

Constructive and Destructive Conflict, Parenting, and Coparenting Alliance

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Abstract

We conducted secondary analysis using data from the Building Strong Families project. At baseline, the sample consisted of low-income unmarried couples that were expectant or new parents. We examined the link between destructive and constructive conflict and parenting (i.e., supportive and harsh) and coparenting alliance when children were 36-months old across three different family structures: married, cohabiting, and romantically uninvolved couples. We found: (1) no differences across family structures, (2) destructive conflict was related to decreased coparenting alliance, (3) constructive conflict was related to increased coparenting alliance; and (4) fathers' destructive conflict was associated with harsh parenting.

Literature Review

- **Destructive conflict** (hostility, verbal/physical aggression)
 - *In relation to parenting*: associated with less sensitive and more harsh parenting (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000)
 - *In relation to coparenting*: parents may undermine each other and disagree on parenting practices (Strurge-Apple et al., 2006)
- **Constructive conflict** (respect, affection)
 - *In relation to parenting*: predicted high parental sensitivity (McCoy et al., 2013)
 - *In relation to coparenting*: no published research

Theoretical Background

- **Family Systems Theory** – family members are interrelated and changes in one relationship potentially affect changes in other relationships (Cox & Paley, 2003)
 - *Spillover Hypothesis* – transfer of mood and behaviors from one relationship to another (Engfer, 1988)

Current Study

- **Hypothesis 1**: Destructive conflict is positively related to harsh parenting and negatively associated with supportive parenting and coparenting alliance, for mothers and fathers.
- **Hypothesis 2**: Constructive conflict is negatively related to harsh parenting and positively associated with supportive parenting and coparenting alliance, for mothers and fathers.
- **Hypothesis 3**: The effect of conflict is more pronounced in families in which parents live together (more opportunities for conflict).

Methods

Demographics of Participants

- *N* Married=620; *N* Cohabiting=984; *N* Romantically uninvolved=1,044
- Mothers/Fathers: 31%/26% White, 63%/68% African American, 24% Hispanic
- 1/3 of the sample had less than a high school degree
- W0 = baseline; W1 = W0 + 15 mos, W2 = W0 + 36 mos

W2 Constructive Conflict

- 8 items: "even when arguing, we keep a sense of humor"
- 1 = *often happen* to 4 = *never happen*
- Mothers, *as* = .90; Fathers, *as* = .87

W2 Destructive Conflict

- 9 items: "partner puts down my opinions or feelings"
- 1 = *often happen* to 4 = *never happen*
- Mothers, *as* = .89; Fathers, *as* = .87

W2 Parenting Behaviors

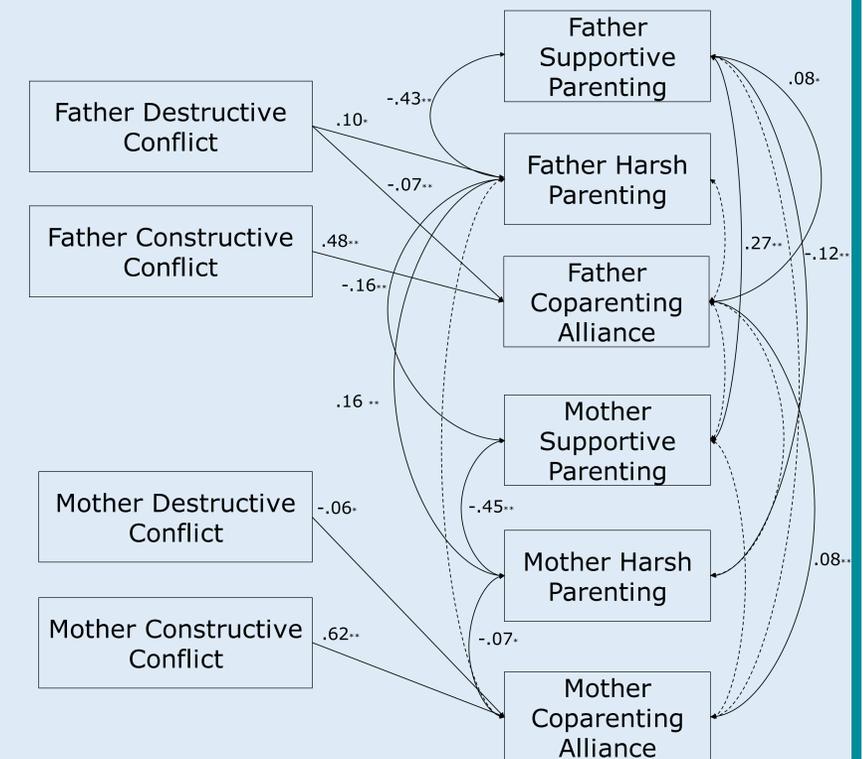
- Three-Bags task; 1 = very low to 7 = very high
- Mothers: supportive (*a* = .84), harsh (*a* = .86)
- Fathers: supportive (*a* = .68), harsh (*a* = .70)

W2 Coparenting alliance (Abidin & Brunner, 1995)

- 10 items: "my child's other parent and I are a good team"
- 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*
- Mothers, *a* = .95; Fathers, *a* = .94

Results

- Multi-group analysis in *Mplus* v.7.3; FIML used for missing data
- No differences by family structure
- Control variables: program site, intervention status, race, and self-reported depressive symptoms
- Destructive conflict was negatively correlated with constructive conflict for mothers ($b = -.64, p < .05$) and fathers ($b = -.56, p < .01$)
- Mothers' and fathers' constructive conflict ($b = .40, p < .01$) and destructive conflict ($b = .36, p < .01$) were positively correlated
- High scores on destructive conflict for mothers and fathers related to low coparenting alliance
- High scores on constructive conflict for mothers and fathers related to high levels of coparenting alliance
- Fathers' destructive conflict related to fathers' harsh parenting



** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Model fit: $\chi^2(42) = 88.95, p < .01$; CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03

Conclusions and Implications

- Support for the **spillover hypothesis** from conflict behaviors to coparenting alliance for mothers and fathers
- Support for the **spillover hypothesis** from destructive conflict to parenting behaviors, but only for fathers
 - Fathers are more vulnerable to interparental discord, phenomenon known as *fathering vulnerability hypothesis* (Cummings et al., 2010)
- No difference in conflict and (1) parenting and (2) coparenting behaviors across different family structures
 - Couples, regardless of their relationship status, behave similarly when it comes to parental responsibilities
 - Mean differences in conflict behaviors:
 - Married couples reported greater levels of constructive and lower levels of destructive conflict, followed by cohabiting, and then romantically uninvolved couples



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