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ABSTRACT

Parental conflict as it occurs in the context of divorce was studied in an effort to determine the role that conflict plays in a variety of psychosocial problems in children. Data were drawn from a 5-year longitudinal study of about 1,000 families who filed for divorce in 1984. The first phase of the study involved a series of interviews with the divorced parents over a 3-year period. In the second phase, the adolescent children in the families were interviewed about 4.5 years after their parents separated. Research areas investigated included interparental hostility, discordant coparenting, conflict between custodial parents and adolescents, the adolescent's relationship with both parents, loyalty conflicts, and the adolescent's bonding with each parent. Although data analysis was not complete at the time of this progress report, it is suggested that when children maintain contact with two parents who exhibit high hostility toward each other, there is risk to the children. It is tentatively concluded that it is best for children to see both parents only if the parents can cooperate to a reasonable degree. Although many children suffer from the parent conflicts involved in divorce, it is not inevitable that their level of functioning will be impaired. (LB)

SRCD symposium: Children Exposed to Conflict and Violence

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CONFLICT IN DIVORCING FAMILIES

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There is now substantial evidence that conflict between parents is associated with a variety of psychosocial problems in their children. Several of the other participants in this symposium will be examining some of the processes whereby parental conflict affects children in families in which conflicted parents are still living together. Today, Christy Buchanan and I want to consider the special case of parental conflict as it occurs in the context of divorce. We will be drawing on the data from a five-year longitudinal study of approximately 1000 families who filed for divorce in the year 1984-85.

The first phase of the study involved a series of interviews, over a three year period, with the divorced parents; (this work has been done jointly with Prof. Robt. Mnookin, Stanford Law School). The second phase of the study is a follow-up of the adolescent children of the divorcing families. This phase of the study is also collaborative (Buchanan, Maccoby, Dornbusch). The adolescents were interviewed approximately 4 1/2 years after their parents separated. We are still in the midst of data

analysis, so the material presented today is in the nature of a progress report.

Some recent longitudinal studies have shown that children in intact families in which the parents will subsequently divorce show similar adjustment problems to those found among children whose parents have already divorced (Block and xxxx; Chase-Landsdell, Cherlin and Furstenburg, in press). Such findings would appear to point to a certain amount of continuity in the conflicted nature of pre-divorce and post-divorce family environments, and that they have similar effects on children. We want to suggest, however that the situations that prevail in the pre-separation periods are different in some important respects; in particular, there are different sources of inter-parental conflict, and the children's situation is different when it comes to exposure to inter-parental conflict.

We believe post-divorce parental conflict needs to be conceptualized and studied in its own right. Parents are relieved from the constant irritations of the former spouse's daily presence, and from the need to negotiate details of daily living. But there are new sources of conflict, new things to quarrel about. For example, in the large majority of divorcing families with children, the children continue to spend some time with both parents. The division of time ranges from occasional visits to a non-resident parent to a 50-50 division of time in which the child spends alternate weeks, or part of each week, in each of the two parental households. While most couples manage to agree about the division of the child's time without much conflict, there is a subgroup for whom there is intense dispute over physical custody or over how much visitation with the

non-resident parent there will be.

More and more, it is clear that intense legal battles over custody or visitation are damaging to children. The work of Steinman on conflicted families in which at least one parent wants to have joint custody, and Johnston's work with the children of families in which there has been a bitter custody dispute, both amply demonstrate the critical difficulties a child faces when two parents who are intensely angry at each other are both attempting to remain closely involved in a child's life. Our own findings indicate that a legal battle over custody or visitation can exacerbate the high level of hostility that, in many couples, already accompanies their decision to divorce. But whether there is a legal battle or not, some parents remain intensely hostile toward one another over a considerable time, and we must ask: Why are children put in the situation of going back and forth between the households of two parents who are maintaining their bitterness toward one another? Partly, because our legal system expresses a considerable ambivalence that is felt by both parents and legal policy makers. Both policy makers in the field of family law and mental health professionals are firmly committed to the assumption that it is in children's best interests if they can have maximum access to both parents following parental separation. To lose contact with one of the parents subjects the child to intense grief over the loss of a major attachment figure, to continued longing for the lost parent, and possibly to feelings of guilt over having had some part in driving the parent away.

Yet clearly the maintenance of contact carries risks when the parents are in conflict. Especially when children are young, it is

difficult for parents to manage the logistics of getting children back and forth from one household to another without coming into contact with one another. Also, there is need for continued negotiation of the visitation arrangements -- negotiation over summer vacations, over how the child will get back and forth when one parent moves farther away, over a temporary change in schedules when a child is ill or a parent makes a trip out of town, or over more long-range modifications when a child changes schools or a parent remarries. Negotiations and contact between the parents can become the occasion for reopening old wounds, and can expose the child to continued parental quarreling or even violence. If it is indeed true that hostile parents cannot cooperate in their post-separation child-rearing, then there appears to be a trade-off. The question becomes one of how much benefit children derive from continued contact with both parents, and whether this benefit is counterbalanced by a great or greater risk stemming from exposure to conflict.

We need to know a number of things. Is it true that parents who are highly hostile toward one another are unlikely tc be able to cooperate in their co-parental roles as time goes on? Does the effect of inter-parental conflict on children's adjustment depend on how much time the children are spending in the two parental households? Does conflict between two divorced parents have a direct negative impact on children's adjustment, or does the effect depend on other, mediating factors, such as the closeness of the relationship between the child and each of the parents? We are working on a model to explore direct and indirect effects:

Figure 1.

We have information on the amount of hostility expressed by each parent toward the other from interviewer ratings done at the time of each of the three parent interviews done at six months, 1 1/2 years, and 3 1/2 years following separation. Our information on the quality of coparenting comes from the parent interviews. The other elements in our model were assessed from the interviews with adolescents taken a year after the final parent interview (that is, 4 1/1 years following their parents' separation). We interviewed 366 young people who were living with their mothers, 100 who were living with their fathers, and 51 who were in dual residence -- that is, who were dividing their time fairly equally between the two parental households.

You will note that we are distinguishing between hostility and discordant co-parenting. We are beginning with the assumption that there will be some parents who are intensely hostile toward one another but manage to insulate their parental behavior from their personal conflict. Others, of course, will express their hostility by trying to undermine the former spouse's relationship with the children, quarreling in the children's presence, and sabotaging visitation. There is reason to believe that it matters which of these two paths parents take, and so we want to keep parental hostility and discordant parenting conceptually distinct for the present.

In this symposium, we are concerned with the effects of parental conflict upon children. One possible path whereby interparental hostility can affect children's adjustment in the case of parental separation has not been fully examined: that is, inter-parental hostility may be instrumental in weakening the child's relationship with either the

residential or the non-residential parent (or both), and the weakening of these relationships may in turn lead to adjustment problems. Another possibility, which we are also examining, is that some children (but not all) will be caught up in whatever conflict is occurring between the parents, and that the degree to which children are caught in conflict will determine how much parental conflict affects their adjustment. We will return to this issue later, but for the moment will concentrate on the relationship to the two parents as mediators of the effects of parental conflict.

What can we learn from our data? We are using a summary score, which we call "bonding", which assesses the closeness of the adolescent to each parent (the items are shown here):

Figure 2

We have selected the adolescents who live primarily with one parent (either the mother or the father) omitting those in dual residence. The closeness an adolescent reports feeling toward the parent with whom the young person is living does not appear to have been affected by the amount of hostility expressed by the parents toward each other a year earlier. There is clearly an effect, however, on the relation with the non-residential parent:

Figure 3

How does this weakening come about? Not surprisingly, a major factor is the loss of contact with the outside parent. When the primary residential parent is hostile toward the former spouse, the amount of visitation with the outside parents drops off substantially over time, while visitation is quite well maintained when the residential parent is more friendly -- or

at least neutral -- toward the former spouse. This is true whether the children are living primarily with the mother or with the father. Furthermore, not surprisingly, the closeness an adolescent reports feeling toward the non-residential parent depends in part on the amount of contact the young person has with that parent.

Figure 4

As this figure shows, the effect of parental hostility on closeness to the outside parent is largely mediated by contact. Adolescents report feeling closer to a parent when they are able to spend time with that parent. We can interpret the Figure in two ways: (1) the residential parent is a gatekeeper, and is in a position to either undermine or support children's continuing contact with the outside parent; or (2) some of the very characteristics of the non-resident parent that have made the resident parent hostile to him or her also keep the non-resident parent from being willing or able to visit with the children. At present, we cannot distinguish between these possibilities. Possibly, both apply.

Considering for the moment only those families in which the children are living with their mothers, it is important to note that the hostility of a residential mother has a different effect on closeness to the father at different levels of the children's contact with their fathers (significant interaction, data not shown here). When children seldom see their fathers, the mother's attitude toward him has a substantial impact on how close the adolescents say they feel to their fathers; when they do see the father frequently (or for long summer vacations), the mother's attitude makes much less difference. In this situation, the father-adolescent relationship is built on the direct interaction of the

pair, not derived from the mother.

The drop in visitation that is associated with hostility between the parents is not the only path whereby parental hostility may weaken a child's relationship with one or both parents. Inter-parent hostility is very likely to express itself through poor-quality coparenting. We have a summary measure which we call parental discord, including the following pieces of information derived from the parent interviews:

Figure 5

We have computed a Discord score only for those parents whose children are spending time in both parental households, so the analyses with this score do not include the families in which one of the parents has dropped out of the children's lives. The next figure shows how parental hostility is related to the discordance of their coparenting:

Figure 6

What is the effect of discordant parenting on the adolescent's closeness to each parent? Once again, we do not find a significant effect on the relationship with the residential parent, but the relationship with the non-custodial parent is weakened when the two parents are undermining one another's parenting, having trouble managing the logistics of visitation, and so forth.

Figure 7

And indeed, when parents are hostile but manage not to be discordant in their coparenting, their hostility no longer damages the relationship with the non-residential parent.

Figure 8

We have seen that when conflict between parents continues into the

post-separation period, the adolescent's relationship with the non-residential parents is weaker, especially if the parent hostility is expressed in the arena of co-parental functioning. The important question then becomes: how much difference does it make if young people can maintain a close relationship with an "outside" parent? In Robert Emery's recent book on Marriage, Divorce and Children's Adjustment, he summarizes the research on effects of visitation with outside parents, and reports that while some studies have found visitation to be helpful to children's adjustment, other studies have not, and that we cannot yet come to a firm conclusion. At present, we can add only a little additional information to the existing body of evidence: we find that when it comes to predicting depression in our adolescents, a strong bond with the residential parent is the most important buffer against depression, but a positive relationship with the non-resident parent adds significantly to the prediction of low levels of depression. With respect to deviant behavior and school progress, however, it is an adolescent's relationship with the mother, rather than the father, that is the best predictor of the several aspects of adolescents' adjustment, and this is true regardless of which parent the young person lives with.

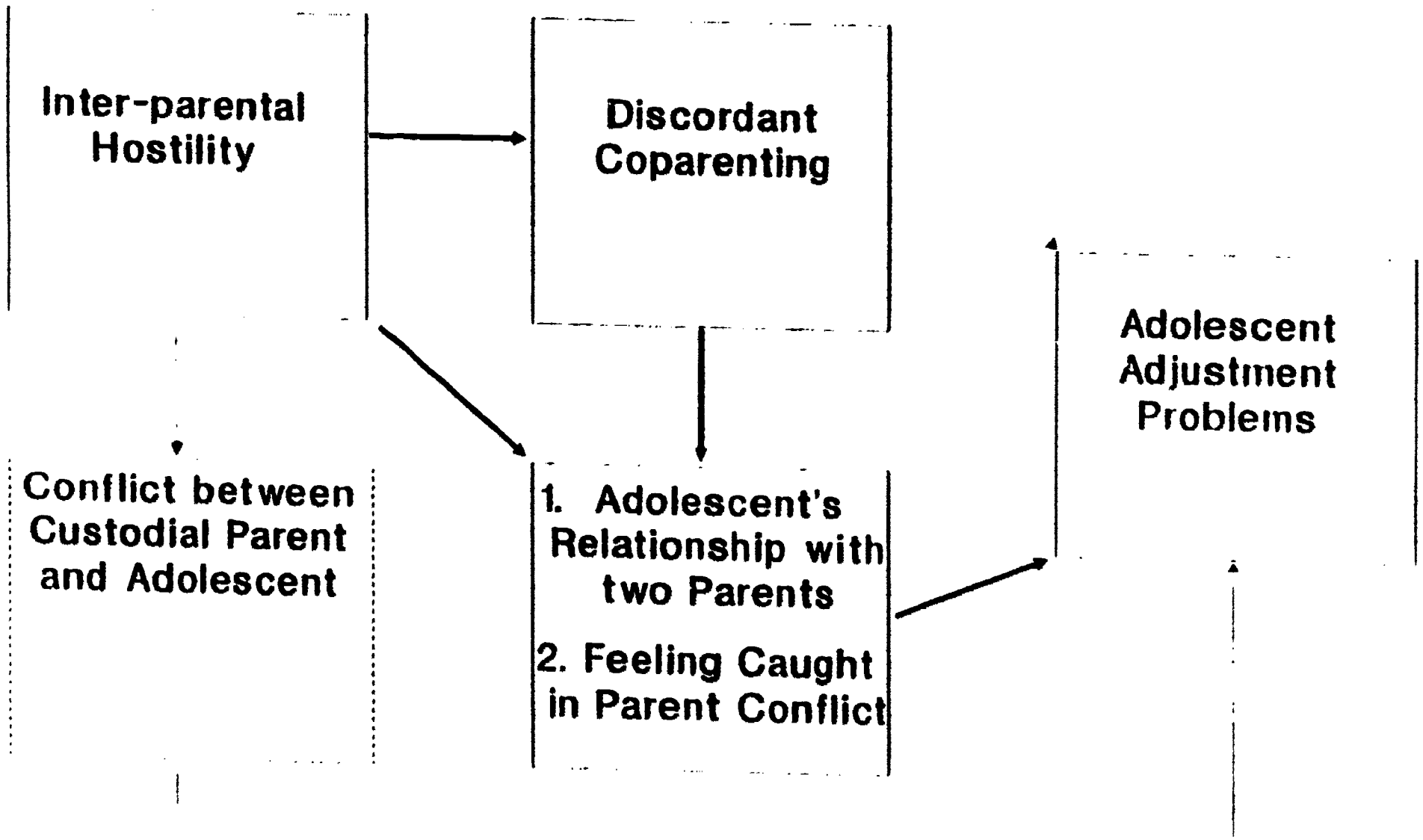
Let us return to the question we raised earlier: when parents maintain high levels of hostility toward one another during the period after separation, is it better for their children not to visit their non-residential parents, or not to be in joint physical custody, because of the stresses imposed by the additional exposure to parent conflict? Our answer is a tentative one. We have seen that young people can develop a strong relationship with an outside parent so long as they are able to

see that parent, regardless of the amount of conflict between the two parents. So far, we have found only modest benefits from maintaining this relationship, but it is still early in the post-divorce period, and the evidence is not all in.

We get a somewhat different picture when we consider the effect of high levels of contact with both parents on the children's being caught up in loyalty conflict. Buchanan (Buchanan et al, Child Development, in press) has shown that dual residence can be the best or the worst situation for adolescents -- best because if their parents can cooperate, they are least likely to feel caught up in the parental conflict; worst if the parents are discordant in their co-parenting, since having frequent contact with two conflicted parents is associated with strong feelings of being caught up in the parental conflict, which in its turn is reflected in a variety of adolescent adjustment problems. These findings would suggest that it is in children's best interests to continue to see both parents only if the parents can cooperate to a reasonable degree.

We believe it is in children's long-term best interests to have more than one person intensely committed to the child's welfare. There may be considerable future benefits from continuing to have access to non-residential parents. Therefore we believe that it behooves mental health professionals who are working with divorcing families to consider how to advise high-conflict couples who clearly are not going to be able to cooperate in child-rearing during the early post-separation period. Especially when children are aged 10 or older, it is possible for children to spend time with both parents without the parents having much to do with one another. Of course, in this situation, the children frequently must

bear the burden of becoming the communication channel between the parents when communication is absolutely necessary. Still, our findings indicate that it is better for the children of conflicted parents, when the children are continuing to see both parents, if their parents disengage, rather than meeting and fighting. If hostile parents initially disengage, we find there is a better chance that they will be able to cooperate subsequently than if they engage in overt conflict from the inception of the post-separation period. Of course, cooperative coparenting is the best solution of all, but in the majority of divorcing couples it is not achieved. In our study, only about a quarter of the couples can be described as cooperative in their coparenting. Parental conflict can be mitigated by separation, at least in terms of the effects of their conflict upon the children, and although many children do suffer from the parental conflicts involved in divorce, it is not inevitable that their level of functioning will be impaired.


Inter-parental Hostility
Discordant Coparenting
Adolescent Adjustment Problems
Conflict between Custodial Parent and Adolescent
1. Adolescent's Relationship with two Parents
2. Feeling Caught in Parent Conflict

Bonding to Mother, to Father

I can talk openly with

I feel comfortable admitting doubts and fears to

(Parent) is interested in talking to me when I want to talk

(Parent) knows what I'm really like

I feel close to (parent)

I am confident (parent) would help if I had a problem

I feel comfortable asking (parent) for money if needed

(Parent) is interested in the things I do

(Parent) can be counted on to keep promises

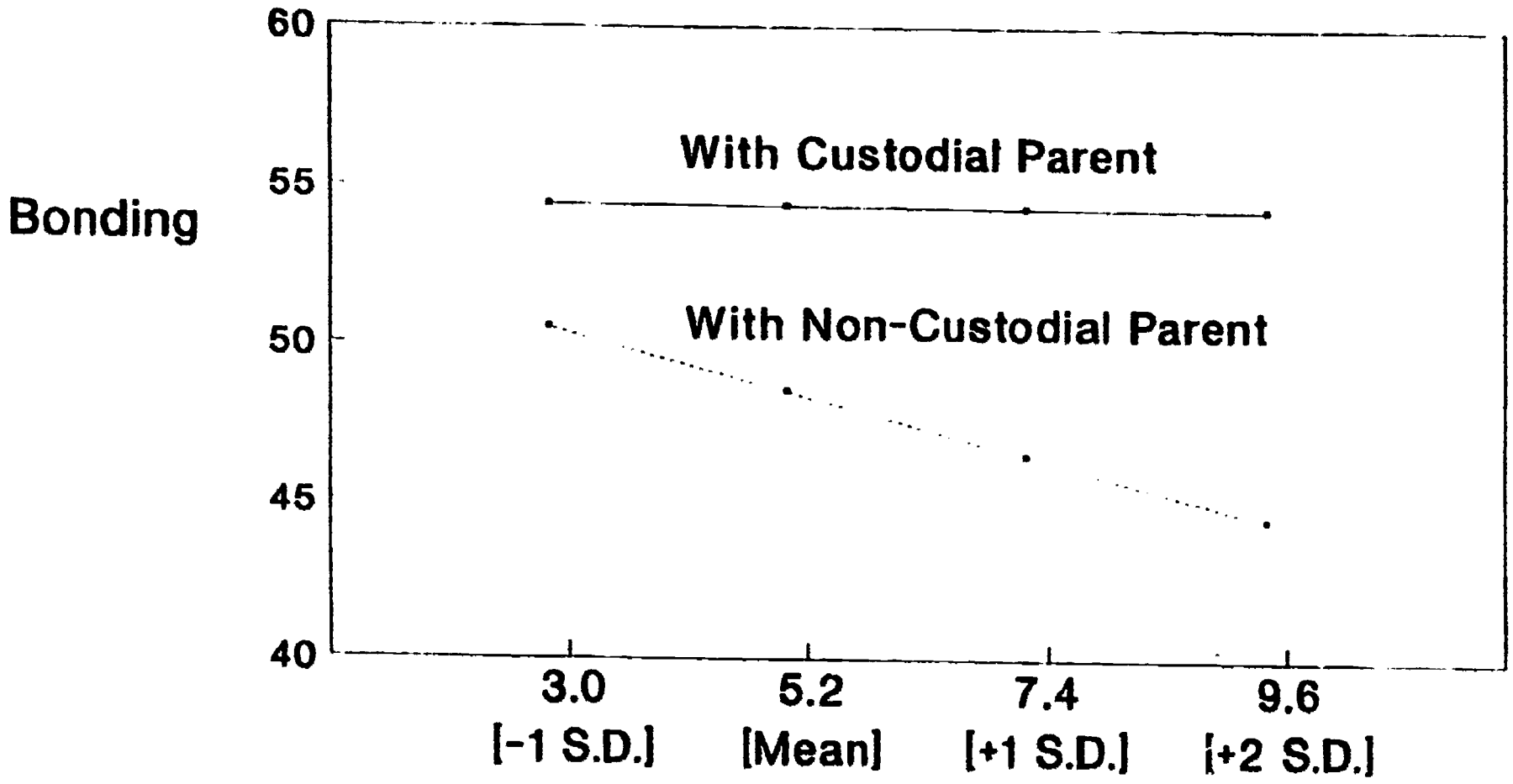
If (parent) has agreed to spend time with me, does so

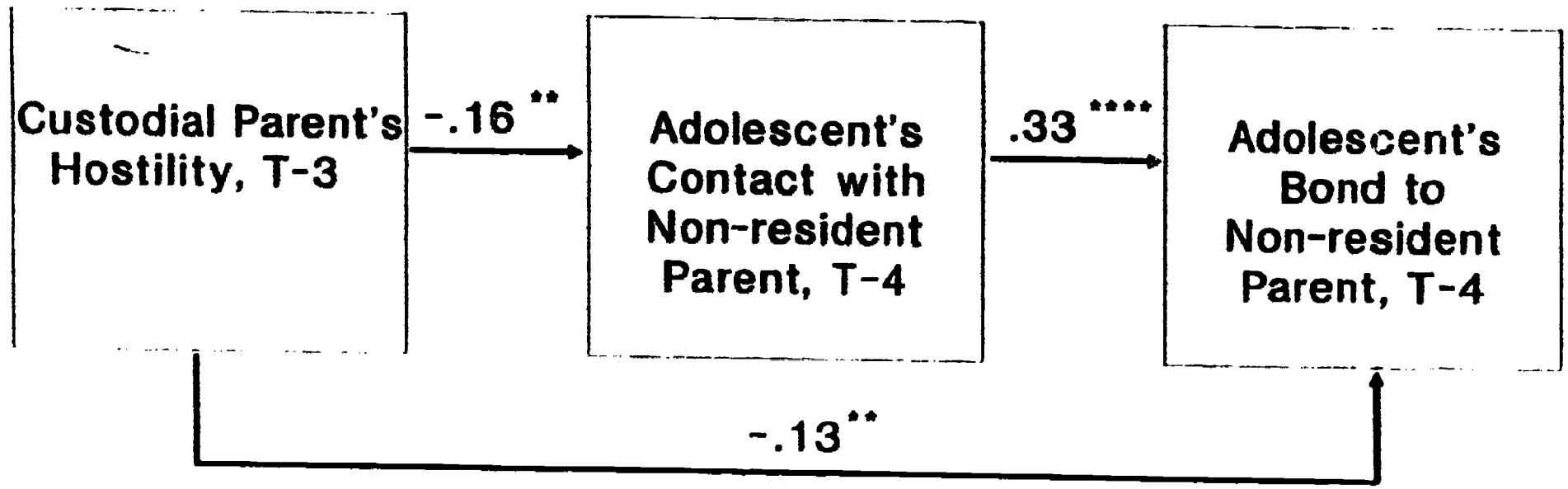
I want to be like the kind of person (parent) is

I would like to be the kind of parent (parent) is

	Mother	Father
Alpha =	.91	.92
Range =	14 - 67	13 - 67

Effect of Custodial Parents' Hostility toward Ex-spouse on Adolescent's Bonding with Each Parent




Custodial Parent's Hostility, T-3
-.16 **
Adolescent's Contact with Non-resident Parent, T-4
.33 ****
Adolescent's Bond to Non-resident Parent, T-4
-.13**

Discordant Coparenting

Often argue*

Ex-spouse tries to upset respondent when they disagree

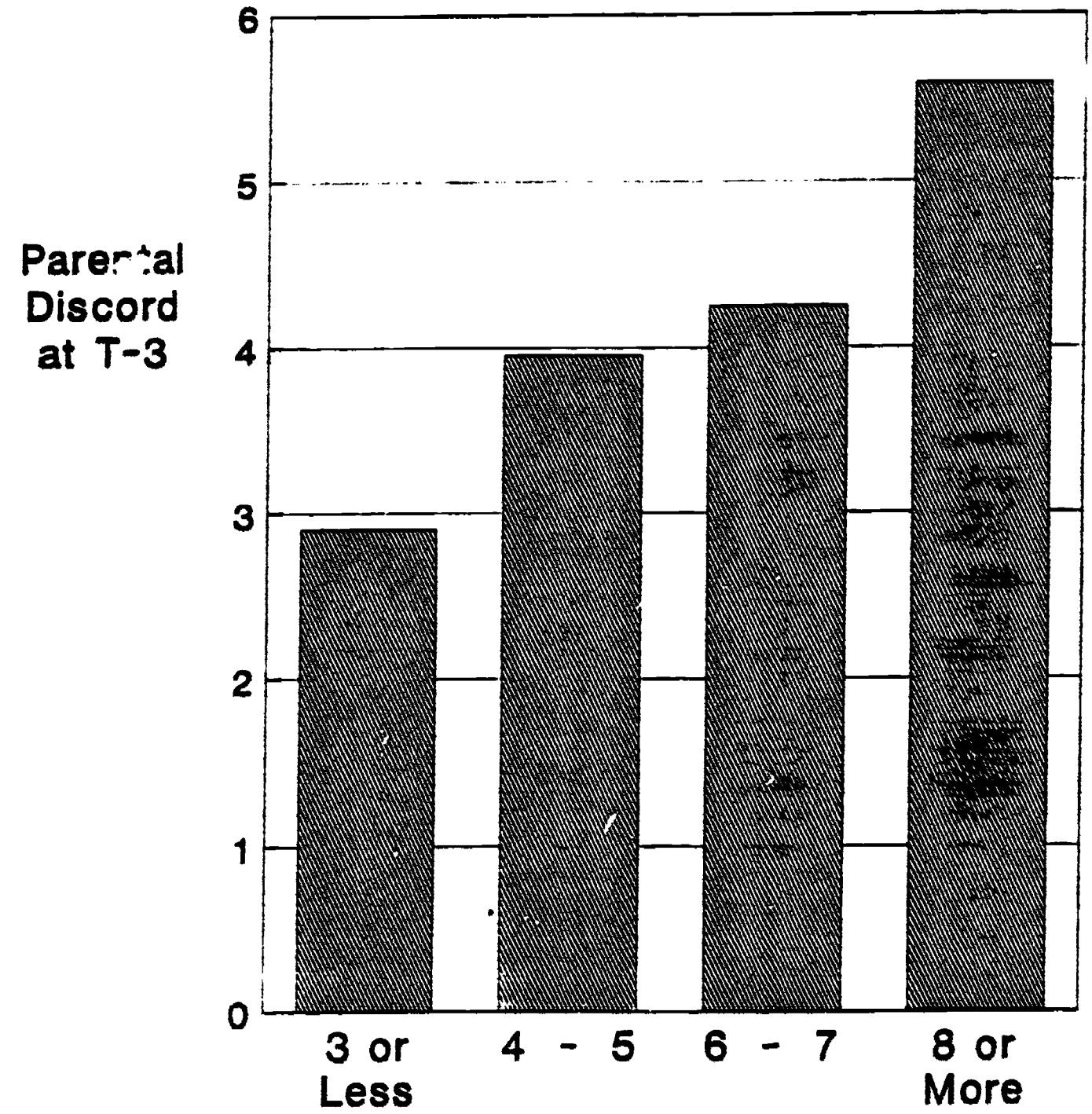
One or both parents have refused to allow visitation (or threatened to do so)

High incidence of logistical problems in managing visitation, alternation*

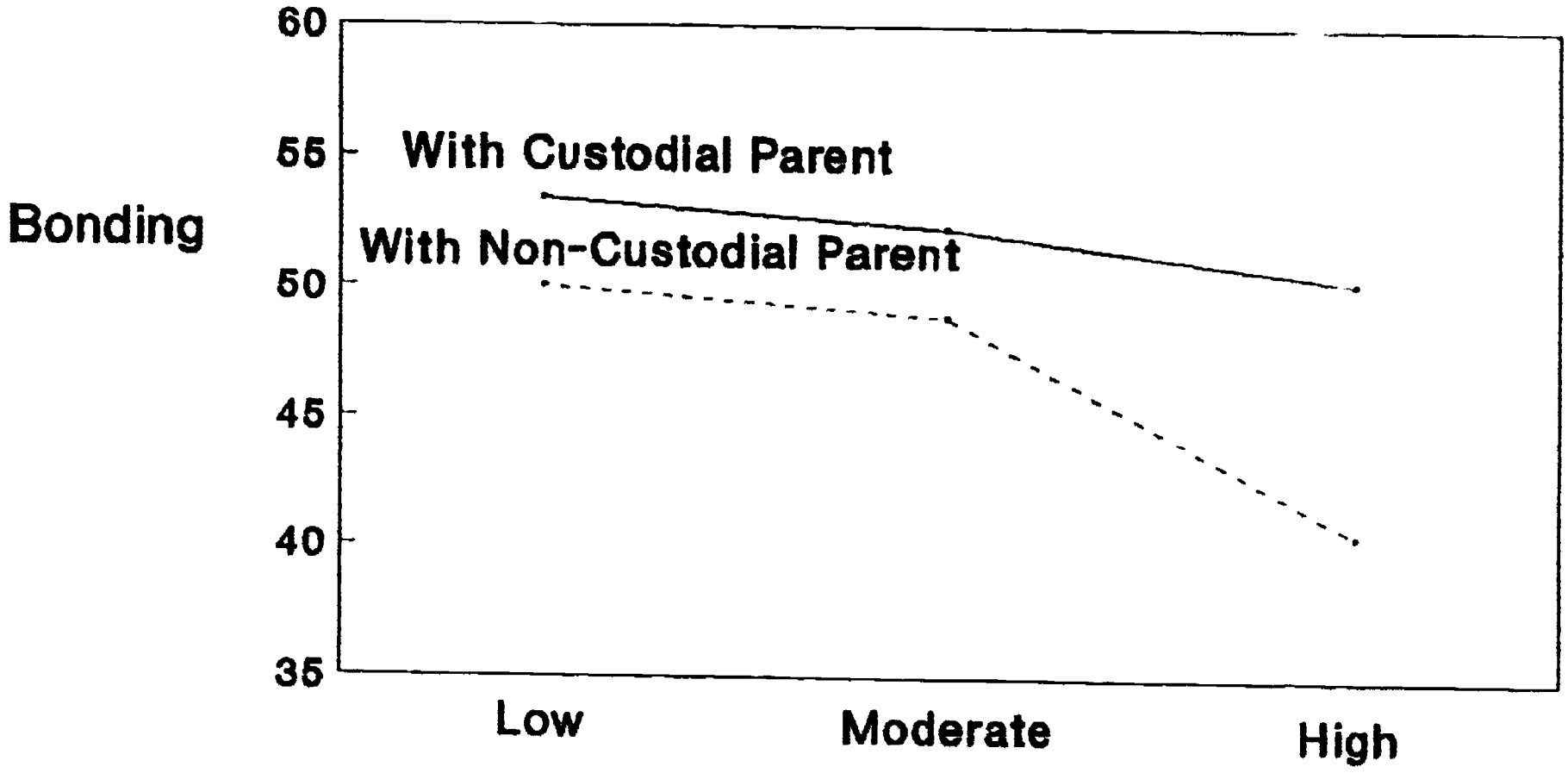
Ex-spouse undermines respondent's parenting*

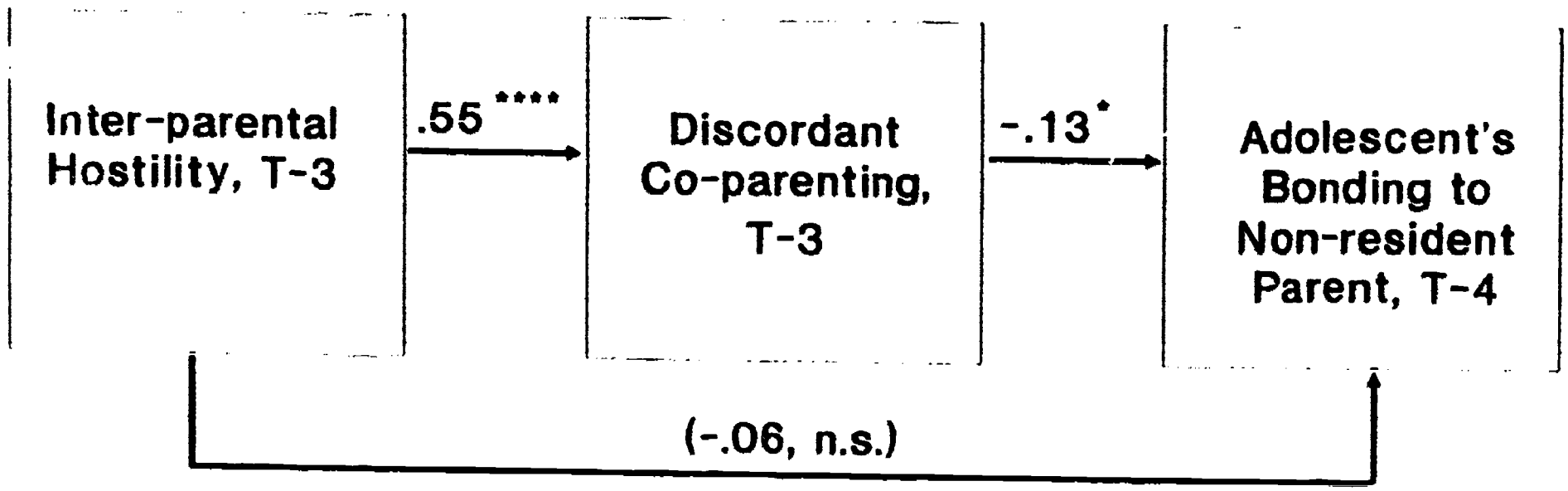
*If both parents were interviewed and they differed, the more discordant score was used

Relation of Inter-parental Hostility to Discordant Coparenting



Effect of Discordant Coparenting on Adolescent's Bonding with Each Parent




Inter-parental Hostility, T-3
.55****
Discordant Co-parenting, T-3
-.13*
Adolescent's Bonding to Non-resident Parent, T-4
(-.06, n.s.)