Experiences of Family Structure and Maltreatment Across Childhood
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As American families become more diverse (Cherlin 2010) and economic inequality across families increases (McLanahan 2004), researchers have concentrated on the family contexts that promote or harm children's development. This study connects the family context to an extreme outcome of child wellbeing, exposure to maltreatment. Along with economic resources, parents' mental health and the quality of their parenting are key mechanisms explaining the association between their romantic lives and their children's wellbeing (McLanahan and Percheski 2008). Similarly, child maltreatment more likely arises from an environment that impairs parents' abilities to follow through on their intentions to positively parent their children than from any inherent pathology (Belsky 1993; Vasta 1982). For example, life stressors such as poverty or being in less institutionalized romantic relationships may make it more difficult for parents to respond positively to their children. As a result, in such families characterized by stress and disadvantage, the risk for child maltreatment could be higher.

This connection, however, likely varies by developmental stage. Because family structure here refers to romantic relationships between biological parents, older children have experienced their parents' relationships for longer. For example, a 9 year-old of married biological parents has been exposed to her parents' marriage (or at least some kind of relationship) longer than an otherwise similar 3 year-old. As another example, given the precarious and short-term nature of most cohabiting unions (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008), older children whose biological parents are cohabiting are a select group experiencing less family change. Moreover, the proposed mechanisms may be more impactful for younger children because of the intensive care they require relative to older children. On the one hand, parental mental health may already be more compromised during this time when the stakes are higher and there are fewer reprieves such as when children are at school. On the other hand, parenting and home quality may be more important for young children who spend more time at home with their parents.

As shown in the conceptual model in Figure 1, the current study thus poses three research questions: 1) Is family structure tied to the risk for child maltreatment? 2) Does this association operate through parental mental health and parenting quality? and 3) How may this association differ for children at various phases of development?

Data and Method
Data. The data for this study come from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN), a multi-level, longitudinal dataset with parent reports, child assessments, and a community survey. The Longitudinal Cohort Study component was conducted across seven cohorts of almost 1,000 children ages 0, 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18 and their caregivers and followed them over three survey waves (W1-3). As a result of the stratified probability sample of neighborhoods, participants are racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. The analytic sample included children from the age 3, 6, and 9 year old cohorts with available data on family structure at W1 and child maltreatment at W3 ($n = 2,792$). Note that those children were 3, 6, and 9 years old at W1 in 1994-1997, yet the outcome variable was from W3 in 2000-2001, meaning children were around 6, 9, and 12 years old at that time.

Measures. The outcome of *child maltreatment* was measured using the Conflict Tactics Scale for Parent and Child (CTSS; Straus et al. 1998). At W3, primary caregivers reported on a 7-point scale the frequency of 22 behaviors regarding non-violent discipline (e.g., denying

privileges), psychological aggression (e.g., threatening), and physical assault ranging from minor corporal punishment (e.g., spanking the bottom) to severe (e.g., slapping the face) and extreme (e.g., burning). The current study employs a binary indicator for ever experiencing maltreatment.

The focal predictor of *family structure* comes from primary caregivers' (usually the focal child's mother) marital status and cohabitation status with the other biological parent at W1. Biological parents were classified into six family structure categories: married, divorced or separated, cohabiting (and never married), visiting (never married but romantically involved), not involved (and never married), or some other family structure (including children in other living arrangements, such as living with grandparents).

The proposed mechanisms linking family structure and maltreatment were *parent mental health* (number of symptoms and impairments for anxiety and depression) and quality of *parenting* (the home as a developmental environment), both of which were measured at W2. *Age* was measured as survey cohort (age 3, 6, or 9 at W1), and a number of sociodemographic covariates acted as controls in the model.

Plan of Analyses. Following a descriptive exploration of the frequency of child maltreatment overall and by family structure and age, logistic regression models predicted the log-odds of child maltreatment. Initial models established a link between the two components, with subsequent models testing for mediation via parental stress and parenting. Finally, multiple group analyses were conducted to determine whether those interconnections differed by child developmental stage. All models were conducted with three different outcomes: ever experiencing physical or psychological maltreatment, ever experiencing physical maltreatment, and ever experiencing psychological maltreatment.

Preliminary and Expected Findings

Preliminary descriptive results are shown in Table 1. To begin, column 1 of the first panel compared experiences of maltreatment in the full sample of children in each family structure to experiences of children not in those family structures (e.g., married parents vs. all other family structures) using χ^2 tests. Experiences of physical or psychological maltreatment were significantly more common for children whose biological parents are divorced or separated or not romantically involved. Both physical and psychological maltreatment was significantly lower among children whose biological parents were married. Turning to the second and third panels which specify type of maltreatment, the higher incidence for children of divorced or separated parents relative to all other groups appears to be driven by psychological maltreatment.

Next, χ^2 tests compared experiences of maltreatment within each family structure category and across age cohort groups (e.g., children of cohabiting parents in cohort 3 vs. children of cohabiting parents in cohort 6). Among children of married biological parents, more of cohort 3 experienced maltreatment than cohort 6 or cohort 9. As shown in the second panel, cohort 3 was even more distinct in terms of the higher levels of physical maltreatment across all family structure groups except for divorced, separated, or visiting biological parents, who were statistically indistinguishable across cohorts.

Overall, descriptive results suggest that maltreatment was a less common experience for children whose biological parents were married, especially for older children. Among children of non-involved parents, however, maltreatment was significantly more common, as was the case for psychological maltreatment among children whose biological parents were divorced or separated. Additionally, age differences were greatest when considering physical maltreatment and among children of married biological parents for any kind of maltreatment.

In future multivariate analyses, I hypothesize that, net of sociodemographic controls, the risk of maltreatment will be higher among more precarious or disadvantaged families (e.g. divorced/separated, not involved), especially for physical maltreatment. I also expect the influence of family structure on child maltreatment to be partially mediated by parents' mental health and parenting. Furthermore, I anticipate that the link between family structure and parent-level mechanisms will be weaker among older children and the link between mechanisms and maltreatment will be stronger among younger children.

References

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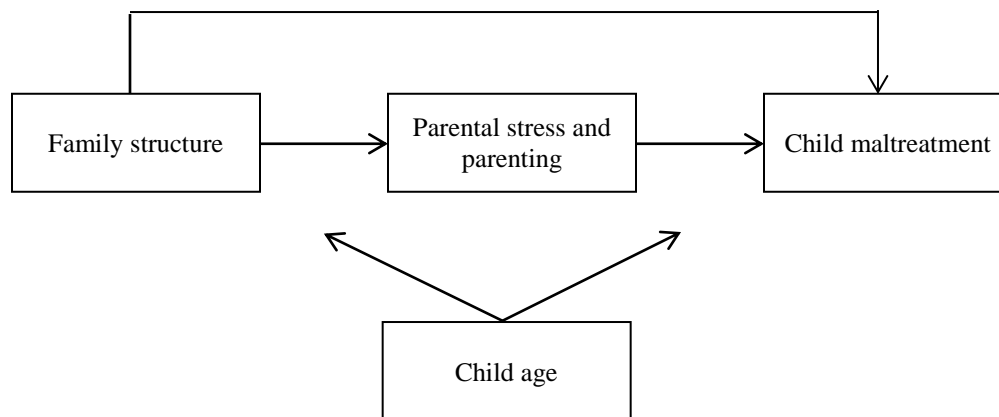
Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Table 1. Frequency (%) Ever Experiencing Maltreatment at W3, by Family Structure Across the Full Sample and Age Cohorts at W3

	Full Sample	Cohort 3 [a]	Cohort 6 [b]	Cohort 9
<u>Physically *or* Psychologically Maltreated</u>	89.28	92.32	87.36	87.79
Biological Parents at W1				
Married	86.69***	91.51	84.02 [a]	83.63 [a, b]
Divorced/separated	94.30*	95.74	94.74	92.86
Cohabiting	86.51	90.48	80.49	86.36
Visiting	90.54	85.71	100.00	92.31
Not involved	93.14**	93.59	91.93	94.34
Other family structure	89.45	96.10	85.71 [a]	88.00
<u>Physically Maltreated</u>	67.59	77.09	65.49	58.19
Biological Parents at W1				
Married	63.62***	74.79	60.36 [a]	53.02 [a, b]
Divorced/separated	70.98	70.21	77.63	64.29
Cohabiting	73.81	84.13	63.41 [a]	63.64 [a, b]
Visiting	77.03†	71.43	84.21	84.62
Not involved	74.94***	82.05	71.43 [a]	69.81 [a, b]
Other family structure	63.64	80.52	61.22 [a]	53.00 [a, b]
<u>Psychologically Maltreated</u>	86.88	89.67	84.65	86.12
Biological Parents at W1				
Married	83.74***	88.77	80.77 [a]	80.78 [a, b]
Divorced/separated	92.75*	91.49	93.42	92.86
Cohabiting	85.71	88.89	80.49	86.36
Visiting	89.19	83.33	100.00	92.31
Not involved	92.20***	92.31	90.68	94.34
Other family structure	85.09	90.91	79.59 [a]	86.00
n	2,792	996	975	821

Note: χ^2 statistic significantly different from all other family structure groups in full sample at † $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; χ^2 statistic significantly different at the $p < .05$ level from cohort 3 [a] or cohort 6 [b] in same family structure group.