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# Relating Parental Relationship Tolerance to Parent Relationship Outcomes and Social Outcomes of Children in Fragile Families Data

Jeremy Yu, Washington University in St. Louis

## Abstract

An abundance of research has elaborated on the policy implications of the connection between parents' marital quality and the social outcomes of their children. In order to evaluate marital quality, researchers typically analyze data describing existing marriages or previously existing marriages. Logically, marital quality is then a fruitless measure when assessing the quality of a relationship between unmarried parents. In this article, I pivot to examine a specific aspect of parental attitudes that may inform the future quality of a marriage between currently unmarried parents. More specifically, I discuss how parents' relationship tolerance is an important factor to consider when analyzing parents' relationship outcomes and the social outcomes of their children. I illuminate the trends and relationships that are found in data collected from the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWB) that revolve around parents' relationship tolerance. I primarily hypothesize that parents' relationship tolerance will be positively related to parents' marital status. Furthermore, I intend to highlight relationships between parent's relationship tolerance and the quality of children's relationships with various subgroups, the child's separations from the mother or father, the child's evaluation of her parents' relationship, the parents' belief that marriage benefits children, and other outcomes of the child. I find that parents who view staying in a strained relationship for their children as the right thing to do, despite being few in number amongst both mothers and fathers, are more likely to be married initially and in the future. My findings also suggest that couples that disagree on relationship tolerance differ in marriage rates based on whether the mother or father is the one in disagreement.

## Introduction

**Theoretical Framework in Existing Literature:** Research from the past two decades has shown that the proportion of births attributed to unmarried families has been on the rise for decades (*Ventura & Bachrach, 2000*). The policy implications of this research are important because marriage is seen by many as the mechanism by which the well-being of both parents and children can improve (*Huston & Melz, 2004*). While the nature of this relationship between marriage and well-being is contested by many, federal programs designed to aid and encourage disadvantaged, less-educated parents in their pursuit of marriage and marital stability acknowledge that marriage and marital quality play a key role in lifting children out of poverty. Such programs use marriage and relationship education to change parental attitudes towards marriage and parental behaviors exhibited by couples in order to promote "healthy marriages" (*Brown, 2010*).

The importance of these initiatives is not to be understated; research has also shown that marriage has become a disfavored relationship outcome for unmarried, low-income parents post-childbirth because these families have increasingly high financial standards and/or mismatching relational expectations for marriage (*Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004*). Therefore, helping parents shape appropriate attitudes towards marriage may promote marriage between unmarried parents and thus drive the formation of more two-parent families, considered to be the family structure that is most conducive to reducing child poverty (*Amato & Maynard, 2007*). The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, a piece of legislative welfare reform that encouraged government

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funding for marriage facilitation amongst low-income populations, provides a backdrop for this pursuit (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002).

**Motivation to Describe the Data:** This paper takes up the call to identify aspects of parental attitudes that could be targeted in the future as a part of marriage and relationship education programs by focusing on one such aspect: parents' relationship tolerance. It focuses on how parents' theoretical tolerance of relationship strain for the sake of their children may be connected to the outcomes of those relationships and the outcomes of children birthed from those relationships. Conveying trends related to this aspect of parental attitudes towards their existing relationship informs two questions that the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study sought to address. These questions are listed below.

1. What is the nature of the relationships between unmarried parents?
2. How do children born into these families fare?

While related literature focuses on connecting marriage as a relationship outcome and marital quality to social outcomes of the child (Brown, 2010; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009), the answers to the aforementioned questions documented in this article describe parents' attitudes that may underlie this connection. Further work is required to frame parent's relationship tolerance as a possible predictor of marital quality, parents' relationship outcomes, and children's social outcomes.

**Hypothesis & Expectations:** In describing the trends that relate to parent's relationship tolerance, my hypotheses relate parents' relationship tolerance to a set of dependent variables that describe parents' relationship outcomes and social outcomes of their children. These dependent variables are listed in Table 5. In regards to parent's relationship outcomes, I predict that parents who agree that couples should stay together for the sake of their children even if they don't get along are more likely to actually stay together via marriage. Within the context of the FFWS Study, this means that a child's biological father and biological mother end up tying the knot in any of the study's six waves. Additionally, a supplementary hypothesis is made about the relationship between parent's relationship tolerance and the number of separations from the father and mother experienced by the child; more specifically, I predict that children whose parents agree with the idea of staying together for their children despite differences are less likely to be separated from both of their parents.

I expect parent's relationship tolerance to be fairly high amongst both fathers and mothers even though most of the families analyzed are labeled as "fragile" by the original study's researchers. This expectation hinges on the fact that the variable defining parent's relationship tolerance in the actual data is posed theoretically and not applied directly to father or mother's existing relationship with their spouse or partner. At the same time, I expect parents' relationship outcomes in each wave to be positively correlated with parents' relationship tolerance; parents will apply relationship tolerance to the relationships they subjectively experience and marriage rates will reflect their evaluation of whether or not a currently nonmarital relationship is "worth it" after the birth of a child (recorded by baseline interviews).

**Findings:** I first find that many parents don't agree with the question that produces the parents' relationship tolerance measure (Table 1 & 4). At the same time, mothers far out-report fathers on this measure in Wave 1. As for other outcomes of the child, I find that children whose parents agree on relationship tolerance experience the lowest average number of separations from either parent. I find that a contradictory relationship exists between parents' relationship tolerance and parents' view of marriage as beneficial to children; more specifically, while the vast majority of couples both disagree on relationship tolerance, the vast majority across all race groups believe children benefit from having married parents. I examine marriage as a specific relationship outcome for parents and find that parents who agree on relationship tolerance are much more likely to be married at every wave; at least a 10% gap between parents from that specific relationship tolerance category and

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other categories exists for most waves. Furthermore, it seems as though marriage rates are higher at the baseline when only fathers agree on relationship tolerance but this changes in Wave 3, 4, and 5 where couples where only the mother agrees on relationship tolerance see higher marriage rates. I also break down marriage by father's race and find that non-Hispanic whites pull overall marriage percentages up while the majority of non-Hispanic black and Hispanic fathers aren't married to their child's biological mother. Lastly, I find that a series of the child's relationship outcomes do not seem to be positively or negatively related to parents' relationship tolerance. Results from linear regressions are not elaborated on and will be explored in future work.

## Fragile Families Data

Data collected from the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study (FFWCB) offers a quantitative summary of survey questions asked to a group of 4,898 children born in 20 large, U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000, many of whom were born to families that are considered "fragile families" because of the unmarried status of the child's parents. Information was collected through interviews that occurred in waves, each recorded when children reached a certain age. More specifically, these interviews collected information from parents and primary caretakers across six waves: a baseline wave recorded from 1998 to 2000 at the child's birth and five subsequent waves recorded when the child reached ages 1, 3, 5, 9, and 15.

The nature of the births recorded through the FFWCB Study is representative of birth trends in large cities as 3,712 of the children were born to unmarried parents while the other 1,186 children were born to married parents (*Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002*). This data allows us to examine the nature of relationships within fragile families, inform policy related to improving child well-being, and explore the relationship between parenting behavior and children's cognitive and emotional development. In particular, Fragile Families Data sheds light on various parental attitudes that we can connect to concrete events like marriage and the number of times children were separated from their parents.

Drawing from this data, I analyze parents' relationship tolerance, a specific aspect of parental attitudes defined in the FFWCB study by a question asked to fathers and mothers in the baseline wave of interviews. This question asks parents about the extent to which they agree that parents should stay together for the sake of their children even if they don't get along. My analysis relates responses to this question amongst fathers and mothers to marriage as a specific relationship outcome in the waves that follow the baseline report and to children's outcomes documented in the 5th and 6th waves.

## Methods & Plan of Analysis

Cleaning the Fragile Families Data allowed me to narrow down the set of dependent variables that I would describe. My analysis started with an examination of just parent's relationship tolerance, the independent variable in question. The survey questions that correspond to this measure are seen in Table 4. I first identify trends in this measure according to gender by using responses to these two questions. These initial trends separate responses to our independent variable into two categories: those who express some form of agreement and those who express some form of disagreement. My research quickly departs from this method of grouping relationship tolerance responses in favor of a 4-category breakdown: I group children based on which of their parents agree or disagree about parents' relationship tolerance.

| Category                        | Count |
|---------------------------------|-------|
| Both parents agree              | 171   |
| Mother agrees, Father disagrees | 258   |
| Mother disagrees, Father agrees | 751   |
| Both parents disagree           | 2559  |

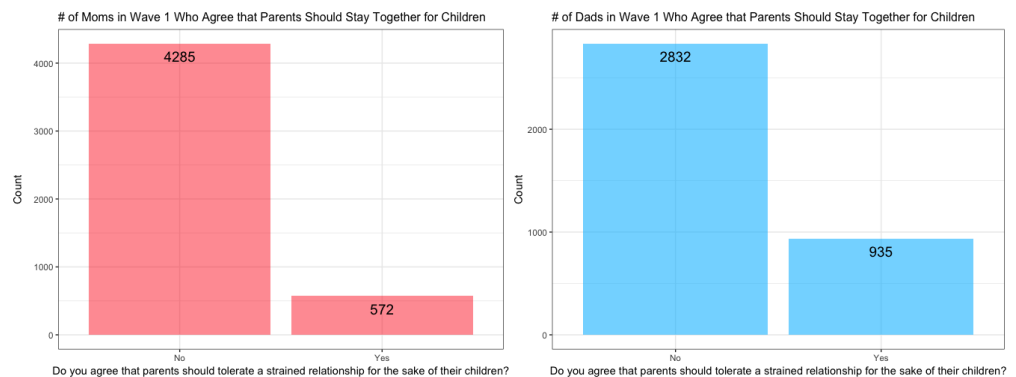
**Table 1.** Categorical breakdown of parents' relationship tolerance based on parents' combined responses

I calculate linear regressions relating parents' relationship tolerance and marriage at each wave but decline to discuss such results in-depth in this paper as more analysis of regression results is required for my understanding of this relationship. Given that the primary purpose of this paper is to describe and bring trends related to a particular aspect of parental attitudes to light, I methodically move through variables including marriage rates at each wave as described in Table 5 by looking at the basic relationships each one forms with parents' relationship tolerance. These basic relationships involve calculating a measure's average for each relationship tolerance category.

## Descriptions & Results

**Describing Parents' Relationship Tolerance:** Approximately 12% and 25% of mothers and fathers respectively agreed that parents should stay together for their children despite not getting along with the other parent. Raw counts tell a more complete story, as made evident by Figure 1; mothers from almost all 4898 families responded to the survey's question about relationship tolerance while only about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of fathers gave a valid response. The cause of such lopsided reporting even in the baseline interviews is attributed to the absence of many fathers in the families we are studying. While my analysis did not dive into the living arrangements of mothers, the data does show that the vast difference in responses is due to fathers' responses not being in the baseline wave. When grouped by race, proportions for both mothers and fathers across racial groups (White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and Other) match the overall percentages mentioned above fairly well. In no racial group did a simple majority of fathers or mothers agree that parents should have relationship tolerance.

**Figure 1.** Raw counts show that while a low number of mothers and fathers agreed that parents should have relationship tolerance for the sake of their children, a much larger number of valid responses came from mothers.

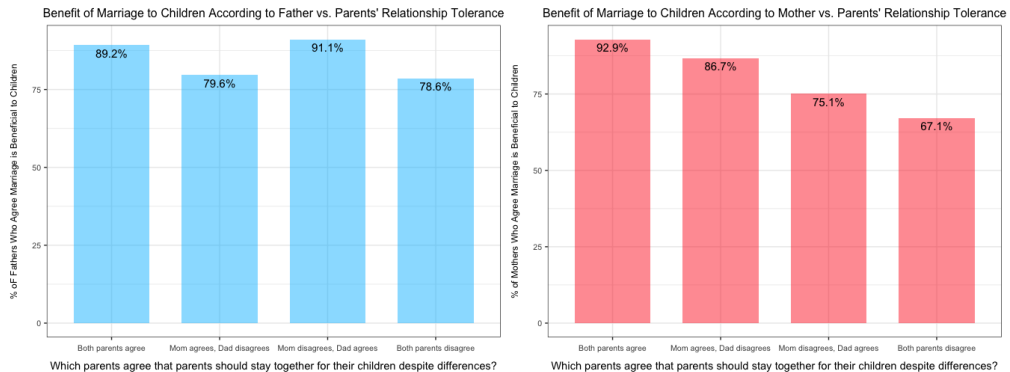


**Relating Relationship Tolerance to Separations:** Parents' relationship tolerance is logically related to the child's separations from the father and mother. It makes sense that couples who agree that parents should stay together for their children amidst relationship strain would put children through less separations from both parents. My hypothesis along these lines was correct as separations from both mother and father are smallest on average when parents agree about relationship tolerance (2.44

and 1 for fathers & mothers respectively) and greatest when they disagree (4.73 & 6.55 respectively). The presumed link between these two measures is the likelihood that parents actually end up staying together in some way (via cohabitation, marriage, etc.). Further description of this link with marriage as the mechanism by which parents stay together is done in my discussion of parents' relationship outcomes.

**Relating Parents' View of Marriage Benefits for Children to Parents' Relationship Tolerance:** My findings on parents' views of whether or not marriage benefits children supports what we know to be true about how people view marriage in existing literature. Across all relationship tolerance groupings, a majority of mothers and fathers agreed that children fare better if their parents are married. This trend is shown in Figure 3. Fathers in the relationship tolerance categories in which the father agrees (1st & 3rd columns) were also the most likely to agree that children are better off with married parents (89% when both parents agree, 91.1% when only the mother disagrees). This trend also applies to mothers in relationships where both parents agree on relationship tolerance and where only the father disagrees; for these groups of mothers, 92.9% and 86.7% agree that children are better off with married parents respectively. Agreement with this attitude towards marriage seems to tell us a story that contradicts relationship tolerance responses. Low numbers of couples agree that parents should “tough it out” for their kids while high proportions believe marriage, historically one of the primary ways of alleviating factors (namely poverty) that may cause relationship strain, benefits children.

**Figure 2.** Regardless of relationship tolerance category, a majority of both mothers and fathers agree that it is better for children if parents are married; percentages are highest when the corresponding parent agrees with the relationship tolerance measure.



**Relating Relationship Tolerance to Marriage:** While reported marriage rates between biological parents align very closely in baseline interviews, the same data recorded in later waves contains disparities between marriage rates as reported by a child's father and mother. Table 2 for fathers and Table 3 for mothers show that baseline marriage rates are logical; the highest percentage of couples who are initially married is found amongst couples who both agree on relationship tolerance. In fact, parents who both agree on relationship tolerance produced the highest percentage of marriages at every wave (note that Wave 2 is excluded due to lack of analyzable data). Interestingly enough, Wave 3 sees fathers reporting marriages at approximately a 5% higher clip than mothers. The same is true in Wave 4. In Wave 5, this gap grows to 12% if we look specifically at children whose parents agree on relationship tolerance. A peculiar trend is found when examining relationship tolerance categories that involve mismatch. In baseline reports, couples where only the father agrees were married more but couples where only the mother agrees were married more in the other 3 waves. This is true whether you examine rates reported by fathers or those reported by mothers.

| Relationship Tolerance Category | Baseline | Wave 3 | Wave 4 | Wave 5 |
|---------------------------------|----------|--------|--------|--------|
| Both parents agree              | 46.2%    | 54.0%  | 53.4%  | 60.2%  |
| Mother agrees, Father disagrees | 29.1%    | 44.0%  | 42.8%  | 46.5%  |
| Mother disagrees, Father agrees | 32.9%    | 43.4%  | 42.6%  | 42.0%  |
| Both parents disagree           | 24.7%    | 37.1%  | 37.9%  | 35.8%  |

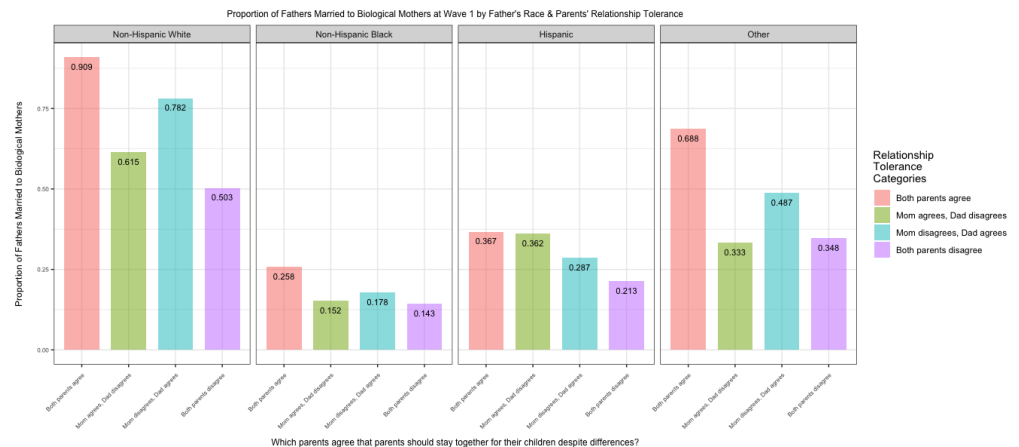
**Table 2.** Marriage Rates between Child's Biological Parents as Reported by the Father

| Relationship Tolerance Category | Baseline | Wave 3 | Wave 4 | Wave 5 |
|---------------------------------|----------|--------|--------|--------|
| Both parents agree              | 47.4%    | 50.0%  | 46.5%  | 48.6%  |
| Mom agrees, Dad disagrees       | 28.3%    | 39.9%  | 39.4%  | 39.6%  |
| Mom disagrees, Dad agrees       | 32.3%    | 38.9%  | 37.2%  | 34.6%  |
| Both parents disagree           | 24.4%    | 34.1%  | 33.5%  | 30.4%  |

**Table 3.** Marriage Rates between Child's Biological Parents as Reported by the Mother

Furthermore, a breakdown of marriage as a relationship outcome just in the baseline wave by the father's race reveals stark differences in the proportion of fathers married to the child's biological mother. Such trends are also seen in the later waves. Figure 3 clearly shows that the percentages of mothers and fathers who are married in Tables 2 & 3 don't tell the whole story when it comes to who in our data is actually married. It is important to note here that blacks makeup the largest portion of respondents. As a result, a large number of fathers from minority groups (i.e non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and Other) reporting that they are not married to the biological mother balances out the smaller number of non-Hispanic white fathers who are more likely to be initially married than not.

**Figure 3.** When broken down by father's race, it is evident that the marriage percentages show in Tables 2 & 3 balance high values amongst non-Hispanic whites with much lower values for non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics; at the same time, disparities between categories of relationship tolerance exist for each category of father's race.



**Understanding Linear Regression Models Involving Marriage and Relationship Tolerance:** A brief dive into the world of linear regression produces statistically significant results when I examine the relationship between marriage and parents' relationship tolerance. Adding control measures like father's race, mother's race, and mother and father's household income reduces the statistical significance of the intermediate relationship tolerance categories (categories where 1 parent agrees and the other disagrees) but when parents both agree or both disagree, the control measures do not minimize the statistical significance of relationship tolerance as much. A more in-depth analysis of these models (including models with interaction) and models involving other dependent variables will bring to light just how significant some of the trends I have discussed are.

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**Connecting Relationship Tolerance to Child's Relationship Outcomes:** My analysis included various survey questions that ask children about the nature of their relationships with peers, teachers, and partners. Children born to couples from any category of parents' relationship tolerance invite others to their home at similar rates. Additionally, similar proportions of children reported having trouble getting along with teachers and students across relationship tolerance categories. Even children's responses about the quality of their own relationships are fairly steady no matter which parents agree about relationship tolerance. These variables that don't seem to be related to parent's relationship tolerance at first glance are broad; one can imagine that many social factors play a role in shaping how a child gets along with non-familial parties.

## Concluding Discussion

There are many positives to take away from this research. In describing a specific aspect of parental attitudes towards marriage and relationships, we now know about one aspect of a relationship between unmarried parents that could be targeted by federal initiatives and marriage education programs in the future. There is certainly room to improve; in the Fragile Families Data we analyzed, findings tell us that the low number of couples who both agreed on relationship tolerance can certainly be improved in the future. Ideally, a vast majority of unmarried parents would both agree on relationship tolerance, an aspect of parental attitudes that seems like it would line up with parents' views of whether or not marriage benefits children. Looking back, such low numbers aren't surprising for the cohort of families interviewed in the FFWC Study. As mentioned above, relationship tolerance is inherently a measure that may remind couples of negative aspects of their existing relationships. Therefore, while the measure in the study & data is framed as a parent's agreement with an objective statement (Table 4), it is logical to assume that parents consider their existing relationship when indicating whether they agree or disagree with such a statement. While the link between parents' relationship tolerance and parent's views of marriage as beneficial to children, as discussed above, theoretically go hand in hand because marriage is a mechanism by which parents can benefit their children by staying together, there is a caveat with the contradictory relationship I discovered in the data: factors that cause parents to not get along often cannot be solved through marriage and so my pre-existing hypothesis in regards to this relationship is certainly off.

A definite relationship between parents' relationship tolerance and marriage exists. Even when accounting for father's race, disparities between relationship tolerance categories remained. This posits a few questions that are important for policy and relationship education work in the future: what can we do to build up relationship tolerance (a similar term, relationship resiliency, is used when characterizing individuals who have endured relationships that were subpar in quality) even within parents who are labeled as "fragile" and considered to be at greater risk of living in poverty than your traditional family? Is building up one's ability to "stick a relationship out" for one's children even the best option for such parents in some cases? At the moment, relationship tolerance has been considered as a part of the attitude that affects whether or not parents get married (future work includes exploration of whether it affects marital quality). It is a part of the innermost layer of the onion; but what factors actually affect whether a parent agreed or disagreed with the original study's measure of relationship tolerance? Amongst many others, variables that come to mind are a parent's judgement of their partner's ability to raise a child and judgement of their partner's character. Peeling back yet another layer by studying these judgements that are the building blocks of aspects of attitudes like relationship tolerance could be crucial to understanding the situations fragile families find themselves in and the pathways that could lead such families into healthier relationships.

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| Orig. Var. Name | Label  | New Variable Name       | Asked to? |
|-----------------|--|-------------------------|-----------|
| m1d3b           | Parents should stay togethr for the children even if they don't get along, Ag/Dis? | m_tolerate_relationship | Mother    |
| f1d3b           | Parents should stay together for the children even if they don't get along?        | f_tolerate_relationship | Father    |

**Table 4.** A catalog of the variables describing parents' relationship tolerance

| Orig. Var. Name | Label  | New Variable Name        | Asked to? |
|-----------------|--|--------------------------|-----------|
| f4c7g           | How many times were mother and child separated?            | num_sep_from_mother      | Father    |
| m4c7g           | How many times were father and child separated?            | num_sep_from_father      | Mother    |
| k6d2l           | There are people in my life who really care about me       | has_caring_ppl           | Child     |
| k6d36b          | Hours per day hangs out w/family members on weekdays       | weekday_hrs_with_fam     | Child     |
| m1a4            | Is respondent married to baby's father?                    | married_to_father_1st    | Mother    |
| f1b2            | Is respondent married to baby's mother?                    | married_to_mother_1st    | Father    |
| m2e2a2          | Are mother and father married?                             | married_to_father_2nd    | Mother    |
| f2e2a2          | Are mother and father married?                             | married_to_mother_2nd    | Father    |
| cm3marf         | Mother married to baby's father at year three              | married_to_father_3rd    | Mother    |
| cf3marm         | Father married to baby's mother at year three              | married_to_mother_3rd    | Father    |
| cm4marf         | Mother married to baby's father at year five               | married_to_father_4th    | Mother    |
| cf4marm         | Father married to baby's mother at five-year               | married_to_mother_4th    | Father    |
| cm5marf         | Mother married to child's father at nine-year              | married_to_father_5th    | Mother    |
| cf5marm         | Father married to child's mother at nine-year              | married_to_mother_5th    | Father    |
| m1d1e           | It is better for children if their parents are married?    | m_married_helps_chld     | Mother    |
| f1d1e           | It is better for children if their parents are married?    | f_married_helps_chld     | Father    |
| k6c1            | Relationship quality between biological parents            | bio_parents_rela_qual    | Child     |
| k6c2            | Relationship quality between biological parent and partner | nonbio_parents_rela_qual | Child     |
| k6d1k           | I invite others to my home                                 | invite_to_home           | Child     |
| k6b21b          | Trouble getting along with your teachers                   | teacher_trble            | Child     |
| k6b21d          | Trouble getting along with other students                  | peers_trble              | Child     |
| k6f14           | Relationship quality with current partner                  | partner_rela_qual        | Child     |

**Table 5.** A catalog of the dependent variables used alongside parent's relationship tolerance

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