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Abstract

Young people's compromised relationship skills are often implicated as a factor in the intergenerational transmission of divorce and family instability. Most of the research, however, focuses on young people's relationship skills *during* adulthood. Given the developmental nature of relationship skills and evidence that parental union stability shapes opposite-sex relationships during adolescence, the roots of such compromised relationship skills may be evident earlier in the life course. This study, therefore, examined the interplay among family instability, relationship skills during middle childhood, and the romantic lives of teens. Analyses of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development suggest that trajectories of peer competence mediated the link between early family instability and dimensions of romantic involvement in adolescence.

Family Instability, Early Social Competence, and Later Romantic Activity in Adolescence

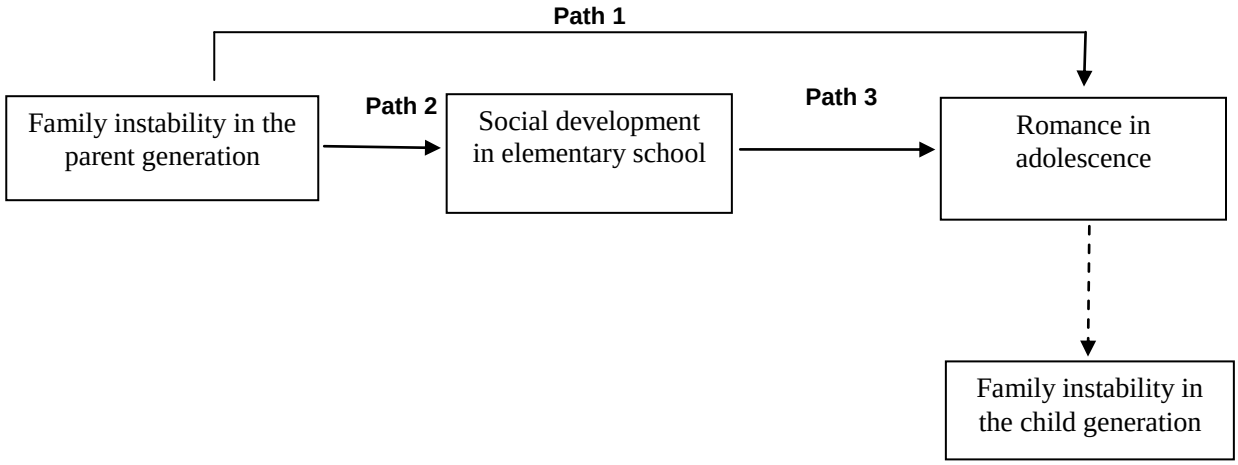
The intergenerational transmission of divorce remains one of the more robust findings in the literatures on union formation and dissolution. Across samples and over time, children's family structure experiences during the first part of the life course often presage their own marital and romantic experiences in adulthood. Specifically, young people who experience a parental divorce often transition to coresidential unions earlier than do others, report lower relationship quality, and are more likely to get divorced (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wolfinger, 2005). Alternatively, young people raised in stably married families typically postpone marriage, coresidential unions, and childbearing, gain more education, and experience a lower risk of divorce (Amato & DeBoer, 2001).

Scholars often point to young people's compromised relationship skills as a factor explaining the linkage between family instability in the parent generation and union formation behaviors in the child generation (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Most of the research, however, focuses on young people's relationship skills *during* adulthood (e.g., Bumpass & Sweet, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 1999). Yet, given the developmental nature of social competence and relationship skills (Sullivan, 1953; Dunphy, 1963; Collins & Steinberg, 2006) and the growing evidence that parental divorce and instability shape young people's opposite-sex relationships during adolescence (Pearson, Muller, & Frisco, 2006; South, Haynie, & Bose, 2005; Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008; Johnson & Tyler, 2007), the roots of compromised relationship skills may be evident long before the transition to adulthood. In this study, we shift the observation window back in time to examine the interplay between experiences of family structure history and the development of relationship skills during middle childhood and, then, the degree to which these experiences help explain the linkage between family instability and

romantic involvement during adolescence. In other words, we ask whether the roots of family instability are evident in sequelae of social development across childhood and adolescence.

Drawing on the life course perspective, the conceptual model underlying this study is illustrated in Figure 1. The three main paths in this model will be tested with the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD). Using prospective measures of family structure across early and middle childhood, we investigate whether cumulative family instability shapes young people's opposite-sex relationships in adolescence (Path 1). Next, using a series of multiple reporter assessments of children's competence with peers and bullying experiences, we examine the degree to which family instability is associated with young people's social development across elementary school (Path 2) and such development, in turn, is linked to adolescent romance (Path 3). Finally, we bring these paths together and examine whether trajectories of social development mediate the links between early family instability and later romantic involvement. In exploring these paths, we pay special attention to gender, recognizing that the consequences of family instability (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Cavanagh et al., 2008), the development of social competency (Maccoby, 1998), and the meanings and significance of romance (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006) differ for boys and girls. By mapping the gendered links between family instability, social development in elementary school, and romance in adolescence, this approach highlights the cumulative nature of social relationships across the life course and the intergenerational nature of unstable partnerships.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Family Instability and the Romantic Lives of Adolescents

As noted above, the romantic relationship histories of parents are closely linked with union formation expectations and behaviors of their adult children (Amato, 1996; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Mueller & Pope, 1977; Wolfinger, 2005). Children of divorce tend to be more pessimistic about the chances of life-long marriage and view divorce less negatively than others, whereas adult children of stably married parents experience lower rates of marital disruption (Amato & Booth, 1991). Children of divorce also transition to first unions—marriage or cohabitation—sooner (Cherlin, Kiernan, & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Wolfinger, 2005). Although less is known about the adult relationship trajectories of children born outside of marriage, evidence suggests that the romantic trajectories of these young people are similar to those who experienced a parental divorce (Amato, 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Lastly,

residing in stepparent families further increases the likelihood of early marriage (Wolfinger, 2005).

Although union formation behavior data is unavailable for the SECCYD sample, we do have data on adolescent romantic involvement. Because adolescent romantic experiences shape union formation behaviors during the transition to adulthood (Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007; Cavanagh, 2009), the consideration of romantic ties in adolescence will tell us something about how this intergenerational process unfolds over time. Thus, our first aim is to explore the association between family instability in childhood and romantic involvement in adolescence.

Consistent with recent work with the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Cavanagh et al., 2008), we expect that increases in family instability will be associated with three aspects of romantic involvement in adolescence. First, the likelihood of a lifetime romantic relationship provides a baseline measure of romantic involvement in adolescence. Second, as a proxy of romantic instability in adolescents' own romantic trajectories, we examine the number of romantic partners young people have (Cavanagh, et al. 2008). Third, the likelihood of a current romantic relationship captures ongoing romantic involvement. Together, these dimensions of adolescent romance capture young people's exposure to dating.

Explaining the Intergenerational Link between Parents' and Adolescents' Relationships

The intergenerational transmission of divorce literature highlights two distinct but related processes that might explain the associations between family instability in the parent generation and romantic relationship experiences in the child generation: lesser commitment to marriage and compromised relationship skills. Briefly, the commitment to marriage perspective argues that the intergenerational link is direct. That is, by living through parents' own unstable unions, young people learn that marriage or marriage-like unions can be broken, relationships do not last,

people do not have to remain in unsatisfying relationships, and happiness may be found with a new partner (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). These lessons, then, undermine young peoples' commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage and to their marital partners. The second explanation, the compromised relationship skills hypothesis, posits that the intergenerational linkage is indirect. That is, young people in unstable families do not learn the positive social, conflict resolution, and compromissary skills necessary to establish and maintain intimate relationships, i.e., friendships in childhood or stable and healthy romantic unions in adolescence and young adulthood (Laursen, 1993; Amato, 1996).

The contribution of this study is testing the second hypothesis. More specifically, we explore whether family instability in early childhood shapes young people's social competence and friendship-related behaviors during elementary school in ways that affect the nature of romance in adolescence (Paths 2 and 3). To that end, we draw on developmental theories to explain the link between family instability and trajectories of social competence. Attachment theory posits that ways of relating in intimate relationships, romantic and otherwise, are rooted in earlier and concurrent relationship experiences (Bowlby, 1973; Collins et al., 1997). Closer, more securely attached parent-child relationships, the mother-child in particular, are expected to organize children's behavior in ways that are more normative, where children learn to be competent with peers, engage in more reciprocal and less hostile interactions, and are often more popular later in life (Sroufe et al., 2005). Through repeated interactions with mothers, children gain the skills, motivation, and experiences needed to form a working model of relationships as well as the capacities to stay engaged and be attractive to others (Sroufe et al., 2005).

Parental divorce and/or romantic recoupling and the stress these changes can introduce for both mother and child may undermine the parent-child relationship, disrupting the

connections that allow children to develop and maintain healthy social relationships outside the home (Bowlby, 1969). Family instability in early childhood—between birth and the transition to elementary schools—appears to be especially consequential to young people's later social development (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). Moreover, subsequent transitions that are contemporaneous with ongoing social development represent "shocks" to developmental trajectories in ways that may have consequences for later romantic involvement. The second goal of this paper, then, is to explore how cumulative family instability shapes both teachers and children's own perceptions of social development *over time*.

We focus on two dimensions of social development—teacher reports of peer competence during elementary school and adolescent reports of engaging in physical or verbal bullying behaviors. By paring peer competency and bullying, we assess both positive and negative skills, feelings, and behaviors that may be shaped by family structure history (Bowlby, 1969; Olweus, 1993) and can shape young people's romantic involvement during adolescence and beyond (Farrington, 1993). Furthermore, multiple reporters offer a more comprehensive view of how young people develop. Teacher reports, for instance, reflect their view of the child in the classroom, relative to their expectations of other same-aged peers (Entwisle & Alexander, 1999). A young person, on the other hand, has access to her or his inner most feelings and full set of behaviors she or he engages. Overall, we expect that early family instability will negatively predict social development both early in elementary school and as young people move through elementary school. Therefore, young people raised in less stable homes may experience lower levels of peer competence and higher levels of bullying behaviors.

Social Development as a Mediator of the Early Family Instability and Later Romance Link

The final aim is to understand how trajectories of social skills shape romantic involvement in adolescence (Path 3 in Figure 1). The skills young people enact with peers early on can provide a meaningful window into how they might negotiate romance in adolescence (Collins et al., 1997). Across elementary school, children spend increasingly large chunks of their day with peers and are more cognitively and emotionally able to connect with them and develop intimate, mostly reciprocated, relationships (Collins, 1984; Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Youniss, 1980). Friendships in the early life course are typically viewed as positive, reflecting a young person's ability to get along with and be liked by others (Fletcher et al., 1995; Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990; Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999). Moreover, these ties represent an important arena for socialization and development, especially as it relates to romance (Brown, 1999; Dunphy, 1963; Sullivan, 1953). Finally, friendships and peer relationships regulate social behavior, setting group norms and opportunity structures that shape the kinds of behaviors young people engage, including romantic unions.

For these reasons, young people who possess positive social skills and engage in socially acceptable behaviors in elementary school may be more likely to engage in romantic relationships during adolescence (Brown, 1999). At the same time, young people who are more socially connected and are considered socially competent may be embedded in friendship groups that monitor romantic ties and behaviors more closely, shaping the likelihood of romantic involvement but, more importantly, the nature of romantic ties (Eder, 1985).

Yet what is the role of peers among those with compromised social skills? On one hand, these young people may be likely to engage in romantic relationships in adolescence. Not only are they less well socialized into the romantic role, these young people may not have the skills

needed to be interesting and attractive partners to other youth (Berndt, 1996). On the other hand, these same young people may be especially inclined to pursue romantic relationships, seeking the intimacy and social support that romantic ties might offer as a way to compensate for what they are not getting from friends and peers. Similarly, evidence suggests that young people who engage in bullying behaviors are more likely to engage in romantic unions and do so earlier than their peers (Connolly et al., 2000). This link is explained, in part, as a consequence of the higher social status that bullying can provide, especially for boys (Connolly et al., 2000). Bullying behaviors may also be evident in romantic unions, which can be defined by issues of power and domination. Young people who engage in bullying behaviors may also be embedded in less prosocial friendship groups in which advanced social behaviors, including romantic and sexual unions, are more common. Overall, we expect that teens with lower levels and modest increases in peer competence across elementary school and those who engage in more bullying across elementary school will be more romantically involved in adolescence.

Gender, Family Instability, and Adolescent Romance

Thus far, the interplay among family instability, children's social development, and adolescent romance has been discussed as similar for boys and girls. Emerging evidence, however, suggests the processes that link family structure and the presence and stability of adolescent romance operate differently for boys and girls (Cavanagh et al., 2008). Young people often compensate for changes in parental relationships by drawing on peers. Girls often have long histories of intimate friendships with peers and may be more inclined to turn to them for support (Giordano et al., 2006; Maccoby, 1998). Because boys have fewer intimate friendships, they may be more likely to compensate for diminished parental support or closeness through romantic ties. Indeed, evidence from Add Health suggests that the romantic lives of boys are

shaped more by experiences of family instability than are the romantic lives of girls (Cavanagh et al., 2008). Conceptualizing these links among family instability, social development, and later romantic involvement as gendered, therefore, is necessary.

METHOD

Source of Data and Sample

The NICHD SECCYD is a national longitudinal study of American children (see http://public.rti.org/secc for more details). Originally designed to examine the development significance of childcare, the SECCYD has evolved into a study of general youth development. Families were recruited from hospitals located in ten U.S. communities. In 1991, during selected 24-hour sampling periods, 8,986 women were visited in the hospital shortly after giving birth. About 5,265 women—who were at least 18, healthy, conversant in English, and had a healthy singleton child—agreed to be contacted when they returned home from the hospital. A month later, 1,364 families were enrolled in the study. The study consists of four phases: Phase I (1991-1994) followed the children from birth to age 3; Phase II (1995-1999) from age 3 through 1st grade; Phase III (2000-2004) from 2nd through 6th grades; and Phase IV (2005-2006) at age 15.

Like most longitudinal data sets, SECCYD contains missing data. We used a multiple imputation package, IVEware, to minimize the bias that missing data can introduce (Raghunathan, Solenberger, & Van Hoewyk, 2002). Thus, the analytic sample used here includes 1,364 young people.

Measures

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Key Analytical Variables

	Percent	Mean
Adolescent Romantic Involvement		
Any romantic relationship	66.40	--
Number of relationships	--	1.31
Current romantic relationship	23.50	--
Family Structure History		
Number of family transition in early childhood	--	0.59
Any family instabilty:		
In early childhood	24.50	--
Between kindergarten and 1st grade	6.90	--
Between 1st and 3rd grade	11.60	--
Between 3rd and 4th grade	5.20	--
Between 4th and 5th grade	6.90	--
Between 5th and 6th grade	5.20	--
Child Characteristics		
Gender (female)	48.31	--
African American	12.90	--
White	80.42	--
Other	6.68	--
Maternal Characteristics		
Maternal age	--	28.11
Educational attainment	--	14.23
Percent poor at child's birth	21.40	--

At age 15, children were asked a series of questions about their expectations of and involvement in romantic relationships. From these questions, three dimensions of romance were considered. First, we considered the percent of teens who ever engaged in a serious romantic relationship. Second, to measure relationship stability, we examined young people's reports of the number of serious romantic relationships they ever had. Finally, we measured the percent who were currently engaged in a romantic relationship. Comparisons to published statistics for romantic involvement in national data sets (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003) suggest similar rates of involvement in the SECCYD sample.

Multiple reporter assessments of peer relationships and social behavior across elementary school served as measures of children's social competency. Every year, beginning with teacher reports in grades 1-6 (expect 2nd grade), teachers rated children's peer competency using a scale of 10 items from the Social Skills Rating Scale (SSRS). This scale measured children's responses to peers, including their ability to control their temper in conflict situations and respond appropriately to teasing (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). For each item, the teacher was asked how well it described the child (0 = *never* to 2 = *very often*). Turning to child reports, at 3rd, 5th, and 6th grades, children answered questions that tapped whether they engaged in bullying at school, including picking on other kids, saying mean things to or about other kids, and hitting other kids at school (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). For each item, the child was asked how well it described their experience (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*).

Measures of *family instability* are based on telephone interviews (at 3, 9, 12, 18, 21, 27, 30, 33, 42, 46, 50, 60, and 66 months, fall and spring Kindergarten, fall of 1st grade, spring and fall of 2nd, 4th, and 6th grades) and home interviews (at 1, 6, 15, 24, 36, and 54 months, spring of 1st, 3rd, and 5th grades) in which the mother (typically) completed a household roster listing each household member and that person's relationship to her and the study child. Family structure was coded into nine mutually exclusive categories: 1) two biological parents (married); 2) two biological parents (cohabiting); 3) biological mother and stepfather (married); 4) biological father/stepmother (married); 5) biological mother and cohabiting partner; 6) biological father/cohabiting partner; 7) biological mother-only; 8) biological father-only; and 9) all other family types (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; 2008). From these data, 28 binary variables indicating a family transition between one contact and the one that preceded it were created. Family instability in early childhood is a count of transitions from birth through the start of kindergarten.

Family transitions thereafter, between kindergarten and the end of 1st grade, between 1st and 3rd grades, and between 3rd and 5th grades, were also count measures designed to capture changes that preceded measures of social competence. These indicators were hypothesized to capture the "shocks" that concurrent family change might have on developmental trajectories. They are also proximate to romance in adolescence.

All analyses took into account child (gender, race) and maternal (education, age, poverty status at birth) characteristics that both select young people into different family structure histories and shape social and romantic development.

Analyses Plan

The first stage of multivariate analyses involved establishing the focal association between family instability and adolescent romantic involvement, net of other factors. These models were estimated with logistic regression (ever in a romantic union and in a current romantic union) and OLS (for number of romantic unions). Because this last measure is a count variable, Poisson regression was also estimated. The findings were consistent with the OLS results. Although the preferred regression technique for this type of measure, the full model, described below, did not converge when estimated with Poisson regression.

Next, we estimated children's social development trajectories using latent growth curve analysis. The growth curve model provided an estimate for the intercept (or starting point) of social development and the slope (or change) in social development across elementary school. Once established, we explored the associations between family instability in early childhood and children's social development trajectories and the associations between social development trajectories and adolescent romance using latent growth curve analysis.

Finally, we explored the extent to which these components of the social development growth curve mediated the association between early family instability and romantic involvement in adolescence.

All models were estimated in Mplus 5.1 (Muthen & Muthen, 2001; Bollen, 1989) for three reasons. First, path models can be analyzed within a single model, allowing the effects of exogenous and endogenous variables on outcomes to be estimated simultaneously. Second, latent growth curve modeling that uses longitudinal data to determine change across time can be incorporated into these analyses (Bollen & Curran, 2006). Third, Mplus allows the estimation of associations among constructs free of the effects of measurement unreliability (Bollen, 1989). Although Mplus can estimate missing cases using a maximum likelihood estimator, this option cannot be invoked when modeling binary outcomes like lifetime or current romantic involvement. Thus, IVEware was used to impute missing data for these analyses.

RESULTS

Most children (77%) were born to two-biological married parents; 14% were born to single mothers; and about 9 % were born to cohabiting parents. Most children experienced *no* family structure change from birth until the end of kindergarten. A quarter of the sample, however, did experience the exit or entrance of a biological parent or a parent's romantic partner at least once; about 11% experienced one family structure transition, 9% experienced two, and 6% experienced three or more transitions in these first six years of life. Just about a quarter also experienced the exit or entrance of a biological parent or a parent's romantic partner during elementary school; about 14% experienced one family structure transition, 6% experienced two, and about 4% experienced three or more transitions. Taken together, about 62% experienced no family transitions, about 12% experienced family transitions in both early childhood and

elementary school, 13% experienced family transitions in early childhood only, and 12% experienced family transitions in elementary school only.

Turning to measures of social development (Table 2), child and teacher reports of positive and negative aspects of social development operated in expected ways. For example, child reports of bullying other kids and teacher reports of peer competence were highly correlated (negative) across elementary school despite teachers changing from year to year.

Table 2. Correlations and Means for Measures of Social Development in Childhood

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Child Report of Experiences of Bullying									
1	Grade 3	--							
2	Grade 5	0.36	--						
3	Grade 6	0.29	0.52	--					
Teacher Reports of Peer Competence									
4	Grade 1	-0.08	-0.16	.06(ns)	--				
5	Grade 3	-0.14	-0.14	-0.09*	0.39	--			
6	Grade 4	-0.17	-0.16	-0.08*	0.38	0.49	--		
7	Grade 5	-0.18	-0.17	-0.13*	0.35	0.42	0.50	--	
8	Grade 6	-0.12	-0.14	-0.14	0.33	0.39	0.38	0.48	--
	Means	1.21	1.29	1.37	15.30	14.86	14.89	14.94	14.99

Note: All correlations are singificant at the 0.001 level except where noted.
* = p <.05

Finally, about two-thirds of the sample reported at least one romantic relationship with someone special by age 15. The average number of romantic relationships was about 1.3, with some reporting no romance and others reporting up to 14 romantic relationships. Finally, just under a quarter (24%) reported being in a current romantic relationship.

Family Instability and Adolescent Romance

With these descriptive statistics as background, we explored the link between family instability and romantic involvement in adolescence using logistic and OLS regression (see Table

3). Overall, young people who experienced more family instability in early childhood were more likely to ever be in a romantic union, reported more serious romantic relationships, and were more likely to be currently involved in a relationship at age 15 than others. Family transitions experienced between 3rd and 4th grades were associated with an increased likelihood of a current romance at age 15; however, this association did not reach statistical significance. Thus, family transitions between kindergarten and 6th grade were not significantly associated with any indicator of romantic involvement at age 15.

Table 3. Results from Regression Models of Family Instability and Later Romantic Involvement

	Any romantic relationship	Number of relationships		Current romantic relationship
	Odds Ratio	Estimate	SE	Odds Ratio
Family Instability				
Transitions between birth and start of kindergarten	1.18 **	0.09 *	(0.05)	1.14 **
Transitions between kindergarten and 1st grade	1.42	0.20	(0.18)	1.35
Transitions between 1st and 3rd grade	0.99	0.01	(0.15)	0.98
Transitions between 3rd and 4th grade	1.06	0.08	(0.25)	1.58 +
Transitions between 4th and 5th grade	1.12	0.11	(0.22)	1.24
Transitions between 5th and 6th grade	0.99	-0.18	(0.25)	0.79
Child characteristics				
Female	0.68 ***	-0.37 ***	(0.11)	1.19
Race (African American)	1.39	0.81 ***	(0.17)	1.23
Maternal characteristics at birth				
Age	0.99	-0.01	(0.01)	0.99
Educational attainment	0.93 *	-0.04	(0.03)	0.97
Poverty status	1.12	-0.07	(0.14)	1.29
Intercept		2.23	(0.40)	

Other associations are worth noting. Girls were less likely to report having ever been romantically involved and reported fewer relationships than others—no gender differences in the likelihood of a current union where detected. African American adolescents reported more relationships than others groups reported. Finally, maternal education was negatively associated with the likelihood of any romantic union. Unlike findings from Add Health (Cavanagh et al.,

2008), the link between family instability and romantic involvement operated similarly for boys and girls—no interaction was detected (findings not shown). Given the absence of an interaction, the gender-family instability interaction term was not included in subsequent analyses.

Interplay among Family Instability, Children's Development, and Romantic Involvement

These links between family instability and later romantic involvement were hypothesized to work through children's development of social competence. As a first step in testing this mediating link, we estimate the unconditional growth models for peer competence and bullying behaviors (Table 4). On average, young people started elementary school competent with peers (mean of intercept = 14.99, p <.001) and experienced a modest decline in peer competence across elementary school (mean of slope= -.07, p < .1). At third grade, young people reported low levels of bullying behaviors (mean of intercept = 1.21, scale of 1 - 5), experiencing increases over time (mean of slope = .05, p <.001). Both trajectories are characterized by significant levels of inter-individual variation, in both initial levels (2.93, p < .001 for peer competence; .06, p < .001 for bullying behaviors) and rate of change (.35, p < .001 for peer competence; .02, p < .001 for bullying behaviors). It should be noted that teacher reports of peer competence in 4th, 5th and 6th grade were freely estimated.

Table 4. Parameter Estimates for Unconditional Latent Growth Curve Models for Social Development

	Intercept		Slope		Correlation
	Mean	Variance	Mean	Variance	(int, slope)
Peer competence	14.99 ***	2.93 ***	-0.073 +	0.349 ***	0.22
Bulling behaviors	1.209 ***	0.06 ***	0.05 ***	0.017 ***	-0.01

*** = p <.001 ** = p <.01 * = p <.05

Note: Peer competence: $\chi 2$ = 31.6/8**, CFI = .96; RSMEA = .03; Bullying behaviors: $\chi 2$ = 6.18/1*; CFI = .99; RSMEA = .02

Next, we explored whether these trajectories of social development during elementary school shaped adolescent romance at age 15. Beginning with peer competence, the intercept and slope of this trajectory were unrelated to the likelihood of ever having a romantic relationship; however, the intercept was linked with both the number of romantic unions and the likelihood of a current romantic relationship. More specifically, young people who were rated lower on peer competence at the start of elementary school were more likely to be in a current relationship and reported more romantic unions overall than others. Changes (or the slope) in this trajectory, however, were not associated with any indicator of romance in adolescence. Turning to bullying, young people who reported higher levels of bullying at 3rd grade and those who reported increases in bullying over the next three years were more likely to be romantically involved and to report more relationships than others. The bullying intercept was not related to the likelihood of a current union, but the slope was, with young people who reported increases in bullying significantly more likely to be in a current union.

Table 5. Assocation between Social Competence Trajectories in Elementary School and Romance in Adolescence

	Any romantic relationship	Number of relationships		Current romantic
	Odds Ratio	B	SE	Odds Ratios
Peer comptence				
intercept	0.95	-0.15 ***	(0.04)	0.87 **
slope	0.76	0.09	(0.44)	1.04
Bullying				
intercept	2.03 *	1.23 **	(0.34)	0.87
slope	5.7 **	1.85 **	(0.60)	4.55 *

*** = p <.001 ** = p <.01 * = p <.05

A third step was to explore how family instability shaped trajectories of social development across elementary school. Family instability in early childhood was significantly associated with the intercept or starting point for teacher reports of peer competence, but was not linked with changes in peer competence. These associations suggest that young people who experience more instability in early childhood began their formal education displaying lower levels of peer competence compared with others, but changed at rates similar to other young people. Turning to child reports of bullying, family instability was unrelated to both the intercept for bullying behavior and changes in bullying across elementary school.

Table 6. Association between Family Instabilty and Trajectories of Social Development

	Peer competence		Bullying	
	Intercept	Slope	Intercept	Slope
Transitions between birth and start of kindergarten	-0.32 ***	0.03	-0.008	(0.01)
	(0.06)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Transitions between kindergarten and 1st grade	-0.17	-0.03	0.065	-0.02
	(0.25)	(0.09)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Transitions between 1st and 3rd grade				
	--	--	-0.03	0.03
	--	--	(0.03)	(0.02)
Child characteristics				
Female	0.66 *	0.07	-0.05 *	0.00
	(0.18)	(0.05)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Race (African American)	1.20 ***	0.08	0.07 *	0.03
	(0.29)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Maternal characteristics at birth				
Educational attainment	0.10 *	0.00	-0.10 +	0.02
	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Age	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.00
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Poverty status	0.65 **	-0.01	0.01	0.13
	(0.24)	(0.07)	(0.02)	(0.02)

*** = p <.001 ** = p <.01 * = p <.05

Social Development as a Mediator

The final set of analyses explored the extent to which trajectories of social development mediated the link between family instability and romantic involvement in adolescence. Although the intercept and slope of the bullying behavior trajectory were significantly linked with dimensions of adolescent romance, family instability, in early childhood and thereafter, was not associated with bullying behavior. Consistent with Baron and Kenney (1986), the models with bullying as mediator were not estimated. The association between family instability and adolescent romance does not operate through bullying behaviors across elementary school.

Models were estimated with the peer competency trajectory as a potential mediator of the family instability and adolescent romance link. Because only early family instability (family transitions experienced prior to kindergarten) was linked with later romantic behavior, we focus on this indicator to detect mediation. Beginning with the lifetime romance indicator (Model 1), the inclusion of the peer competence slope and intercept did little to change the focal relationship between early family instability and later romance. Evidence of mediation, however, was found for the other measures of romance. In terms of number of romantic unions (Model 2) and the likelihood of a current union (Model 3), the link between family instability in early childhood and romantic involvement in adolescence was no longer significant at conventional levels once the intercept and slope of peer competence was taken into account. Consistent with the findings discussed above, family instability in early childhood was negatively associated with the peer competence intercept. This intercept, in turn, was negatively associated with the number of romantic unions young people reported at age 15 as well as the likelihood of a current romantic union. These associations suggest that young people in more stable homes are also more competent with peers, from the teachers' perspective. These young people, in turn, were less

likely to engage in romantic relationships at age 15 and had fewer relationships overall. Alternatively, young people who underwent more family instability in early childhood were less competent with peers during elementary school, which, in turn, increased the likelihood that they engaged in romantic unions in adolescence. Thus, there is modest evidence of mediation here, with some of the family instability effect operating through teacher reports of peer competence during elementary school.

Table 7. Full Model with Peer Competence as Mediator

	Model 1					Model 2					
	Peer Competence				Ever Romance	Peer Competence				Number of Romance	
	Intercept		Slope		Odds Ratio	Intercept		Slope		b	SE
Peer Intecept	--	--	--	--	1.08	--	--	--	--	-0.07 +	(0.06)
Peer slope	--	--	--	--	0.74	--	--	--	--	-0.21	(1.71)
Transitions between birth and start of kindergarten	-0.38 ***	(0.07)	0.03	(0.02)	1.23 *	-0.38 ***	(0.07)	0.03	(0.02)	0.08 +	(0.05)
Transitions between kindergarten and 1st grade	-0.11	(0.30)	-0.03	(0.08)	1.42 *	-0.11	(0.30)	-0.03	(0.08)	0.19	(0.19)
Transitions between 1st and 3rd grade	-0.08	(0.24)	-0.04	(0.07)	0.99	-0.08	(0.24)	-0.04	(0.07)	-0.01	(0.16)
Transitions between 3rd and 4th grade	-0.67	(0.41)	0.05	(0.11)	1.13 **	-0.67	(0.41)	0.05	(0.11)	0.05	(0.28)
Transitions between 4th and 5th grade	0.02	(0.36)	0.01	(0.10)	1.12	0.02	(0.36)	0.01	(0.10)	0.11	(0.22)
Transitions between 5th and 6th grade	-0.56	(0.41)	-0.02	(0.11)	1.03	-0.56	(0.41)	-0.02	(0.11)	-0.22	(0.25)
Child characteristics											
Female	0.65 ***	(0.18)	0.07	(0.05)	0.66	0.65 ***	(0.18)	0.07	(0.05)	-0.31 *	(0.14)
Race (African American	-1.49 ****	(0.26)	0.06	(0.07)	1.57	-1.49 ***	(0.26)	0.06	(0.07)	0.73 **	(0.24)
Maternal characteritics											
Educational attainment	0.08 *	(0.04)	0.01	(0.01)	0.93	-1.01 ***	(0.23)	0.03	(0.12)	-0.04	(0.03)
Age	-0.01	(0.02)	0.00	(0.00)	0.99	0.12 ***	(0.04)	-0.02	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.01)
Poverty status at R's birth	-0.62 ***	(0.17)	-0.02	(0.02)	1.15	-0.67 ***	(0.19)	0.01	(0.10)	-0.09	(0.14)

*** = p <.001 ** = p <.01 * = p <.05

Table 7. Continued

	Model 3				
	Peer Competence				Current Romance
	Intercept		Slope		Odds Ratio
Peer Intecept	--	--	--	--	0.87 +
Peer slope	--	--	--	--	3.87
Transitions between birth and start of kindergarten	-0.38 ***	(0.07)	0.03	(0.02)	1.05
Transitions between kindergarten and 1st grade	-0.11	(0.30)	-0.03	(0.08)	1.39
Transitions between 1st and 3rd grade	-0.08	(0.24)	-0.04	(0.07)	1.02
Transitions between 3rd and 4th grade	-0.67	(0.41)	0.05	(0.11)	1.37
Transitions between 4th and 5th grade	0.02	(0.36)	0.01	(0.10)	1.24
Transitions between 5th and 6th grade	-0.56	(0.41)	-0.02	(0.11)	0.73
Child characteristics					
Female	0.65 ***	(0.18)	0.07	(0.05)	1.20
Race (African American	-1.49 ***	(0.26)	0.06	(0.07)	0.94
Maternal characteritics					
Educational attainment	--	--	--	--	0.98
Age	--	--	--	--	0.99
Poverty status at R's birth	--	--	--	--	1.25

Conclusion

Divorce and family instability in one generation is associated with divorce and family instability in the next generation. This intergenerational process is coupled with economic stability and the reproduction of social class and rising inequality among American children (McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). In light of the persistent levels of instability in American families (Cherlin, 2009), exploring the developmental processes that may contribute to this association remains an important task. In this study, we took advantage of prospective, multiple reporter measures of family structure, social development, and romance in the SECCYD to do just that. Three themes emerged from this investigation.

First, experiences of family instability were associated with romantic involvement in adolescence. Interestingly, family instability in early childhood, but not family instability in middle childhood, better predicted all dimensions of romantic involvement years later. The salience of family instability in early childhood is consistent with our prior research on the timing of instability and social development in elementary school (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). That this early pattern persists into high school and is also linked with romantic involvement provides further support for the idea that timing matters; in so much as early family instability disrupts the parent-child relationship in ways that alters the template upon which subsequent relationships—platonic and romantic—are based (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008).

Second, trajectories of peer competence, as reported by teachers, and of bullying behavior, as reported by young people, were linked with romantic involvement in adolescence. More specifically, children considered more competent with peers at the start of elementary school reported *fewer* romantic relationships and were less likely to be currently involved in a relationship at age 15, whereas those who were less competent were more likely to engage in

romance in adolescence. At the same time, young people who started out higher on bullying behaviors at 3rd grade and increased these behaviors at greater rates were significantly *more* likely to ever have a romantic relationship and to have more unions by middle adolescence. Those who engaged in more bullying behaviors across elementary school were also more likely to be in a current union.

These associations, although not necessarily causal, tell us something about the developmental nature of young people's orientation to intimate relationships. Romance in adolescence is normative (Connelly & Goldberg, 1996; Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). These findings, however, suggest that young people who engage in less normative behaviors or in less positive relationships during elementary school are overrepresented among the romantically involved. At present, we do not know about the nature of these romantic ties, but other research suggests that a non-trivial portion of young people experience some type of victimization in romantic relationships (Halpern et al., 2001). Moreover, young people who engage in bullying behaviors are more likely to experience relationship aggression, as both perpetuator and victim, during adolescence (Connelly et al., 2000). Because many of these romantic unions as well behaviors marking competency and bullying are nested in schools, these associations highlight the potential of schools as a setting for healthy relationship development during early stages of the life course.

Third, family instability appears to shape early social development—peer competence in particular—in ways that increase the likelihood of romantic involvement in adolescence. More specifically, young people who experienced more family instability were rated as less competent with peers at the start of elementary school and were more likely to engage in romantic behaviors during adolescence. Conversely, those who experienced less instability were rated as more

competent and were less likely to be romantically involved. These results suggest that at least part of the family instability effect operates through peer competence. Given evidence that higher levels of romantic involvement in adolescence presages early cohabiting and marriage in young adulthood (Raley et al., 2007; Cavanagh, 2009) and that coresidential unions in early adulthood are often associated with a higher likelihood of relationship instability across adulthood (Raley & Bumpass, 2003), these findings suggests that the roots of family instability appear early in the life course.

In this study, we have emphasized an attachment perspective, stressing the notion that early family transitions and the turbulence they can introduce can compromise the parent-child relationship in ways that alter the template upon which later relationships and ways of relating in them are based. Yet, other processes may also play a role. Economic disadvantage often brought on by family instability may be another important process by which children's social development is compromised (McLoyd, 1998). The timing of economic disadvantage in early childhood is especially likely to affect achievement and later attainment (Duncan et al., 1998); it may also affect social development, including romance in adolescence.

The general pattern emerging from this study, therefore, is that experiences of family instability in early childhood, social development during elementary school, and romance in adolescence are related, with early family instability setting in motion social skills and relationship orientations in the early life course that might increase the chances of family or relationship instability in the next generation. It is important to emphasize, however, that family instability in early childhood (or later) is not destiny. Many young people who experience family instability engage in healthy peer and romantic relationships during elementary school and beyond. Yet these links do suggest that intervention, such as those outlined in the marriage and

healthy relationship initiatives that gained ground over the past decade, may be more effective earlier in the life course. Based on what we know about the academic-related inequalities among children from the sociology of education literature as well as literatures on child development, differences among children are often most malleable early in their academic careers (Entwisle & Alexander, 1995). A similar model may also be applied to social development, with early intervention guiding social development in ways that encourage more measured social interactions with peers.

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