

IMPACT OF PARENTAL COHABITING STATUS AND CONFLICT ON
PRESCHOOLERS' EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL ENGAGEMENT

by

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HONORS THESIS

Submitted to Texas State University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
graduation in the Honors College
August 2020

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DEDICATION

To my siblings, I hope this inspires you instead of bores you.

To my parents, I turned out just fine!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express the deepest appreciation and gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Priscilla Goble, who has been an extremely helpful and inspiring mentor for the past year and a half in the STARS lab. My thesis would be non-existent if it wasn't for her knowledge and guidance throughout this project. Thank you, Dr. Goble, for being a part of this experience.

In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Amy Weimer for acting as my second reader and encouraging me to complete this thesis. A big thank you to my mentor, Michelle Villalpando, for motivating me to go above and beyond in my academic career and life. I want to thank Toria Flynn for being an amazing role model and graduate student, who helped me with the original research project. I thank Texas State University and Texas State Honors College for this opportunity and to Dr. Ron Haas for his feedback and support throughout this process.

Last but not least: Mom, Dad, Nick, Mia, Alex, Jessica, Aunty Neoko, Uncle Rich, Shadow, Kaya, and Rosie, thank you for all of your support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	9
II. THE PRESENT STUDY	14
III. METHOD	14
IV. RESULTS.....	17
V. DISCUSSION	18
REFERENCES	24

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Descriptive Statistics for Parental Cohabiting Status, Conflict, and Perception of Conflict, and School Engagement.....	32
2. Correlations between Parental Cohabiting Status, Conflict, and Perception of Conflict, and School Engagement.....	33

ABSTRACT

The present study examines the effect of parental cohabiting status and conflict on preschoolers' emotional and behavioral engagement. Participants were Head Start preschool children ($N = 287$; 47% girls, M age = 52 months, range 37 - 60); 70% were Mexican/Mexican-American; 82% of families were of low socioeconomic status. Students of cohabiting parents (e.g., parents who lived together) displayed higher levels of behavioral engagement in the classroom compared to children of non-cohabiting parents (e.g., parents who did not live together). Findings from the current study provide support for previous research analyzing the impact of parents on students' school engagement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Establishing children's positive school engagement (i.e., enjoyment, cooperative participation, and self-directedness in school settings) early on is essential to future academic achievement, resilience, and success (Heatly & Votruba-Drzal, 2017; Skinner et al., 2009). There are several factors that can impact preschool children's school engagement, including parental living arrangements (e.g., cohabiting parents versus non-cohabiting parents). For example, children whose parents live together have higher quality home environments than children whose parents live separately, which has been shown to positively contribute to their behavioral engagement in school (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Elffers, 2013). Additionally, previous research has found that children's observation of parental relationship behaviors (e.g., conflict) is related to their emotional engagement (Heatly & Votruba-Drzal, 2017). Parents play a crucial role in their children's educational development as children imitate parental behaviors.

Parental Cohabiting Status and Conflict

In recent years, there has been growing diversity in family structure (i.e., married, never divorced; divorced, living with partner; separated; Pearce et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2015). Cohabiting is commonly referred to as a living arrangement in which two unmarried partners live together, often characterized by less commitment and more instability (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). In the present study, parental cohabiting status refers to whether or not the child's primary caretakers live together in the same home as the child. Therefore, parents who lived together despite their legal marital status, were categorized as *cohabiting* and those who did not live together were considered *non-cohabiting*.

There is a lack of research that focuses on the effects of parental living arrangements, as opposed to parental marital status, on child outcomes. Most research has examined children's development in families of married couples, single-parents, or divorced-separated couples. It is necessary to study parental living arrangements, as the home environment plays a key role in children's development (Searle et al., 2013). From previous research, it has been established that cohabiting families, more specifically two-parent families, are related to positive development for children (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014) whereas children who grow up with parents that are non-cohabiting are more likely to develop internalizing and externalizing problems and demonstrate lower levels of academic achievement (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Sun & Li, 2011).

One particular aspect of the home environment related to parents cohabiting is the nature of their relationship, which is characterized by qualities such as cooperation and conflict. Parental conflict is one of the most important predictors for children's future outcomes (Barthassat, 2014; Bayer et al., 2006; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). It has been repeatedly shown that how parents handle conflict in front of children can negatively impact children's development, as children might learn certain patterns of behavior from observation (Bandura, 1978). For example, adverse conflict resolution (i.e., withdrawal and verbal hostility) triggers negative emotional reactions from children (Cox et al., 1999) while favorable conflict resolution (i.e., compromise and apology) was associated with nonnegative reactions from children (Goeke-Morey, et al., 2007). Furthermore, children who observe parental conflict are more inclined to produce those similar behaviors (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014). For example, children who perceive negative and high-stress interactions between parents, might interact with their peers at school in this

way. Therefore, it is important to examine both parental cohabiting status and conflict as they play a crucial role in student's academic success.

School Engagement

School engagement refers to feelings and overt manifestations of motivation and is a multidimensional concept made up of emotional engagement and behavioral engagement (Fredricks et al, 2004). Emotional engagement is a child's affective connection to school, more specifically, their positive and negative reactions towards peers, teachers, and schoolwork. Behavioral engagement refers to a student's cooperative and independent involvement in academic and social activities (Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Generally, children who exhibit higher levels of engagement have positive feelings about school, follow classroom rules, and respond appropriately to teachers' expectations (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Ladd et al., 2000). Children who are low in engagement are less likely to follow directions, pay attention, and cooperate (Ladd et al., 1999). Moreover, early engagement is a predictor of future academic outcomes such as school absences across kindergarten, grade retention until fifth grade, math and reading achievement prior to seventh grade, and high school dropout rates (Claessens et al., 2009; McClelland et al., 2006; Valiente et al., 2008). Given the importance of school engagement at an early age, it is important to consider how parental cohabiting status and conflict are related to student's school engagement.

Parental Cohabiting Status & Conflict Related to School Engagement

Children's feelings of self-worth and competence, which ultimately predict school engagement, are promoted by close and supportive relationships with their parents (Searle, et al., 2013). Importantly, Goldberg and Carlson (2014) found that these close

and supportive relationships occur more frequently in cohabiting families as stable two-parent families are associated with positive child development. Previous research has also found that children from families who are non-cohabiting receive less support, supervision, and encouragement about school than do children whose parents stay together (Astone & McLanahan 1991). To some extent, children from separated families who are non-cohabiting obtain lower levels of educational attainment (Einglund et al., 2004). For example, children raised in families that are non-cohabiting, like single-mother families, are more likely to exhibit lower levels of academic achievement and school expectations (Hofferth, 2006; Sun & Li, 2011) and are more likely to drop out of high school and not attend college (Rubin et al., 2003; Waldfogel et al., 2010). Adverse outcomes that might be due to low levels of school engagement.

While there is a lack of research directly linking the effects of parental conflict to student's engagement, there is research which looks at how parental conflict impacts children's development. Conflict between parents is linked to children's emotional and behavioral responses (Mark Cummings et al., 2002; Xuan et al, 2018) and influences children's behaviors as children react to their observation of the conflict (Barthassat, 2014). As children perceive parental conflict, they can model their parent's behavior (Bandura, 1978) within their own interactions with peers and teachers. Specifically, Duman and Margolin (2007) found that exposure to aggression in the home environment can generalize to aggressive responses in peer interactions. These results came from a relatively diverse sample of 118 elementary students whose parents were cohabiting. Furthermore, the results of the study revealed similarities between parent and child responses in hypothetical conflict scenarios (i.e., a mother would "yell back" at spouse

during conflict and her child would “tease him [peer] right back...”). In another study, Sandy and Boardman (2000) promoted conflict resolution and social-emotional skills in a diverse sample of 404 preschoolers from Head Start and day care centers. The researchers randomly assigned classrooms to one of three conditions: (1) day care staff, parents, and children, (2) day care staff and children (but not their parents), and (3) control, no training. Children whose parents participated in the intervention were rated as being higher in assertiveness, cooperation, self-control, and received lower scores of internalizing and externalizing behaviors compared to children in the staff-only and control conditions.

Conflict, which is characterized by intensity, content, duration, and resolution, can accumulate (Grych & Finchman, 1990) and negatively affect children. Exposure to high intensity and frequent conflict is related to higher levels of behavioral problems in children (Tschann et al., 2002). Children who display high levels of aggression and low levels of involvement with peers are less likely to participate in school activities (David & Murphy, 2007). Due to the lack of participation in school activities and peer involvement, children might not reach appropriate developmental milestones necessary for academic learning (Anghel, 2010). It stands to reason that children who experience high levels of conflict are more likely to model these behaviors while children who are exposed to high levels of cooperation and compromise will mirror these actions as well. In turn, exposure to low levels of conflict and high levels of resolution will promote higher levels of school engagement. Children who are from cohabiting families might have more opportunities to see conflict behaviors compared to children with parents who are living separately. It is important to evaluate the effect cohabiting parental status and

conflict has on preschool engagement as these effects continue throughout middle and high school.

II. THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this study was to assess the relation between children's parental cohabiting status and cohabiting conflict in the home and children's levels of emotional and behavioral engagement in preschool. It was hypothesized that parental cohabiting status (i.e., living together or not) and cohabiting conflict (i.e., overall levels of conflict and percent of time children observe conflict) would be related not only to children's emotional engagement but also their behavioral engagement. Specifically, it was hypothesized that children whose parents were cohabiting would have higher rates of emotional and behavioral engagement in preschool compared to children whose parents were non-cohabiting. Furthermore, it was expected that children whose parents engaged in less conflict overall would have higher rates of school engagement and children with high levels of parental conflict would have lower rates of school engagement. In addition to overall levels of parental conflict, the greater the percent of time children actually observed conflict would be related to lower levels of both emotional and behavioral engagement compared.

III. METHOD

Participants

Data were drawn from a 3-year longitudinal study of Head Start in a large, metropolitan southwestern city. Participants included 287 children (47% female, M age = 4.35 years, SD = .42 years) and their parents. The majority of the children were Latino (specifically of Mexican/Mexican American ethnic origin; 70%). Approximately 8%

were non-Latino Caucasian, 7% of children were African American, 2% were Asian/Pacific Islander/Middle Eastern, and 2% identified as other. Parents reported on total family income, and 82% of households had a yearly income of less than \$30,000, though incomes ranged from less than \$10,000 (20% of the sample) to more than \$60,000 (1.7% of the sample). Overall, 45% of reporting parents were married, 24% were together but never married, 15% were single, never married, and 14% were divorced/separated/widowed.

Procedures

At recruitment, parents were provided a family questionnaire that included information about children's demographic information, parental cohabiting status, and cohabiting conflict. During Head Start, questionnaire packets were delivered to the teachers, and a member of the research team picked them up upon completion. Among other measures, teacher's reported on children's emotional and behavioral engagement at school in the spring of their preschool year.

Measures

Cohabiting Status. Cohabiting status was measured on a binary scale, *Cohabiting* (1=Married, never divorced 3=Divorced, remarried 4=Divorced, but together, 5=Divorced, living with partner 9=Together, never married) and *Non-cohabiting* (2=Divorced, single parent 6=Separated 7=Widowed 8=Single never married 10=Other).

Cohabiting Conflict. Cohabiting conflict was measured with the Marital Conflict Scale. This scale includes ten questions regarding parents' perceptions of the frequency, content, and intensity with which conflict occurs in front of the child (e.g., how often do you and your spouse argue over finances? How often is there physical fighting?) scored

on a five-point response scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*). One item assesses the frequency of parental affection expressed toward each other and is reverse coded. Another item asks parents to report the percentage of arguments that happen in front of the child (<10% = very few, >75% = almost all). The ten questions are averaged to get a conflict score with higher scores indicating higher rates of conflict (Porter & O’Leary, 1980). The 10-item scale has demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$) and test-retest reliability over 2 weeks ($r = .96$).

School Engagement. Preschool teachers reported on school engagement using the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ladd et al., 1999). Teachers responded using a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 = *doesn’t apply* to 3 = *certainly applies*). The subscales have been shown to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .77-.91$; Buhs & Ladd, 2001).

Emotional engagement. Emotional engagement was assessed with items from the School Liking and School Avoidance subscales (school avoidance was reverse coded). Higher scores indicated higher rates of emotional engagement (e.g., “student has fun at school”; “student dislikes school”).

Behavioral engagement. Behavioral engagement was assessed with items from the cooperative participation (i.e., the extent to which the child is cooperative in the classroom; e.g., “student listens carefully to teacher’s instructions”) and self-directedness (i.e., the extent to which the child works autonomously in the classroom; e.g., “student works independently”) subscales. Higher scores indicated higher rates of behavioral engagement.

Covariates

Children's demographic characteristics were included as covariates to account for their potential impact on study variables. These include children's gender (female = 0, male = 1) and age (range from 3 years to 5 years).

IV. RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics for study variables are presented in Table 1. For all study variables except for emotional engagement, the skewness and kurtosis were low and did not indicate notable deviations from normality, which might be problematic (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). To address the slight deviation from normality in emotional engagement, this variable was standardized prior to conducting analyses.

Study Analyses

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted comparing school engagement (i.e., emotional and behavioral) of children with cohabiting and non-cohabiting parents. Consistent with hypotheses, results of the *t*-test revealed a significant effect of cohabiting status on behavioral engagement ($t(240) = -3.00, p < .01$). Specifically, children from cohabitating families were rated higher by their teachers on measures of behavioral engagement ($M = 2.59, SD = 0.41$) than children from non-cohabiting families ($M = 2.41, SD = 0.46$; see Figure 1). There was no significant effect of cohabitating status on emotional engagement.

Pearson partial correlations were utilized to examine the relations between parental cohabiting conflict (i.e., overall and in front of the child) and school engagement (i.e., emotional and behavioral) controlling for children's gender and age (see Table 2). Contrary to hypotheses, there were no significant relations found between overall

cohabiting conflict and either subscale of school engagement. Correlations revealed, however, a trend level relation between percent of time children observed parental conflict and their emotional engagement, $r(87) = -0.19, p = .07$. This relation was not present for behavioral engagement.

V. DISCUSSION

The present study contributes to the relatively limited research examining the effects of parental cohabiting status and conflict on children's emotional and behavioral engagement in preschool. It is the first study to examine this association utilizing a sample of predominantly Mexican/Mexican American Head Start children.

Cohabiting Status

Children of cohabiting parent's exhibited higher levels of behavioral engagement in the classroom compared to children of non-cohabiting parents. These results suggest that cohabiting parents, or two-parent households, provide an environment that supports children's development of cooperation and self-directiveness skills. These findings are consistent with previous research showing the positive effects of environments that include two parents for children's development (Parke, 2003).

Conversely, these results suggest that children from non-cohabiting families were less likely to cooperate in the classroom, work independently, and follow directions. Links between behavioral engagement problems (e.g., disobedience and social withdrawal) and separated/divorced parents have been found in preadolescent children (Wood et al., 2004). It has also been reported that children with higher rates of behavior problems were those with separated parents (Dawkins et al., 1995).

Although it was expected that cohabiting status would impact both school engagement measures, there were no significant differences on emotional engagement. In general, young children generally enjoy going to school (Hallinan, 2008). It seems that children enjoy the feelings of belonging and commitment to school (Smerdon, 2002) regardless of parental cohabiting status. Despite the lack of relation between cohabiting status and emotional engagement, living arrangements do not tell the whole story as the quality of the parental relationship likely plays an important role, especially for emotional outcomes in children.

Previous literature has found that children are more likely to reside with their mothers and visit their fathers when parents live separately (Kelly, 2007). Contact between supportive fathers and children during the school week is important, as it promotes emotional engagement (e.g., children's interest and connection to school; Kelly, 2007; Pruett, 2005). This implication might be important to consider in future research as the present study did not evaluate whether or not children saw their non-residential parent if parents were living separately. If the present study evaluated this aspect, there might have been more evidence for the link between cohabitation status and emotional engagement.

Parental Conflict

Despite the fact that overall parental conflict was expected to impact school engagement, there were no significant findings in the present study. These findings are surprising given that past research has shown that children learn patterns of behavior from their parents (McCoy et al., 2009) and can expect similar behavioral patterns in the future (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003). This concept is especially prominent in younger

children, as children generalize what they learned from their parents and apply it to their own social interactions (Gaylord et al., 2003). Thus, it was predicted that parents with less conflict and more prosocial conduct (i.e., cooperating, obeying rules) would promote these similar behaviors in children. For example, children who see parents cooperating at home might influence children to exhibit cooperative behaviors during school activities.

Such ties might not have shown up in this sample as (a) only two-thirds of parents reported on parental conflict, and when conflict was reported, there were overall low levels of occurrence; (b) low levels of conflict might play a neutral role; or (c) children become accustomed to little or no conflict. Since reports were missing and most children were not exposed to high levels of conflict, there might not have been enough variance to distinguish an effect or enough data to support the hypothesis. Future research should further examine conflict and cooperative levels, as lower parental conflict does not assume an absence of conflict or presence of cooperation. Future researchers might also want to compare the higher and lower scores of parental conflict on student's school engagement in a bigger sample with more data. Future studies should also consider looking at this relation longitudinally. As children grow older and gain more experience with conflict, they are able to develop their own way of socially interacting with others (e.g., cooperating or acting aggressively; Barthassat, 2014). It might be helpful to collect data over the course of two consecutive school years instead of one semester. This would allow researchers to investigate how children's engagement changes with experiencing parental conflict overtime.

Percent of Time Seeing Conflict

Unlike previous studies (e.g., Tschann et al., 2002), there were no significant associations found between percent of time child sees conflict and school engagement in the present study. Instead, current findings suggest that percent of time seeing conflict might slightly impact emotional engagement but not behavioral engagement. Specifically, as the percent of time children observed conflict increased, emotional engagement also increased. Observing conflict resulted in higher levels of school liking, such as, having fun, enjoying classroom activities and being at school. Furthermore, these results suggest that higher levels of conflict might imply higher exposure to conflict frequency, intensity, and content, which in turn, affect children (Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Sorek, 2019). For example, parental conflict has been considered a threat to the child only if it is openly visible, aggressive, or hostile in form and content (e.g., domestic violence; Holt et al., 2008). Such links might not have surfaced in this sample since less than one-third of parents reported on the percent of time child sees conflict.

Strengths and Limitations

These results should be considered in the context of both strengths and limitations. A key strength of the present study supports previous findings of the positive impact of two-parent households on children's academic performance. Another strength of this study is that, as the first study to examine the relation between parental cohabitation and children's school engagement, findings were not expected and pose several questions for future research.

The present study also has potential limitations. A limitation of this study concerns the lack of multiple informants. Specifically, only the student's preschool teacher reported on student's emotional and behavioral engagement. In future research, it

might be important to consider utilizing reports from teachers, parents, and an outside observer to measure school engagement. Previous research has found there is low agreement between teachers and parents on standardized measures of behavior between informants from different settings (Grietens, et al., 2004; Youngstrom et al., 2000). Utilizing an outside observer, who is unfamiliar with the student, could mediate the disagreement between teachers and parents. Another limitation to take into consideration is the parental self-reporting. As stated before, slightly over half of the parent questionnaires reported parental conflict and a little over 25% reported percent of conflict seen by child. This could have skewed results regarding conflict, as parents did not complete the full questionnaire, giving an accurate and holistic representation of their conflict. Future studies should attempt to extend the current study by conducting in-person interviews to assess parental conflict.

Conclusion

The present study has generated new knowledge regarding parental cohabitation factors (i.e., status and conflict) that might affect student's school engagement (i.e., emotional and behavioral engagement). Results from the study show somewhat positive findings, given that most of the children did not experience high levels of parental conflict or extremely low levels of emotional and behavioral engagement. However, a little less than half of the children came from families whose parents lived separately. The only significant relation, consistent with study hypothesis, was between cohabiting parents and higher levels of behavioral engagement in preschoolers. Overall, findings from the present study lend support to future researchers and intervention approaches that focus on improving student's academic performance in the context of parental

cohabitation issues. Future research should try to identify the causal mechanisms between cohabiting families and better behavioral engagement, to support other types of family structures with non-cohabiting parents. Intervening at an early age like preschool may provide parents with necessary skills to promote positive school engagement behaviors such as enjoyment, cooperation, and self-directedness from elementary through high school.

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Table 1								
<i>Descriptive Statistics for Parental Cohabiting Status, Conflict, and Perception of Conflict, and School Engagement</i>								
Total (<i>n</i> = 287)								
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	Min	Max	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
Covariates								
Child Gender (Female)	287	47%						
Child Age (in months)	287		52.21	37.00	60.00	5.06	-0.88	0.57
Parental Cohabitation								
Cohabiting Status (Cohabiting)	247	62%						
Cohabiting Conflict	189		2.00	1.11	4.00	0.57	0.93	0.80
% Time Child Sees Conflict	94		1.51	1.00	4.00	0.74	1.40	1.45
School Engagement								
Emotional Engagement	266		2.37	1.00	2.50	0.23	-2.57	7.95
Behavioral Engagement	266		2.54	1.41	3.00	0.43	-0.58	-0.80
<i>Note.</i> Valid N (listwise) = 90								

Table 2

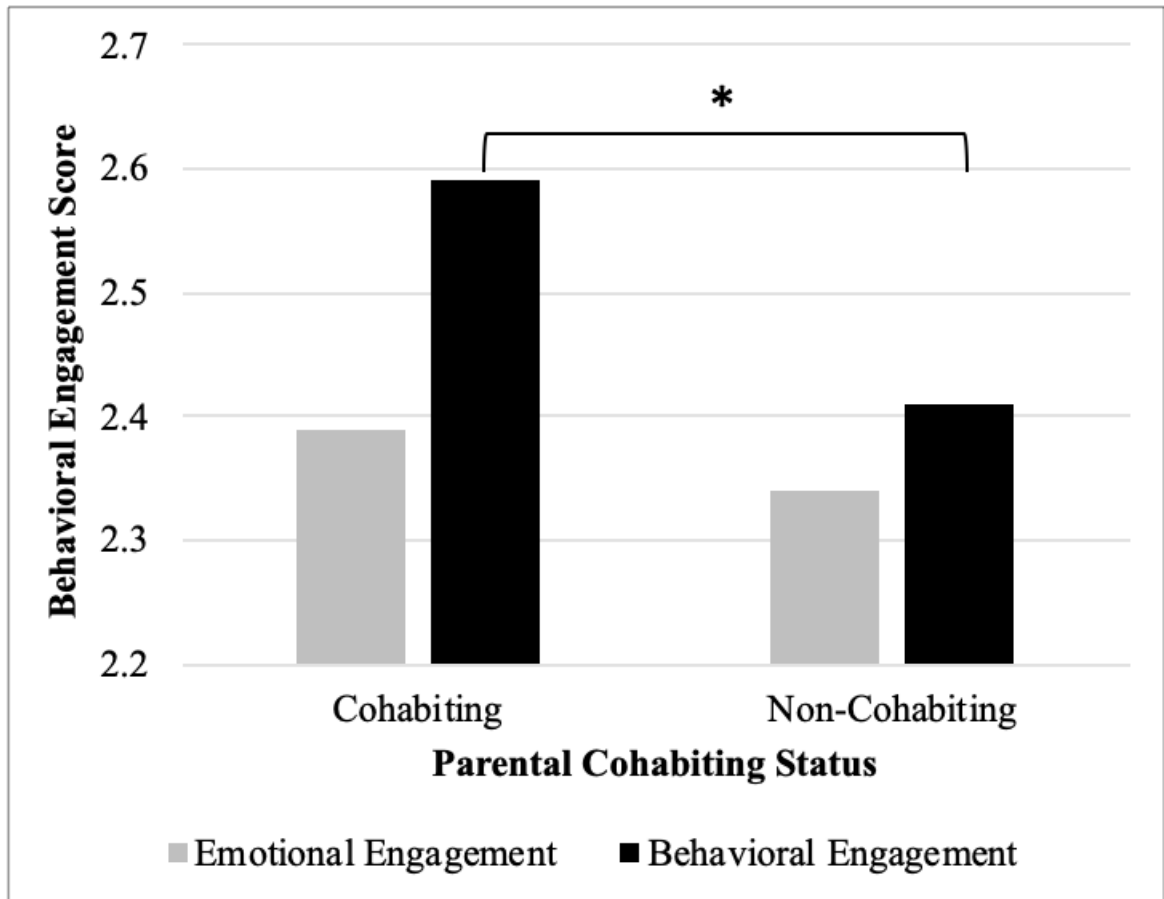
Correlations between Parental Cohabiting Conflict and School Engagement

Total (<i>n</i> = 287)				
	1	2	3	4
Parental Cohabitation				
1 Cohabiting Conflict	—			
2 % Time Child Sees Conflict	0.46***	—		
School Engagement				
3 Emotional Engagement	-0.06	-0.19 ^T	—	
4 Behavioral Engagement	0.00	-0.10	0.35***	—

Note. Partial correlations controlled for the child's gender and age. ^T $p < .10$ *** $p < .001$

Figure 1

Comparison of parental cohabiting status on behavioral engagement



Note. *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)