

Previous longitudinal research has shown that parental monitoring is a powerful predictor of child outcomes. Children from families with low levels of monitoring are particularly at risk for antisocial behavior, difficulties in school, and related problems. We studied whether parental monitoring—as reported by mothers/stepmothers, fathers/stepfathers, interviewers, and teachers—differs across two-parent biological families, stepmother families, and stepfather families. Two-parent biological families were hypothesized to have higher levels of monitoring than stepparent families. Controlling for demographic differences, two-parent biological families showed higher levels of monitoring than stepfather families but did not differ significantly from stepmother families. The significant difference between stepfather and two-parent biological families involved the length of the relationship: only biological families of shorter duration (9 years or fewer) had higher levels of monitoring than stepfather families.

Parental monitoring of children's behavior is one of the more salient parenting practices that impact children's development. Parental monitoring involves tracking the child's whereabouts and activities ([Bulcroft, Carmody, & Bulcroft, 1998](#)); ensuring that the child is in adult-supervised settings; and enforcing the rules related to tracking (e.g., having the child provide a phone number where he or she can be reached; [Dishion & McMahon, 1998](#)). In general, active parental involvement in children's lives has been associated with more positive academic and behavioral outcomes ([Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992](#)). One study ([Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998](#)) suggested that for boys and girls parental monitoring was related to fewer overall problem behaviors and to higher levels of psychosocial adjustment.

Conversely, inadequate parental monitoring is an important indicator of risk, as many childhood problems are mediated through monitoring. Low levels of monitoring have been associated with the development of antisocial behavior ([Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984](#)); substance use and abuse ([Dielman, Butchart, Shope, & Miller, 1991](#); [Dishion & Loeber, 1985](#); [Dishion, Reid, & Patterson, 1988](#); [Fletcher, Darling, & Steinberg, 1995](#); [Steinberg, 1986](#)); male delinquency ([Loeber & Dishion, 1983](#); [Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1987](#)); antisocial peer association ([Chassin, Pillow, Curran, & Molina, 1993](#); [Dielman et al., 1991](#); [Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991](#)); fire-setting ([Kolko & Kazdin, 1986, 1990](#)); and depressed mood ([Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996](#)) in children and adolescents.

According to coercion theory ([Patterson, 1982](#)), poor monitoring, in combination with harsh and inconsistent discipline practices, is a strong predictor of child behavior problems ([Forgatch, 1991](#); [Loeber & Dishion, 1983](#); [Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992](#); [Wasserman, Miller, Pinner, & Jaramillo, 1996](#)). As coercive behavior unfolds in the early years, parents may begin to disengage from the parenting process, thereby decreasing supervision and monitoring of their child. (Alternatively, they may never have been inclined to monitor their children.) Parental monitoring practices may be reflected at home (where parents may monitor children by maintaining an awareness of their child's whereabouts, friends, and activities) or at school (where parents may attend school conferences, have contact with teachers, or be involved in school activities). As children move into the social realm outside of the family during middle childhood, parental

monitoring becomes particularly important. During this period, children may spend increasing amounts of time with peers and in decreasingly supervised settings. As supervision decreases, opportunities for deviant activities increase.

Throughout middle childhood, monitoring continues to be important in the short- and long-term prevention of problem behaviors. [Chilcoat and Anthony \(1996\)](#) found that higher levels of parental supervision and monitoring in middle childhood were associated with a 2-year delay (on average) in the onset of drug use. [Dishion et al. \(1991\)](#) found that, after controlling for prior levels of peer rejection and antisocial behavior, lower levels of parental monitoring in middle childhood were predictive of children's involvement with deviant peer groups in early adolescence.

As children move into adolescence, monitoring of their activities may become increasingly difficult. In their movement toward autonomy, adolescents may actively avoid monitoring by spending time in unsupervised contexts ([Stoolmiller, 1994](#)). [Patterson and Stouthamer-Loeber \(1984\)](#) found individual differences in parental monitoring practices to be correlated with levels of antisocial behavior in boys. The consistent association between low levels of monitoring and negative child outcomes supports the notion that prevention and intervention efforts should focus on monitoring. Such prevention efforts are important, as early problematic behavior can result in severe and negative developmental trajectories.

Monitoring and family structure

 

Various family types exist in the United States. Accordingly, many children grow up in families that change structure at least once. It is estimated that at least 50% of first marriages end in divorce ([Cherlin, 1992](#)). Single-parent families often are temporary, with over 50% of those who divorce remarrying ([Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995](#)). For children under the age of 18, about 68% live with two parents, approximately 16% live with one parent, and nearly 20% live in stepparent households ([United States Bureau of the Census, 1998](#)).

Studies of adolescence suggest that monitoring may vary according to family type. For example, some researchers have suggested that stepfamilies are characterized by lower levels of control and monitoring than two-parent biological families ([Henderson & Taylor, 1999](#)). Given the diversity of family structures and the role of monitoring in affecting outcomes, it is important to understand how monitoring practices differ across family types. Levels of monitoring may be determined by family composition and the availability of parental figures ([Dishion & McMahon, 1998](#)) and may be further determined by the general involvement of parents in their child's life.

Stepfamilies may encounter challenges in their monitoring practices for a variety of reasons. Remarriage impacts the subsystems within the family (including the parent-child, marital, and sibling relationships) and redefines the family system ([Hetherington &](#)

[Clingempeel, 1992](#)). Prior research indicates that stepfamilies experience higher levels of childrearing conflict, lower levels of cohesion, higher levels of stress, and more problems in childrearing and child adjustment than families in first marriages ([Bray, 1988](#); [Bray & Berger, 1993](#); [Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993](#)). Additionally, because the marital relationship in stepfamilies may be more unstable and conflictual than the marital relationship in biological families (Bray; [Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998](#); [Visher & Visher 1988](#)), parental monitoring in stepfamilies may more likely be affected by tension occurring within the marital relationship and between each parent and the child. Parents in stepfamilies may be more likely to disagree on supervision and monitoring practices, potentially affecting the quantity and quality of child monitoring. Stepparents may bring expectations and practices from their family of origin and from their experiences in previous family situations ([Ganong & Coleman, 1997](#)). Such expectations and practices may include parenting skills and, more specifically, monitoring practices. Further, children and parents in stepfamilies are likely to have divergent perceptions of a stepparent's role in parenting the child ([Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998](#); [Fine, Kurdek, & Hennigen, 1992](#)).

There is a paucity of research on parental monitoring differences between stepmother and stepfather families. In a study by [Kurdek and Fine \(1993\)](#), adolescents living with stepfathers reported higher levels of permissive parenting than those living with stepmothers, suggesting that monitoring may have been lower in stepfather families. Other studies suggest that stepfathers tend to utilize a disengaged parenting style, including low levels of involvement, discipline, and monitoring ([Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992](#)). Stepfathers of preadolescents are most effective in forming positive relationships with stepchildren if they do not make early attempts at discipline or control ([Hetherington, 1993](#); [Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992](#)), as such attempts may interfere with the stepfather-child relationship and may be more actively avoided by new stepfathers. Hetherington and Clingempeel reported that negative reactions by children toward stepfathers led stepfathers to disengage from attempts to involve themselves in their stepchildren's lives. Some authors have suggested that, owing to the social roles of women in this culture, stepmothers try harder to become parent figures to their stepchildren at an earlier point in time than do stepfathers ([Brand, Clingempeel, & Bowen-Woodward, 1988](#)), which may partially explain children's ratings of closer relationships with stepmothers than with stepfathers ([Sturgess, Dunn, & Davies, 2001](#)). It remains unclear, however, whether monitoring in stepmother and stepfather families differs.

In this study, we examined parental monitoring across stepmother, stepfather, and two-parent biological families in children between the ages of 5 and 8. This is an age group in which there has been a relatively limited amount of research to date (most work has focused on preadolescents and adolescents). We considered whether the constituents of parental monitoring differ across family types by examining whether comparable reliability exists in two-parent biological families, in stepmother, and in stepfather families for scales of monitoring. We also explored whether there are differences in the amount of monitoring provided across family types by using a construct score representing mother-, father-, teacher-, and interviewer-reported monitoring. We

expected to find differences in the constituents of monitoring across family types, with the reliable indicators of monitoring in stepmother and stepfather families appearing more similar to one another than the indicators of monitoring in two-parent biological families. Based on prior research, we also expected that two-parent biological families would have higher levels of monitoring than either stepfamily type.

Method

 

Participants

Stepmother/biological father families ($n= 32$), biological mother/stepfather families ($n= 77$), and two-parent biological families ($n= 82$) participated in this study. All participating families had a child between the ages of 5 and 8. Families were recruited from the Eugene/Springfield, OR, area via newspaper advertisements, flyers placed on bulletin boards, and newsletters. Families who contacted the project office were screened to ensure that they met criteria for participation. To qualify for participation, parents needed to be married or to be in an ongoing relationship for at least 6 months. In families with more than one child between the ages of 5 and 8, stepchildren were chosen for participation over biological children. When two stepchildren or two biological children were present, one child was randomly selected to be the focus of this study. The sample reflected the greater population of Eugene/Springfield. Demographic information for the sample by family type is reported in [Table 1](#).

For the remainder of this paper, the following abbreviations are used: stepmother/biological father (SM) families, biological mother/stepfather (SF) families, and two-parent biological (B) families. Reports from both parents in the custodial family were included.

Measures

Parent interview

The Parent Interview (PINT; [Capaldi & Patterson, 1989](#)), a face-to-face, in-home interview, lasts approximately 45 minutes. The six items taken from the 91-item interview included the following: where the child plays when with friends, whether the parent knows the friends' parents' names, how well the parent knows the friends' parents, how often the parents talk with the friends' parents, how frequently the parent visited their child's daycare/school in the past year, and how often the parent discusses school with their child. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher values indicating greater parental monitoring/knowledge.

Reliability indicators for this and other study measures are included in [Table 2](#) and are discussed in the *Results* section. For each measure, a monitoring score was computed by taking the mean of the monitoring items, with higher scores indicating greater

monitoring. (When necessary, individual items were rescaled to maintain consistent response scales for all items from each instrument.)

Parent interviewer impressions

Parent Interviewer Impressions (PIIMP; [Capaldi & Patterson, 1989](#)) is a 28-item rating form that interviewers completed immediately following the home visit; two items—rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree/never*) to 4 (*strongly agree/very often*)—were used as indicators of parental monitoring: the extent to which the mother and father "keep track of what the child is doing" and are generally "aware of their child's activities and whereabouts."

Walker-mcconnell scale of school competence/social adjustment

The Walker-McConnell Scale of School Competence/Social Adjustment (WMS; [Walker, Shinn, O'Neill, & Ramsey, 1987](#)), a 37-item questionnaire, was mailed to each child's teacher or daycare provider. Designed to assess teacher ratings of peer-to-peer social-behavioral competencies, the WMS uses 5-point Likert frequency ratings ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*frequently*). The test has been normed using a national sample, has shown high levels of internal consistency, and has demonstrated various types of validity (Walker et al.). For our study, we selected the following three items:

- 1 "Do this student's parent(s) show interest in his/her school progress (e.g., coming to conferences and/or open houses, responding to notes or calls about schoolwork, or helping him/her with homework)?"
- 2 "Do you think that the parents track this student's behavior outside of school adequately, or does s/he seem to have a lot of unsupervised time when s/he does as s/he pleases or gets into trouble?"
- 3 "Do the parents seem concerned about behavior problems or attendance problems, and do they follow through when informed of such problems?"

Analyses

To examine the structure of monitoring across family types, we conducted separate reliability analyses by family type (i.e., B, SM, and SF) for each indicator of monitoring described above. We then examined the internal consistency of the scale (i.e., Cronbach's alpha or correlation, in the case of a two-item indicator), which allowed us to identify any scale-level and/or item-level similarities across family types. We also examined the loadings of individual items related to the overall scale (item-total correlations). To examine levels of monitoring across groups, we computed an analysis of variance (ANOVA) model. The lack of item-level differences across groups allowed us to compute scores on scales with identical items for each group. Scales were computed using equal weighting of all indicators on each instrument.

Results

Controlling for demographic differences

As is shown in [Table 1](#), SF, SM, and B families differed significantly on several demographic variables. The length of the relationship differed significantly between B families and stepfamilies, with B families reporting more established relationships than SM or SF families ($M= 11.8, 3.8, \text{ and } 3.7$ years, respectively). Scheffe post hoc comparisons revealed significant differences in mothers'/stepmothers' and fathers'/stepfathers' level of education, with a greater proportion of parents in B families having completed college or graduate school than parents in SF families. Similar results were obtained with the [Hollingshead \(1975\)](#) ratings of fathers'/stepfathers' occupational status. We also found that parents in B families were significantly older than parents in SM and SF families. On the remaining demographic indicators, we found no significant differences between the family configurations. However, the sample was disproportionate across family types. To ensure that these significant differences did not influence our results, we controlled for their effects by using the standardized residual scores. For each of the five scales (WMS, mother/stepmother PIIMP, father/stepfather PIIMP, mother/stepmother PINT, and father/stepfather PINT), we created residualized monitoring scores that controlled for variance owing to mother educational status, father educational status, father occupational status, mother age, and father age. These residualized scores were utilized in the remaining analyses.

Reliability analyses

The item-total correlations for each measure are shown in [Table 2](#). Monitoring scores residualized for demographic differences are included in parentheses. (The unresidualized scores are included for comparison purposes only.) In accordance with reliability theory and prior work ([Capaldi & Patterson, 1989](#)), any item with an item-total correlation below .20 was excluded from the construct indicators; these values are indicated with dashes in [Table 2](#).

Most notable of these results is the similarity in values across family types for items on each indicator. For instance, item-total correlations for the three WMS items across the three family types ranged from .68 to .85, with less than .10 variability for any given item (regardless of whether the residualized or nonresidualized scores were examined). Similarly, Cronbach's alphas for the WMS using the residualized values were $B = .87$, $SM = .88$, and $SF = .90$. This pattern was repeated at lower values on the PIIMP, from .34 to .70 for the residualized scores. Because the PIIMP was a two-item scale, these values are Pearson correlation coefficients that represent the internal consistency of the overall scale. The pattern also was evident for items on the PINT scale, as the most robust item-total correlations appeared across family types. However, there were some differences across family types on the PINT. Three items had item-total correlations greater than .20 in one or two (but not all) of the family types:

1 "Outside of organized activities (e.g., school, church, or daycare time), where does

your child most often play with his/her friends?"

2 "How many times did you visit your child's school/preschool/daycare during the last year (e.g., open house, school sponsored event, visit, or in-class assistance)?"

3 "How often do you talk with your child about his/her schooling?"

It is difficult to discern a pattern among these insufficient item-total correlations for a particular informant or family type. It appears that these simply may be less reliable indicators. These low-reliability PINT items were excluded from further analyses. Thus Cronbach's alphas for the PINT scale (excluding the low-reliability PINT items) were $B = .90$, $SM = .84$, and $SF = .91$ for mother-reported data and were $B = .89$, $SM = .89$, and $SF = .90$ for father-reported data.

In the reliability analyses, the item-total correlations were consistently lowest in the SM families. However, these differences were subtle and did not suggest that any items were inadequate for use in subsequent analyses. In the final column of [Table 2](#), we present the combined sample reliability coefficients, which are all in the acceptable range of greater than .20 ([Capaldi & Patterson, 1989](#)).

Monitoring composite score

We next sought to form a composite score from the five scales described above. First, we created a scale score for each of the five measures (i.e., the mean of the residualized item values for each scale). For example, a WMS scale score was calculated from the mean of the three residualized values. For the parent PINT scores, only the three items with satisfactory item-total correlations across all three family types using the residualized scores (i.e., knows friends' parents' names, how well knows friends' parents, how often talks with friends' parents) were included.

Next, scores on the five scales were equally weighted to form an overall monitoring composite score. The alpha reliability of this composite was .65. The item-total correlations were above .20 for each scale for each family type. Thus, combining across the family types produced a composite with satisfactory interitem reliability.

Differences by family type in the level of monitoring

We examined group differences in monitoring levels by conducting a one-way ANOVA, with family type as the independent variable and our residualized monitoring composite score as the dependent variable. Results revealed a significant difference across family type in the composite monitoring score, $F(2, 188) = 3.09, p < .05$. A Bonferroni post hoc comparison test revealed significantly higher values for B than for SF families ($p < .05$), with the mean level of monitoring for B families being approximately .5 standard deviations higher than that for SF families.

Because the length of relationship differed significantly between B families and stepfamilies, we next sought to examine whether relationship length contributed to the differences found between B and SF families' levels of monitoring. We formed a trilevel

split among the B families: the lower third of the B distribution had relationship lengths of less than 9 years (comparable to the range of relationship length for the SM and SF families), the middle third of the B distribution had relationship lengths of 9 to 13 years, and the upper third of the B distribution had relationship lengths of 13+ years. The mean relationship length and mean monitoring scores for each of these groups is presented in [Table 3](#). A one-way ANOVA with the monitoring composite as the dependent variable indicated a trend for differences in monitoring between the five groups, $F(4, 186) = 2.37$, $p < .06$. A Bonferroni post hoc test comparing all stepfather families with B families who had been in a relationship for less than 9 years found significantly lower levels of monitoring for the SF families ($p < .05$). No other significant group differences were found.

Discussion

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We hypothesized that there would be greater similarity in the structure of monitoring between SM parents and SF parents than between B parents and either stepfamily type. That is, we expected that the reliable indicators of monitoring for SM and SF families might be different than those for B families. Had this been the case, our analyses of the internal consistency of the five monitoring measures would have produced scales for the B parents with items that were eliminated for SF and SM parents owing to inadequate item-total correlations (and vice versa). Contrary to these expectations, we found interitem similarity across all three family types. The three PINT items were the only exceptions; two of these involved the parents' knowledge of children's activity at school, and one involved the parents' knowledge of where children play. There was no consistent pattern across family types on these items.

Thus, it does not appear that the elements of monitoring differ between SM, SF, or B families. The outcome of the analyses reported here makes it possible to develop a single measure of monitoring that is appropriate for use across family types; contrary results would have increased the complexity of measuring monitoring across family types. For instance, if stepmothers tended to focus on the child's friends but varied in the extent to which they got involved in the child's school, a measure sampling from both domains might provide a divergent measure of monitoring levels than one sampling from a single domain. Indeed, the additional analyses on the development of the construct measure reveal a degree of convergence among indicators that would be expected for a sample having a high level of homogeneity in the relations among items.

Our analyses of the level of monitoring across family types partially were consistent with our hypotheses. We found higher levels of monitoring in B parents than in SF parents when demographic differences were controlled. This effect held when only those B families with relationship lengths comparable to parents in the SM and SF families were examined, suggesting that the effect does not result merely from the amount of time that the parents have spent together. Interestingly, B parents with longer relationship lengths demonstrated poorer monitoring than B parents with shorter relationship lengths. The

differences between B and SF families show statistical significance and, as is shown by the mean levels in [Table 3](#), are of practical importance. The mean monitoring score for B families with relationship lengths of less than 9 years was approximately .5 standard deviations higher than that for SF families. We did not find significant differences between B and SM families.

Prior studies with adolescents have suggested that stepfamilies may have poorer monitoring skills than biological families. Our results extend this work downward to middle childhood. However, associating risk with stepfamilies, in general, may not be completely accurate. SM families did not differ significantly from either B or SF families; thus, they appear to fall between these two groups in their levels of monitoring. This challenges a common assumption that the stress of the repartnering process per se or the lack of a biological bond may lead to deterioration in the care that stepfamilies take to oversee their child's activities ([Hetherington & Henderson, 1997](#)). The several potential explanations for the lack of differences between SM and B families in this study are described below.

First, the circumstances leading to stepmothers entering an existing family may differ from those for a stepfather. Although joint custody is an increasingly common resolution to divorce, mothers more commonly are granted custody. Circumstances leading fathers to retain custody are limited and may include the death of the biological mother or the mother having problems that affect her ability to parent adequately (e.g., substance abuse, psychological problems, or incarceration). Under these circumstances, family members may be more likely to expect a stepmother to replace the biological mother. Stepmothers may fulfill these expectations, which would help to explain why monitoring levels in SM families are more similar to those of B families. This may contrast with SF families, in which there may be less expectation for a stepfather to assume the biological father's role. Further work is needed to tease apart whether the differences found between B and SF families (and the similarities found between B and SM families) result from the precipitating factors that led to the stepparent arrangement between SM and SF families (e.g., death of a spouse, severe mental illness, etc.) or whether they result from parent gender effects (mother vs. father roles). Substantial variability exists across stepfamilies, and studies examining within-group differences in stepfamilies suggest that the precipitating causes of stepparenthood are important factors to consider (e.g., [Pasley, 1988](#); [Vinick & Lanspery, 2000](#)).

Implications for practice

The results reported here have a number of implications for therapists working with families. When working with any family type, it is important for a therapist to build a trusting relationship with the family and to facilitate the coordination of parenting efforts. Owing to transitions and newly formed relationships, stepfamily relationships may be more fragile than B family relationships. In addition, parents entering stepfamily relationships may have established ideas about discipline and child rearing. Therapists can work with such parents to identify areas of difference and agreement. Furthermore, therapists can help parents to nurture the marital relationship while negotiating and

collaborating on discipline strategies. Acknowledging the value of each parent's perspective and emphasizing the importance of working together may help to strengthen the bond between the parents and the bond between the therapist and the family.

In addition to being aware of family dynamics, it is important that therapists acknowledge their own stereotypes (if any exist) regarding the relationship between family type and monitoring. Research demonstrates that there are pervasive societal stereotypes about the characteristics of stepparents (e.g., [Coleman & Ganong, 1997](#); [Ganong & Coleman, 1997](#)). In the present study, we found little difference across families in parental conceptualizations of monitoring. Therapists working with stepfamilies are advised to inquire about the family's conceptualization of monitoring, rather than assuming that monitoring in stepfamilies differs from monitoring in biological families. Therapists can then structure treatment based on the family's current situation and provide the appropriate levels of teaching, support, and guidance.

Despite the lack of differences in the elements of monitoring among the different family types reported in this study, lower levels of monitoring were found in SF families. This suggests the importance for therapists to carefully assess levels of monitoring within SF families. Increasing supervision and monitoring would be an important focus in any family displaying lower levels of these parenting skills. To this end, parent management training (PMT; [Kazdin, 1997](#)) has been found to be effective in helping parents develop more effective discipline strategies and increase levels of monitoring. PMT has effectively changed child and parent behavior in families referred for child noncompliance ([Forehand et al., 1979](#)). This type of training can be useful for parents in many family types. In working with any family, the use of PMT alone may be insufficient given additional risk factors (e.g., marital difficulties and parental depression). Therapists must assess each parent's discipline practices and help the parents work toward a consensus, if necessary.

Therapists can help parents to establish specific guidelines to increase child monitoring levels. These guidelines might include knowing the parents of the child's friends, setting up check-in times for the child, and/or helping families to establish rules regarding communication of the child's whereabouts. Even in middle childhood, constant communication about the child's whereabouts can help develop patterns of supervision that can prevent deviant behavior from occurring.

Outcomes may be further improved when monitoring within the family is complemented with greater accountability in other contexts. Communication between community, school, and parents regarding the child's whereabouts may assist parents in keeping track of their child's activities, thereby decreasing the likelihood that the child will follow a deviant path. Treatment programs for high-risk children have begun to address the ecology of children and to recognize the importance of extending treatment into the child's environment ([Chamberlain & Reid, 1998](#); [Henggeler, Cunningham, Pickrel, & Schoenwald, 1996](#)).

Schools are important in the collaboration between parents and community. Monitoring within the schools has proved particularly beneficial to attending students. The results of one intervention study demonstrated that monitoring within the school context, including the playground, was associated with decreases in child aggression ([Stoolmiller, Eddy, & Reid, 2000](#)). Another program that included family and school collaboration found that an increase in parent involvement at school led to improvements in child functioning ([McDonald & Sayger, 1998](#)). School-based programs have been effective in prevention efforts for at-risk youth; interventionists working in community contexts can assist school personnel to implement monitoring practices and to establish links with parents. School involvement is particularly important for families in which children are not as accountable to parents at home because of the frequent physical absence of a parent or a general lack of parental involvement.

Limitations

Several limitations of the present study require comment. First, the participants in this study were self-selected. Families responded to advertisements and flyers, suggesting that they were a generally well-functioning group. As a result, families facing more challenges may not have been adequately represented. In addition, there were significant differences between groups on certain demographic characteristics. Parents in B families were significantly older and more educated than parents in stepfamilies, suggesting that they may have had more experience with monitoring and discipline. Younger families may also experience lower socioeconomic status. However, these differences were statistically controlled for in our ANOVA models, resulting in robust differences between B and SF families.

The second limitation of this study involved the measures. Levels of monitoring may not have been accurately assessed by the PINT, as the concept of monitoring may be difficult to capture in such a short interview. In addition, the results of the interview may fail to represent the actual level of parental monitoring. The WMS also may have been limiting. Because stepfamilies frequently are stereotyped and are seen as less functional and as having more problems than the idealized nuclear family ([Ganong & Coleman, 1997](#)), the teacher-reported WMS may be biased against parents in stepfamilies, therefore adding bias to the data (i.e., stereotypes of stepfamilies may have influenced teachers to report lower scores for SF families). Future research could ask teachers to indicate their understanding of family structure and could add this rating as a covariate in the analyses.

Another measurement issue involved the absence of information in the data about the amount of time children in stepfamilies spent with their other biological parent. It is likely that there is considerable variation among participants on this variable. Children who spend the majority of their time within their stepfamily may differ in important ways from children who spend more time with the other biological parent. In particular, children in the latter category may experience inconsistencies in monitoring across these different contexts. Also, stepfamily parents may not be aware of the other biological parent's monitoring practices; this may introduce circumstances in which an otherwise well-monitored child is at risk for problems. In view of these concerns, future research

examining monitoring of children in stepfamilies should focus on the amount of time spent with the other biological parent.

A final limitation of this study involves the descriptive information that was gathered on participating families regarding custody issues, nonresidential parents, and children living outside of the home. No information was gathered concerning why custody was awarded to a particular parent or concerning the influence of the nonresidential parent on the child. Thus it is possible, for example, that the nonresidential father was involved in school-related issues and that this information was not captured by the measures. Future research should examine the role of the nonresidential parent in the child's life. In addition, because no information was gathered on children living outside of the home, we could not distinguish parents who had no children from those who had children living outside of the home. Stepparents without children may not have had the opportunity to develop parenting skills or to understand the importance of monitoring.

Summary and conclusion

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This research has provided preliminary evidence that SM, SF, and B families differ little in their conceptualization of monitoring, indicating that intervention efforts need not address different elements of monitoring across family types. However, the results suggest that SF families warrant a greater degree of attention in terms of prevention and intervention; this family type appears to maintain lower levels of monitoring than B families. We did not find the expected similar trends in SM families, which may result in part from the smaller sample size of SM families, who are difficult to locate/recruit. Future research may help to clarify whether these results developed from substantive differences between SM and SF families or from potentially confounding variables.

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