

**The Paradoxical Power of Protecting: How Protective Buffering Harms Post-Divorce Adjustment in
Parent-Adolescent Relationships**

Reine C. van der Wal^{a*}, Eva Grosfeld^{a*}, Merel M. Nap – Van der Vlist^b, Sanne L. Nijhof^b, and Catrin
Finkenauer^a

^aUtrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

^bWilhelmina Children's Hospital, University Medical Center Utrecht, The Netherlands

*Reine van der Wal and Eva Grosfeld contributed equally

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Reine van der Wal, Department of Social, Health,
and Organizational Psychology, Heidelberglaan 1, 3584 CS, Utrecht, The Netherlands, Email:

r.c.vanderwal@uu.nl

Abstract

After a divorce, parents and children try to minimize each other's distress by hiding their feelings and pretending they are doing fine, a coping strategy called protective buffering (PB). Although there is substantial evidence that PB among romantic partners harms both partners' well-being, the consequences of PB in parent-child relationships remain unclear. To examine PB among parents and children, we conducted a survey study among 100 dyads of Dutch divorced parents and their adolescent children. We examined actor and partner effects of PB on post-divorce adjustment. We additionally investigated whether decreases in authenticity and intimacy explained the association between PB and post-divorce adjustment. Data were analyzed by employing an Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) and an APIM extended to Mediation. Results revealed that PB was negatively associated with parents' life satisfaction, and to children's life satisfaction and divorce-specific well-being. These negative actor effects were mediated by decreased authenticity for both parents and children. Consistent with research on PB in romantic relationships, PB not only impeded own post-divorce adjustment, but also the adjustment of the person participants tried to protect. Specifically, children's PB was negatively associated with their parents' divorce-specific well-being. Although further research is needed, the present study was the first to provide insights into the paradoxical effects of PB in parent-adolescent relationships.

Keywords: protective buffering, post-divorce adjustment, parent-adolescent intimacy, authenticity, Actor-Partner Interdependence Model

Highlights:

- This study examined protective buffering in parent-child relationships following parental divorce
- Protective buffering was negatively associated with parents' and children's post-divorce adjustment
- Reduced authenticity explained the association between protective buffering and post-divorce adjustment
- Children's protective buffering was negatively associated with their parents' post-divorce adjustment
- Protective buffering has the paradoxical power to do more harm than good

In the Netherlands almost forty percent of all marriages end in divorce, and more than half of these divorces involve families with children (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2019). Parents and children from these families are confronted not only with their own emotions and distress, but also with each other's. Researchers and therapists have noticed that, after a divorce, parents and children often try to shield each other from additional burden, for example, by hiding their own negative feelings and thoughts – a coping strategy called *protective buffering* (PB) (Afifi et al., 2006b; Sviggum, 2000; Yarosh et al., 2009). Although PB is intended to decrease another person's distress, studies among romantic partners have demonstrated that PB backfires; it increases distress in both the person who protects as well as their partner (e.g., Langer et al., 2009). Whether the harmful paradoxical effects of PB extend to divorced parents and their children remains unclear. As understanding these consequences may advance the development of intervention programs that seek to improve parents' and children's coping with divorce (e.g., Mauricio et al., 2018; Pelleboer-Gunnink et al., 2015), we investigate whether PB impedes post-divorce adjustment in parent-adolescent relationships, and if so, which underlying mechanisms may explain this. More specifically, we investigate the mediating role of decreased authenticity and parent-child intimacy.

Parents and Children Coping with Divorce

Over the past decades, a considerable body of research has investigated why some parents and children hardly or never fully adjust to divorce, whereas others are successful. Various perspectives (e.g., risk and resilience perspective, multiple transitions perspective, divorce-stress-adjustment perspective) provide a framework to understand which factors affect post-divorce adjustment. Despite their mutual differences, these perspectives agree on the notion that post-divorce adjustment is not predominantly determined by the single event of the divorce itself, but mostly by the presence of risk and protective factors, by other life transitions, and by the way in which individuals cope with the divorce (e.g., Amato, 2010; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Van der Wal et al., 2019). Understanding which coping strategies are adaptive and which are not is particularly important, because they may provide leverage points for intervention programs.

Studies investigating how individuals cope with stress have increasingly taken an interpersonal approach; that is, they have recognized that parents' and children's responses and adaptation to, as well as communication about stress, are interdependent and should be considered in relation to each other (Afifi et al., 2006b; Minuchin, 1985; Ponnet et al., 2016). On the one hand, these studies have found that the expression of feelings and thoughts fosters post-divorce adjustment because it stimulates a constructive environment in which parents and children are able to engage in a supportive, joint meaning-making process (Afifi et al., 2006b; Golish, 2003). For

example, open communication about divorce stressors was positively associated with parents' and children's ability to cope with the divorce (Afifi et al., 2006a; Greeff & Van der Merwe, 2004), to children's life satisfaction (Levin & Currie, 2010), and to strong family ties (Golish, 2003). On the other hand, some studies have suggested that too much parental communication, especially when it involves negative disclosures about the other parent, harms children's post-divorce adjustment, because it makes children feel caught between their parents and encourages parentification (Afifi et al., 2006a; Golish, 2003; Luedemann et al., 2006). Although it is clear that parents and children shape each other's adjustment to the divorce, results regarding the expression of feelings and thoughts are inconsistent.

With regard to the *suppression* of feelings and thoughts after the divorce, research findings are more consistent, as they suggest that suppression is likely to harm parents' and children's post-divorce adjustment. For example, when children used avoidant coping strategies, such as the suppression and denial of painful feelings regarding the divorce, they were more likely to have depressive symptoms, anxiety, and conduct problems (Roubinov & Luecken, 2013; Sandler et al., 1994). An interview study showed that parents' maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as rumination and suppression, were associated with more anger, hostility, and resentment (Willén, 2015). Furthermore, parents' emotion suppression in general has been negatively linked to both their own and their children's emotional well-being, warmth, and responsiveness (Karnilowicz et al., 2019; Le & Impett, 2016). In sum, avoiding negative feelings and thoughts may threaten adjustment to the divorce among parents and children.

The question arises whether and when the expression or suppression of divorce-related distress is maladaptive. Research indicates that parents and children from post-divorce families tend to avoid burdening each other with their own distress in order to protect each other (Afifi et al., 2006b; Sviggum, 2000; Yarosh et al., 2019). These behaviors, named protective buffering (PB), include for example hiding feelings, avoiding conversing about divorce-related topics, or refusing to ask for support. Despite parents' and children's intentions to protect each other, however, preliminary evidence suggests that PB may backfire and impede post-divorce adjustment of both the family member who is trying to protect the other as well as the family member who is the target of such protection.

The Paradoxical Negative Effects of Protective Buffering

Prior studies have investigated the consequences of PB only among romantic partners, revealing that PB yields negative outcomes for both partners. That is, when couples experienced stressful situations and one of the partners aimed to shield the other partner from stressors, PB was associated with more psychological distress

(Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Manne et al., 2007), more grief following the death of a child (Stroebe et al., 2013), reduced intimacy (Manne & Badr, 2012; Perndorfer et al., 2019), and lower relationship satisfaction (Langer et al., 2007) in both partners. So paradoxically, although PB is intended to protect the other, it seems to exacerbate instead of mitigate distress in both the protecting and the protected partner.

Remarkably, although the prevalence of PB among parents and children in post-divorce families has been demonstrated (Afifi et al., 2006b; Sviggum, 2000; Yarosh et al., 2019), research on its consequences in parent-child dyads is, to our knowledge, lacking. Considering the rising number of families that experience a divorce worldwide, and the potentially harmful effects of suppressing divorce-related distress, it is crucial to understand more about the consequences of PB in parent-child dyads, so as to inform prevention and intervention strategies aimed at adaptive coping strategies for parents and children in post-divorce families.

This Research

We seek to extend existing findings on the paradoxical effects of PB to parent-child relationships coping with (the aftermath of) divorce. The first aim of the current research therefore is to examine whether engaging in PB impedes parents' and children's post-divorce adjustment. Based on the literature, we expect that PB backfires and harms one's own post-divorce adjustment. In addition, given the interdependent nature of how parents and children respond and adapt to stress (Minuchin, 1985), and the interpersonal outcomes in studies on PB among romantic partners, we expect that the harmful consequences of PB may not be limited to the protector (i.e., the actor), but also affect the protected (i.e., the partner). As people tend to have more attention for other people's behaviors than for their intentions (Manne & Pearce, 2001), partners are likely to be unaware of the actors' positive intentions and to misunderstand and/or misinterpret the behaviors they observe. For example, when children engage in PB, parents may perceive their children's behavior as withdrawal or rejection. Similarly, when parents engage in PB, children may not notice their parents' protective intentions, but feel ignored or deceived (Thomas et al., 1995). PB may thus leave the partner feeling disconnected and may hinder adaptive coping efforts. Therefore, we expect that PB in parent-child dyads also impedes the partner's post-divorce adjustment.

The second aim of the current research is to investigate which mechanisms can explain the presumed link between PB and post-divorce adjustment. We suggest that PB generates intra- and interpersonal processes that complicate adjustment, namely decreased authenticity and intimacy. Intrapersonally, PB may decrease the protector's feelings of authenticity, which is the experience that one is behaving in congruence with one's actual feelings, attitudes and beliefs (Wood et al., 2008). As PB involves the avoidance and suppression of actual

feelings and thoughts, it may hinder the experience of authenticity (English & John, 2013; Gross & John, 2003). Because authenticity is considered fundamental to well-being and life satisfaction (Boyratz et al., 2014; Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Thomaes et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2018), reduced levels of authenticity may in turn impede post-divorce adjustment.

Interpersonally, PB may jeopardize post-divorce adjustment by reducing parent-child intimacy. Intimacy refers to the feeling of being understood, accepted, and cared for, and develops through the exchange of personal feelings and thoughts, followed by a responsive reaction of the other person (Dalsgaard et al., 2006; Laurenceau et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1998). As children mature, parent-child intimacy is less defined by physical expressions such as cuddles, and more by conversations in which feelings and thoughts are openly conveyed (Hartup & Laursen, 1991). When parents and children engage in PB, they may disrupt these conversations, thus undermining the development or maintenance of parent-child intimacy (Manne & Badr, 2012). As intimacy in parent-child relationships is assumed key to successful post-divorce adjustment (Afifi et al., 2006a; Guttman & Rosenberg, 2003; Richardson & McCabe, 2001), PB may harm post-divorce adjustment through decreased intimacy.

Research Overview

To investigate the hypotheses, we conducted a study among adolescent children – from here on referred to as children – and (one of) their divorced parents. Actor and partner effects were analyzed using dyadic analysis. It is important to note that both parents and children can be conceived of as actor and partner within the dyad. An Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005) and an APIM extended to Mediation (APIMeM; Coutts et al., 2019) for distinguishable dyads were employed to overcome the interdependence of observations. The use of APIM is emerging in the literature on parent-child interactions (e.g., Afifi et al., 2006a; Brenning et al., 2017; Coates et al., 2019), but the current study is among the first to use it in a divorce context. As parent-child communication changes throughout adolescence (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013), and when continuing parental conflict is low (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007), and children often show improvements in adjustment over time (Kelly & Emery, 2003), we controlled for children's age, parental conflict severity, and time since divorce. Consistent with evidence on PB in romantic couples, we hypothesized that PB would negatively be associated with parents' and children's own (i.e., actor effects) and the other's (i.e., partner effects) post-divorce adjustment, and that these associations would be mediated by decreased authenticity and intimacy.

All data and analysis scripts are available at the Open Science Framework (see [link](#)).

Method

Procedure and Design

The current research had a cross-sectional survey design including both parents and children. The studies were approved by the Ethics Committee of our institution and preregistered (see <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=4fx67z> for the analyses and mediation of intimacy, and <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=vy6e9f> for mediation analyses of authenticity, which was already intended and preregistered for another study). Considering that the main aim of preregistration is to overcome false positives when researchers do new analyses merely to achieve positive results (Kupferschmidt, 2018), and we did not change our initial hypotheses but only added a second mediator, our deviation from the initial preregistration does not affect the validity of the study.

We initially recruited child participants through a Dutch foundation aiming to help children of divorced parents (Author citation). Among these participants, gift cards worth €15 were raffled as a reward for their participation. To increase the sample size, we recruited Utrecht University students with divorced parents in exchange for course credits. All child participants completed an online survey of approximately 15 minutes and were asked to provide their mother's and/or father's e-mail address. If they did, their parent(s) received an e-mail with a separate web link to the parental version of the survey, which took approximately 10 minutes. We sent reminders to maximize the number of complete dyads. Active informed consent was obtained from all participants, and for children younger than 16 years from one of their parents as well. All participants were ensured that their participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, and they were debriefed after completing the survey.

Participants

We conducted an a priori APIM power analysis in APIMPowerR to estimate the required number of dyads to achieve a statistical power of .80 ($\alpha = .05$) (Ackerman et al., 2016). This analysis showed that, based on medium actor effect sizes of $\beta = .25$ and medium partner effect sizes of $\beta = .15$, a minimum of 59 dyads was needed for the actor effects, and a minimum of 158 dyads for the partner effects.

We approached 1248 child participants, of whom 518 responded. After excluding cases listwise due to drop-out ($n = 179$) and non-willingness to provide a parent's e-mail address ($n = 249$), we ended up with 90 complete child cases (response rate 7.2%). Of these children, 126 parents ($n_{\text{mothers}} = 86$, $n_{\text{fathers}} = 40$) were invited to complete the survey. We excluded 26 cases due to non-response ($n = 13$), double cases ($n = 3$), and drop-out

($n = 10$), resulting in 100 complete parent cases (response rate 79.4%). Parents who incorrectly answered all three attention checks ($n = 5$) were, deviating from what was stated in the preregistration, not excluded in order to maintain statistical power. The responses of these participants showed considerable variation and removing them did not change the results from the main analyses. The final sample consisted of 100 dyads (70 mothers, 30 fathers, 95 girls, five boys), 19 children were included twice as they formed a double dyad (one with mother and one with father). On average parents were 52.92 years old ($SD = 5.66$, range = 37-66), and children 20.65 ($SD = 3.00$, range = 13-27). Most of the parents completed middle (40%) or high (37%) vocational education, 18% attained a university degree, and 5% did not complete education after high school. The divorce had taken place on average 9.67 years before the moment of assessment ($SD = 5.69$, range = 0.42-23.50). Of the children, 26% lived with one of their parents, 14% lived at both their parents' houses, and 60% lived with (a) roommate(s). A majority of the parents lived with their new partner (42%), 28% had a new relationship without living together, and 30% did not have a new relationship.

The recruitment method yielded significant differences between participants. Students reported lower life satisfaction, divorce-specific well-being, authenticity, and intimacy, and higher PB than foundation participants (see Table SII in the Supplementing Information). We did not control for recruitment method as this did not change the outcomes in a significant way. There were also differences between children whose parent(s) participated and children whose parent(s) did not participate, as the first group reported higher life satisfaction and divorce-specific well-being, and lower PB than the second (see Table SII), indicating a positive selection bias. Finally, for double dyads, the outcomes were not affected by the family factor, as the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was low for all parents' main study variables (ranging between $-.32$ and $.19$, $n = 38$). The degree in which children buffered their parents was correlated ($ICC = .79$), indicating that children engaged in PB to a similar extent for both their parents.

Materials

Post-divorce adjustment. We examined post-divorce adjustment with two separate outcome variables: life satisfaction and divorce-specific well-being. These measures shared for neither parents nor children a sufficient amount of variance to form a latent construct of post-divorce adjustment. For parents, the two-factor model ($\chi^2(251) = 514.13$, CFI = $.79$, TLI = $.77$, RMSEA = $.10$) had a significantly better fit than the one-factor model ($\chi^2(252) = 701.45$, CFI = $.63$, TLI = $.60$, RMSEA = $.13$), $\Delta\chi^2 < .001$. For children, the two-factor model ($\chi^2(43) = 94.32$, CFI = $.90$, TLI = $.87$, RMSEA = $.11$) also had a significantly better fit than the one-factor model ($\chi^2(44) = 222.82$, CFI = $.64$, TLI = $.55$, RMSEA = $.20$), $\Delta\chi^2 < .001$.

Life satisfaction. We assessed life satisfaction with a Dutch translation of the 5-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985). Participants rated the items (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”) on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*. The SWLS had Cronbach’s alphas of .85 for parents and .87 for children.

Divorce-specific well-being.

Divorce-specific well-being parents. Parents’ divorce-specific well-being was measured with two subscales of the Dutch version of the Psychological Adjustment to Separation Test: lonely negativity and ex-partner attachment (de Smet et al., 2011; Sweeper & Halford, 2006). Parents rated the 19 items (e.g., “I constantly think about my former partner”) on a 7-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from *totally disagree* to *totally agree*. Internal consistency was high with a Cronbach alpha of .89.

Divorce-specific well-being children. Children’s divorce-specific well-being was measured with the Painful Feelings About Divorce scale, which originally consists of 74 items among seven subscales (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). To improve study feasibility, we selected and translated a total of eight items across three subscales (Author citation). The selection consisted of four items from the self-blame subscale (e.g. “I wish I had tried harder to keep my parents together”), two items concerning forgiveness towards parents (i.e. “I forgive my [mother/father] for the divorce”), and two items concerning anger towards parents (e.g., “Sometimes I feel angry at my [mother/father] for my parents’ divorce”). Items were reverse coded so that higher scores indicated higher divorce-specific well-being. Answer options ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* on a 7-point Likert scale. This scale yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of .79.

As stated in our preregistration, post-divorce adjustment was also assessed with a measure of physical well-being. Because this measure did not form a latent construct of post-divorce adjustment with life satisfaction and divorce-specific well-being, we tested separate models for physical well-being. These models were not included in the current paper due to limited space and because we decided to focus only on psychological outcomes.

Authenticity. To assess authenticity, we translated the 12-item Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2008) to Dutch. Participants rated items (e.g., “I am true to myself in most situations”) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Cronbach’s alphas of this scale were .85 for parents and .84 for children.

Intimacy. We measured intimacy with an adapted version of the four-item partner intimacy scale (Debrot et al., 2012). We adapted this scale because the feeling and development of intimacy are similar between partner

dyads and parent-child dyads (Dalsgaard et al., 2006; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Items assessed to what extent children felt *close to, secure with, cared for, and understood by* their mother/father. Parents received the same items, with exception of the item *secure with*; key to parent-child intimacy is that parents are able to make their child feel safe and not vice versa (Dalsgaard et al., 2006). Participants rated the items on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*. Cronbach's alphas were .76 for parents and .77 for children. As preregistered, a physical measure of intimacy was also assessed. This measure did not form a latent construct of intimacy with psychological intimacy and was therefore not included in the analyses.

Protective buffering. PB was measured with three items from the 16-item PB subscale of the Relationship-Focused Coping Scale (Coyne & Smith, 1991), which were also used by Stroebe et al. (2013). We adapted the scale to the parent-child relationship, yielding the following items: *In stressful situations...* "I stay strong in front of my [mother/father/child]"; "I try to spare my [mother's/father's/child's] feelings"; "I hide my feelings for the sake of my [mother/father/child]". These items were translated into Dutch using backward and forward translation. Participants scored the items on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*, with higher items indicating more buffering. Cronbach's alphas were .80 for parents and .87 for children.

Covariates. Children's age and parental conflict severity were reported by children. The latter was measured with the item: "How severe would you rate the conflicts between your parents after the divorce?" on a 7-point scale, ranging from *not at all severe* to *very severe*. Time since divorce in years was reported by parents. One parent's value on time since divorce was missing and was therefore replaced by the child's value.

Analyses

Statistical analyses were performed with RStudio (2019). We ran two sets of models through ordinary least square (OLS) regression analyses, including PB as predictor. First, a set of APIM models was run on each of the outcome measures of post-divorce adjustment. Since the predictors covariance and the residual covariance could not be calculated in RStudio using the OLS approach, they were obtained using a structural equation modeling approach in an online application (Stas, Kenny, Mayer, & Loeys 2018), which yielded similar regression coefficients. Second, a set of APIMeM models was run on each of the outcomes, including authenticity and intimacy as mediators. We conducted an OLS regression mediation analysis for distinguishable dyadic data using the MEDYAD package for RStudio (Coutts et al., 2019). This analysis allowed for constructing bootstrap confidence intervals for the indirect effects of protective buffering on post-divorce adjustment through authenticity and intimacy. Child participants completed intimacy scales for both parents, but

we only included intimacy for the parent with whom the child formed a dyad as mediator. All models controlled for children's age, conflict severity, and time since divorce.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the main study variables. Paired sample *t*-tests showed that parents engaged significantly more in PB ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.34$) than children ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.80$), $t(99) = -2.51$, $p < .05$.

**** TABLE 1 SHOULD BE PLACED HERE ****

Main Analyses

Actor-Partner Interdependence Models. Figure 1 displays APIM models for the outcome variables life satisfaction and divorce-specific well-being, in which PB is used as a predictor. Unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors, *t*-values, and *p*-values for all predictors, including covariates, are provided in Table SI2 and SI3 in the Supplementing Information. The model including life satisfaction as outcome variable revealed negative actor effects of PB for both parents and children, indicating that PB was negatively linked to own life satisfaction. No partner effects emerged. The model including divorce-specific well-being as outcome variable yielded a negative actor effect of PB for children, but not for parents. A partner effect also emerged, as children's PB was negatively linked to parents' divorce-specific well-being.

**** FIGURE 1 SHOULD BE PLACED HERE ****

Actor-Partner Interdependence Models extended to Mediation. Figures 2 and 3 display APIMeM models for the respective outcome variables life satisfaction and divorce-specific well-being, including the predictors PB, authenticity and intimacy. Note that in contrast to Figure 1, the regression coefficients are unstandardized and not the covariances, but correlations between predictors and residuals are provided. Table SI4 and SI5 in the Supplementing Information provides detailed output of the mediation models, including unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors, *p*-values and 95% confidence intervals (CI).

The model including life satisfaction as outcome variable revealed negative actor effects from PB to authenticity and intimacy for both parents and children. Authenticity was positively linked to both parents' and

children's life satisfaction and intimacy was positively linked to children's life satisfaction. One partner effect emerged: children's PB was negatively associated with parents' intimacy. Results of 95% bootstrapping confidence intervals revealed indirect actor effects from PB to life satisfaction through authenticity for both parents, $B = -0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [-0.16, -0.02], and children, $B = -0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.13, -0.02]. This suggests that, even after controlling for all the other effects, the negative association between PB and life satisfaction can be partially explained by reductions in authenticity. None of the indirect effects from PB to life satisfaction through intimacy reached significance.

**** FIGURE 2 SHOULD BE PLACED HERE ****

In the model with divorce-specific well-being as outcome variable, we observed negative actor effects from parents' and children's PB to authenticity and intimacy, and negative partner effects from children's PB to parents' intimacy and divorce-specific well-being. Authenticity was for both parents and children positively linked to their divorce-specific well-being. None of the actor effects from intimacy to divorce-specific well-being reached significance. The model revealed significant indirect actor effects from PB to divorce-specific well-being through less authenticity for both parents, $B = -0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [-0.17, -0.03], and children, $B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.11, -0.01]. Again, there were no significant indirect effects from PB to divorce-specific well-being through intimacy.

**** FIGURE 3 SHOULD BE PLACED HERE ****

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine whether and how PB is associated with post-divorce adjustment among parents and adolescent children. Although PB has been demonstrated a maladaptive coping strategy among romantic partners (e.g., Coyne & Smith, 1991; Langer et al., 2009; Stroebe et al., 2013), it remained unknown whether PB is also harmful in parent-child relationships in the aftermath of divorce. Importantly, we examined the consequences of attempts to protect another person on one's own and on the "protected" person's adjustment. The results confirmed our expectation that for parents and children alike, PB is associated with a decrease in their own post-divorce adjustment. Thus, parents and children who intend to protect each other from negative feelings show poorer post-divorce-adjustment themselves. In addition, the

results partially support our expectation that PB is negatively associated with post-divorce adjustment of the person who is the target of such protective efforts. Our examination of authenticity and intimacy shed light on intra- and interpersonal mechanisms through which PB may harm post-divorce adjustment.

Actor and Partner Effects of Protective Buffering

Consistent with our expectation, we found negative actor effects of PB on post-divorce adjustment. Specifically, for both parents and children, PB was negatively associated with their own life satisfaction. For children, PB was negatively associated with their own divorce-specific well-being as well. These results indicate that the maladaptive actor effects of PB not only apply to romantic partners (e.g., Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Manne et al., 2007; Winterheld, 2017), but also generalize to parent-child relationships in the divorce context. Furthermore, these results are in line with previous studies that indicated that adjustment to the divorce is harmed by avoidance of distress and limited expression of thoughts and feelings (e.g., Karnilowicz et al., 2019; Le & Impett, 2016; Roubinov & Luecken, 2013; Sandler et al., 1994). Accordingly, trying to protect each other in the aftermath of divorce comes at a price, because PB undermines post-divorce adjustment.

Moreover, in support of our expectation, the results showed that children's PB was negatively associated with their parents' divorce-specific well-being. In other words, despite children's good intentions, the more children tried to stay strong for their parents, the worse their parents' divorce-specific well-being was. This partner effect corroborates findings on negative partner effects among romantic partners (Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Langer et al., 2007; Manne et al., 2007; Stroebe et al., 2013). This effect may partially stem from decreased intimacy experienced by parents, as parents reported lower intimacy with their children when children engaged in more PB.

Unexpectedly, partner effects were only found for divorce-specific well-being and not for life satisfaction. The different pattern for each of these outcome variables may have emerged because divorce-specific well-being is a domain-specific outcome, which may depend mainly on other family members, whereas life satisfaction is a more general outcome, which is also determined by other factors and contexts (e.g., school, work, friends). To illustrate, Antaramian and colleagues (2008) showed that family structure predicted adolescents' satisfaction in terms of living environment, while it did not predict their general life satisfaction. Similarly, for divorced parents, life satisfaction is strongly determined by other factors, such as full-time employment, economic well-being, and low conflict levels with the other parent (e.g., Schoon et al., 2005). The reciprocal influence of parents' and children's coping strategies may thus be greater on divorce-specific outcomes than on general life outcomes, such as life satisfaction.

Explaining the Link between Protective Buffering and Post-Divorce Adjustment

The second aim of the current study was to provide insight into the processes that might explain the negative associations between PB and post-divorce adjustment. We examined an intrapersonal process (i.e., decreased authenticity) and an interpersonal process (i.e., decreased intimacy). Our results indicate that PB was negatively associated with post-divorce adjustment due decreased authenticity within participants (i.e., actor effects). In other words, when parents and children hid or downplayed their actual feelings and thoughts, they experienced lower levels of authenticity, which explained why they experienced declines in post-divorce adjustment. These findings concur with research pointing to the negative effects of emotion suppression on authenticity (English & John, 2013; Gross & John, 2003). It thus seems that while parents and children try to protect each other, they behave inconsistently with their feelings, attitudes or beliefs, resulting in maladaptive outcomes for themselves.

However, although PB was associated with lower intimacy for parents and children, intimacy did not explain the link between PB and post-divorce adjustment. A possible explanation for this finding is that authenticity and intimacy interact when affecting adjustment. Specifically, not PB, but decreased authenticity may have predicted lower intimacy. Some theories and studies suggest that authenticity is crucial for the development of intimacy, as authenticity increases openness, trust, and mutual understanding (English & John, 2013; Reis & Patrick, 1996). Feeling inauthentic thus interferes with the development of intimate relationships. Future studies on these intra- and interpersonal pathways is an interesting direction for future research.

Limitations and Future Directions

We must note some limitations of our study. First of all, the study was conducted (on average) nearly ten years after divorce. As such, one may wonder whether PB was completely related to the divorce-context. A related issue is that there was no comparison sample of children with non-divorced parents. We acknowledge that we cannot be sure whether there is something unique about PB after parental divorce which is harmful to parents and children or whether PB is something that is observed in all parent-child dyads. It is therefore important that future studies recruit parent-child dyads that went through divorce recently, and additionally compare the findings with a sample of children with non-divorced parents. More broadly, this limitation suggests that PB may be an often-used dyadic coping strategy in parent-child relationships in response to stressful situations. Hence opening up to other areas of ‘stress’ research would be a highly relevant direction.

Second, we cannot rule out the possibility that PB was higher *because* parents and children were less adjusted to the divorce. Possibly, when individuals experience difficulties in coping with the divorce, they

project this on other family members. The belief that another family member is not capable of dealing with the divorce may fuel the need to protect him or her. Such complex interpersonal feedback loops are not unlikely and warrant further investigation in longitudinal studies.

Another limitation is that the sample presented a potential selection bias. Children who formed a complete dyad with their parent(s) reported higher life satisfaction and divorce-specific well-being and lower PB than children whose parents did not respond to the survey (see Table S11 in the Supplementing Information). There may thus be a relation between the reason for nonresponse and the variables under scrutiny, which may have biased the results (Groves, 2006). Future research should be aware of the challenge to recruit more than one member of a family, especially in difficult family situations, and the potential bias that this issue may cause. Nevertheless, the current research drew data from a relatively large number of dyads from a hard-to-reach sample, thereby providing novel and unique insights into PB in parent-child relationships.

A final limitation of the current study is that it relied on self-reports, which may have biased the results due to common method variance (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). To illustrate, when PB and life satisfaction would both be inflated through response bias, the correlation between these variables would represent a correlation between method variance instead of an actual correlation. Accordingly, a path for future studies would be to develop behavioral measures of PB. For example, Langer et al. (2007) instructed cancer patients and their spousal caregivers to participate in two emotion expression exercises, one in presence and one in absence of each other. The researchers subsequently measured PB by observing participants' facial expressions and word usage. Ideally, scientific rigor in measuring PB within the family context would be achieved by employing a combination of self-reports, observations, and experimental manipulations (Halberstadt et al., 1995).

Many interesting questions remain for future research. Are there gender differences with regards to PB and its effects? Our sample mainly consisted of mothers and girls, but they may have different needs and communication styles than fathers and boys (Levin & Currie, 2010). What consequences does PB have in the period before the divorce – a period that is sometimes even more stressful to both parties (Amato, 2010; Kelly & Emery, 2003) – and in other stressful contexts, such as illness of a family member? And how are parents and children affected by the extent to which they *perceive* they are being protected?

Conclusion

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the current research was the first to shed light on the maladaptive effects of PB in parent-child dyads in the divorce context, showing that for parents and children alike, shielding each other from divorce-related distress has the potential to interfere with one's own and the other person's

adjustment. Although future research is required to gain a better understanding of the negative association between PB and post-divorce adjustment, our findings are of value for intervention programs aimed at supporting divorced parents and children. In particular, our findings underscore the importance of a family environment in which parents and children do not avoid their own divorce-related distress in order to shield each other, as PB has the paradoxical power to do more harm than good.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Main Study Variables (n = 100)

Variable	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Time since divorce ^a	9.67 (5.69)	–											
2. Conflict severity	4.33 (1.71)	-.03	–										
3. Age of child	20.65 (3.00)	.47***	.14	–									
Child													
4. PB	3.91(1.80)	.14	.23*	.01	–								
5. Authenticity	5.00 (0.96)	.10	-.11	.18	-.33***	–							
6. Intimacy	5.86 (1.23)	.15	-.19	.08	-.27**	.39***	–						
7. Life satisfaction	4.92 (1.17)	.17	-.36***	.28**	-.35***	.52***	.45***	–					
8. Div-spec WB	5.83 (0.95)	.18	-.26**	.11	-.35***	.42***	.22*	.48***	–				
Parent													
9. PB	4.46 (1.34)	-.12	.12	-.04	.05	.02	-.05	-.20*	-.09	–			
10. Authenticity	5.47 (0.81)	.09	-.03	.09	-.11	.25*	.31**	.28**	.24*	-.28**	–		
11. Intimacy	6.20 (0.89)	.19	.03	.04	-.16	.16	.47***	.14	.05	-.22*	.32**	–	
12. Life satisfaction	5.06 (1.08)	.20	-.04	.19	-.05	.05	.19	.31**	.08	-.28**	.47***	.31**	–
13. Div-spec WB	5.70 (0.96)	.17	-.01	.16	-.22*	.15	.27**	.29**	.27**	-.10	.52***	.23*	.33***

Note. PB= Protective buffering; Div-spec WB = divorce-specific well-being.

^aIndicated in years.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

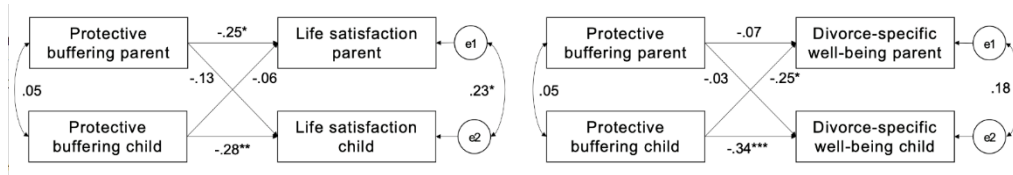


Figure 1. APIM models depicting the associations between PB and 1) life satisfaction and 2) divorce-specific well-being among parents and children ($n = 100$ dyads). Standardized regression coefficients, predictor covariances, and residual covariances are provided. Since the predictors covariance and the residual covariance could not be calculated in RStudio using the OLS approach, they were obtained using a structural equation modeling approach in an online application (Stas, Kenny, Mayer, & Loeys 2018), which yielded similar regression coefficients.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

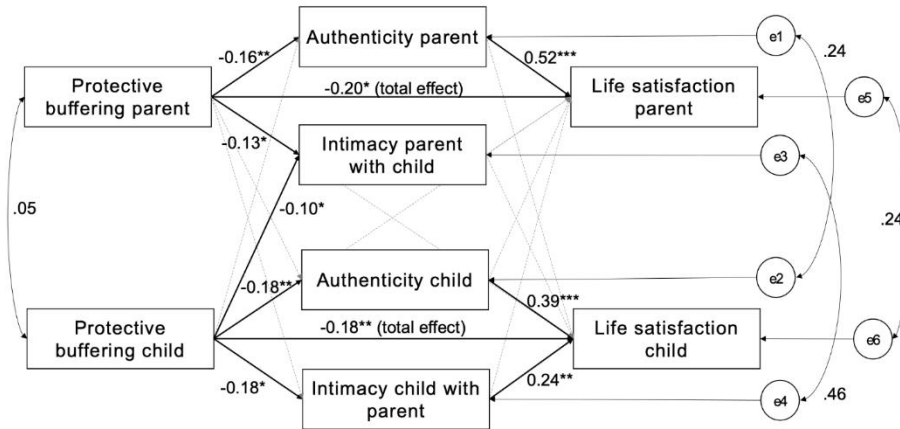


Figure 2. APIMeM depicting concurrent associations between PB, authenticity, intimacy, and life satisfaction among parents and children ($n = 100$ dyads). Only significant unstandardized coefficients, predictors correlation, and residual correlations are provided.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

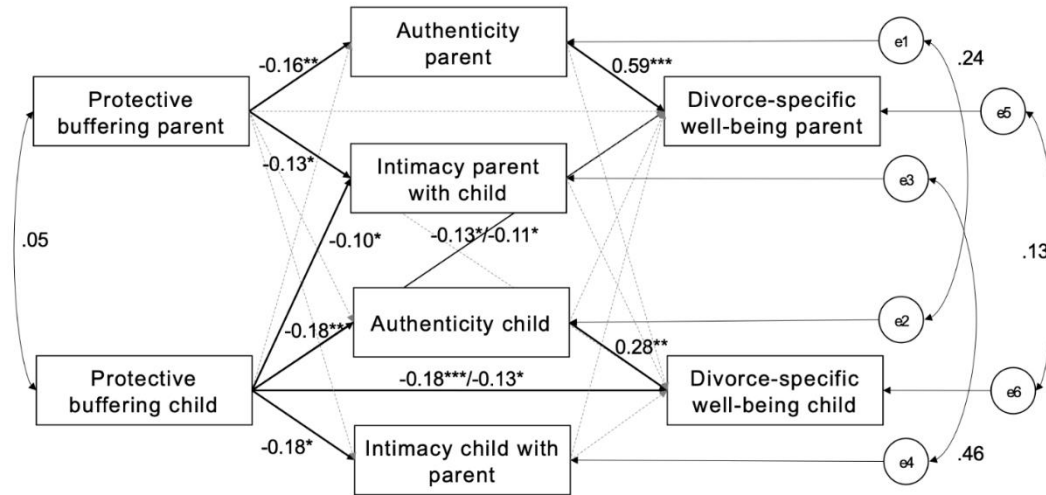


Figure 3. APIMeM depicting associations between PB, authenticity, intimacy, and divorce-specific well-being among parents and children ($n = 100$ dyads). Only significant unstandardized coefficients, predictors correlation, and residual correlations are provided. Total effects are provided before direct effects.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.