

Introduction: Although children's behavior problems are normative in the early years, children who continue to exhibit behavioral difficulties in childhood are more likely to exhibit behavior problems, perform poorly in school, and are less able to form and maintain relationships throughout adolescence (Campbell, 1995; Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000; Shepard & Dickstein, 2009). This is of concern because over the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of children who exhibit behavior problems. For example, research on American adolescents and school-age children in 1976, 1989, and 1999 found evidence of increased levels of externalizing problem behaviors (EPB) from low levels in the 1970s (Achenbach et al., 2003; Collishaw et al., 2012). This alarming trend has shed the spotlight on families, which are most influential to children's development (Bates, Bayles, Bennett, Ridge, & Brown, 2013). One aspect of the family that has been under scrutiny is family structure because over the last 40 years, there have been dramatic changes in family composition (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). For example, in 1970, 5% of infants were born to single mothers (Akerlof & Yellen, 1996; Census, 2013), whereas 40% of all children today are born to single mothers (CDC, 2013). Since 1970, there has also been an increase in cohabitation (living romantically with someone outside of marriage) from 10% to nearly 60%, which helps explain the increase in unwed births (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; National Center for Marriage and Family Research, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Researchers have found that, in general, compared to children living in married families, children living in other types of families (e.g. cohabiting, single parent) exhibit more behavioral problems (Foster & Kalil, 2007; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). One explanation for this is that cohabiting families are more likely experience more union transitions (change from one relationship status to another) (Cavanaugh & Huston, 2006; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007) than married families.

However, it is not well understood why union transition is positively related to children's problem behaviors. One study found that couple quality moderates this association but only when there were less than 2 union transitions; toddlers exhibited more EPB when their mothers reported 2 union transitions regardless of the quality of the relationship with her current partner (Fomby & Osborne, 2010). Scholars have also argued that the coparenting relationship, parent's ability to work together to rear their children, is more important for children than the couple relationship because of the proximity to the child (Feinberg, 2003). Moreover, there is evidence that positive coparenting explains why marriage and stable cohabitation (parents continuously living together outside of marriage from their child's birth to 4 years) is positively related to child behaviors (Cabrera et al., 2012). Therefore, it is possible that coparenting support might also explain why union transition is negatively related to children's EPB.

To address these gaps, we use Feinberg's model of coparenting, a family system approach, to address the following questions: (1) how are union transitions (change in relationship status) during early childhood related to children's behaviors at age 5? (2) Does coparenting support mediate the association between union transitions and children's behaviors at age 5? And (3) does couple quality moderate the association between union transitions and children's behavioral outcomes at age 5? Based on our review of the literature and our conceptual model, we test the following hypotheses: (H1) children will exhibit more EPB when their mothers report a higher number of union transitions; (H2) in households with higher union transitions children will experience more EPB because their mothers will report less coparenting support and (H3) the association between number of union transitions and children's EPB will be moderated by couple quality.

Method: Data were drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) study, a national data set that follows a cohort of 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 U.S. cities with populations of 200,000 or more (see McLanahan & Garfinkel, 2000). These data are ideal for the current study because each biological parent was interviewed at each wave and was asked questions about other partners. Family functioning variables, such as co-parenting support and marital quality, were asked for the child's other parent as well as for the interviewee's current partner.

Of the 4,898 children and their families, we excluded families in which the mother did not complete the Child Behavioral Checklist (CBCL) at year 5 ($n = 1,912$), families in which the biological mother and father were not in some sort of relationship in at least one wave ($n = 652$) because family functioning measures were only asked of parents if they were in a relationship, and families in which children did not live with their mother ($n = 25$). This results in our analytical sample of 2,309 families.

Expected findings: We ran multiple regression analyses, and preliminary results support our hypotheses: (H1) more union transitions were related to more EPB at age 5 ($\beta = .083$, $F(1,1648) = 11.425$, $p < .001$). (H2) Reduced coparenting support among families with more union transitions explained why union transitions were associated with EPB ($\beta = -.111$, $F(4,1645) = 13.117$, $p < .001$). Lastly, (H3) children whose mothers reported high number of union transitions and reported more couple support with the child's biological father had fewer EPB than mothers who reported less couple support ($\beta = -.218$, $F(4,1645) = 13.117$, $p = .006$). Further analyses will examine these links with imputed data; the final model will also include controls (i.e., maternal and paternal race, education, depression, involvement; paternal physical abuse; maternal poverty status, and child age, gender, and year 3 CBCL scores).