Interparental Conflict and Children’s Externalizing Problems: The Protective Role of Effortful Control

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INTRODUCTION
- Interparental conflict is consistently associated with externalizing problems (Buehler et al., 1997)
- Effect sizes are only modest to moderate (Buehler et al., 1997)
- Effortful control may weaken associations between interparental conflict and externalizing problems
- Effortful control promotes strategies to manage reflective, intense negative emotions (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002)
- Unclear how or why effortful control moderates contexts of interparental conflict

HYPOTHESES
1) High effortful control weakens associations between interparental conflict and externalizing problems
2) Effortful control decreases vulnerability to externalizing problems by reducing angry reactivity to interparental conflict

METHOD

Participants
- 243 children and their families
  - 56% girls
  - 44% boys
  - M age at W1 = 4.6 years
  - Ethnicity/Race:
    - 45% African-American
    - 43% White
    - 9% Multi-racial or Other
  - 16% Latino
  - Socio-economic Status:
    - Median income: $36,000
    - 69% received public assistance
    - Median parental education: High school diploma or equivalent
  - Data collected at three annual time points

Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Reporter</th>
<th>Waves</th>
<th>Measures Description</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interparental Conflict</td>
<td>Observation, trained coder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Interparental problem solving task assessing destructive parental conflict tactics.</td>
<td>Inter-rater reliability = .81 and .86 (M = .79)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effortful Control</td>
<td>Observation, trained coder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Children’s ability to suppress a prepotent response and voluntarily enact a substance response: 1) Peg Tapping task 2) Block Removal task 3) Gift Delay task 4) CCQ Consistency/Inconsistency scale</td>
<td>Inter-rater reliability = .94 or .81</td>
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<td>Angry Reactivity to Interparental Conflict</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview, trained coder</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>Children’s emotional and behavioral responses to interparental conflict: 1) Tally of angry and controlling behaviors 2) Molar ratings of children’s hostile reactivity 3) Molar ratings of children’s dominant patterns of responding</td>
<td>Inter-rater reliability = .79 or .83</td>
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<td>Externalizing Problems</td>
<td>Survey, maternal, paternal, and teacher report</td>
<td>1 &amp; 3</td>
<td>Child oppositional defiant, conduct problem, hostile, relationally aggressive, and ADHD behaviors.</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>.79</td>
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RESULTS

CONCLUSIONS
- Effortful control protected children from high conflict homes from developing externalizing problems by decreasing angry responses to interparental conflict
- Moderation findings are consistent with protective-stabilizing effects (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000)
- According to social learning theory, effortful control may disrupt:
  1) vicarious learning processes preventing the disinhibition of behavior
  2) negative reinforcement contingencies that intensify anger (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001)
- Consistent with emotion contagion processes, effortful control may suppress “mimicking” anger (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007)
- Effortful control as a protective factor and predictor:
  - Self-regulatory interventions may disrupt the cascade of risk associated with interparental conflict

Acknowledgements
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