influence the adolescent's ability to stay out of or, inversely, become involved in problem behaviors.

One such component is parental supervision of the adolescent. Parental supervision, defined as direct monitoring of the adolescent's activities or being available should the adolescent need assistance, has been related to a number of problem behaviors including school achievement (Coley & Hoffman, 1996), sexual behavior (Benda & Corwyn, 1996; Ensminger, 1990), susceptibility to peer influence (Stacy, Sussman, Dent, & Burton, 1992), illicit drug use (Chilcoat & Anthony, 1996), and delinquency (Ensminger, 1990; Farrington, 1996; Mednick & Buikhuisen, 1988; O'bing, 1995; Peeples & Loeber, 1994; Quinn, Sutphen, Michaels, & Gale, 1994; Weintraub & Gold, 1991; Wilson, 1987).

One study attempting to investigate whether sexual behavior was related to other problem behaviors found that this relation was significant only in the group with low parental supervision (Ensminger, 1990). This finding suggests that while low rates of parental supervision are related to the acquisition of separate problem behaviors, low supervision also is related to the likelihood that adolescents will become involved in multiple problem behaviors simultaneously.

However, it is important to note that while parents may recognize the need for supervision, certain factors including vocational and personal demands influence the availability of parents to supervise their adolescents (Peterson & Stern, 1997). In addition, the amount of supervision parents provide may vary directly as a function of the age of the adolescent and may be subsequently related to rates of problem behavior. For example, in a sample of African-American children ages 11-15, low levels of parental supervision were related to delinquency

for younger adolescents, but the same relation was not supported for older adolescents (Jang & Krohn, 1995).

It is important to note that during adolescence parental monitoring declines notably because the adolescent becomes more capable of taking care of him or herself (Crockett & Petersen, 1993). For pre-school children, supervision must be constant, while in elementary school a child can typically go from five to fifteen minutes without supervision (Peterson, Ewigman, & Kivlahan, 1993). However, currently there is great disagreement regarding how much supervision is enough for older children, including adolescents. Moreover, early adolescents (e.g., 11-12 year olds) and older adolescents (e.g., 16-17 year olds) are likely to require differing amounts and types of supervision.

There is much evidence that family structure and parental supervision rates are related to the acquisition of problem behaviors in adolescents, however, to date, these perspectives have not adequately been considered together. Two studies which have considered family structure and parental supervision together found that low supervision and monitoring were associated with low achievement (Coley & Hoffman, 1996) and conduct disorders (Goldstein, 1984) for children in intact homes, but not for children from intact families. Goldstein (1984) did find that when supervision was high, children from single-mother families were no more likely than children from intact families to become involved in problem behaviors. A possible limitation of these studies, however, was that only single-mother homes were considered without regard for single-father homes.

For girls living with single fathers, however, high monitoring has been found to be associated with delinquency while high levels of supervision for intact families and single-father families with boys was related to low levels of delinquency (Weintraub & Gold, 1991). Given these findings, it appears that sex of parent and age and sex of child are important considerations in estimating the moderating effects of supervision on the child's problem behavior development.

With the proportion of single-mother and single-father families rapidly on the rise, it is important to consider how adolescents are faring, and whether parents are doing their role in providing adequate supervision for their adolescent children in terms of reducing the likelihood that the child will become involved in problem behaviors. Furthermore, with approximately 53% of single-mother families living on less than

\$10,000 annually, it becomes important to consider how supervision rates are affected in conditions of great poverty (Morrison, 1995).

In order to expand the current literature, the present study seeks to investigate the role of family structure and parental supervision by resident parents on the development of adolescent problem behaviors (e.g., alcohol behaviors, illicit drug use, delinquency). In this study the following hypotheses will be investigated:

- I. Intact families will have higher rates of parental supervision than single-parent families.
- II. Adolescents from intact families will have lower rates of problem behaviors compared to children from single-parent families.
- III. Adolescents from homes with lower rates of parental supervision will report more problem behaviors than adolescents from homes with higher rates of supervision.
- IV. Adolescents from single-mother families and adolescents from single-father families will not differ in the levels of problem behavior observed.

METHOD

Participants

The adolescents in this sample are participants in an on-going longitudinal federally funded project study of adolescence. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health has collected data on over 90,000 students in grades 7-12 who completed a questionnaire at their school and an additional random sample of over 15,000 adolescents who were selected for an in-home interview. Approximately 75% of the students who completed the in-home interview had completed the in-school questionnaire (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, Jones, Tabor, Beuhring, Sieving, Shew, Ireland, Bearinger, & Udry, 1997). To gather additional information about family functioning, 86% of the adolescents who completed the in-school interview also had one parent complete a half-hour interview, although the data for these parents are not included in this study.

Two stages of data collection occurred for the longitudinal study, but the data for this study were drawn only from the first wave, which

was collected between April and December 1995. Data for the second wave were collected one year later in 1996. The in-home interview probed issues related to the adolescent's experiences with emotional distress, suicidality, violence, substance use (e.g., cigarette use, alcohol use, marijuana use), sexual behaviors, family context (e.g., parent-child connectedness, parent-adolescent activities, parental presence, parental school expectations, family suicide attempts and/or completions), school context (e.g., school connectedness, school prejudice, attendance), and individual characteristics (e.g., self-esteem, religious identity, perceived risk of untimely death). Many of the questions on the interview were very personal in nature, therefore, to increase honest reporting by participants, the students were allowed to listen to the questions using personal headphones and enter their responses directly into a laptop computer.

Independent Variables

Family structures were categorized into three groups: single-mother families, single-father families, and families including two parents. Single-parent families were included only if an adolescent's biological parents were never married or were divorced. The family structure variable was derived from adolescent reports of who lived with the adolescent and parent reports of marital status. For this study, participants included a total of six hundred eighty-four adolescents, including 322 from single-mother families (males = 157, females = 165), 106 from single-father families (males = 79, females = 27), and 256 from intact families (males = 128, females = 128). These participants were pulled from the larger sample of 15,000 when family structure could be clearly established. Cases which could not be clearly established as being from single-father, single-mother, or intact homes were excluded from this analysis. Participants ranged from 11 to 19 with an average age of 14.8 years. The majority of the sample was Caucasian (64.2%), while other ethnic groups such as African-American (26.8%), American-Indian (2%), Asian American (2.6%), and some who were not classified (4.4%) were represented.

Parental supervision was derived from three items related to how often the resident parent is home when the child leaves for school, how often the parent is home when the adolescent returns and how often the parent is home when the adolescent goes to bed. In the case of adolescents from intact families, an average score was derived from

the sum total of the six items that represent both parents. A *parental supervision grouping variable* was derived by splitting the parental supervision score into three approximately equal groups (e.g., low supervision, medium supervision, high supervision) within each family structure type.

Multiple Dependent Measures

The *alcohol behavior score* was derived from the sum of 18 items related to deleterious outcomes of alcohol consumption including how often the adolescent has consumed alcohol, how often the adolescent has experienced problems with parents, peers, or romantic partners due to alcohol, how often the adolescent regretted using alcohol, etc. (Cronbach's alpha = .87). The dependent measures have no overlap and, thus, are independent estimates of separate problem behaviors. The mean score for alcohol behavior was 3.2 with a range of 0-34.

The *illicit drug behavior score* was derived from 12 items related to illicit drug usage including how often the adolescent drives a car while using drugs, goes to school after using drugs, uses drugs alone, as well as a variety of questions concerning how often the adolescent drinks alcohol while using various drugs such as marijuana, crack-cocaine, inhalants, etc. (Cronbach's alpha = .82). The mean score for drug behavior was .57 with a range of 0-9.

The *delinquency score* was derived from 18 dichotomous items regarding whether the adolescent had shoplifted, injured another person, damaged someone else's property, put graffiti on someone else's property, etc. (Cronbach's alpha = .86). The mean score for delinquency behavior was 4.6 with a range of 0-35.

RESULTS

Because involvement in one problem behavior tends to relate to involvement in other problem behaviors (Jessor & Jessor, 1977), the multiple dependent variables in this study were correlated to determine their relation. Supporting previous findings, the multiple dependent variables in this design were significantly correlated. Correlations between delinquency and alcohol behavior and delinquency and drug behavior are .56 ($p < .001$) and .53 ($p < .001$), respectively. In addi-

tion, the correlation between alcohol and drug behaviors is .65 ($p < .001$). To minimize family wise error rates and because the dependent variables have a high degree of relation, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was calculated to examine the relation between family structure, supervision levels, and the multiple dependent variables.

To test the hypotheses, sex of participant, types of family structures, and levels of parental supervision were entered into the model first, followed by three 2-way interaction effects, and one 3-way interaction. Because parental supervision and family structure were correlated with income, it was entered as a covariate, but it provided no significant results and was excluded from further analyses. The remaining analyses simply test for main and interaction effects. The results of the MANOVA are given in Table 1. Other descriptive statis-

TABLE 1. Multivariate Analysis of Variance Predicting Adolescent Delinquency, Alcohol Behavior and Illicit Drug Use

Independent Variables	Multivariate F		Univariate F	
	Three Dependent Variables Taken Together	Delinquency	Heavy Drinking	Illicit Drug Use
Income (covariate)	ns	ns	ns	ns
<u>Demographic factors</u>				
Sex	5.66***	31.67***	5.38**	9.07***
Male				
Female				
Family structure	5.57****	13.08****	6.98****	9.52****
Single-mother family				
Single-father family				
Intact families				
Parental supervision	1.80*	3.76*	3.54**	3.42**
Low supervision				
Medium supervision				
High supervision				
<u>2-way interactions</u>				
Sex x parental supervision	2.16**		4.81***	341**
Sex x family structure	ns	ns	ns	ns
Family structure x parental supervision	ns	ns	ns	ns
<u>3-way interactions</u>				
Sex x family structure x parental supervision	ns	ns	ns	ns

Note. * $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

tics for the dependent variables such as the means and standard deviation are given by family structure and parental supervision in Table 2.

Multivariate *F*s for sex, supervision, and family structure were significant. Furthermore, an additional *F*-test indicated that supervision rates were significantly different for the different family structures ($F = 1070.98, p < .001$). To test Hypothesis I a planned comparison of intact families versus the pooled variance of the single-parent family groups was performed on the continuous supervision variable. For this comparison the mean score for intact families was weighted with a 2 while the two single-parent groups were weighted with -1 s. This comparison was significant ($t = 44.51, p < .001$). Additional post-hoc comparisons indicated supervision for both single-father and single-mother homes was significantly lower than intact families ($p < .05$).

To test Hypothesis II a series of planned comparisons was performed comparing the three problem behaviors for intact families versus the pooled variance of the two single-parent family groups. In this stage of the analysis, the two single-parent families were weighted with -1 s while the intact family structure was weighted with a 2. Each comparison was significant with adolescents from intact families scoring lower than the two pooled single-parent families on delinquency ($t = -5.27, p < .001$), illicit drug behavior ($t = 3.19, p < .001$), and alcohol use ($t = 3.40, p < .001$). Subsequent post-hoc tests revealed alcohol behavior ($p < .05$), drug behaviors ($p < .05$) as well as delinquency rates ($p < .05$) were highest in single-father homes.

TABLE 2. Adolescent Delinquency, Alcohol Behavior and Illicit Drug Use by Family Structure and Parental Supervision

Variables	Delinquency		Heavy Drinking		Illicit Drug Use	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Family structure	4.6	(5.8)	3.2	(5.0)	.57	(1.4)
Males ($n = 364$)	5.7 [†]	(6.7)	3.6*	(5.6)	.43 [†]	(1.7)
Females ($n = 320$)	3.3	(4.3)	2.7	(5.2)	.39	(1.7)
Family structure	4.6	(5.8)	3.2	(5.0)	.57	(1.4)
Single-mother family ($n = 322$)	5.0	(5.8)	3.2	(4.7)	.57	(1.4)
Single-father family ($n = 106$)	6.6*	(7.8)	4.9*	(6.9)	1.10*	(2.1)
Intact families ($n = 256$)	3.2	(4.5)	2.5	(4.1)	.35	(1.2)
Parental supervision	4.6	(5.8)	3.2	(5.0)	.57	(1.4)
Low supervision ($n = 179$)	5.5 [†]	(6.7)	3.8*	(5.3)	.70*	(1.6)
Medium supervision ($n = 273$)	4.4	(5.4)	3.4	(5.1)	.63	(1.5)
High supervision ($n = 232$)	4.0	(5.5)	2.5	(4.4)	.39	(1.2)

Note. Highest value mean denoted by symbols when significant univariate *F*s were observed.
* $p < .05$. [†] $p < .10$.

To test Hypothesis III a series of planned comparisons was calculated comparing low supervision groups with the pooled variance of both medium and high supervision groups. For this analysis the low supervision group was weighted with a 2 while the medium supervision and high supervision were both weighted with -1 s. The hypothesis that adolescents from homes with lower supervision would have more problem behaviors was not supported for illicit drug use ($t = 1.52, ns$) but was supported for delinquency behavior ($t = 2.32, p < .05$) and was marginally significant for alcohol use ($t = 1.86, p < .10$). Post-hoc tests also indicated that delinquency rates were lowest in homes with high supervision ($p < .05$).

Another series of planned comparisons was calculated to test whether adolescents from single-mother and single-father families differed in levels of problem behavior (Hypothesis IV). In fact, for all three dependent variables, significantly higher levels of problem behavior were observed for single-father homes while adolescents from single-mother homes observed lower scores for delinquent behavior ($t = -1.90, p < .10$), alcohol use ($t = -2.37, p < .05$), and illicit drug use ($t = -2.57, p < .05$).

Regarding differences by sex, males scored higher than females on delinquency ($t = 5.78, p < .001$), alcohol use ($t = 2.36, p < .05$), and illicit drug use ($t = 3.08, p < .01$). While no significant interaction effect was found for family structure by sex or parental supervision group by family structure, a significant interaction effect was found for sex by supervision group for heavy drinking ($F = 4.81, p < .01$) and illicit drug use ($F = 3.41, p < .05$) but not for delinquency. These effects, represented in Figures 1 and 2, indicate lower levels of problem behaviors for both male and female adolescents with high supervision and higher levels of problem behaviors for males in groups from lower levels of alcohol and illicit drug use. However, adolescent females from the low supervision group fared worse than females from groups of high or medium supervision. The findings for females and males for alcohol and illicit drug use differ given different levels of supervision. High levels of supervision were most adaptive for males and females. Females, however, appear to be faring well at medium levels of supervision but not at low levels of supervision while males appear to be having problems at medium and low levels of supervision.

In summary, these results suggest that intact families have higher levels of parental supervision and that lower levels of supervision are

associated with higher levels of delinquency in adolescents. Furthermore, single-parent families appear to have adolescents with higher levels of problem behaviors than intact families where adolescents

FIGURE 1. Two-Way Interaction of Mean Alcohol Behavior Score by Sex and Supervision Level

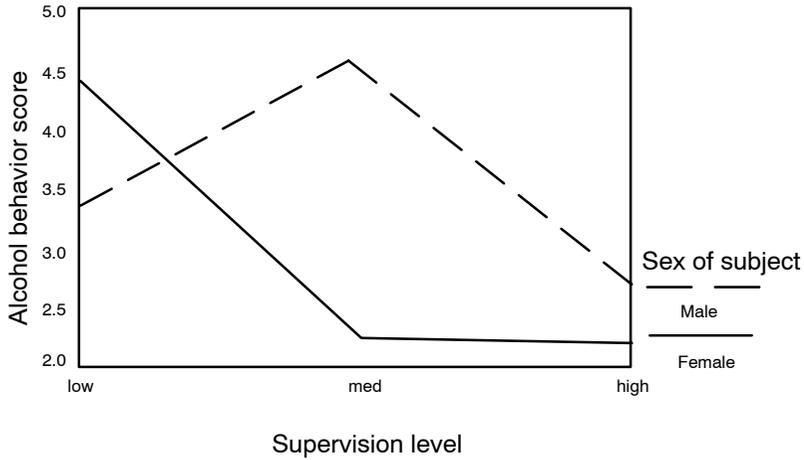
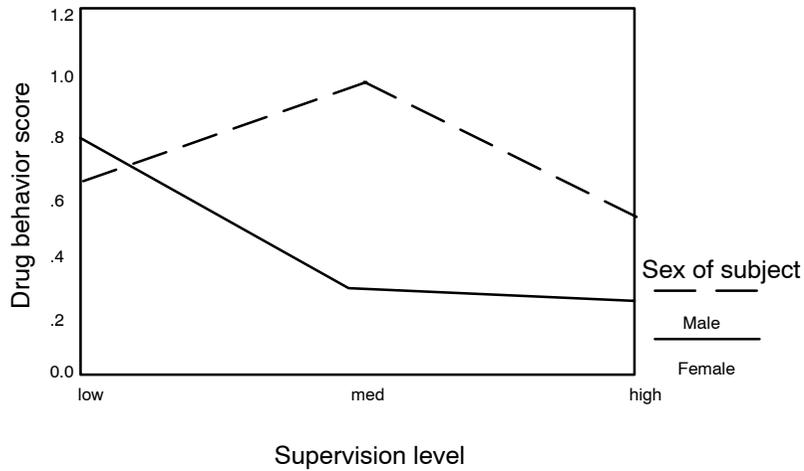


FIGURE 2. Two-Way Interaction of Mean Illicit Drug Use Score by Sex and Supervision Level



from single-father families have the highest levels of problem behaviors.

DISCUSSION

It has been argued here that the effects of family structure on the incidence of adolescent problem behavior would rely on the gender of the adolescent and levels of parental supervision in the home. First, it was hypothesized that intact families would have higher levels of parental supervision of adolescents than single-parent families. Second, adolescents from intact families were hypothesized to have lower rates of problem behavior compared to children from single-parent families. Third, it was hypothesized that adolescents from homes with lower levels of supervision would report more problem behaviors than adolescents from homes with higher levels of parental supervision. Finally, adolescents from the two single-parent homes were hypothesized to have approximately equal levels of problem behaviors.

For the most part, these hypotheses were supported. The results suggest that the role of parent supervision can have a positive impact on deterring the rates of adolescent problem behavior acquisition. Furthermore, with the highest rates of problem behavior and lowest levels of parental supervision observed in single-father homes, supervision must be considered a potentially beneficial protective factor in single-father homes. Because children in single-father homes appear to be at the highest risk for the acquisition of problem behaviors, an intervention program attempting to teach single-fathers about the importance of supervision may be warranted with the expressed goals of increasing awareness of this concern and ultimately increasing the rates of supervision observed. In addition, when adolescents from single-father families were found to have higher levels of problem behavior than those from single-mother families the final hypothesis was not supported. This suggests even more strongly the necessity of high levels of supervision in single-father homes.

One surprising finding concerns the pattern of interaction between supervision level and sex of participant. The results indicate that males from high supervision fared better than males from medium or low supervision, but that problem behavior scores for females became notably lower when in any group except low supervision. It appears that females from homes with low supervision are at the highest risk

for involvement in problem behaviors while males from homes with anything less than high supervision may be at risk. The effects of low supervision on females and males suggest a risk factor which should be addressed in future research.

One limitation of this design, however, was that the duration of single-parent status was not established and taken into account when determining the potentially negative effects of family structure on problem behavior. This is a concern because the negative effects of divorce and separation tend to endure for approximately three years. If many of the subjects in this sample had experienced the divorce of their parents in the past three years, this data was unable to capture that fact and may have contributed to the high rates of problem behavior for adolescents. However, these results do capture the enduring nature of life in a single-parent home, regardless of the separation length. Future research on single-mother, single-father, and intact families may wish to address this concern and attempt to accommodate for this limitation.

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