

# Parent Relationship Quality and Youth Behavioral Adjustment: Exploring Parental Supportiveness as a Mediating Factor

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## Abstract

This study examines ways that parents' relationship quality influences adolescent behaviors. It uses data from a federal evaluation of relationship education programming for married couples. Findings suggest relationship quality has a direct, independent effect on youth behaviors, whereas parental supportiveness mediates this relationship in some models.

## Background

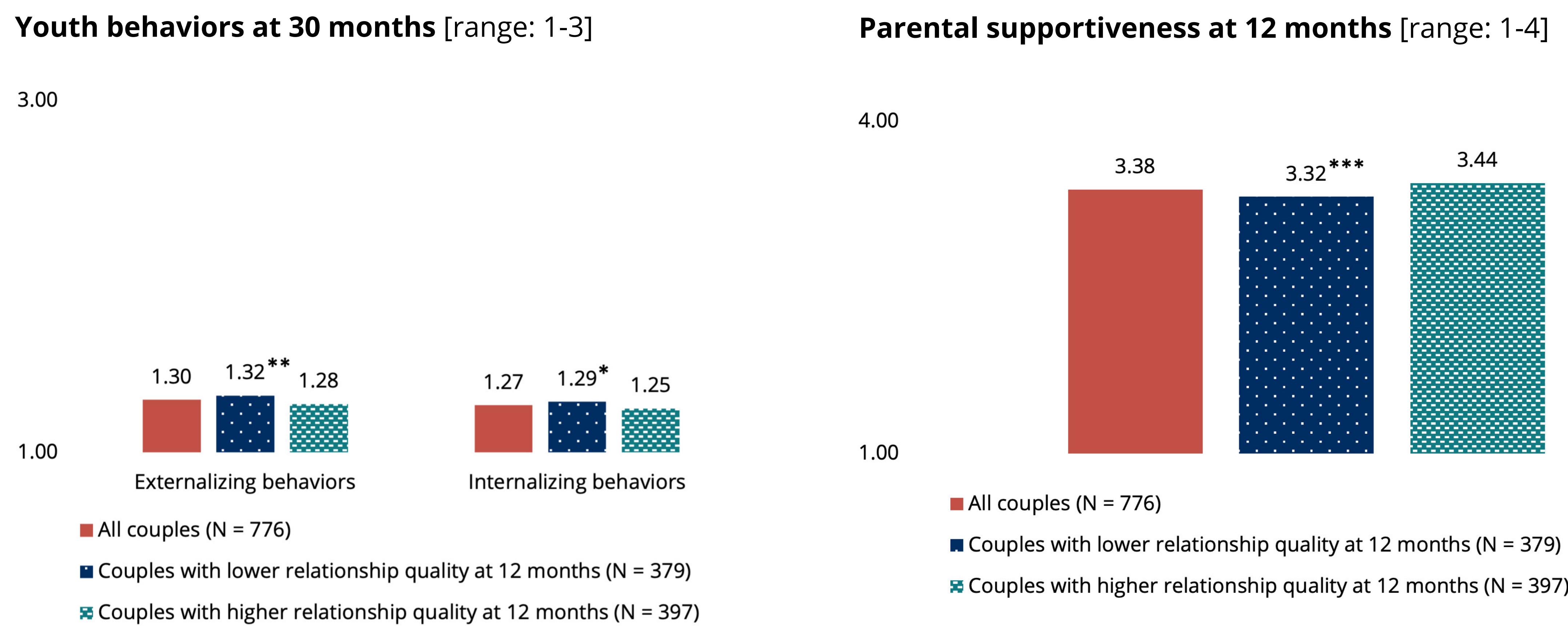
- Research finds positive associations between parents' relationship quality and child behaviors across family structures.
- Research suggests that parent relationship quality affects child behaviors in part through its positive influences on parenting and parent-child relationships.
- However, the literature offers limited evidence about how these factors shape child behaviors in adolescence, a gap that our study aims to explore.

## Data and Methods

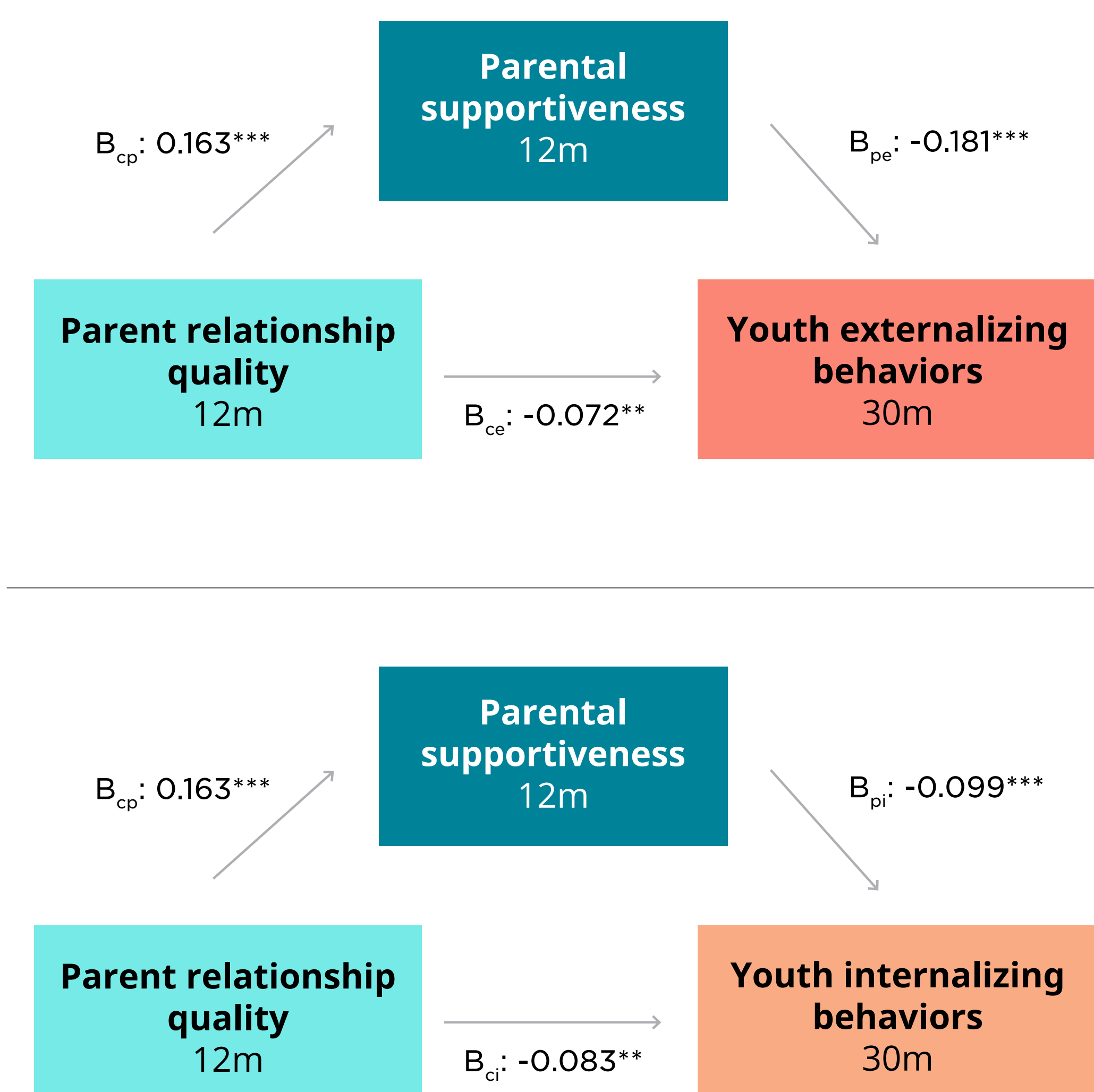
- **Data:** Data from a federal evaluation of Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) programs provided in 8 states.
- **Sample:** 776 married couples who participated in the evaluation with an adolescent child (11 to 17 years old) in the 30-month follow-up (fielded in 2013 and 2014).
- **Outcomes:** Standardized scales for externalizing and internalizing behaviors

## Results

**Figure 1.** Averages of Key Variables, Total Sample and By Level of Relationship Quality



**Figure 2.** Diagrams of the hypothesized relationships between couple relationship quality and child behaviors, with standardized estimates from structural equation modeling



**Table 1.** First-Differencing Models for Change in Adolescent Behaviors between Follow-Ups

	Change in parental supportiveness	Change in externalizing behaviors	Change in internalizing behaviors
	N = 776	N = 776	N = 776
Change in couple relationship quality	0.080* (0.041)	-0.182*** (0.041)	-0.202*** (0.041)
Change in parental supportiveness		-0.006 (0.036)	0.035 (0.036)

**Notes:**

1. Figure 1 shows statistical differences in unstandardized measures between couples with parent relationship quality higher and lower than the median. Figure 2 and Table 1 use standardized measures.
2. Models in Figure 2 and Table 1 control for cohabitated before marriage, either had a previous marriage, female focal child, focal child is less than 14 years old at 30 months, focal child is either partner's step child, either had children who lived elsewhere, both Hispanic, both NH Black, multi-racial or ethnic or other race/ethnicity, number of children at baseline, lived with others, neither had a high school education, wife did not work last month at 12 months, husband did not work last month at 12 months, family lived in poverty at baseline, not able to pay rent or mortgage last 12 months, either had a health condition or fair/poor health, either at risk for psychological distress, either had a drinking or drug use problem, treatment status.
3. Standard errors in parentheses
4. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $0.01 < p < 0.05$ , \*  $0.05 < p < 0.1$ .

## Data and Methods cont.

- **Key independent variables:** A 9-item scale for parent relationship quality and an 8-item scale for parental supportiveness (both standardized)
- **Analytic approach**
  - Regression of outcomes at 30 months on relationship quality and parental supportiveness at 12 months.
  - Structural equation models examine parental supportiveness as a mediator.
  - Regression of change in outcomes on change in relationship quality and parental supportiveness between 12 and 30 months (referred to as "first-differencing").

## Summary of Findings

- Across models, couple relationship quality is uniquely and negatively associated with adolescent behavioral problems.
- Parental supportiveness at 12 months mediates the relationship between relationship quality at 12 months and adolescent behaviors at 30 months.
- However, due to lack of change in parental supportiveness between waves, first-differencing models do not find mediation.

## Research & Program Implications

- Importance of services addressing both couple relationship quality and parenting.
- Unique data increase the understanding of relationship dynamics among families that seek help in communities.

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