Associations Between Marital Conflict, Parent-Child Interaction and Children's Adjustment

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Recent research has attempted to identify the mechanisms by which marital conflict affects children. According to the emotional security hypothesis proposed by Davies and Cummings (1994), marital conflict, especially when it is unresolved, affects children by negatively impacting their emotional security derived from the parent-parent relationship. This study tested this hypothesis as well as examined whether the quality of parenting mediated the relationship between marital conflict and children's adjustment.

Participants in this longitudinal study were one-hundred twenty-six families consisting of mother, father, and their first- (n = 44), third- (n = 43), or fifth-grade (n = 39) child, recruited from the Mountain West. Families visited the laboratory for a 90-minute session during which parent-child interaction was recorded in three episodes. In one episode, the family discussed a recent disagreement that involved all three of them (i.e., mom, dad, and child), including how it was resolved and how each of them felt about the resolution. In another episode, the parents discussed their division of household chores. In the third episode, families were instructed to select from a set of provided games and to spend five minutes playing that game together. Dimensions of parenting quality were rated from videotaped interactions. During the lab visit, parents and children completed (individually) questionnaires assessing marital conflict. Children's emotional insecurity in the context of interpersonal conflict was assessed using the Security in the Interpersonal Subsystem (SIS) Scale (Davies, Foreman, Ral, and Stevens, 2007). Parents' reports of children's internalizing and externalizing behavior were obtained three years after the original visit.

As predicted by the emotional security hypothesis, results indicated that interpersonal conflict was related to a decrease in emotional security in the sample. Results further indicated that as marital conflict increased, quality of parenting decreased. However, a significant relationship between quality of parenting and emotional security in the interpersonal subsystem was not found in this sample.

A secondary aim of this study was to examine the relationship between marital conflict, quality of parenting, and internalizing and externalizing behavior in children. Results indicated that an increase in marital conflict is associated with an increase in children's internalizing and externalizing behavior. Results also indicated that a decrease in quality of parenting is associated with an increase in internalizing and externalizing behavior in children.