



# Adolescent Mothers' Perceptions of the Coparenting Relationship With Their Child's Father: A Function of Attachment Security and Trust

Arielle H. Sheftall<sup>1</sup>,  
Sarah J. Schoppe-Sullivan<sup>1</sup>,  
and Ted G. Futris<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This study used data from 75 adolescent mothers to examine relations among adolescent mothers' attachment avoidance and anxiety, their ability to trust their child's father, and their perceptions of the quality of their coparenting relationship with their child's father. Results suggest that mothers with lower avoidance had more trust for their child's father and also had coparenting relationships characterized by less conflict and a stronger parenting alliance. Moreover, trust mediated the associations between mother's avoidance and coparenting quality. In contrast, mothers' attachment anxiety was not associated with trust for their child's father or their perceptions of coparenting relationship quality. This study provides evidence that adolescent mothers' relationship histories may play an important role in the quality of the coparenting relationship they have with their child's father.

<sup>1</sup>Ohio State University, Columbus

<sup>2</sup>University of Georgia, Athens

## Corresponding Author:

Arielle H. Sheftall, The Ohio State University, 1787 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210  
Email: [Sheftall.1@osu.edu](mailto:Sheftall.1@osu.edu)

**Keywords**

attachment, adolescents, coparenting, trust

In recent years, adolescent pregnancies have decreased (Klein, 2005), but teen parenthood is still prevalent in the United States; in 2003, more than 414,000 live births occurred to adolescent girls (The Guttmacher Institute, 2006). The majority of past research suggests that continuous adolescent father involvement and support is beneficial to the adolescent mother and child. Father involvement and support have been shown to increase responsiveness of mothers to their infants, lead to greater satisfaction in mothers' lives, and yield better maternal adjustment to parenting (Letourneau, Stewart, & Barnfather, 2004), as well as foster higher self-confidence and self-esteem among mothers (Amin & Ahmed, 2004). Adolescent father involvement has also been linked with better educational, behavioral, and emotional outcomes for their children (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Some suggest that father involvement and support are on the increase (Amin & Ahmed, 2004), whereas others describe fathers as typically uninvolved or only involved for a short period of time (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Gee & Rhodes, 2003).

Nonetheless, a key factor in establishing and maintaining adolescent fathers' involvement with their children may be the quality of their relationship with their child's mother (Gee & Rhodes, 2003). One important aspect of the father's relationship with his child's mother, which may have particular relevance for his involvement with their child, is the quality of their coparenting relationship (Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007). The focus of this study was on examining how adolescent mothers' perceptions of the quality of their coparenting relationship with their child's father relate to mothers' attachment security and their ability to trust their child's father.

**Coparenting Relationship Quality**

The coparenting relationship represents the ways in which parents relate to each other as parents and share responsibilities for rearing their child (Feinberg, 2003). Although much research on coparenting has focused on married parents, less is known about the factors influencing the coparenting relationships of never-married parents (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). According to Feinberg (2003), there are four components of a coparenting relationship: childrearing agreement or disagreement, division of labor, support/undermining, and joint family management. In the current study, we focused in particular on the support/undermining aspect, which is central to evaluating coparenting

relationship quality (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). The support component describes the extent to which parents are accommodating and cooperative, and includes: affirmation of the other's competency as a parent, acknowledging and respecting the other's contributions, and upholding the other's parenting decisions and authority. The undermining component is indicated by coparental conflict characterized by criticism, blame, and belittling (Feinberg, 2003).

Another important aspect of the coparenting relationship, the "parenting alliance," focuses less on behavior between partners and more on partners' perceptions of and feelings about the quality of their coparenting relationship. According to Cohen and Weissman (1984), the parenting alliance includes the capacity of a spouse to acknowledge, respect, and value the parenting roles and tasks of his or her partner. Four components are necessary for the formation of a parenting alliance: (a) each parent has an investment in the child, (b) each parent values the importance of the other parent in fostering the growth and development of the child, (c) each parent respects and values the judgments of the other parent, and (d) an ongoing means of communication is established that maintains the alliance around the needs of the child (Cohen & Weissman, 1984).

Research on coparenting relationship quality, primarily in families with married parents, indicates that when parents have more cooperative and less conflictual coparenting relationships and stronger parenting alliances, children experience more positive adjustment and development (McHale et al., 2002; Schoppe et al., 2001). A positive coparenting relationship may also foster an increase in father involvement, which many studies have shown to be related to more positive outcomes for children (for a review, see Lewis & Lamb, 2003). Among married couples, the parenting alliance has been found to be a much stronger predictor of father involvement than the quality of the parents' overall relationship (McBride & Rane, 1998). Recent research has extended these findings to adolescent and nonresident parents. Among adolescent parents, if mothers perceived the parenting alliance as strong, they also perceived nonresident fathers as more involved with their young children (Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007). Moreover, in a study of divorced parents, Sobolewski and King (2005) found that cooperative coparenting was associated with an increase in father-child contact, higher quality father-child relationships, and more responsiveness among nonresident fathers.

### **Attachment Security and Relationship Quality**

Given evidence indicating the importance of supportive coparenting relationships for father involvement and child functioning, researchers have

begun to investigate potential influences on coparenting relationship quality (Feinberg, 2003; McHale et al., 2002). A parent characteristic that may potentially influence coparenting quality is the parents' attachment security (Doherty & Beaton, 2004), given its relevance to relationships formed across the life span. However, this association has not been directly studied.

Attachment theory posits that children maintain close proximity to their caregivers in order to survive and that this proximity results in the development of internal working models that serve to regulate, interpret, and predict attachment behaviors, thoughts, and feelings about the self and others across multiple relationships. In this way, working models serve as a guide to understanding and interpreting relationships across the life span (Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Thus, in the past several decades, a number of researchers have become interested in applying attachment theory to relationships between adults (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

In their seminal work, Hazan and Shaver (1987) and Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) suggested that adult romantic relationships were experienced differently by different people because of their attachment histories with their parents. These researchers described types of romantic attachment analogous to those used to describe parent-child attachment. More recently, however, the work of Fraley and Waller (1998) suggests that attachment is best measured dimensionally rather than categorically, as the attachment categories do not represent true taxons. In particular, adult attachment seems to be best represented by two dimensions—avoidance and anxiety. Individuals high on avoidance devalue interpersonal relationships and value their independence, whereas individuals high on anxiety are preoccupied with their relationships and worry that their partners will reject them (Brenman, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Low levels of both avoidance and anxiety are indicative of greater attachment security.

Consistent with attachment theory, research examining how adult attachment security relates to relationship quality indicates that secure individuals have higher quality intimate relationships than insecure individuals across a number of dimensions, including commitment, trust, self-disclosure, satisfaction, conflict resolution, and forgiveness (for reviews, see Feeney, 1999, and Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, & Cowan, 2002). Although little research has specifically explored relations between adult attachment and coparenting relationship quality, related work has demonstrated the relevance of attachment security for new parents' adjustment to the transition to parenthood. Not surprisingly, secure individuals show better adjustment to this stressful event than do insecure individuals. Feeney, Alexander, Noller, and Holhaus (2003) and Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Tran, and Wilson (2003) both found

that highly ambivalent women were most vulnerable to postpartum depression when their partners provided less appropriate support. Similarly, Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, and Grich (2001) and Simpson and Rholes (2002) examined change in marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood and found that when highly anxious women perceived their husbands as unsupportive, both these women and their husbands were at risk for experiencing declines in marital satisfaction. Rholes et al. (2001) also showed that high levels of attachment avoidance in women were associated with concurrent lower levels of (but not change in) marital quality. However, Rholes, Simpson, and Friedman (2006) found that expectant parents higher on attachment avoidance had less desire to have children, experienced greater stress postpartum, and derived less satisfaction and meaning from parenting.

Going beyond couple dynamics to family dynamics, research by Mikulincer and Florian (1999) indicates that families with young children headed by secure parents have higher levels of adaptability compared to families headed by avoidant or anxious parents. Thus, consistent with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Fraley & Shaver, 2000), attachment security may not only affect romantic relationship quality but may also affect other types of relationships (parent-child, coparental).

### **The Role of Trust**

A central tenet of attachment theory is that one's ability to trust other people is dependent on one's experiences in significant attachment relationships and how these experiences are incorporated into internal working models (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Mikulincer, 1998). Research supports this proposition, given that secure individuals have relationships characterized by more trust, commitment, and interdependence than individuals with insecure attachments (Feeney, 1999; Mikulincer et al., 2002). In fact, attachment security is included in Simpson's (2007) dyadic model of trust as an important dispositional tendency that may affect the development and maintenance of trust. Whereas individuals high on attachment avoidance may be reluctant to even enter situations in which trust could be developed, individuals high on attachment anxiety may enter these situations with zeal, but their experiences with a relationship partner may not translate into greater feelings of trust for that partner or security within the relationship. Consistent with these ideas, individuals high on attachment avoidance are nervous when others try to get close and do not completely trust others, whereas individuals high on attachment anxiety tend to distrust their partners more, leading to lower forgiveness (Finkel, Burnette, & Scissors, 2007; Mikulincer, 1998; Pistole, 1993; Simpson, 1990).

Recent research confirms the important role of trust as a link between attachment orientations and relationship outcomes, as Finkel et al. (2007) found that partner-specific trust played the role of a mediator in the processes linking attachment anxiety and relationship beliefs with tendencies to forgive one's partner.

Even as trust can be viewed as a central component of any successful relationship, it is a key prerequisite for a high-quality coparenting relationship. Developing and maintaining a high-quality coparenting relationship characterized by high cooperation, low conflict, and a strong parenting alliance certainly requires trust in one's partner (Cohen & Weissman, 1984; Feinberg, 2003). In particular, a strong parenting alliance cannot exist when partners fail to acknowledge, respect, and value each other's roles as parents. Meeting these criteria requires trust between partners (Cohen & Weissman, 1984). However, research on the direct association of trust with coparenting relationship quality is scant.

### The Present Study

This study focused on examining relations among adolescent mothers' attachment anxiety and avoidance, their ability to trust their child's father, and their perceptions of the quality of their coparenting relationship with their child's father. Two research questions were addressed. First, how does adolescent mothers' attachment avoidance and anxiety relate to their perceptions of the quality of their parenting alliance with their child's father, as well as to the levels of conflict and cooperation in their coparenting relationship? Consistent with findings that secure individuals (low on avoidance and anxiety) have higher quality romantic relationships (e.g., Feeney, 1999; Mikulincer et al., 2002), more adaptable family relationships (Mikulincer & Florian, 1999), and show better adjustment to the transition to parenthood (e.g., Rholes et al., 2006; Simpson et al., 2003), we predicted that mothers low on anxiety or low on avoidance would perceive less conflict and more cooperation in their coparenting relationships and would view their parenting alliances as stronger.

The second research question addressed whether mothers' ability to trust their child's father mediated the association between mothers' attachment avoidance or anxiety and their perceptions of coparenting relationship quality. Based on theory and research linking attachment security and trust in relationships (Finkel et al., 2007; Mikulincer, 1998; Simpson, 2007) and the centrality of trust in high-quality coparenting relationships (Cohen & Weissman, 1984; Feinberg, 2003), we predicted that the effects of mothers' attachment avoidance

and anxiety on the quality of their coparenting relationship with their child's father would operate through her trust in him.

We focused on mothers' perceptions in the present study because previous research suggests that mothers' views of interparental relationships may carry particular weight with respect to coparenting and father involvement (Furtis & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007; McBride & Rane, 1998), likely because of mothers' typical roles as primary caregivers. It is also important to note that in addressing our questions, we took into account other factors that may also affect the quality of the coparenting relationship between adolescent parents. We controlled for romantic status—whether or not the mother and the child's father were currently in a romantic relationship—and the couples' relationship length prior to the pregnancy. Previous research has found that fathers are more likely to participate in coparenting when they are romantically involved with their child's mother (Gee & Rhodes, 2003). In contrast, relationship satisfaction tends to decrease over the life of a relationship (Van Laningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). We also accounted for the frequency of contact between adolescent parents, given that more frequent contact between parents might be expected to provide greater opportunities for both cooperation and conflict (Herzog, Umaña-Taylor, Madden-Derdich, & Leonard, 2007).

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

The participants in the present study were recruited through a statewide school-based program for adolescent parents from 32 schools in the Midwest serving 296 pregnant or parenting teens. Participants selected for the study had to meet certain criteria, which were as follows: (a) Mothers were 19 years old or younger at the time of their child's birth, (b) fathers were 24 years old or younger at the time of their child's birth, and (c) the child was younger than 25 months at the time the survey was sent. Of the 167 mothers who met the criteria, 125 returned a completed survey (response rate 75%). For the purposes of this study, the current sample was reduced to mothers who reported that their child's father had at least weekly contact with their child ( $n = 75$ ). The rationale for this decision was that in order for a coparenting relationship to exist and the quality of that relationship to be evaluated, the father and mother had to have relatively consistent contact.

Most of these first-time mothers were Caucasian (69.3%) and ranged in age from 14 to 19 years ( $M = 17.0$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ). Most of the fathers were also

Caucasian (69.3%), and ranged from 15 to 24 years of age ( $M = 18.8$ ,  $SD = 2.0$ ). The child, on average, was 8.8 months old ( $SD = 6.6$ ), and 52% were girls. Approximately 76% ( $n = 57$ ) of the mothers were currently romantically involved with their child's father. Of those mothers romantically involved with their child's father, 88% ( $n = 50$ ) were planning to marry, were engaged to be married, or were married, and 42% ( $n = 24$ ) lived with the child's father at the time of the survey. No statistically significant differences on the demographic profiles of these 75 mothers and the mothers not selected ( $n = 50$ ) were found.

### Measures

**Mothers' attachment security.** Attachment was measured using the dimensional method (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). The dimensional method is most appropriate (Britton & Fuendeling, 2005; Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001; Kurdek, 2002; Schmitt, 2003) as the categories of attachment do not appear to be true taxons as demonstrated by Fraley and Waller (1998). The attachment measure used in this study consisted of 17 items derived from Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) descriptions of attachment styles (Joo, 2005). Mothers were asked to rate their experiences across different types of relationships (including those with parents, romantic partners, or other significant figures) throughout their lifetime. Mothers responded to the items along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The items on this measure are similar to, and in some cases identical to, the items on the well-known, reliable, and valid Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) scale (Brennan et al., 1998). The avoidance dimension was composed of nine items (e.g., "I find it difficult to depend on others completely";  $\alpha = .68$ ), and the anxiety dimension composed of eight items (e.g., "I worry that others do not value me as much as I value them";  $\alpha = .71$ ). Items for each dimension were summed to create total scores for attachment avoidance and anxiety.

**Dyadic trust.** The eight-item dyadic trust subscale of the Coparental Communication scale measured the interpersonal trust the mother had for her child's father (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). Mothers responded to each item along a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. Some example items on this scale are "There are times when my child's father cannot be trusted" (reversed) and "My child's father is truly sincere in his promises." A mean score was computed, with higher scores representing more trust for the child's father (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .96$ ).

**Coparental cooperation.** A four-item scale measured the level of coparental cooperation between the parents (Ahrons, 1981). Mothers were instructed to



think about the conversations they had with their child's father during the past month and how often each item described the situation with the father (e.g., "Did he provide emotional support in dealing with your child?") "Was he a resource to you in raising your child?"). The mothers responded to each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*. A mean score was computed, with higher scores signifying more cooperation between the parents (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ).

**Coparental conflict.** A five-item scale measured the conflict experienced between the two parents (Ahrons, 1981). Mothers were instructed to think about the conversations they had with their child's father during the past month and how often each item described the situation with the father (e.g., "Did you and he call each other names?") "Did an argument result?"). Mothers responded to the five items on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*. A mean score was computed, with higher scores signifying more conflict between the two parents (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Parenting alliance strength.** The overall quality and strength of the coparenting relationship was measured using 29 items adapted from the Parenting Alliance Inventory (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Mothers responded to each item (e.g., "My child's father believes I am a good parent" and "I learn how to better manage my child by watching his/her father manage him/her") along a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. A mean score was computed, with higher scores representing a stronger coparenting relationship (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .98$ ).

**Control variables.** The current *relationship status* between the mothers and their child's father was determined by mothers' responses to the question "Are you currently in a romantic relationship with your child's father?" Current relationship status was treated as a dichotomous variable. *Relationship length pregnancy* was based on the mother's report of how long she and her child's father dated before she became pregnant, and responses were converted into months. Mothers also reported on how often their child's father saw their child in the past month. In the subsample of mothers selected for this study, their *level of contact* with their child's father ranged from weekly to every day.

### Sample Comparison Analysis

Comparisons were conducted between the 75 mothers selected for the present study and the mothers not selected ( $n = 50$ ) on the main variables of interest. No statistically significant differences were found on avoidance, anxiety, or coparental conflict. However, the mothers selected for our sample

reported higher trust,  $t(122) = -9.70, p < .001$ , higher coparental cooperation,  $t(123) = -14.84, p < .001$ , and stronger parenting alliances,  $t(123) = -10.99, p < .001$ , than the ones not selected. This was expected given that the fathers of the children in the nonselected sample did not have contact or had minimal contact (i.e., once a month) with their child and the child's mother. With such limited contact, trust, coparental cooperation, and a strong parenting alliance would have been unlikely to be established. As noted above, focusing on fathers who had at least weekly contact with their child made it possible to more carefully examine variations in the quality of parents' coparenting relationships. Importantly, the two samples exhibited similar levels of attachment avoidance and anxiety, and, as noted above, were demographically similar.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and ranges for all study variables are presented in Table 1. Mothers in our sample had coparenting relationships characterized by moderate to high levels of cooperation, relatively low conflict, and strong parenting alliances. These mothers also had relatively high levels of trust for their child's father and moderate levels of attachment avoidance and anxiety.

Correlations among the main variables of interest are reported in Table 1. Avoidance was positively correlated with conflict, such that mothers with higher avoidance had more conflict in their coparenting relationship with their child's father. This dimension was also negatively correlated with parenting alliance, trust, relationship length, pregnancy, and frequency of contact, indicating that mothers with higher avoidance reported less trust for their child's father, a lower quality parenting alliance, a shorter relationship with their child's father before they conceived, and saw their child's father less frequently. Mothers' anxiety was positively correlated with the frequency of contact variable, such that mothers who were more anxious were more likely to also report more contact with their child's father.

Trust was positively correlated with parenting alliance, coparental cooperation, and frequency of contact with their child's father. Trust was also negatively correlated with coparental conflict. In other words, mothers who had more trust for their child's father had stronger parenting alliances, greater cooperation, more contact with their child's father, and less conflict in their coparenting relationships.

To compare those mothers who were romantically involved with their child's father and those who were not,  $t$  tests were conducted on the key

Table 1. Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

	Anxiety	Avoidance	Dyadic trust	Coparental cooperation	Coparental conflict	Parenting alliance	Relationship length	Frequency of contact
Anxiety	1.00							
Avoidance	.06	1.00						
Dyadic trust	-.01	-.26*	1.00					
Coparental cooperation	.07	-.19	.51**	1.00				
Coparental conflict	.12	.24*	-.68**	-.34**	1.00			
Parenting alliance	-.06	-.30**	.79**	.67**	-.66**	1.00		
Relationship length	-.11	-.37**	-.11	-.06	.15	-.17	1.00	
Frequency of contact	.26*	-.24*	.30**	.36**	-.22	.34**	-.04	1.00
M	23.11	28.62	4.27	3.82	2.33	4.91	15.68	7.04
SD	5.36	5.11	1.31	1.00	1.03	0.89	13.43	1.25
Range	8.00-34.00	9.00-40.00	1.25-6.00	1.00-5.00	1.00-5.00	2.62-6.00	0.00-52.00	4-8

\*p &lt; .05. \*\*p &lt; .01.

variables studied. It was found that mothers did not differ on relationship length pregnancy, anxiety, or avoidance. But compared to mothers who were not romantically involved with their child's father, those who were reported more coparental cooperation,  $t(73) = -4.15, p < .001$ , less coparental conflict,  $t(73) = 3.00, p < .001$ , stronger parenting alliances,  $t(73) = -5.37, p < .001$ , more trust for their child's father,  $t(73) = -4.41, p < .001$ , and more contact with their child's father,  $t(73) = -5.24, p < .001$ . Thus, these analyses supported our inclusion of romantic status as a control variable in subsequent analyses.

### Multivariate Analyses

Regression analysis was used to test if trust mediated the associations between mothers' attachment avoidance and anxiety and the three measures of coparenting relationship quality. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), for mediation to exist, certain criteria must be met: (a) The independent variable must account for variation in the dependent variable; (b) variation in the mediator must account for variation in the dependent variable when holding the independent variable constant; and (c) when the impact of the mediator on the dependent variable is controlled, a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables no longer exists. To determine whether the criteria for mediation were met, we analyzed the data in several steps. With respect to avoidance, the first criterion was already satisfied by correlations reported above. Because anxiety did not correlate with trust or any of the coparenting relationship quality variables, the mediation analyses were only conducted for avoidance and only in relation to the coparental conflict and parenting alliance variables. To satisfy the second criterion, each dependent variable assessing coparenting quality (conflict and parenting alliance) was regressed on trust while controlling for mothers' avoidance. Finally, to satisfy the third criterion, we examined the association of each of the dependent variables (conflict and parenting alliance) with avoidance while holding trust constant. As noted above, these regression analyses also controlled for relationship length pregnancy, frequency of contact, and romantic status, which were entered on Step 1 of the equations. In addition, Sobel's test (1982) was conducted to determine the strength of the indirect relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

When predicting coparental conflict (see Table 2), the significant effect of avoidance in the second step ( $\beta = .28, p < .05$ ) was reduced to nonsignificance in the third step when trust was added to the model. Trust accounted for an additional 34% of the variance in coparental conflict ( $\beta = -.67, p < .01$ ).

**Table 2.** Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Coparental Conflict and Parenting Alliance

Predictors	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
<b>Coparental conflict</b>									
Constant	3.07	0.69		1.01	1.15		3.75	0.99	
Frequency of contact	-0.06	0.11	-0.07	-0.02	0.11	-0.02	0.00	0.08	.00
Relationship length	0.01	0.01	.12	0.02	0.01	.22	0.01	0.01	.10
Relationship status	-0.62	0.32	-.26	-0.54	0.31	-.23	0.07	0.26	.03
Avoidance				0.06	0.03	.28*	0.02	0.02	.11
Dyadic trust							-0.52	0.08	-.67**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.07			0.12			0.46	
F change		2.80*			4.94*			43.49**	
<b>Parenting alliance</b>									
Constant	3.78	0.53		5.70	0.86		3.23	0.63	
Frequency of contact	0.06	0.08	.08	0.02	0.08	.02	0.00	0.05	.01
Relationship length	-0.01	0.01	-.12	-0.02	0.01	-.23*	-0.01	0.01	-.10
Relationship status	1.09	0.24	.51**	1.01	0.23	.48**	0.46	0.17	.22**
Avoidance				-0.05	0.02	-.29**	-0.02	0.01	-.12
Dyadic trust							0.47	0.05	.68**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.30			0.37			0.72	
F change		11.47**			7.62**			86.94**	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

When predicting parenting alliance, similar patterns of results were found. Specifically, avoidance was significantly associated with parenting alliance when entered on the second step ( $\beta = -.29, p < .01$ ), but was reduced to non-significance when trust was added to the model on the third step ( $\beta = .68, p < .01$ ). In fact, trust accounted for an additional 35% of the variance in parenting alliance. It is also notable that these results held when controlling for romantic status, which was significantly associated with parenting alliance at Step 1 ( $\beta = .51, p < .01$ ).

To satisfy the final criterion for establishing mediation, another set of regression equations was computed, with trust entered on the second step and mothers' avoidance entered on the third. When predicting coparental conflict, the significant effect of trust in Step 2 ( $\beta = -.70, p < .01$ ) remained significant in step three ( $\beta = -.67, p < .01$ ) after adding mothers' avoidance ( $\beta = .11, ns$ ). When predicting parenting alliance, trust was significant in Step 2 ( $\beta = .71, p < .01$ ) and remained significant ( $\beta = .68, p < .01$ ) after including mothers' avoidance ( $\beta = -.12, ns$ ). Thus, consistent with mediation, after accounting for trust, mothers' avoidance did not explain additional variance in coparental conflict or parenting alliance.

Finally, Sobel's test was conducted to determine the magnitude of the indirect effects of mothers' avoidance on the two measures of coparenting quality through the mediator, trust. Sobel's test confirmed that the indirect effect was significant for coparental conflict ( $z = 2.19, p < .05$ ) and parenting alliance ( $z = 2.23, p < .05$ ). The significance of these indirect effects provides additional evidence that trust mediates the relation between mothers' avoidance and perceptions of coparenting relationship quality.

## Discussion

This study suggests that adolescent mothers' relationship histories may play a role in the quality of the relationship they are able to sustain with their child's father as they continue to parent their child together. In particular, we found that mothers' attachment avoidance relates to their ability to trust their child's father, which in turn is related to their perception of the quality of their coparenting relationship with their child's father. These findings are important because healthy coparenting relationships benefit both parents and children (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004).

As hypothesized, we found that adolescent mothers with lower levels of avoidance perceived their coparenting relationship with their child's father as less conflictual and as more strongly allied. These findings are consistent with propositions of attachment theory (Feeney, 1999; Mikulincer et al., 2002), which posit that attachment representations play an important role in the quality of individuals' relationships. Moreover, results of the present study are consistent with research indicating that more secure individuals have more adaptable family relationships (Mikulincer & Florian, 1999), and show better adjustment to the transition to parenthood (Rholes et al., 2006; Simpson et al., 2003), and thus may experience more adaptive coparenting.

Our findings also supported our hypothesis that trust would mediate the association between mothers' attachment avoidance and coparenting

relationship quality. In particular, we found that the relationship of mothers' avoidance with coparental conflict and parenting alliance was accounted for, or explained by, the level of trust she has for her child's father. These findings are consistent with theory (Bowly, 1969, 1988; Simpson, 2007) and research (Finkel et al., 2007; Mikulincer, 1998), which posit that individuals' ability to trust others may depend in part on the security of working models of attachment relationships.

Notably, we did not find associations between mothers' attachment anxiety and our measure of trust or any of the three measures of coparenting relationship quality, which precluded further tests of mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). At first glance, this might seem surprising as research has shown that anxious individuals experience more conflict in their relationships, feel more hurt by the conflicts experienced, and see the conflicts as leading to long-term negative outcomes (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Moreover, attachment anxiety tends to be linked to couple conflict, whereas attachment avoidance is linked to lower levels of couple support (Gallo & Smith, 2001). However, the literature on adult attachment and the transition to parenthood suggests that anxiety or ambivalence may only be related to relationship maladjustment when combined with other risk factors such as a husband's overinvolved caregiving style (Feeney et al., 2003) or low spousal support (Rholes et al., 2001; Simpson & Rholes, 2002). In contrast, avoidance has been directly linked to relationship difficulties for new parents (Rholes et al., 2001; Rholes et al., 2006). Also, as stated by Fraley and Shaver (2000), the avoidance dimension regulates attachment-related behaviors in anxiety-provoking situations whereas the anxiety dimension regulates closeness to the attachment figure. Being an adolescent parent could be, potentially, an anxiety-provoking situation, and because the avoidance attachment dimension is more prominent in these situations, this may be the reason we found that avoidance was associated with conflict through trust whereas the anxiety dimension was not.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

Findings from the present study have important implications for research and practice. From a research standpoint, these results can contribute to our understanding of the reasons why some adolescent parents have positive coparenting relationships and others cannot sustain them. As this study suggests, a mother's trust for her child's father was found to be an important factor, and if trust was not present, mothers perceived the coparenting relationship as characterized by greater conflict, less cooperation, and a weaker

parenting alliance. The present study also identified mothers' attachment avoidance as an important potential influence on trust, which in turn may influence coparenting relationship quality. Thus, factors representing mothers' attachment representations and trust between parents should be incorporated into theoretical models of coparenting and father involvement, particularly with respect to young, unmarried parents.

From a practice standpoint, these findings can be used to inform community leaders and researchers who use interventions about possible strategies for increasing the quality of coparenting relationships between adolescent parents—a worthwhile goal given that the presence of a positive coparenting relationship is associated with greater father involvement and better outcomes for both children and mothers (Letourneau et al., 2004; Lewis & Lamb, 2003). One promising avenue for intervention suggested by the present study is that programs intended to foster positive coparenting relationships between adolescent parents may want to focus on fostering trust between adolescent parents. Results of the present study suggest that if trust can be established within the relationship between the mother and her child's father, a supportive coparenting relationship may be sustainable. Given that working models of attachment tend to persist over time (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000), focusing on trust between adolescent parents, which is more proximally related to the quality of their coparenting relationship, may be fruitful.

However, it is likely that trust may be difficult to foster for highly avoidant mothers. In particular, individuals high on attachment avoidance may be reluctant to even enter situations in which trust could be developed ("trust or test situations"; Simpson, 2007). Thus, in some cases, focusing on the mother's attachment style may be warranted, although this may require a more extensive intervention approach. Promising preliminary work suggests avenues for intervening with women who have insecure attachment styles (Kilmann, Urbaniak, & Parnell, 2006). It is also important to keep in mind that in some instances fathers cannot be and should not be trusted, particularly when there is serious conflict and physical and sexual abuse present (Gee & Rhodes, 2003). Thus, in some cases, a lack of trust for the father by an avoidant mother may not reflect an inability to develop trust but rather an accurate assessment of the relationship. In such circumstances it may be best for the children and mothers if the fathers are not involved, and thus, unwise to attempt to foster trust and supportive coparenting relationships between these fathers and mothers. Certainly, these types of cases need to be considered when implementing intervention programs. Overall, the type of intervention that works best will depend on the characteristics of the



population of adolescent parents as well as the characteristics of the individuals involved.

Some limitations of this study that should be addressed include the mothers' characteristics, the use of mothers' self-reports, the measurement of attachment, and the study design. The mothers in this study appeared to have relatively positive relationships with their child's father. Although these mothers were demographically similar to those not included from the larger sample, they did report greater trust for their child's father, more coparental cooperation, and stronger parenting alliances. These differences likely resulted from our selection criteria, which were designed to include mothers who actually had coparenting interactions with their child's father so that we could better examine variations in the quality of parents' coparenting relationships. Because of the characteristics of our sample, we recommend caution in generalizing our findings to the larger population of adolescent parents. Studies that include adolescent parents with more variability in coparenting relationship functioning are needed to further our understanding of the associations among attachment security, trust, and coparenting quality.

It is also important to keep in mind that all data for the present study were provided by mothers. Although mothers' perceptions of the interparental relationship may be particularly relevant for coparenting and father involvement (Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007; McBride & Rane, 1998), mothers and fathers may not always share the same view of their coparenting relationship, and data on coparenting relationship quality obtained from fathers as well as mothers would increase confidence in the overall picture of the relationship that is reported. In addition, shared method variance resulting from the use of self-report data from mothers only may have inflated the relations among the variables in this study. Future research would benefit from including the perceptions of both mothers and fathers, as well as observations of coparenting relationship quality, given that individuals may not always be accurate when reporting the quality of their relationships (McHale et al., 2002). Research on relations among attachment security, trust, and coparenting quality should also consider the role of fathers' attachment styles, given that both partners' internal working models may contribute to their relationship quality (Banse, 2004).

We also acknowledge that our measurement of attachment was not without limitations. Although the dimensions assessed by our measure (avoidance and anxiety) are analogous to those contained within commonly used measures of adult attachment (e.g., the Adult Attachment Questionnaire, Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996; the Experiences in Close Relationships scale; Brennan et al., 1998), our measure was not directly comparable to these

measures. An important direction for future work on adolescent parents' attachment security and coparenting will be to use more established measures, including measures designed specifically for adolescents. A final limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which precludes us from concluding that a causal chain exists linking attachment avoidance to trust, and trust to coparenting relationship quality. Although we hypothesized that the chain works in this fashion based on current theory and research (Finkel et al., 2007; Mikulincer, 1998; Simpson, 2007), it is certainly possible, for example, that a high-quality coparenting relationship could foster the development of trust between adolescent parents, which in turn could affect the continuing development of parents' internal working models of attachment. Future studies using a cross-lag longitudinal design could more definitively address the question concerning causal ordering of these variables (Cole & Maxwell, 2003). Further research on attachment, trust, and other factors that may affect the likelihood of building and sustaining successful coparenting relationships between adolescent parents has significant potential for informing intervention efforts aimed at fostering these types of relationships. In turn, developing and sustaining positive coparenting relationships holds promise for improving the lives of adolescent parents and their children.

#### Authors' Note

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2006 Society for Research on Adolescence Meeting, San Francisco, California.

#### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

#### Funding

This research was supported by new faculty seed grant funding from The College of Human Ecology, The Ohio State University.

#### References

- Abidin, R. R., & Brunner, J. F. (1995). Development of a Parenting Alliance Inventory. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 24*, 31-40.
- Ahrons, C. R. (1981). The continuing coparental relationship between divorced spouses. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 51*, 415-428.
- Amin, R., & Ahmed, J. (2004). Unwed adolescent fathers: Their involvement in the lives of adolescent mothers and their children. *The Negro Educational Review, 55*, 187-195.

- Banase, R. (2004). Adult attachment and marital satisfaction: Evidence for dyadic configuration effects. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 273-282.
- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 1173-1182.
- Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M. (1991). Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a four-category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61, 226-244.
- Belsky, J., Putnam, S., & Crnic, K. (1996). Coparenting, parenting, and early emotional development. In J. P. McHale & P. A. Cowan (Eds.), *Understanding how family-level dynamics affect children's development: Studies of two-parent families: Vol. 74. New directions for child development* (pp. 45-55). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brennan, K. A., Clark, C. L., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). Self-report measurement of adult attachment: An integrative overview. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 46-76). New York: Guilford.
- Bretherton, I., & Munholland, K. A. (1999). Internal working models in attachment relationships. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 89-111). New York: Guilford.
- Britton, P. C., & Fucndeling, J. M. (2005). The relations among varieties of adult attachment and the components of empathy. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 145, 519-530.
- Campbell, L., Simpson, J. A., Boldry, J., & Kashy, D. A. (2005). Perceptions of conflict and support in romantic relationships: The role of attachment anxiety. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88, 510-531.
- Cohen, R. S., & Weissman, S. H. (1984). The parenting alliance. In R. Cohen, B. Cohler, & S. Weissman (Eds.), *Parenthood: A psychodynamic perspective* (pp. 33-49). New York: Guilford.
- Cole, D. A., & Maxwell, S. E. (2003). Testing mediational models with longitudinal data: Questions and tips in the use of structural equation modeling. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 112, 558-577.
- Coley, R. L., & Chase-Lansdale, L. (1998). Adolescent pregnancy and parenthood: Recent evidence and future directions. *American Psychologist*, 53, 152-166.
- Doherty, W. J., & Beaton, J. M. (2004). Mothers and fathers parenting together. In A. L. Vangelisti (Ed.), *Handbook of family communication* (pp. 269-286). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Feeney, J. A. (1999). Adult romantic attachment and couple relationships. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 355-377). New York: Guilford.
- Feeney, J. A., Alexander, R., Noller, P., & Holhaus, L. (2003). Attachment insecurity, depression, and the transition to parenthood. *Personal Relationships, 10*, 475-493.
- Feinberg, M. E. (2003). The internal structure and ecological context of coparenting: A framework for research and intervention. *Parenting: Science and Practice, 3*, 95-131.
- Finkel, E. J., Burnette, J. L., & Scissors, L. E. (2007). Vengefully ever after: Destiny beliefs, state attachment anxiety, and forgiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*, 871-886.
- Fraley, R. C., & Shaver, P. R. (2000). Adult romantic attachment: Theoretical developments, emerging controversies, and unanswered questions. *Review of General Psychology, 4*, 132-154.
- Fraley, R. C., & Waller, N. G. (1998). Adult attachment patterns: A test of the typological model. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 77-114). New York: Guilford.
- Futris, T. G., & Schoppe-Sullivan, S. J. (2007). Mothers' perceptions of barriers, parenting alliance, and adolescent fathers' engagement with their children. *Family Relations, 56*, 258-269.
- Gallo, I. C., & Smith, T. W. (2001). Attachment style in marriage: Adjustment and responses to interaction. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 18*, 263-289.
- Gee, C. B., & Rhodes, J. E. (2003). Adolescent mothers' relationship with their children's biological fathers: Social support, social strain, and relationship continuity. *Journal of Family Psychology, 17*, 370-383.
- Granqvist, P., & Hagekull, B. (2001). Seeking security in the new age: On attachment and emotional compensation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 40*, 527-545.
- The Guttmacher Institute. (2006). *U.S. teenage pregnancy statistics national and state trends and trends by race and ethnicity*. New York: Author.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*, 511-524.
- Herzog, M. J., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Madden-Derdich, D. A., & Leonard, S. A. (2007). Adolescent mothers' perceptions of fathers' parental involvement: Satisfaction and desire for involvement. *Family Relations, 56*, 244-257.
- Jou, E. (2005). Attachment styles of female parenting and nonparenting adolescents. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 66*, 3465.
- Kilmann, P. R., Urbaniak, G. C., & Parnell, M. M. (2006). Effects of attachment-focused versus relationship skills-focused group interventions for college students with insecure attachment patterns. *Attachment and Human Development, 8*, 47-62.

- Klein, J. D., & the Committee on Adolescence. (2005). Adolescent pregnancy: Current trends and issues. *Pediatrics*, *116*, 281-286.
- Kurdek, L. A. (2002). On being insecure about the assessment of attachment styles. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *19*, 811-834.
- Larzelere, R. E., & Huston, T. L. (1980). The Dyadic Trust Scale: Toward understanding interpersonal trust in close relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *42*, 595-604.
- Letourneau, N. L., Stewart, M. J., & Barnfather, A. K. (2004). Adolescent mothers: Support needs, resources, and support-education interventions. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *35*, 509-525.
- Lewis, C., & Lamb, M. E. (2003). Fathers' influences on children's development: The evidence from two-parent families. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *18*, 212-228.
- McBride, B. A., & Rane, T. R. (1998). Parenting alliance as a predictor of father involvement: An exploratory study. *Family Relations*, *47*, 229-237.
- McHale, J., Khazan, I., Erera, P., Rotman, T., DeCoursey, W., & McConnell, M. (2002). Coparenting in diverse family systems. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting* (2nd ed., pp. 75-107). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Mikulincer, M. (1998). Attachment working models and the sense of trust: An exploration of interaction goals and affect regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*, 1209-1224.
- Mikulincer, M., & Florian, V. (1999). The association between spouses' self-reports of attachment styles and representations of family dynamics. *Family Process*, *38*, 69-83.
- Mikulincer, M., Florian, V., Cowan, P., & Cowan, C. (2002). Attachment security in couple relationships: A systemic model and its implications for family dynamics. *Family Process*, *41*, 405-434.
- Pistole, M. C. (1993). Attachment relationships: Self-disclosure and trust. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, *15*, 94-106.
- Rholes, W. S., Simpson, J. A., Campbell, L., & Grich, J. (2001). Adult attachment and the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *81*, 421-435.
- Rholes, W. S., Simpson, J. A., & Friedman, M. (2006). Avoidant attachment and the experience of parenting. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *32*, 275-285.
- Schmitt, D. P. (2003). Are men universally more dismissing than women? Gender differences in romantic attachment across 62 cultural regions. *Personal Relationships*, *10*, 307-331.
- Schoppe, S. J., Mangelsdorf, S. C., & Frosch, C. A. (2001). Coparenting, family process, and family structure: Implications for preschoolers' externalizing behavior problems. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *15*, 526-545.

- Simpson, J. A. (1990). Influence of attachment on romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *59*, 971-980.
- Simpson, J. A. (2007). Psychological foundations of trust. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *16*, 264-268.
- Simpson, J. A., & Rholes, W. S. (2002). Attachment orientations, marriage, and the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *36*, 622-628.
- Simpson, J. A., Rholes, W. S., Campbell, L., Tran, S., & Wilson, C. L. (2003). Adult attachment, the transition to parenthood, and depressive symptoms. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *84*, 1172-1187.
- Simpson, J. A., Rholes, W. S., & Phillips, D. (1996). Conflict in close relationships: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *71*, 899-914.
- Sobel, M. E. (1982). Asymptotic confidence intervals for indirect effects in structural equation models. In S. Leinhardt (Ed.), *Sociological methodology* (pp. 290-312). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sobolewski, J. M., & King, V. (2005). The importance of the coparental relationship for nonresident fathers' ties to children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *67*, 1196-1212.
- Van Egeren, L. A., & Hawkins, D. P. (2004). Coming to terms with coparenting: Implications of definition and measurement. *Journal of Adult Development*, *11*, 165-178.
- Van Laningham, J., Johnson, D. R., & Amato, P. (2001). Marital happiness, marital duration, and the U-shaped curve: Evidence from a five-wave panel study. *Social Forces*, *79*, 1313-1341.
- Waters, E., Merrick, S., Treboux, D., Crowell, J., & Albersheim, L. (2000). Attachment security in infancy and early adulthood: A twenty-year longitudinal study. *Child Development*, *71*, 684-689.