The Effect of Intercparental 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: Intercparental 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Measure</th>
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<tr>
<td>Intercparental Conflict</td>
<td>Structured Interaction Task</td>
<td>Observational ratings of parental conflict were completed using The System for Coding Interactions in Dyads (SCID: Malish &amp; Lindahl, 2004)</td>
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<td>(Wave 1)</td>
<td>Interparental Problem-Solving Task (Davies et al., 2006)</td>
<td>Mothers were coded for: Verbal Aggression, Attempts to Control, Negativity &amp; Conflict, and Lack of Partner Support</td>
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<td>Positive Maternal Implicit Attitudes</td>
<td>Child Go/NoGo Association Task (Child-GNAT; Sturge-Apple, 2015)</td>
<td>A word sorting task in which three types ofelman, movable words (e.g., loving), unmovable words (e.g., selfish), and words referring to the target child are presented in random order, and subjects are asked to sort them</td>
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<td>(Wave 2)</td>
<td>Structured Interaction Task</td>
<td>Accuracy of sorting within the positive word children trials served as the main performance index To control for inflated hit rates, a D’ score was calculated by subtracting the false alarm rate from the hit rate after they were standardized</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting: Discipline Context</td>
<td>Parent-Child Discussion Task</td>
<td>Observational ratings of parental conflict were completed using The Caregiving Around Discipline coding system (Sturge-Apple &amp; Jones-Gordils, 2017)</td>
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<td>(Wave 2)</td>
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<td>Mothers were coded for: Warmth, Authoritarian Discipline, and Harsh Discipline</td>
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RESULTS & DISCUSSION

- Intercparental Conflict was significantly related to mothers’ positive implicit attitudes about their children, $B = -12, p = .012$
- Intercparental conflict was significantly associated with parental warmth and parental use of harsh discipline $β = -1.6, p = .03$ and $β = .21, p = .01$
- Maternal implicit positive attitudes about children were associated with parental 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, $β = -.07, p = .03$, 95% bootstrap confidence interval [-.2, -.02]

Discussion:
- Intercparental 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