

The Effect of Interparental Conflict on Maternal Implicit Attitudes About Children and Discipline Strategies

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BACKGROUND

- ❑ Belsky's Determinants of Parenting Model (Belsky, 1984) suggests that linkages between parents' psychological well-being and parenting behaviors can be traced back to psychosocial stressors
- ❑ As a potential psychosocial stressor, this model takes into account the marital relationship
- ❑ Heightened interparental conflict is associated with more negative parenting behaviors and increases in harsh discipline (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006)
- ❑ Implicit attitudes about children may be an explanatory mechanism behind *why* this association occurs
- ❑ Implicit attitudes are characterized as automatically activated reactions to environmental stimuli, and are believed to be unconscious and relatively stable (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Strack & Deutsch, 2004)
- ❑ A cognitive framework of parenting postulates that caregivers hold beliefs and attitudes about their children which influence how parents interpret and respond to caregiving situations
- ❑ Previous research has shown that maternal positive implicit attitudes about children predict higher levels of empathy, and mediate the relationship between challenging child behavior and maternal sensitivity (Sturge-Apple et al., 2015)

AIMS:

Examine the associations between interparental conflict, maternal implicit attitudes about children, and discipline strategies over time

- **Hypothesis 1:** Interparental conflict will be associated with lower levels of parental warmth and higher levels of harsh and authoritarian discipline
- **Hypothesis 2:** This effect will be mediated by maternal implicit positive attitudes about children, such that implicit positive attitudes will be associated with higher levels of warmth, and lower levels of harsh and authoritarian discipline

METHODS

Participants: 243 families: mothers and their 4-5 year old children (56% female)

- European American (43%)
- African American (48%)
- Latino (16%)
 - Median Family Income- \$36,000 per year (range: \$2,000-\$121,000)
 - 69% of sample received public assistance

Procedure:

Families visited the laboratory at University of Rochester for two waves of data collection spaced one year apart.

Construct	Method	Measure
Interparental Conflict (Wave 1)	Structured Interaction Task: Interparental Problem-Solving Task (Davies et al., 2006) Parents were given 10 minutes to discuss three topics of disagreement	Observational ratings of parental conflict were completed using The System for Coding Interactions in Dyads (SCID; Malik & Lindahl, 2004) Mothers were coded for: Verbal Aggression, Attempts to Control, Negativity & Conflict, and Lack of Partner Support
Positive Maternal Implicit Attitudes (Wave 2)	Child Go/NoGo Association Task (Child-GNAT; Sturge-Apple et al., 2015) A word sorting task in which three types of stimuli: loveable words (e.g., loving), unlovable words (e.g., selfish), and words referring to the target child are presented in random order, and subjects are asked to sort them	Accuracy of sorting within the positive word-child trials served as the main performance index To control for inflated hit rates, a <i>d'</i> score was calculated by subtracting the false alarm rate from the hit rate after they were standardized
Parenting: Discipline Context (Wave 2)	Structured Interaction Task: Parent-Child Discussion Task Parents were given 5 minutes to discuss an issue of discipline with their child	Observational ratings of parental conflict were completed using The Caregiving Around Discipline coding system (Sturge-Apple & Jones-Gordils, 2017) Mothers were coded for: Warmth, Authoritarian Discipline, and Harsh Discipline

Table 1. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Primary Variables

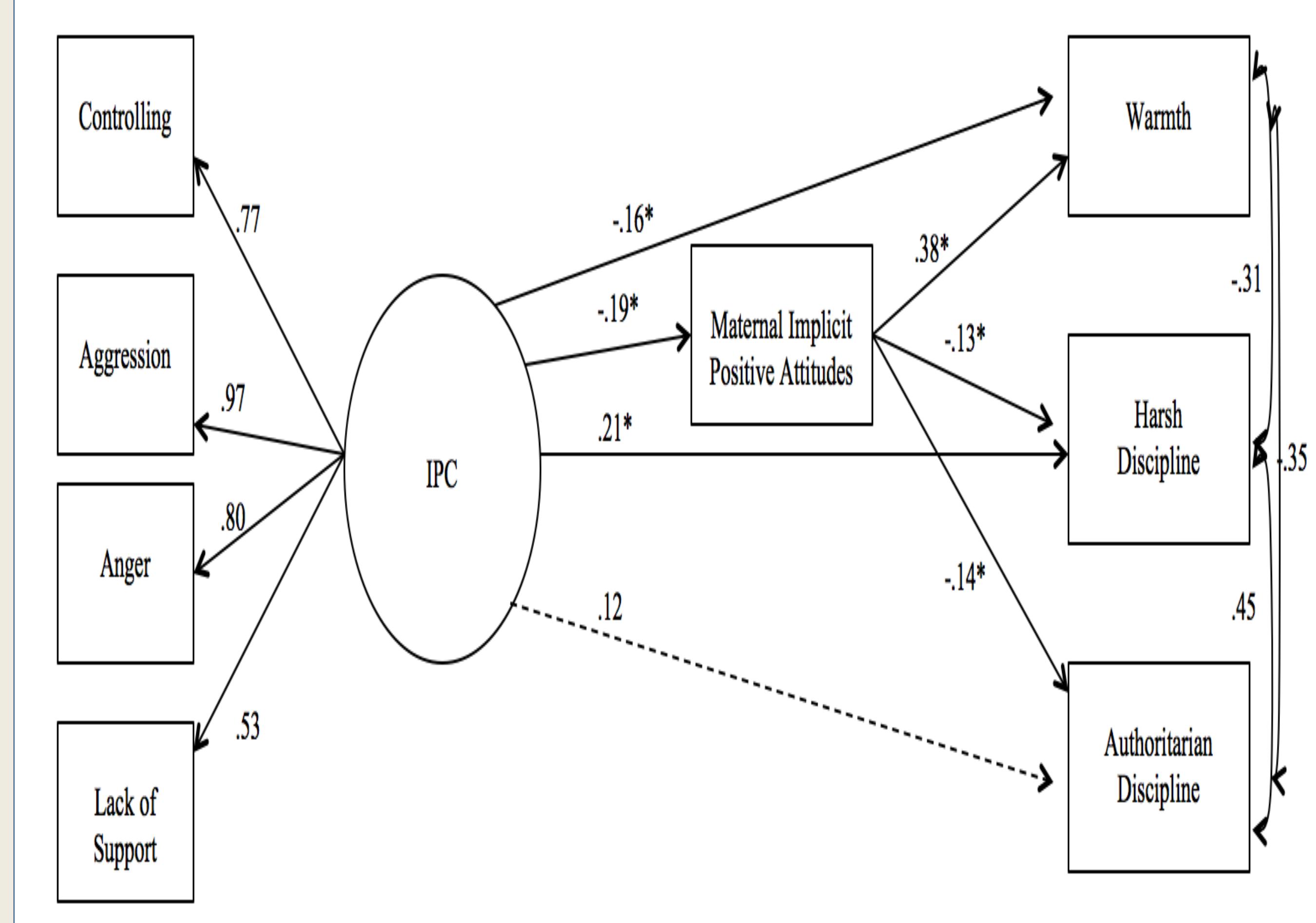
Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. W1 IPST Anger	—							
2. W1 IPST Aggression	.79**	—						
3. W1 IPST Controlling	.62**	.75**	—					
4. W1 IPST Lack of Support	.43**	.51**	.43**	—				
5. W2 GNAT Loveable	-.162	-.171	-.12	-.12	—			
6. W2 Warmth	-.23**	-.22**	-.08	-.237**	.40**	—		
7. W2 Harsh Discipline	.28**	.22*	.12	.104	-.15	-.37**	—	
8. W2 Authoritarian Discipline	.22**	.127	.12	.06	-.14	-.40**	.48**	—
<i>M</i>	3.91	3.49	3.92	6.58	.00	4.12	1.73	2.67
<i>SD</i>	2.17	2.53	2.45	2.37	1.11	2.40	1.80	2.37

Note. **p* < 0.05. ***p* < 0.01

Note. Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, and correlations for relevant variables in the study

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Eunice Shriver Kennedy National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R01 HD065425) awarded to Patrick T. Davies and Melissa L. Sturge-Apple. A special thanks to all the students and staff who helped on the project, and to all the families who participated.



Note. Figure 1. Structural equation model examining associations between interparental conflict, implicit positive attitudes, and parenting behaviors. For ease of interpretation, only standardized path coefficients are depicted. Dashed lines indicate an insignificant effect. IPC= Interparental Conflict * *p* < .05

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

- Interparental Conflict was significantly related to mothers' positive implicit attitudes about their children, $B = -.12, p = .012$
- Interparental conflict was significantly associated with parental warmth and parental use of harsh discipline $\beta = -.16, p = .03$ and $\beta = .21, p = .01$
- Maternal implicit positive attitudes about children were associated with paternal warmth, $B = .83, p < .001$ and authoritarian discipline, $B = -.30, p < .05$. This effect was trending for harsh discipline, $B = -.20, p = .06$
- Maternal implicit positive attitudes mediated the relationship between interparental conflict and warmth, $\beta = -.07, p = .03$, 95% bootstrap confidence interval [-.2, -.02]

Discussion:

- Interparental conflict did significantly predict maternal implicit positive attitudes. The mechanisms behind this association should be explored in future research
- Implicit positive attitudes about children may have a potential buffering effect on the association between interparental conflict and parenting behaviors