A Strengths-based Application of the Spillover Hypothesis: Constructive Interparental Conflict, Parenting, and Children’s Cognitive Development

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Study Rationale

• *Destructive* interparental conflict $\rightarrow$ deficits in parenting and child functioning

• However, *constructive* interparental conflict, which involves problem-solving, active listening, and support provision during conflict, is linked to positive outcomes.

• No study has examined how *constructive* conflict might impact children’s cognitive development

• Therefore, the current study tested a spillover model of the effects of constructive conflict on parenting and children’s cognitive development

(Goeke-Morey et al., 2003; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Kopystynska et al., 2020)
Research Question: Do maternal or paternal supportive-problem solving behaviors mediate associations between constructive interparental conflict and children’s cognitive development?
Overview: Key Theories

- Family Systems Theory & The Spillover Hypothesis
- Strengths-Based Approaches/Family Resilience Theory
- Domain-Specific Approaches
Family unit as a complex social system in which members interact to influence each other’s behavior

(Kerr & Bowen, 1988)
The Spillover Hypothesis

Affect/behaviors transfer or “spill over” from one relationship to another within a family system

Conflict/difficulties in interparental relationship → Difficulties with parenting/parent-child relationships → Negative child outcomes

(Erel & Burman, 1995; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006; van Dijk et al., 2020)
FAMILY RESILIENCE THEORY

• More recent (Hadfield & Ungar, 2018; Walsh, 2016) extension of Family Systems Theory
• Use principles of FST to identify strengths and protective factors in contexts of stress
• Complements broader resilience frameworks (e.g., Masten & Monn, 2015)
Grusec & Davidov, 2010: domain approaches argue for greater specificity with respect to parenting contexts.

**Emphasis on function**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Parent-Child Relationship</th>
<th>Parent Behavior</th>
<th>Mechanism of Socialization</th>
<th>Child outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Protection</strong></td>
<td>Provider-recipient of protection</td>
<td>Alleviate child’s distress</td>
<td>Confidence in parental protection</td>
<td>Greater empathy, trust, and effective coping under stress</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reciprocity</strong></td>
<td>Exchange/equality</td>
<td>Comply with child’s reasonable requests and influence attempts</td>
<td>Innate tendency to reciprocate</td>
<td>Receptive compliance and cooperation</td>
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<td><strong>Control</strong></td>
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<td>Use discipline best suited to parental goal</td>
<td>Acquired self-control or responding to heterocontrol</td>
<td>Obedience based on internalization or external pressures</td>
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<td><strong>Guided-Learning</strong></td>
<td>Teacher-student</td>
<td>Match teaching to child’s changing level of understanding</td>
<td>Guided learning and scaffolding child competences</td>
<td>Acquisition of culturally relevant knowledge and skills</td>
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<td><strong>Group Participation</strong></td>
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**Domain-Specific Approaches**

- Grusec & Davidov, 2010: domain approaches argue for greater specificity with respect to parenting contexts
- Emphasis on function

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Participants: Project FLIGHT

- 231 mothers, fathers, and their 3-year-old child
- 2.5-hour laboratory visits at W1 and W2
- Sample demographics
  - Child Race
    - 21.6% Black or African American
    - 55.4% White
    - 1.7% Asian
    - 21.2% multiracial or other
  - Child Ethnicity
    - 17.9% Latine/Hispanic
Measures: Constructive Conflict (W1)

- Observed Constructive Conflict:
  - “Problem-Solving and Communication” and “Support” behavioral codes during discussion task
  - ICCs: .64-.86

- Self-Reported Constructive Conflict
  - Cooperation subscale of the Conflict and Problem-Solving Scales
  - Ex: “try to find a solution that meets both needs equally”

(Kerig, 1996; Malik & Lindahl, 2004)
Measures: Parent Supportive Problem-Solving (W1)

Observational Codes:
- Planning/Organization
- Engagement/Maintaining

ICCs:
.64-.91 across mothers and fathers

*faces blurred to protect participant identities (Suor et al., 2019)
Measures: Child Cognitive Outcomes (W1 & W2)

• Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence, Fourth Edition
  • The Block Design subtest assesses children’s visual-spatial reasoning abilities by asking them re-create images and structures.
  • The Picture Memory subtest assesses working memory through asking children to recall images that are no longer perceptually present.
  • The Day/Night Task is a developmentally appropriate, modified Stroop task assessing inhibitory control.

(Gerstadt et al., 1994; Wechsler, 2012)
Results

W1 Constructive Interparental Conflict

W1 Father Problem-Solving Behavior

\[ \beta = 0.360, p < 0.01 \]
\[ B = 0.135, SE = 0.036 \]

W1 Mother Problem-Solving Behavior

\[ \beta = 0.299, p < 0.01 \]
\[ B = 0.091, SE = 0.027 \]

*LDS = latent difference score; only significant paths displayed*
**Results**

- **W1 Constructive Interparental Conflict**
  - $\beta = 0.360, p < 0.001$
  - $B = 0.135, SE = 0.036$

- **W1 Father Problem-Solving Behavior**
  - $\beta = 0.129, p = 0.029$
  - $B = 0.538, SE = 0.246$

- **W1 Mother Problem-Solving Behavior**
  - $\beta = 0.299, p < 0.001$
  - $B = 0.091, SE = 0.027$

- **W1-W2 LDS Child Inhibitory Control**
- **W1-W2 LDS Child Visual-Spatial Reasoning**
- **W1-W2 LDS Child Working Memory**

*LDS = latent difference score; only significant paths displayed*
Results

\[ \beta = .129, \ p = .029 \]
\[ B = .538, \ SE = .246 \]

\[ \beta = .098, \ p = .047 \]
\[ B = .607, \ SE = .306 \]

*LDS = latent difference score; only significant paths displayed*
Summary

• Overall conclusion: In line with Family Resilience Theory, spillover cascades stemming from constructive interparental conflict can have positive implications for parenting and children’s cognitive development.

• There was also specificity in outcomes:
  • Paternal problem-solving supports inhibitory control
  • Maternal problem-solving supports working memory
  • Visual-spatial reasoning is not impacted by constructive conflict or parenting
Implications

- Fostering constructive conflict in couples may have broader benefits for the family system
- Constructive interparental conflict has implications for children’s cognitive development, especially working memory and inhibitory control
- These developmental cascades are *specific* in nature (e.g., transmitted via parent problem-solving, not more general parenting behaviors such as sensitivity)
Future Directions

01 Expand outcomes we examine in relation to constructive conflict

02 Conduct translational intervention research that may foster constructive conflict in couples

03 Apply Family Resilience Theory/Strengths-Based Approaches to future interparental conflict research
References


THANK YOU

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Acknowledgements: Thank you to our funders (NICHD), the research assistants and student staff at Mt Hope Family Center, my mentors and co-authors, and the participating families