The present study addressed the following questions: (a) To what extent do different methods of measuring the family environment converge onto a single latent construct? (b) How are the constructs of positive and of negative family environment related? (c) Do the associations among various methods of measuring the family environment differ as a function of children’s gender or of risk? and (d) How are the latent constructs of family environment related to depression in mothers and their children? Participants were 240 children (mean age = 11.86 years, SD = 0.57) and their mothers, who varied with regard to their history of depression. Family environment was measured with self-report questionnaires completed separately by mothers and by children, observations of mother–child interactions, and a 5-min speech sample of each mother talking about her child. Confirmatory factor analyses revealed that different methods for assessment of the family environment converged and that the constructs of positive and of negative family environments were significantly related to each other and to depression in both mothers and their children. These findings may help inform future intervention efforts by highlighting specific parenting dimensions that are strongly associated with maternal and with child depression.

Keywords: family environment, depression, adolescents, multimethod assessment

Offspring of depressed parents are at increased risk for psychopathology, in particular for mood disorders, compared with children of nondepressed parents (Beardslee, Versage, & Gladstone, 1998). The familial transmission of psychopathology from parents to children is likely the result of both genetic and environmental factors, particularly in the family context (Goodman & Gotlib, 1999). A growing empirical literature has shown that relationships between depressed parents and their children are disrupted during infancy, childhood, and adolescence (Goodman & Gotlib, 1999; Hammen, 1991). The extent and form of the disruption, however, vary depending on operationalization and the method of measuring the family environment, which has been assessed with self-report questionnaires completed by parents and/or children, by behavioral observation, or by coding family members’ comments about one another (expressed emotion). Our primary purpose in the current study was to explore these distinct methods of assessing the family environment in relation to each other and to depression in mothers and their children.

Family environments characterized by high levels of negativity, conflict, disengagement, or otherwise adverse relationships have been found to be associated with higher levels of depression in youths (e.g., Sheeber, Hops, & Davis, 2001). Studies using adolescent-report measures of the family environment have shown that perceptions of a negative family milieu (e.g., not cohesive, unsupportive, or enmeshed) were associated with more depressive symptoms and disorders (e.g., Cumsille & Epstein, 1994). Similarly, studies that assessed the family environment with parent-report measures have shown a significant relation between