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Stress, Coping, and Adjustment in Mothers and Young Adolescents in Single- and Two-Parent Families[1]

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Compared stress, coping, and psychological adjustment in single (divorced or separated) and married mothers and their young adolescent children. Single mothers reported more daily hassles related to economic, family, and personal health problems, and more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychoticism. Single mothers also reported using more coping strategies related to accepting responsibility and positive reappraisal. After controlling for level of family income, differences in family hassles and coping strategies remained significant. The two groups did not differ on subtypes of symptoms after controlling for income, but single mothers still reported more total psychological symptoms. No differences were found between children in these two family constellations on maternal reports of emotional/behavioral problems or on children's self-reported emotional/behavioral problems, stressful events, or coping. Implications of these findings for adjustment to life in single-parent families are discussed.

It is estimated that 60% of children born in 1984 or later will spend some time living in a single-parent family as a result of parental separation or divorce. In any given year, one in five families with children under the age

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of 18 will be a single-parent family. Further, children who are in a single-parent home as a result of marital disruption spend an average of 5 years in that social environment (Norton & Glick, 1986). As the single-parent family becomes a prevalent and enduring form of family life, it is critical to understand the types of stresses and strains confronting individuals in single-parent families and how they adapt to these stresses. These processes may be particularly important to community psychologists in the design and implementation of interventions to prevent possible adverse effects of divorce for parents and children (e.g., Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, & Cowen, 1989; Bloom, Hodges, Kern, & McFaddin, 1985; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985).

The majority of studies concerning adjustment to living in a single-parent family have focused on families during the time immediately following the marital disruption when individuals are still adapting to the divorce itself. The findings generally indicate that divorce has short-term adverse consequences for parents and children (e.g., Camara & Resnick, 1988; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Stolberg & Anker, 1984), especially boys (e.g., Hetherington et al., 1982; Hodges, Buchshaum, & Tierney, 1983; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). On the other hand, studies that followed up families after this initial period have found mixed results concerning children's and parents' adjustment. Several studies reported that there are enduring problems associated with parental divorce 6 to 10 years after the divorce, with more problems noted for boys than for girls in single-parent families, particularly when mothers' reports are used to assess children's problems (e.g., Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Rickel & Langner, 1985; Wallerstein, 1987). In contrast, other investigators have failed to find any differences in self-reports of maladjustment for children and adolescents in divorced and intact families 6 or more years postdivorce (e.g., Enos & Handal, 1986; Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988).

With these varying results, the enduring effects of living in single-parent families remain unclear. Perhaps some of the variability in the findings of these studies is due to the use of different informants (children, parents, clinicians) to rate levels of children's maladjustment and the absence of comparison samples of nondivorced families in some studies. For example, in findings reported by Allison and Furstenberg (1989), the effects of divorce on children's adjustment appeared different when examining parents', teachers', and children's reports. It is also unclear whether single mothers experience more psychological symptoms than their married counterparts (e.g., Forehand, Fauber, Long, Brody, & Slotkin, 1987; McClanahan, 1983). Clarifying individual differences in response to divorce is important in order to identify appropriate targets for preventive interventions.

The long-term adjustment of parents and children in single-parent families is likely to be due at least in part to the ongoing stressors associated

with this family configuration and the ways that parents and children cope (including social support processes) with these stressors (e.g., Forehand et al., 1987; Hetherington & Camara, 1984). Paradigms concerned with stress and coping processes (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Moos, 1984) offer a useful perspective to examine the experiences and functioning of members of single-parent families. These paradigms emphasize the occurrence of major and minor stressful events, individuals' efforts to cope with these events, and the symptoms of psychological and physical disorder associated with stress. Further, it is important to consider not only individuals' own stress and symptom levels but also the influence of family members' symptoms and stress on one another (e.g., Cohen, Burt, & Bjork, 1987; Compas, Howell, Phares, Williams, & Ledoux, 1989b).

Several authors have noted the potential importance of studying the daily stresses and strains confronting mothers and children in divorced families (e.g., Hetherington & Camara, 1984). Interview data reported by Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1981) indicate that 1 and 2 years after their divorce single parents are faced with more economic and household problems and stresses than their married counterparts. However, data on the types of stressors experienced by single parents have not been assessed on standardized measures of stress over longer periods of time postdivorce. Although specific stressors for children related to divorce have been identified (e.g., Farber, Felner, & Primavera, 1985; Sandler, Wolchik, Braver, & Fogas, 1986), direct comparisons of children from single-parent and two-parent families on the types of ongoing daily stressors which may characterize these two family constellations have not been made. Similarly, recent studies have examined the types of coping strategies employed by single mothers and their children and the associations between coping and psychological symptoms (e.g., D'Ercole, 1988; Krantz, Clark, Pruyn, & Usher, 1985; Propst, Pardington, Ostrom, & Watkins, 1986). However, comparisons of coping of mothers and children in single- and two-parent families have not been made.

The current study examined stress, coping, and psychological symptoms in mothers and their young adolescent children in single-parent families and intact (first-time married) families. The occurrence of a variety of major and minor stressful events and a wide range of psychological symptoms as well as the use of a variety of coping strategies were compared between single and married mothers and their children. We expected that single mothers would report more daily hassles and psychological symptoms and rate their children as experiencing more emotional/behavioral problems than married mothers. However, based on the recent findings of Enos and Handal (1986) and Kurdek and Sinclair (1988), no differences were expected in children's self-reports of maladjustment as a function of family type. Gender differences were examined to determine whether the higher levels of maladjust-

ment in boys found in studies of the short-term effects of divorce would be observed over a longer period of time. Due to the lack of prior research comparing coping in single and married mothers and their children, this aspect of the study was considered exploratory. The association between mothers' and children's reports of their stress and psychological symptoms also was examined to see if there were differences in these relations as a function of family configuration. The young adolescent sample in the present study represents an age group that may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of parental divorce (cf. Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988).

The varying results reported in prior studies also highlight the importance of several issues related to research design and choice of measures which were addressed in the present study (cf. Forehand et al., 1987; Hetherington & Camara, 1984; Long & Forehand, in press). First, detailed demographic data were obtained in order to control for differences in socioeconomic status (SES) and determine whether differences between single- and two-parent families were attributable to family configuration or SES. Particular attention was given to the substantial differences in income that are typically found between single- and two-parent families. Rather than being treated as a methodological confound in comparisons of these two groups, income differences were examined as a possible source of stress that distinguishes single- and two-parent families (e.g., Atkeson, Forehand, & Rickard, 1982). Second, measures with well-established norms were selected to allow for evaluation of the clinical significance of symptoms and emotional/behavioral problems reported by mothers and children. Third, reports were obtained from both mothers and children to compare the perspectives of both informants on stress and adjustment in these two family constellations.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 37 single mothers (29 divorced, 8 separated) and 179 first-time married mothers and their young adolescent children living in the rural northeast portion of Vermont (all participants were white). There were 20 girls and 17 boys in the single-parent families and 97 girls and 82 boys in the two-parent families. These families are a subset of a sample of 309 families participating in a larger study of stress and coping in young adolescents and their parents. Mothers who had remarried or were living with a new partner, widowed mothers, and mothers who had never married were excluded from the present analyses, as prior studies have indicated that these groups differ substantially from divorced, single-parent families (e.g., Fel-

ner, Farber, Ginter, Boike, & Cowen, 1980). Only one child from each family was included in the present analyses. In families where more than one child from the family provided data, one of the children was randomly chosen for the present analyses.

The demographic characteristics of mothers and children in the single- and two-parent families are presented in Table I. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated that single- and two-parent families differed on these demographic variables, $F(8, 167) = 56.56, p < .001$. Specifically, single mothers reported less family income, $F(1, 174) = 56.52, p < .001$, and fewer adults living in the home, $F(1, 174) = 391.95, p < .001$. Single-parent families' mean income was in the range from $9,000 to $11,999, whereas the mean income of two-parent families was in the range from $20,000 to $24,999. Single- and two-parent families did not differ on maternal education, number of hours worked outside the home by the mother, or number of children in the home. Mothers in single- and two-parent families did not differ in SES as determined by the Hollingshead (1975) four-factor index. Children ranged in age from 10 to 15 years old, with a mean of 12.5 years ($SD = 1.0$) and were attending the sixth through eighth grades. Children in the single- and two-parent families did not differ in age or grade in school. This sample was comparable to the population in this section of Vermont in annual income, percentage of two-parent families, education, and family size (Vermont Office of Policy Research and Coordination, 1988).

Time since the divorce or separation in the single-parent families ranged from approximately 1 year to 15 years ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 3.7$). In a comparison between groups of single-parent families (less than 2 years, 2–4 years,

Table I. Demographic Data for Single- and Two-Parent Families

	Single-parent families		Dual-parent families		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F* value[b]
No. of adults in household	1.12	0.49	2.01	0.12	391.95[c]
No. of children in household	2.55	0.94	2.50	0.94	ns
No. of hours mother works outside home	26.46	19.10	30.63	17.45	ns
Family income[a]	9,000–11,999		20,000–24,999		56.52[c]
Mother's education	13.45	2.35	13.61	2.21	ns
SES (Hollingshead)	39.00	10.92	41.09	12.77	ns
Age of child in study	11.64	0.99	12.01	0.98	ns
Grade in school of child	6.55	0.62	6.81	0.75	ns

[a]Family income was reported in terms of increments of $5,000 and these means reflect the average range for each group.
[b]ns indicates *F* value was nonsignificant.
[c]$p < .001$.

more than 5 years since time of separation),[3] no differences were found among the groups on any of the demographic variables with the exception of maternal education. Women who had been divorced the longest had somewhat less education ($M = 11.6$, $SD = 0.97$) than women in the other two groups ($M = 13.7$, $SD = 1.7$ and $M = 13.6$, $SD = 2.5$). Further, no differences among these groups were found on any of the measures of stress, coping, symptoms, or adjustment.

Procedures

All students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in eight rural schools were given a letter of informed consent to take home to their parents. Approximately half of the available families volunteered to take part in the study. Participation was completely voluntary and each family was paid $25 for completion of the forms. Questionnaires were completed anonymously (identified only by a code number for each family).

Students completed their questionnaires at school in groups of approximately 10 students each with a research assistant available to explain directions and answer any questions. The measures were administered in two 50-minute sessions held approximately 1 week apart. Students were given an envelope containing questionnaires for their parents and were instructed to take these materials home and return the completed parent forms in a sealed envelope at the second session the following week. Completed questionnaires were returned by 83% of mothers and 68% of fathers.

Measures

Adolescent Stress. The junior high school version of the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale (APES; Compas, Davis, Forsythe, & Wagner, 1987) was used to measure major and daily stressful events in the lives of the adolescents. The junior high form of the APES contains a list of 164 major and daily life events representative of those experienced during early adolescence

[3]Time since divorce was divided into periods of less than 2 years, 2–4 years, and more than 5 years since separation because previous studies have indicated that the initial 2-year period represents a time of substantial stress and disorganization in family life and that greater stability is achieved after a period of approximately 5 years (e.g., Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Time since divorce was further examined as a continuous variable and was found to be moderately correlated with SES ($r = -.41$, $p = .01$), mothers' education ($r = -.37$, $p = .016$), child's age ($r = .46$, $p = .003$), mothers' use of self-control coping ($r = .35$, $p = .029$), and children's major life events ($r = .34$, $p = .038$).

(5 events related to sexuality were omitted at the request of local school officials, resulting in a measure with 159 items for the present analyses). For each event, respondents indicate whether or not the event has occurred within the last 3 months. If the event has occurred, subjects then rate the perceived desirability of the event on a 9-point scale (-4 = extremely undesirable, 0 = neutral, +4 = extremely desirable). Total weighted negative event scores were calculated by summing events rated as −4 through −1 (these weighted scores were used in all analyses, including the calculation of alphas reported below). Test-retest reliability of the junior high school version of the APES over 2 weeks is r = .86 (Compas et al., 1987). Events were categorized into "major life events" and "daily events" (see Compas, Howell, Phares, Williams, & Giunta, 1989a), yielding 58 major life events (α = .73) and 106 daily events (α = .86). Events were further classified by type of event into five subscales (see Wagner & Compas, in press): network events (e.g., something bad happens to a friend; α = .74), intimacy events (e.g., not having a boyfriend or girlfriend; α = .49), family events (e.g., problems or arguments with parents, siblings, or family members; α = .62), peer events (e.g., fight or problem with a friend; α = .63), and academic events (e.g., doing poorly on an exam or paper; α = .57). Items were sorted into these five domains and an "other" category by five graduate student researchers familiar with the stress and coping literature. An item was included in a particular subscale if four out of five researchers agreed on its categorization. Some of the internal consistencies for the present sample were low, indicating that some categories were relatively heterogeneous.

Adolescent Behavior Problems. Self-reports of adolescents' emotional/behavior problems were obtained on the Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987), a checklist of 102 behavior problem items rated "not true," "somewhat or sometimes true," and "very true or often true" of the respondent. Self-reports of their competence in activities and social situations, and overall competence were also obtained. Normative data for the Youth Self-Report Profile are based on nonreferred samples of children and adolescents. Test-retest reliability of the total behavior problem score over 1 week for clinically referred youngsters aged 11 to 18 has been excellent (r = .87; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987). Mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). The CBCL consists of 118 behavior problem items rated by parents as "not true," "somewhat or sometimes true," or "very true or often true" for their child. Normalized T scores, based on a sample of clinical and nonclinical youth, were used for the Total Behavior Problems, Internalizing, and Externalizing scores. Norms, reliability, and validity for the CBCL are well established (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983).

Adolescent Coping. Adolescents and children completed an open-ended instrument designed to assess coping with self-identified recent stressful events (Compas, Malcarne, & Fondacaro, 1988). Respondents described one par-

ticularly distressing interpersonal event and one stressful academic event that had occurred in the past 3 months and explained why they found the event to be upsetting. Examples of frequently listed social stressors included "illness of a friend or family member" and "arguments or fights with a friend or family member." Common academic stressors included "receiving a poor grade" and "problems with homework." Respondents then generated a list of all possible ways that they could have handled or dealt with the event and placed a check mark next to each item that they actually used to cope with the event. All responses were classified as problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping by two research assistants using a format described by Compas et al. (1988), with an interrater agreement of 95%. Scores were generated to reflect the total number of problem- and emotion-focused alternatives that were generated and used by each participant.

Parental Stress. Separate measures were used to assess major life events and daily hassles recently experienced by parents. The Life Experiences Survey (LES; Sarason, Johnson, & Siegal, 1978) was used to measure infrequent and dramatic life changes. Subjects rated these events for occurrence during the past year and the impact that they exerted on the respondent's life (either positive or negative). The negative impact scores were summed for a total weighted negative life event score. The test–retest reliability coefficients for negative event scores reported by Sarason et al. (1978) ranged from .56 to .88. The Hassles Scale (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981) was used to measure frequent and less dramatic events. These events were rated for occurrence during the past month and the severity to which the hassle was experienced. The severity ratings were grouped into six subscales (Kanner, 1982) and an overall hassles score. The subscales were work hassles (e.g., worries about decisions to change jobs, $\alpha = .72$), practical hassles (e.g., planning meals; home maintenance, $\alpha = .82$), setting hassles (e.g., noise or crime, $\alpha = .60$), family hassles (e.g., overloaded with family responsibilities, $\alpha = .66$), economic hassles (e.g., concerns about owing money, $\alpha = .89$), and health hassles (e.g., side effects of medication; not getting enough sleep, $\alpha = .79$).

Parental Symptoms. The Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1983) was used to assess parental psychological and somatic symptoms. It is a 90-item measure designed to assess a variety of symptoms. Respondents rate the extent to which they have been distressed by each symptom during the past week (0 = not at all, 4 = extremely). Test-retest reliability, internal consistency, and concurrent validity have been shown to be adequate (Derogatis, 1983). Items were grouped into nine subscales and the Global Severity Index ($\alpha = .98$). The subscales were somatic symptoms

(e.g., headaches or pains in chest, α = .89), obsessive-compulsive (e.g., having to check and double-check what you do, α = .88), interpersonal sensitivity (e.g., feeling very self-conscious with others, α = .88), depression (e.g., feeling low in energy or slowed down, α= .93), anxiety (e.g., feeling so restless you couldn't sit still, α = .89), hostility (e. g., shouting or throwing things, α = .86), phobic anxiety (e.g., feeling afraid to go out of your house alone, α = .91), paranoia (e.g., feeling that you are watched or talked about by others, α = .84), and psychoticism (e.g., the idea that something is wrong with your mind, α = .88). Scores for each scale were obtained by summing the scores of individual items and dividing by the total number of items.

Parental Coping. The Ways of Coping Checklist (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) was used to assess mothers' self-reports of coping with a recent stressful event. The 67 items in this measure cover a broad range of cognitive and behavioral strategies people use to manage internal and/or external demands in specific stressful encounters. Subjects were asked to pick an event that they had to cope with during the last 3 months and indicate to what extent they had used each coping strategy to deal with the event (0 = does not apply and/or not used, 3 = used a great deal). Eight subscales (identified in prior factor analyses of the measure with a community sample of adults by Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986) were created by summing the scores of individual items and then dividing by the total number of items for that scale. The scales were labeled as follows: confrontive coping (e.g., I stood my ground and fought for what I wanted, α = .61), distancing (e.g., I tried to forget the whole thing, α = .68), self-control (e.g., I kept others from knowing how bad things were, α = .66), seeking social support (e.g., I talked to someone who could do something concrete about the problem, α = .74), accepting responsibility (e.g., I realized I brought the problem on myself, α = .64), escape-avoidance (e.g., I wished that the situation would go away or somehow be over with, α = .72), planful problem-solving (e.g., I made a plan of action and followed it, α = .76), and positive reappraisal (e.g., I came out of the experience better than I went in, α = .74). The events reported on by single and married mothers were classified into seven subtypes of daily stress (interpersonal relationships, divorce/separation-related events, economics, work, health, setting, practical). Interrater agreement was 78%.

Demographic Questionnaire. Parents completed a demographic questionnaire concerning their marital status, age, education, number of hours worked, income, number of adults living in the home, and number of children in the family.

RESULTS

Comparison of Mothers in Single- and Two-Parent Families

Mothers from single- and two-parent families and children (boys vs. girls) from these family constellations were compared on the measures described above in a series of 2 (Family Type) × 2 (Child's Gender) MANOVAs. In order to control for the multiple comparisons, MANOVAs were run when they were appropriate, followed by univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) if a significant MANOVA was found. These analyses were followed by multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) and analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) controlling for family income, as the two samples were found to differ on income. Thus, differences attributable to income rather than family constellation per se could be determined.

Means and standard deviations on the various measures for single and married mothers are presented in Table II. ANOVAs revealed that single mothers reported more negative major life events, $F(1, 195) = 7.64$, $p = .006$, and more total daily hassles, $F(1, 195) = 5.80$, $p = .017$, than married mothers. However, once income was accounted for in the ANCOVAs single and married mothers did not differ on major life events or total daily hassles. A MANOVA indicated that single and married mothers also differed on several specific daily hassles subscales, $F(6, 174) = 7.55$, $p < .001$, an effect that remained significant after covarying for income, $F(6, 165) = 2.73$, $p = .015$. Univariate ANOVAs indicated single mothers reported more family hassles, $F(1, 179) = 19.28$, $p < .001$, economic hassles, $F(1, 179) = 21.63$, $p < .001$, and health hassles, $F(1, 179) = 8.70$, $p = .004$. Results of the ANCOVAs indicated that, after accounting for income, single mothers still reported more family hassles, $F(1, 170) = 7.59$, $p = .007$, and more health hassles, $F(1, 170) = 3.85$, $p = .051$.

With regard to psychological symptoms, a MANOVA indicated that single and married mothers differed in their responses to the SCL-90-R subscales, $F(9, 170) = 2.47$, $p = .011$, a difference that remained significant in the MANCOVA, $F(9, 162) = 2.34$, $p = .017$. Univariate ANOVAs revealed that single mothers reported more depressive symptoms, $F(1, 178) = 8.74$, $p = .004$, symptoms of anxiety, $F(1, 178) = 4.66$, $p = .032$, and psychotic symptoms, $F(1, 178) = 9.53$, $p = .002$. However, ANCOVAs indicated only trends for differences on depressive symptoms, $F(1, 170) = 3.79$, $p = .053$, and psychoticism, $F(1, 170) = 3.15$, $p = .078$, after controlling for income. Single-mothers did report more total psychological symptoms, $F(1, 178) = 4.58$, $p = .034$, and this effect remained significant after covarying for income.

Table II. Major Life Events, Daily Hassles, Psychological Symptoms, and Coping for Single and Married Mothers

	Single mothers		Married mothers		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F* values[a]
Negative life events	10.00	8.99	5.83	7.50	7.64[c]
Daily hassles					
Total	49.63	38.75	31.88	26.26	5.80[b]
Work	1.76	2.57	1.82	3.16	ns
Practical	8.48	8.29	7.32	5.64	ns
Setting	1.38	2.56	0.97	1.56	ns
Family	6.10	4.44	3.20	2.99	19.28[d]
Economic	11.41	10.24	4.91	6.08	21.63[d]
Health	5.76	6.88	3.22	3.56	8.70[c]
Psychological symptoms					
Global Severity Index	0.75	0.59	0.60	0.50	4.58[b]
Somatic	0.54	0.66	0.44	0.42	ns
Obsessive-compulsive	0.68	0.61	0.58	0.52	ns
Interpersonal sensitivity	0.82	0.78	0.65	0.61	ns
Depression	1.07	0.80	0.67	0.66	8.74[c]
Anxiety	0.71	0.69	0.48	0.54	4.66[b]
Hostility	0.56	0.65	0.56	0.59	ns
Phobic anxiety	0.22	0.56	0.14	0.36	ns
Paranoia	0.66	0.79	0.47	0.51	ns
Psychoticism	0.52	0.60	0.26	0.40	9.53[c]
Coping					
Confrontive	0.66	0.40	0.68	0.54	ns
Distancing	0.86	0.45	0.71	0.49	ns
Self-control	1.10	0.54	0.96	0.52	ns
Social support	1.08	0.68	1.05	0.65	ns
Accept responsibility	0.85	0.60	0.59	0.57	5.43[b]
Escape-avoidance	0.70	0.57	0.59	0.46	ns
Planful problem-solving	1.31	0.74	1.09	0.72	ns
Positive reappraisal	1.27	0.56	0.91	0.64	8.93[c]

[a]ns indicates *F* value was nonsignificant.
[b]$p < .05$.
[c]$p < .01$.
[d]$p < .001$.

Finally, a MANOVA also indicated a difference between single and married mothers in the strategies they used to cope with stress, $F(8, 188) = 1.99$, $p = .049$. This difference remained significant in the MANCOVA after controlling for income, $F(8, 181) = 2.55$; $p = .026$. Univariate ANOVAs revealed that single mothers reported accepting more responsibility, $F(1, 195) = 5.43$, $p = .021$, and using more positive reappraisal, $F(1, 195) = 8.93$, $p = .003$. Results of the ANCOVAs indicated that, after controlling for income, single mothers reported using more problem solving, $F(1, 188) = 4.24$, $p = .041$, and more positive reappraisal, $F(1, 188) = 7.07$, $p = .009$. Their

use of accepting responsibility approached significance in the ANCOVA, $F(1, 188) = 2.93$, $p = .089$. Single and married mothers differed in the types of events they reported on the Ways of Coping Checklist, $\chi^2 = 35.05$, $p < .005$. More married mothers reported on general interpersonal stressors (52%) as compared to single mothers (18%). The most frequently reported events for single mothers (46%) involved divorce/separation events, typically interactions with their ex-spouse.

Comparison of Young Adolescents in Single- and Two-Parent Families

Means and standard deviations for the various child measures for children in single- and two-parent families are reported in Table III. With regard

Table III. Major and Daily Stressful Events, Coping, and Maternal and Self-Reported Emotional/Behavioral Problems for Children in Single- and Two-Parent Families[a]

	Single-parent families		Two-parent families	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Stressful events				
Network events	5.76	6.33	5.74	7.01
Intimacy events	1.72	2.28	2.01	3.03
Family events	4.38	4.49	3.42	4.30
Peer events	2.83	3.41	3.47	4.14
Academic events	4.24	4.53	4.54	4.59
Youth Self-Report				
Total behavior problems	51.76	10.80	50.68	10.61
Internalizing problems	52.46	10.17	51.83	10.40
Externalizing problems	50.41	9.16	48.75	9.78
Competence in activities	53.03	2.92	52.23	4.51
Social competence	50.90	5.16	50.44	6.34
Overall competence	55.38	7.57	55.19	9.02
Child Behavior Checklist				
Total behavior problems	54.11	7.82	55.84	9.76
Internalizing problems	53.72	7.89	55.68	9.00
Externalizing problems	53.00	8.41	54.09	9.11
Competence in activities	48.21	7.81	46.22	9.39
Social competence	48.88	8.49	50.17	6.25
Overall competence	51.67	14.57	48.91	11.33
Coping				
Total alternatives	5.56	3.44	5.79	3.02
Problem-focused alternatives	3.88	2.89	4.16	2.64
Emotion-focused alternatives	1.68	1.63	1.58	2.16
Total alternatives used	3.44	2.45	3.00	2.29
Problem-focused alternatives used	2.52	2.33	2.08	1.85
Emotion-focused alternatives used	0.92	1.08	0.88	1.38

[a]None of the comparisons between single- and two-parent families was significant.

to stressful events, ANOVAs did not indicate significant differences as a function of family type on either major or daily stressful events on the APES. However, there was a significant main effect for gender on major life events, $F(1, 187) = 12.88, p < .001$, and daily stressors, $F(1, 187) = 5.29, p = .023$, with girls reporting more of both types of stress regardless of family type. A MANOVA did not show any significant differences as a function of family type on the subtypes of stressful events on the APES. These results were unchanged in the MANCOVA and ANCOVAs. Similarly, children did not differ as a function of family type or gender on total, internalizing, or externalizing behavior problems on either the YSR or the CBCL. On the competence scales of the YSR, there were no differences as a function of family type or gender on the social or total competence scores. However, there was a Family Type × Gender interaction on the activities scores, $F(3, 185) = 4.13, p = .004$. There were no differences between boys' and girls' self-reports of activities in single-parent families, but girls in married families (mean T score = 52.94) reported higher competence in activities than boys in married families (mean T score = 50.65), $F(1, 169) = 10.85, p = .001$. This effect remained significant after covarying for income. On the competence scales of the CBCL, there were main effects for gender on the activities, $F(1, 199) = 3.65, p = .058$, social competence, $F(1, 199) = 3.98, p = .044$, and total compentence scores, $F(1, 199) = 7.56, p = .007$. On each of these variables girls were rated higher in competence than boys. There were no main effects for family type. There was a Gender × Family Type interaction on the CBCL total competence score, $F(3, 197) = 8.03, p = .005$. Boys (mean T score = 49.01) and girls (mean T score = 48.83) did not differ in the two-parent families, but single mothers rated daughters (mean T score = 57.33) as higher in competence than sons (mean T score = 44.87), $F(1, 31) = 7.14$, $p = .012$. This effect remained significant after covarying for income. Finally, a MANOVA failed to reveal any differences in overall coping, problem-focused coping, or emotion-focused coping. Again, MANCOVAs and ANCOVAs accounting for differences in family income did not reveal any differences between the two groups.

Correlational Analyses

Pearson correlations among the measures of mothers' and children's stress and psychological symptoms are presented separately for single- and two-parent families in Table IV. For both samples, mothers' self-reports of major life events, daily hassles, and psychological symptoms were strongly intercorrelated. Similarly, major and daily stressful events and the total behavior problem T scores on the YSR were related with one another for children in both families, except daily stressors and behavior problems were not

Table IV. Pearson Correlations Among Mothers' and Children's Reports of Stress and Adjustment in Single- and Two-Parent Families[a]

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Mother							
1 Major life events	—	.493[d]	.413[d]	.142[b]	.003	.103	.288[c]
2 Daily hassles	.610[d]	—	.508	.008	−.039	.062	.351[c]
3 Psychological symptoms (GSI)	.508[d]	.671[d]	—	.128	.216[c]	.197[c]	.367[c]
Child							
4 Major life events	.094	−.217	−.129	—	.702[d]	.385[d]	−.146
5 Daily stressors	−.093	−.149	−.024	.674[d]	—	.387[d]	.018
6 Total behavior problems (YSR *T* Score)	−.160	−.175	−.020	.337[b]	.221	—	.259[c]
7 Total behavior problems (CBCL *T* Score)	−.179	.366[c]	.100	−.152	−.255	−.182	—

[a]Correlations above the diagonal are for two-parent families and correlations below the diagonal are for single-parent families.
[b]$p < .05$.
[c]$p < .01$.
[d]$p < .001$.

significantly related for children in single-parent families. After a Bonferroni correction to control for chance in evaluating the significance of the correlations (Lazerlere & Mulaik, 1977), there were no significant associations between any maternal self-report and the YSR in the single-parent families. In the two-parent families, mothers' GSI scores on the SCL-90-R and children's daily stress and total behavior problem *T* scores on the YSR were significantly related. In single-parent families, mothers' reports of their children's maladjustment on the CBCL were related only to mothers' daily stress, but in two-parent families the CBCL was related to mothers' major life events, daily hassles, psychological symptoms, their children's daily hassles, and total behavior problems on the YSR. A comparison of the correlation matrices of single- and two-parent families using a procedure developed by Jennrich (1970) revealed that the matrices were significantly different from each other. However, comparisons of pairs of correlations using Fisher's *z* test (1921) revealed no significant differences between specific pairs of correlations, perhaps due to the low level of statistical power in these analyses.

DISCUSSION

The present findings indicate that life in a single-parent family presents a number of ongoing daily stresses and hassles for single mothers, and that single mothers experience higher rates of psychological distress than married mothers. Further, it appears that single mothers rely on different types of coping strategies than those used by married mothers. Several of these differences between single and married mothers were accounted for by differences in family income; however, these two groups of mothers also differed on a number of variables independent of income. No differences were found between young adolescents in the single- and two-parent families on self-reports of stressful events and coping, or self-reports or mothers' reports of emotional/behavioral problems in these youth. However, girls in single-parent families were rated by their mothers as more competent than boys, and girls from intact families reported greater overall competence than boys. The failure to find clear differences between young adolescents in single- and two-parent families, although consistent with the findings of Enos and Handal (1986) and Kurdek and Sinclair (1988), must be interpreted cautiously in light of the small sample of single-parent families in the present study.

Data obtained on the Hassles Scale in the current study support the results of interviews of mothers 1 and 2 years after divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1981) which indicated that single mothers are faced with an increased number of ongoing daily stresses and strains when compared to the level of stress experienced by their married counterparts. Specifically,

in the present sample this increased level of daily stress involved more economic, family, and health hassles several years after the divorce. Economic hassles reflect not having enough money for basic needs and chronic financial problems, family hassles reflect problems with children and family responsibilities, and health hassles reflect health risk behaivors and concerns about physical well-being. As prior research has suggested, it was important to account for family income level, as differences between single and married mothers in economic hassles were no longer significant once income was included as a covariate. However, single mothers reported more family and health hassles than married mothers even after the effects of income had ben accounted for. We believe these findings have two important implications. First, rather than simply representing a variable that needs to be factored out in comparing single and married mothers, the decreased family income in single-parent families constitutes an important source of ongoing stress in these families. In fact, the difference in economic hassles represented the largest difference in daily stress between single and married mothers. Second, mothers in these two family constellations experienced differences in daily hassles in other life domains in addition to economics. The difficulties associated with being a single parent may be reflected in the higher rate of family hassles and the toll of single-parenting may be represented in the higher number of health-related hassles. Aiding single mothers in coping with economic stress may be an important target for interventions.

Prior research has not indicated that rates of psychological symptoms reported by mothers, particularly those related to depression, differ as a function of marital status (e.g., Forehand et al., 1987). The present findings indicate that single and married mothers differ in self-reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychoticism. However, these differences appear to be attributable primarily to differences in family income, as only total symptoms were significantly different in the two groups after covarying for income. Thus, economic stressors are implicated as a major source of distress for single mothers. However, it is noteworthy that the mean depressive symptoms reported by single mothers corresponds to a T score of 62 for a sample of female nonpatients and a T score of 41 for a sample of female psychiatric outpatients on the SCL-90-R reported by Derogatis (1983). Mean depression scores for married mothers corresponded to T scores of 58 (nonpatient norms) and 37 (outpatient norms) on this measure. Although single mothers report more depressive symptoms, the present data do not suggest that the majority of these women are experiencing clinical rates of depression, a finding similar to that reported by Forehand et al. (1987).

The coping efforts reported by single mothers in response to recent stressors also differed from married mothers. Specifically, single mothers reported using more coping strategies related to accepting responsibility for problems

and positively reappraising stressful situations than married mothers. These coping strategies may reflect the realities of single-parent life. Without a marital partner to share in the responsibilities of the stresses and strains of daily life, single mothers may be forced to accept a greater burden of responsibility. However, the present sample of single mothers seem to have balanced this realistic approach to coping by attempting to focus on the positive aspects of the stressful situations which they confronted. Once differences in family income were accounted for, the difference in the use of positive reappraisal remained significant and the difference for accepting responsibility approached significance. In addition, single mothers reported using more problem-solving strategies in coping after income differences were controlled. This suggests that single mothers take a more direct approach to focusing on solving or changing stressful situations that are not related to economic problems. These may well be stressors over which single mothers believe they have more control or more responsibility. Alternatively, these differences in coping may be a result of objective differences in the types of stressful events encountered by single and married mothers, as over half of the single mothers reported on the ways they coped with a divorce-related stressor.

Although other researchers in this area have suggested that single mothers may experience lowered levels of social support available to them for coping with stress (e.g., Weinraub & Wolf, 1983), the absence of comparison samples of married mothers in several previous studies (e.g., D'Ercole, 1988; Propst et al., 1986; Tetzloff & Barrera, 1987) has made it difficult to infer the extent to which social support factors are attributable to single-parent status per se. No differences were found between the present samples in their reported use of social support in coping, indicating that single mothers may not be deficient in this coping resource. Further comparisons of single and married mothers on the availability and use of social support are needed to clarify this important issue.

In contrast to these differences in stress and coping processes in single and married mothers, no differences were found in levels of stress, emotional/behavioral problems, or coping for the young adolescents in these two family constellations. It is important to note that not only were there no differences in levels of emotional/behavioral problems for children in single- and two-parent families but scores for both groups were well within the normal range on both the YSR and CBCL. These findings are consistent with those reported by Enos and Handal (1986) and Kurdek and Sinclair (1988) and have extended their findings by including maternal reports as well as adolescents' self-reports of adjustment. In light of evidence that marital discord and conflict is the critical variable in predicting adjustment difficulties in children (Emery, 1982), the present sample of divorced families may have been relatively free of marital conflict.

Analyses of the social competence data from the CBCL indicated that this was an area of difference between the two groups, as girls in single-parent families were rated by their mothers as relatively high in competence (mean *T* score of 57) while boys in single-parent families were rated as relatively low in competence (mean *T* score of 45). It is possible that girls are given greater responsibilities in single-parent families, leading to their development of greater social competence (Hetherington, 1989).

The absence of differences in stress and adjustment in children in single- and two-parent families is striking in light of differences in self-reported stress and symptoms in their mothers. It appears that the elevated rates of daily hassles and psychological symptoms reported by single mothers do not serve as a source of increased risk for maladjustment for their young adolescent children. This is reflected in both the lack of differences between the two samples of children on the various adjustment measures and in the lack of significant correlations between mothers' and adolescents' reports in the single-parent families. The general pattern of stronger associations between parent and child measures in the two-parent families as compared with the single-parent families indicates that mothers and children in divorced families may be more disengaged from one another (cf. Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989; Weiss, 1979) or that single mothers may protect their children from the stress and distress they experience. However, the correlations in this sample of single-parent families may be unstable because of the small sample.

Future research needs to clarify and build on several of the findings reported here. First, the present sample did not include members of minority groups or nonrural environments and, as a result, the findings cannot be generalized to nonwhite rural populations or urban populations. Second, prior studies have indicated that children's adjustment to divorce may be more closely related to parental conflict than to divorce or separation per se (e.g., Emery, 1982). With regard to adolescents, some aspects of adjustment may be related to the interaction of marital status and parental conflict (e.g., Forehand, McCombs, Long, Brody, & Fauber, 1988) or parental social support. Since the present study did not include a measure of parental conflict, future research is needed to address this issue. Third, although there was some indication of gender differences in adolescents' adjustment to life in single-parent families, the sample of children of divorce was not sufficiently large to allow for in depth analyses of the potential moderating effects of gender.

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