

Children's Appraisals of Marital Conflict: Initial Investigations of the Cognitive-Contextual Framework

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GRYCH, JOHN H., and FINCHAM, FRANK D. *Children's Appraisals of Marital Conflict: Initial Investigations of the Cognitive-Contextual Framework*. CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1993, 64, 215-230. 2 studies examined children's appraisals of marital conflict. In Study 1, 45 11- and 12-year-olds reported cognitive, affective, and coping responses to conflicts varying in content and intensity. When conflict concerned the child, children reported more shame and fear of being drawn into the conflict and tended to endorse coping responses that involved direct intervention in it. More intense conflicts led to greater negative affect and perceived threat. In Study 2, 112 12-year-olds responded to conflicts that included a parent-blaming or child-blaming explanation or gave no explanation for the conflict. Explanations that absolved the children of blame for the conflict decreased their fear of becoming involved in the conflict and their desire to intervene in it. These findings show that appraisals of marital conflict are influenced by its content, intensity, and cause and suggest that the meaning of conflict to children is an important determinant of its impact.

Observing interparental conflict can be stressful for children (e.g., Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981; Lewis, Siegel, & Lewis, 1984) and has been linked to the development of adjustment problems (for reviews, see Emery, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990). However, exposure to parental discord is not necessarily harmful for children. Conflict occurs to some extent in all marriages, yet most children do not develop emotional or behavioral problems; in fact, observing their parents resolve disagreements may even be beneficial for children. For example, it may be instrumental in the development of their own conflict resolution skills. The task confronting researchers, therefore, is to better understand the conditions under which marital conflict is likely to be harmful for children and the process by which it may lead to adjustment problems.

In an effort to address these issues Grych and Fincham (1990) proposed that the stressfulness of interparental conflict is mediated by children's appraisals of the conflict, which are, in turn, shaped by characteristics of the conflict (e.g., intensity) and contextual factors (e.g., the emotional

climate of the family). Their cognitive-contextual framework emphasizes the importance of the meaning of the conflict to the child and is consonant with the view that children's interpretation of a stressor is critical for determining its impact on them (e.g., Compas, 1987; Rutter, 1983). However, despite evidence showing that children's cognitions influence their affect and behavior in other contexts (e.g., achievement settings, Dweck & Leggett, 1988; coping with illness, Tennen, Affleck, Allen, McGrade, & Ratzan, 1984), children's perceptions of marital conflict rarely have been investigated. Consequently, we conducted two studies to examine children's appraisals of interparental conflict.

In the cognitive-contextual framework the term "appraisal" is used to denote the process wherein a child evaluates the significance of an event for his or her well-being (see Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Significant events have been defined as those that are (a) relevant to the goals and strivings of the individual, (b) involve emotional communication from significant others, or (c) inherently produce

John Grych was supported in this research by a National Research Service Award from the National Institute of Mental Health. Frank Fincham was supported by grants from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, National Institute of Mental Health (MH 44078) and by a Faculty Scholar Award from the W.T. Grant Foundation. We thank Susan Englund and Reliford Sanders for their help in creating the vignettes used in this project and Michael Seid for his assistance in collecting the data. Address correspondence to Frank Fincham, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL 61820.

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pain or pleasure (Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989). Although it may not be intrinsically painful, interparental conflict typically involves emotional communication and can be quite relevant to children's desire to feel secure and to live in a harmonious, stable family environment. Thus, marital conflict has the potential to be significant to children.

Evaluating the significance of an episode of marital conflict involves both affect and cognition (Campos et al., 1989; Lazarus, 1991). Emotional responses serve to classify events as threatening or benign and to motivate behavior (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler, & Ridgeway, 1986). Cognition provides information regarding the specific parameters of the situation and the individual's capacity to respond to them. The relation between cognition and emotion has long been a subject of debate, but in the cognitive-contextual framework affect and cognition are viewed as interdependent: emotions are based on and modulated by cognitive input, and affect in turn colors perceptions and judgments (see also Bretherton et al., 1986). Together they shape the meaning of conflict for children.

The framework further specifies three types of cognitions likely to be most important in appraising marital conflict: the degree of *threat* perceived by the child, their *attributions* of cause and blame for the conflict, and their *coping efficacy*. Parental arguments may be threatening for many reasons. For example, children may fear that anger also will be directed at them, that one of their parents will be hurt, or even that their parents will divorce. To the extent that these types of fears are present, conflict will be significant for children. Judgments regarding why the conflict began and who is to blame for it also are important for appraising its meaning. In particular, beliefs about their role in causing a conflict are proposed to directly affect how relevant the disagreement is to children. Finally, children's perceived ability to cope with the conflict is hypothesized to shape its impact. If children feel unable to respond effectively, either by addressing the conflict itself or regulating their own emotional response, marital disagreements are likely to be more stressful.

It is hypothesized that children's conflict appraisals guide their coping responses. In particular, deciding whether or not to intervene in the conflict will be strongly in-

fluenced by children's interpretations. For example, children who believe they are at fault for causing a disagreement may then feel responsible for resolving the dispute, and thus attributions of self-blame are likely to lead to children's involvement in the conflict. Fearing for the safety of one parent also may promote intervention, whereas perceiving a high level of threat to the self may lead children to avoid intervening in a disagreement. Whether they involve themselves in a conflict also depends on children's coping efficacy, which in turn is shaped by prior experiences in the family.

Children's coping efforts have important implications. Although at times they may be successful in stopping their parents' disagreements, intervening directly in marital conflict is likely to be maladaptive because it can turn marital conflict into parent-child conflict and result in anger or aggression being directed at the child. This is particularly dangerous in families where physical abuse occurs. Further, even successful intervention may have maladaptive long-term consequences. Children's involvement in parental disagreements is likely to be maintained if it reduces overt conflict in the marriage even though it is ultimately deleterious for the child and the family (Emery, 1989). For example, the child may become involved in an alliance with one parent against the other, a process referred to as triangulation by family therapists (e.g., Minuchin, 1974). Alternatively, a child who acts out in order to distract attention from marital problems may become a scapegoat for the family, leaving the underlying marital conflict unresolved and reinforcing dysfunctional behavior in the child.

In view of the central role accorded appraisals in Grych and Fincham's (1990) analysis and the paucity of research on children's perceptions of marital conflict, the present studies investigated two fundamental propositions of the cognitive-contextual framework: (a) that children's appraisals are systematically related to specific dimensions of marital conflict and (b) that the cognitive elements of appraisal are associated with children's affective and coping responses. In Study 1, two of the dimensions proposed to be most important for shaping the meaning of conflict to children, content and intensity, were manipulated to examine their impact on children's cognitive, affective, and coping responses. This study is one of the first to investigate systematically children's re-

sponses to child- versus nonchild-related content and extends research on conflict intensity by assessing children's cognitions as well as their emotional reaction to conflict. Study 2 further explored children's appraisals by providing them an explanation for a child-related disagreement that either blamed or absolved the child of blame for the conflict. The perceived cause of the conflict is likely to have a significant impact on the child's understanding of it but has not been investigated in prior studies.

Study 1

Interparental conflict can take many forms, from calm discussion to physical violence, and it is unlikely that all expressions of conflict are equally stressful. Although conflict can be characterized along several dimensions, the cognitive-contextual framework hypothesizes that its intensity and content are particularly likely to influence children's appraisals.

Conflicts resolved through calm discussion may not even be attended to by children, whereas those marked by hostility or aggression may be an intense stressor. Research only recently has begun to examine specific characteristics of conflict but has already shown that more aggressive conflicts lead to greater anger, fear, and sadness in children than conflicts of lesser intensity (Cummings et al., 1981; Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, & El-Sheikh, 1989). Similarly, children exposed to physical aggression between their parents exhibit greater adjustment problems than those exposed only to verbal aggression, who in turn show poorer adjustment than children who do not experience interparental aggression (Fantuzzo et al., 1991). The intensity of conflict is proposed to affect children's cognitions as well as their emotional responses. Interparental hostility is likely to affect children's beliefs about its probable course and outcome, which in turn will influence their emotional and behavioral responses. For example, although children may be very motivated to end intense conflicts, their efficacy expectations for doing so may be quite low and as a result they are likely to feel helpless and to withdraw.

The impact of the content or topic of marital conflict on children's responses has received little empirical attention. Dunn and Munn (1985) found that even toddlers express different emotions depending on the

content of conflict, but they assessed only mother-sibling conflict. Although O'Brien, Margolin, John, and Krueger (1991) recently explored children's responses to marital conflicts that varied in topic, they did not report the main effects of content. Certain conflict content is likely to be more upsetting to children than others: in particular, child-related conflict is hypothesized to be distressing because of its apparent self-relevance for the child. Disagreements over child rearing or similar topics therefore may lead to greater self-blame and fear of becoming involved in the conflict. Further, if children believe that they are responsible for a parental disagreement they may also believe that it is their responsibility to resolve the conflict and so may be more likely to intervene in it.

The present study investigated the impact of conflict intensity and content on the three response domains outlined in the cognitive-contextual framework, namely, cognitions, affect, and coping responses. In regard to cognition, the three components of appraisal highlighted in the framework were assessed: perceived threat, attribution of blame, and coping efficacy. A variety of perceptions may make marital conflict threatening for children, but two that are particularly significant are the beliefs that the conflict will escalate and that the child will become involved in the conflict. Both intensity and content were hypothesized to affect children's perceptions of threat. It was predicted that high-intensity conflict would be viewed as more likely to escalate than low-intensity conflict, and that child-related conflict would be perceived as more likely to involve the child than nonchild-related conflict.

Attributions of cause and blame for marital conflict also are held to be important for shaping children's understanding and response to it. We hypothesized that children who blame themselves for conflict are likely to experience greater distress and shame, and that child-related content would be more likely to elicit self-blame than nonchild-related content. No specific hypotheses were made for the effect of conflict intensity on self-blame.

Intensity and content also were expected to influence children's coping efficacy, or the degree to which they think they can respond effectively to the conflict. Because low-intensity conflict should be less affectively arousing, we predicted that children would feel more able to cope with low-

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than with high-intensity conflict. We also hypothesized that children would report higher efficacy when the conflict was child related because of their ostensible role in causing the conflict. In other words, if children believe they did something to cause the disagreement, they would feel more able to do something to stop the disagreement.

Because appraisal involves affect as well as cognition, children's emotional responses to the conflicts were also assessed. We predicted that high-intensity conflicts would lead to increases in all types of negative affect, but that the child-related content would have a more specific effect on children's feelings of shame and sadness. Further, it was expected that children's affective and cognitive responses would be meaningfully related: high levels of perceived threat were predicted to be associated with higher levels of sadness, anger, worry, and helplessness, and self-blame was expected to be correlated with shame.

Finally, we assessed how children would respond behaviorally if the conflict occurred in their home. Since their coping efforts are one means by which children can become involved in their parents' arguments, it is particularly important to determine the dimensions of conflict and types of appraisals associated with attempts to intervene in the conflict. We predicted that children would be more likely to intervene in child-related than in nonchild-related conflict and would be more likely to avoid or withdraw from high intensity conflict as compared to low-intensity conflict. No predictions were made concerning the interaction of these two variables. Finally, we hypothesized that children who have high efficacy expectations are more likely to attempt to help the parents resolve the conflict, whereas children with low efficacy will be more likely to withdraw from the situation.

In these initial investigations of the cognitive-contextual framework we were interested in examining children's appraisals in the general population, and so the studies were conducted with children drawn from the community. The question of whether children from abusive families or those with clinical problems might differ systematically from other children in their reaction to marital conflict is of considerable theoretical and practical significance and will need to be addressed as this area of research progresses.

METHOD

Research Participants

Participants were 45 11–12-year-old children (26 boys, 19 girls) who took part in individual testing sessions in a research room at the University of Illinois. Fourth- and fifth-grade children were chosen as the sample because they have the cognitive sophistication to report reliably on their thoughts and feelings regarding marital conflict (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). All of the children were white and from middle-class, two-parent families. Children received \$10.00 for participating in the study. These children were drawn from a larger study and were selected on the basis of their perceptions of the frequency of conflict between their parents to include children experiencing a range of interparental conflict. Specifically, the frequency subscale from the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; Grych et al., 1992) and a single item assessing how many times a month their parents have disagreements were used to select children. On the basis of these measures, the sample was divided into three levels of conflict. Children were presumed to be from high-conflict families if their scores were in the top third of both measures, from medium-conflict families if their scores were in the middle third on both measures, and from low-conflict families if their scores were in the lower third of both measures. Parents of eligible children were contacted by phone and asked if their children could participate in the lab session. Approximately half of the parents in each conflict group consented. Written consent was then obtained from both the parents and the children. Fifteen children from each conflict group took part in Study 1.

Marital Conflict Stimuli

Owing to the ethical problems involved in exposing children to actual marital conflict, an analog situation was created similar to that used in previous research. Children listened to audiotapes of a man and a woman involved in disagreements about various topics. They were informed that the individuals on the tape were married and were the parents of a child about their age. They were encouraged to use their imagination to picture the disagreements taking place between their parents. Audiotapes were used because they allowed the conflicts to be standardized across children and were chosen over videotape because they lack concrete visual cues pertaining to the identity

of the individuals in the interaction, thereby making it easier for children to imagine that the conflicts involve their parents. Clearly, these tapes are not as engaging or meaningful as actual conflict between their parents.

The intensity of conflict may be determined by a number of factors, including the level of negative affect expressed and the occurrence of physical aggression. For the conflict vignettes intensity was manipulated primarily through tone of voice and the degree of anger expressed by parents. In the low-intensity conflicts the parents disagreed but remained civil and respectful toward each other. There was little hostility, and each parent made statements indicating that they understood the others' point of view. In contrast, for high-intensity conflicts the parents' voices were raised and the tone of voice used was quite angry. The parents made accusatory and defensive remarks and showed little empathy. The content of the conflicts was varied by changing the topic of each argument. For child-related conflicts the topic of the disagreement involved the child (e.g., what time she or he would do homework, which parent would take him or her to an activity) whereas for nonchild-related conflicts the topic concerned something unrelated to the child (e.g., finances, husband's work schedule). However, even when the topic concerned the child the arguments clearly reflected conflict over marital issues (e.g., lack of communication; see Table 1 for samples from the vignettes).

The arguments used as stimuli were first tested in a pilot study with 44 fourth- and fifth-grade children at a different school to assure that the two high-intensity conflicts were perceived as equally intense and the two low-intensity conflicts were seen as significantly and equally less intense. Eight taped segments portraying conflict designed to be either high or low in intensity and child or nonchild related in content were played to the children in groups at their school. They indicated how angry the parents sounded during each segment, and the means of the two high-intensity, child-related tapes were compared to those of the two high-intensity, nonchild-related tapes. The tapes chosen for use in the study were those that differed in content but not in perceived parental anger. The same procedure was used to choose two low-intensity tapes. The low- and high-intensity tapes thus differed significantly in perceived parental anger.

Procedure

Children participated in individual sessions. All children heard five tape segments that were each slightly over 1 min long. Four of the stimuli were conflictual, and one was a pleasant interaction. The positive interaction was included to break up the string of negative interactions and will not be included in the discussion of the results. To control for any order effects, half the children heard the taped vignettes in one order (low intensity/nonchild content, high intensity/child content, pleasant interaction, low intensity/child content, and high intensity/nonchild content), and the other half heard the tapes in the reverse order. After each vignette, children answered questions about their affective response, cognitions, and coping strategy. Upon completion of the taped segments an effort was made to leave the children feeling positive. They were interviewed about a happy event their family had shared and then received a coupon for a free ice cream cone as an added bonus for their participation in the study.

Measures

Affect.—Children indicated how they would feel if each conflict occurred in their home by rating five emotions (mad, sad, worried, ashamed, and helpless) on bipolar scales. These scales were straight lines anchored on either side by the words "not at all" and "very much" and children indicated the degree that they would feel each emotion by putting a mark on the line at the appropriate place. The distance from the end of the line to the mark was then measured in centimeters and was used as the dependent variable.

Cognition.—Several types of cognitions were assessed. Perceived threat was assessed by inquiring about two types of beliefs: that the conflict would escalate and that the child would be drawn into the conflict. Children responded to each statement by checking "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," or "strongly agree." Coefficient alpha for the four items on the Escalation scale was .86. A sample item from this scale is "The disagreement will get worse." Three items composed the Child Involvement scale, which demonstrated a coefficient alpha of .73. An item from this scale is "I would probably have to take sides." Children also rated the degree to which the conflict was the child's fault (Self-Blame). Coping efficacy was assessed with two items. After asking children how they would re-

TABLE 1
EXCERPTS FROM CONFLICT VIGNETTES

High intensity, nonchild related:

- M: I think that it's common courtesy to call when you're going to be late. I shouldn't have to check up on you.
 D: I hardly think I need checking up on.
 M: Maybe you do and maybe you don't.
 D: What's that supposed to mean?
 M: All I'm saying is that you've been gone a lot. It would be nice to spend a little more time with me.
 D: Don't you think I want to? I work my fingers to the bone for you!
 M: You sure have a funny way of showing that you care.
 D: Look. I'm doing my best to bring money into this house. The least you could do is be a little understanding.
 M: I think I'm more than a little understanding. The problem is that you'd rather spend time at work than at home.
 D: Maybe I have a little more peace of mind at work.
 M: Or maybe work's just more important than me.
 D: I don't need to hear this nonsense.
 M: Well you're going to listen! What's happened to you anyway? You used to listen to me—now you act like you don't care!
 D: And you used to be a lot easier to get along with. Now all you do is complain about things!

Low intensity, child related:

- D: Are you going to be able to take our child to the meeting this weekend?
 M: Well, I've got a lot of things planned that day. Can't you do it?
 D: Not really. I'm not going to have much free time. Anyway, I thought you were going to do it.
 M: Why would you think that? I never said I would.
 D: Sure you did.
 M: When? I don't remember saying anything about it. I think you just assume that I'll be available all the time.
 D: I do not. I thought we decided that you would drive on the weekends.
 M: Maybe you decided that but I sure didn't.
 D: You're just trying to back out of doing this.
 M: That's crazy. It seems like every time that *you* want something done you think that *we* decided it. And sometimes you don't even ask me.
 D: I don't think that's true. We talked about this one night last week. I said that I was going to be busy this weekend.
 M: And that means that I should automatically be available to drive? What about my plans?
 D: I didn't know you had plans.
 M: That's because you didn't listen when I told you.
 D: I really don't remember you telling me anything.
 M: Alright. So neither of us heard the other one. What are we going to do about the driving?
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spond if each conflict occurred between their parents, they rated the extent to which their response would "help make you feel better" (emotion-focused coping) and "help the parents and their disagreement" (problem-focused coping). Children responded to the blame and coping efficacy items by marking a straight line as above.

Coping.—Anticipated coping responses were assessed with open-ended questions. Children were asked what they would do if the disagreement occurred between their

parents, and their first response was recorded. Their first response was coded into one of nine a priori categories: Intervene (e.g., "I'd tell them to stop fighting"), Be Obedient (e.g., "I'd do what they told me to do"), Side with One Parent (e.g., "I'd say I agree with my Mom"), Address the Source of the Conflict (e.g., "I'd do my homework right after school from now on"), Physical Withdrawal (e.g., "I'd go up to my room"), Distract Self (e.g., "I'd start watching TV"), Seek Support (e.g., "I'd go talk to my sister"), Emote (e.g., "I'd start crying"), and Ig-

TABLE 2
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF AFFECTIVE AND COGNITIVE VARIABLES ASSESSED IN STUDY 1

	INTENSITY				CONTENT				EFFECTS
	Low		High		Child		Nonchild		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Affect:									
Mad.....	25.38	24.12	39.36	25.68	33.34	25.44	31.40	24.37	I
Sad.....	29.18	24.99	39.64	25.47	34.97	25.75	33.85	24.72	I
Worried.....	31.59	26.16	49.35	24.47	41.47	25.31	39.48	25.32	I
Ashamed.....	23.77	23.61	33.83	26.73	32.30	25.61	25.31	24.73	I, C
Helpless.....	36.14	28.37	42.64	29.79	37.67	28.90	41.12	29.26	I, I × C
Cognition:									
Escalate.....	12.60	2.19	12.02	2.29	12.29	2.22	12.33	2.25	I
Child involvement.....	9.48	1.70	9.00	1.91	8.92	1.98	9.56	1.63	I, C
Child fault.....	7.17	10.72	12.09	13.94	15.76	16.97	3.50	7.69	I, C
Feel better.....	47.97	17.58	44.68	19.82	46.34	17.77	46.35	19.63	...
Help end.....	45.14	19.88	43.33	18.45	47.52	17.96	40.96	20.37	C

NOTE.—Higher scores on child involvement and escalation indicate lower levels of threat.

nore (“I’d just stay out of it”). Responses that did not fall into one of these categories were coded as “Other.”

RESULTS

Effects of Intensity and Content on Children's Responses

Children's affective and cognitive responses were initially analyzed in 2 (high vs. low intensity) × 2 (child vs. nonchild content) × 2 (gender) × 3 (conflict group) MANOVAs. The first two factors were repeated measures, and the latter two were between-subjects factors. No significant main effects or interactions were obtained for either gender or conflict group on the affective or cognitive responses. Consequently, gender and conflict group were not included in subsequent analyses. Table 2 lists the means for the affective and cognitive variables across the intensity and content conditions and indicates which effects were significant.

Affect.—The hypothesis that high-intensity conflicts lead to greater negative affect than low-intensity conflicts was examined with MANOVA using the five affect scales as dependent variables. This analysis revealed a significant effect of intensity, $F(5, 39) = 11.44, p < .01$. Subsequent univariate analyses examining each emotion were conducted. These analyses indicated that high-intensity conflicts led to greater anger, $F(1, 42) = 21.55, p < .01$, sadness, $F(1, 42) = 15.97, p < .01$, worry, $F(1, 42) = 54.18, p < .01$, shame, $F(1, 42) = 24.33, p < .01$, and

helplessness, $F(1, 42) = 5.54, p < .05$. However, this final result is qualified by a significant interaction with content, $F(1, 42) = 4.78, p < .05$. The nature of this interaction was explored with paired t tests using a Bonferroni-corrected significance level of .025. Children's reports of helplessness did not differ for low- ($M = 37.93$; $SD = 28.45$) and high-intensity ($M = 37.40$; $SD = 29.35$) child-related conflict, $t(44) = .13, p > .025$; however, they reported feeling significantly more helpless when nonchild-related conflicts were high ($M = 47.89$; $SD = 30.23$) rather than low ($M = 34.36$; $SD = 28.29$) in intensity, $t(44) = 2.35, p < .025$.

The main effect for content approached significance, $F(5, 39) = 2.11, p < .10$. As regards specific affects, child-related content led to greater shame than nonchild-related content, $F(1, 42) = 8.59, p < .01$. No interaction effects were obtained.

Cognition.—To test the hypotheses that child-related conflicts are associated with higher levels of threat and self-blame than nonchild-related conflicts and that high-intensity conflicts lead to greater threat and lower coping efficacy, a MANOVA first was conducted on the five cognitive variables. This analysis indicated that both intensity, $F(5, 35) = 4.14, p < .01$, and content, $F(5, 35) = 7.23, p < .01$, influenced children's cognitive responses. Univariate ANOVAs showed that one measure of threat, the expectation that the conflict would escalate, was greater for high- than low-intensity con-

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flict, $F(1, 40) = 8.61, p < .01$, but was not related to content. However, on the second threat measure children reported greater fear of becoming involved in the conflict both when conflict was high in intensity, $F(1, 42) = 11.92, p < .01$, and when the content concerned the child, $F(1, 42) = 8.09, p < .01$. Similarly, the extent to which the conflict was perceived as the child's fault was greater when conflict was intense, $F(1, 43) = 10.45, p < .01$, and child related $F(1, 43) = 37.73, p < .01$. In addition, the interaction of content and intensity was marginally significant for children's self-blame, $F(1, 43) = 3.70, p < .10$. Examination of the means shows that self-blame is higher for child-related conflict across levels of intensity, but that it is particularly high when conflict is high in intensity and child related.

Turning to children's judgments of coping efficacy, child-related content led to greater confidence that the child could help the parents resolve their conflict than did nonchild-related content, $F(1, 43) = 7.68, p < .01$. The interaction of content and intensity was marginally significant, $F(1, 43) = 2.88, p < .10$; efficacy was higher when conflict was child related and low in intensity than when conflict was child related and high in intensity. In contrast, intensity did not affect efficacy judgments for nonchild-related content. The second measure of coping efficacy, the perception that children could do something to make themselves feel better, was not influenced by either intensity or content.

Coping response.—Several of the coping categories received few responses, and therefore the nine a priori categories were collapsed into four superordinate categories: "Direct Intervention" included the Intervene and Side with One Parent categories and involved the child interrupting the conflict in some way (e.g., "Tell them to stop fighting"); "Indirect Intervention" included the Be Obedient and Address the Source of the Conflict categories and consisted of attempts to resolve the cause of the conflict without interrupting the parents' disagreement (e.g., "I'd do my homework after dinner every day"); "Withdrawal" consisted of the Physical Withdrawal and Seek Support categories and involved the child leaving the situation (e.g., "I'd go up to my room"); "Do Nothing" included the Distract Myself and Ignore categories and involved indicating that the child would not react to the conflict in any way (e.g., "I'd just stay out of it").

One category, "Emote" received extremely few responses and did not fit conceptually into one of the superordinate categories; therefore it was dropped from further analyses. Ninety-nine percent of all responses were classifiable into one of the four categories. To establish the reliability of the coding system, one-third of the responses were coded by two raters. Kappa calculated for these data was .95.

The hypotheses that children would endorse intervention as a coping response more often for child- than nonchild-related conflict and that greater withdrawal would occur when conflict is high versus low in intensity were examined. Cochran's Test (Cochran, 1950) was used because it is designed for analyzing data involving repeated measures where the dependent variable can take on only one of two values. For each coping category children's responses in each condition were coded 1 if they used the particular strategy and 0 if they did not. Cochran's Q statistic indicates whether there are significant differences across conditions in the use of each coping response. This statistic is distributed approximately as chi-square for relatively large sample sizes when the null hypothesis (no differences across conditions) is true. Results of these analyses indicated that Direct Intervention (25 responses compared to 10, 5, and 4 responses in the Do Nothing, Withdraw, and Indirect Intervention categories, respectively) was most frequently endorsed when conflict was child related and low in intensity, $\chi^2(3) = 22.01, p < .01$. Indirect Intervention (22 responses compared to 9, 8, and 5 responses in the Do Nothing, Direct Intervention, and Withdraw categories, respectively) was the most common response for conflicts that were child related and high in intensity, $\chi^2(3) = 44.00, p < .01$. For nonchild-related conflicts, Do Nothing was most frequently endorsed regardless of intensity, $\chi^2(3) = 22.13, p < .01$. For low-intensity conflicts, Do Nothing was endorsed by 25 children, Direct Intervention by 13, Withdrawal by 5, and Indirect Intervention by 4. For high-intensity conflicts, the corresponding numbers were 22, 10, 8, and 4. Because only three of the four tests of coping responses are independent, results pertaining to "Withdrawal" will not be reported. However, children's endorsement of withdrawal as a coping strategy was relatively infrequent for each vignette and was distributed roughly equally across conditions (low-intensity child = 5, low-intensity nonchild

TABLE 3
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN COGNITIVE VARIABLES AND AFFECTIVE, COPING VARIABLES

	THREAT			COPING EFFICACY	
	Child Involvement	Escalate	Child Fault	Help Resolve	Feel better
Affect:					
Distress .....	.60	.30*	.25*	.09	.08
Helpless .....	.48*	.29*	.18	.15	-.19
Ashamed .....	.63*	.32*	.39*	.00	.02
Coping:					
Direct .....	.19	.01	.34*	-.13	.26 ⁺
Indirect .....	.33*	.23 ⁺	-.20 ⁺	.23 ⁺	-.16
Withdrawal	-.20	-.24 ⁺	-.32*	.05	-.17
Do Nothing .....	.07	.05	.09	.00	.01

⁺ $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

= 5, high-intensity child = 5, and high-intensity nonchild = 8).

Relations among Affective, Cognitive, and Coping Responses

Hypotheses concerning relations among the cognitive, affective, and coping responses were tested by computing correlations among these variables. Responses across the four vignettes were combined to provide more stable estimates of the relations between them. Children's ratings of anger, sadness, and worry were significantly correlated, and results from ANOVAs on each were the same; thus it is likely that children's ratings of these items represent a general negative affective response rather than distinct qualities of emotion, and for the analyses presented below these variables were combined to form an overall measure of negative affect labeled "distress." Consistent with the MANOVA results, correlations showed no significant relations between children's gender and their responses to the vignettes, and so data from boys and girls were combined.

Table 3 shows that the first hypothesis, that perceived threat would be linked to children's affect, was confirmed. Both measures of threat, Escalation and Child Involvement, were significantly related to distress, shame, and helplessness. The prediction that self-blame for conflict would be significantly related to level of distress and shame also was confirmed. However, counter to prediction, neither measure of coping efficacy was related to children's affective responses.

Relations between children's perception of the conflicts and their coping

responses also were examined. Table 3 shows that the two threat measures showed a similar pattern. Children who believed the conflict would escalate and/or involve them tended to choose indirect intervention as a coping strategy. That is, they would try to help resolve the conflict without becoming involved in it directly. In addition, children who feared greater escalation tended to be less likely to withdraw. Perceiving the child as being at fault for the conflict was associated with greater endorsement of direct intervention and less frequent endorsement of withdrawal as a coping strategy. Finally, children who felt that they could help the parents resolve their disagreement tended to use indirect intervention as a coping strategy, and those indicating that they could do something to make themselves feel better tended to endorse direct means.

Study 2

Study 1 indicated that the content of conflict is an important factor in understanding its impact on children. Child-related conflict may be distressing for children primarily because it implies that they are at fault for causing the conflict and may be drawn into it. Two findings in particular suggest that children felt responsible for child-related conflict: self-blame was higher when conflicts were child-related, and they felt more willing and able to help resolve the disagreement. These findings raise the question of whether children's inferences and consequent responses to marital conflict could be altered by providing explicit information about the cause of the conflict. This issue has not been addressed in prior research, and we therefore conducted a second

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study to examine whether the reason for interparental conflict affects children's responses.

Parents are likely to differ on questions of discipline and other aspects of child rearing from time to time, and it is not always possible to keep children unaware of these disagreements. In this study we investigated whether providing an explanation for the conflict that absolves the child of blame attenuates the negative effects documented in Study 1. Children listened to a conflict vignette that involved a disagreement between two parents over how to handle a difficulty that their child had in school. At the end of the disagreement an explanation was added: the parents either explicitly blamed the child for causing the conflict or explicitly absolved the child of fault and instead attributed the conflict to the parent's own problems. Thus, the explanation provided either supported or contradicted the inference that the child was responsible for the conflict.

This study examines more directly the conclusion drawn from Study 1 that the meaning of conflict, in particular, whether it is the child's fault, is important in shaping children's responses to it. More specifically, we investigated whether children's feelings of guilt, self-blame, fear of involvement, and desire to intervene in the conflict could be reduced when parents disagree about a child-related issue. If children's attributions of blame are important, then the explanation given for the conflict should override the effect of the content of the conflict. However, if attributions are irrelevant, then there should be no difference in children's responses to conflicts which differ only in the reason given for their occurrence.

The same set of response variables used in Study 1 were assessed in Study 2. We predicted that, compared to child-blaming explanations, explanations that absolved children of blame would result in decreased shame, fear of child involvement, and use of intervention as a coping strategy.

METHOD

Research Participants

Study 2 was conducted with 112 fifth-grade children (mean age = 135.5 months; SD = 5.4) from predominantly white (over 90%), middle-class families. Fifty-three boys and 59 girls took part. All of the children in six fifth-grade classes at an elementary school were invited to participate in the

study, and 89.6% received parental consent to do so.

Marital Conflict Stimuli

The taped conflicts used in Study 2 had two parts: a conflict stem and an explanation provided by the parents. The stem consisted of an argument lasting approximately 1 min between two parents concerning their child, "Chris." All of the children heard a conflict that was child-related in content. Specifically, the parents disagreed about how to handle some "trouble" Chris was having at school, the nature of which was purposefully vague so that most children might be able to relate to the content of the discussion. As in Study 1, the conflicts were either low or high in intensity. For Study 2, additional segments were recorded in which the parents on the tape notice that their child is observing their disagreement and provide an explanation to the child for the conflict. One explanation explicitly blames the child for causing the disagreement, stating, "If you would behave we wouldn't get into arguments." The second explanation absolves the child of blame and places it on the parents, saying, "This is something between your mother and me; it's not your fault we disagree." The tapes were edited so that the low- and high-intensity stems were matched with each explanation. In addition, two groups of children heard only the conflict stems without an explanation to provide a comparison for the two explanations. Thus, there were a total of six conditions (high vs. low intensity; child blaming, parent blaming, or no explanation).

Procedure

Sessions were conducted with small groups of 6–10 children in classrooms at their school. Children listened to one audiotaped conflict and were asked to imagine how they would respond if they were Chris and heard their parents having the same argument. In order to increase identification with the child, boys' response forms informed them that Chris was a boy and girls' that Chris was a girl. After listening to the disagreement children responded to questions concerning their affective, cognitive, and coping responses to the conflict.

Measures

The dependent variables in Study 2 were very similar to those in Study 1. Affect was assessed by asking children to indicate how "mad," "sad," "worried," "ashamed," and "helpless" they would feel if they were

TABLE 4
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS (in Parentheses) OF
AFFECTIVE AND COGNITIVE VARIABLES ASSESSED IN STUDY 2

	EXPLANATION		No EXPLANATION
	Child	Parent	
Affect:			
Mad.....	55.73 ^a (21.02)	40.50 ^b (19.52)	34.97 ^b (17.48)
Sad.....	66.03 ^a (16.61)	53.28 ^b (19.56)	42.62 ^b (25.16)
Worried.....	57.14 (24.28)	55.64 (21.05)	54.51 (24.04)
Helpless.....	51.51 (26.72)	43.75 (22.76)	44.59 (25.97)
Ashamed.....	67.22 ^a (19.69)	50.22 ^b (23.25)	51.49 ^b (26.90)
Cognition:			
Child involvement.....	6.73 ^b (1.43)	8.03 ^a (1.52)	7.00 ^b (1.58)
Escalation.....	9.51 (2.21)	10.17 (2.13)	9.71 (1.83)
Self-blame.....	6.14 ^a (1.15)	5.24 ^b (1.33)	5.74 ^{a,b} (1.52)
Help end.....	2.95 ^a (.71)	2.33 ^b (.93)	2.80 ^a (.58)
Feel better.....	2.94 (.83)	2.92 (.60)	2.91 (.66)

NOTE.—Means in same row that have different superscripts differ at the .05 level. Higher scores on child involvement and escalation indicate lower levels of threat.

in Chris's place. They indicated the extent to which they would feel each emotion by making a mark on a straight line anchored at either end by "not at all" and "really."

Cognitions again were examined by assessing perceived threat, attribution of blame, and coping efficacy. Perceptions of threat were assessed by asking children to report on their beliefs that the conflict would escalate and that they would be drawn into the conflict. As in Study 1, children checked either "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree" in response to a series of statements reflecting each belief. The items on the Child Involvement scale were identical to those in Study 1, but a minor change was made in one of the items on the Escalation scale. The item "The disagreement will get worse" was reworded to be more specific and read, "The parents will get madder at each other." In addition, in Study 1 coping efficacy and blame were assessed by having children rate bipolar scales similar to those for rating affect, but in Study 2 the format for these items was changed to be identical to the threat items.

Assessment of children's coping responses also followed the format used in Study 1. Children were asked what they thought Chris should do in response to the conflict, and their answers were classified into the four categories (Direct Intervention, Indirect Intervention, Do Nothing, and Withdrawal) derived in Study 1.

RESULTS

Initial 2 (gender) \times 2 (intensity) \times 3 (explanation) MANOVAs on the cognitive and affective variables showed that there were no main or interaction effects involving gender. This variable therefore was not included in the MANOVAs reported below. Table 4 lists the means of variables assessed in Study 2.

Affect.—A two-way MANOVA using the five affective ratings as dependent variables revealed a significant main effect of explanation, $F(12, 192) = 3.61, p < .01$. The ANOVA analyses showed that this effect occurred for anger ($F = 13.5, p < .01$), sadness ($F = 11.74, p < .01$), and shame ($F = 5.98,$

TABLE 5
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE VARIABLES

AFFECT	THREAT			COPING EFFICACY	
	Child Involvement	Escalate	Child Fault	Help Resolve	Feel Better
Distress.....	.19*	.34*	.22*	.04	.06
Helpless.....	.22*	.25*	.21*	.06	.01
Ashamed.....	.08	.16 ⁺	.33*	.04	.12

⁺ $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

$p < .01$). These main effects were further analyzed using Tukey's HSD test. Explanations that blamed the child for the conflict led to greater anger, sadness, and shame than either parent-blaming explanations or no explanation, which did not differ from each other.

Although the overall multivariate F test revealed a significant main effect for intensity, $F(6, 95) = 2.22$, $p < .05$, intensity did not have significant effects on particular affects. However, children tended to give higher ratings of anger, $F(1, 97) = 3.67$, $p < .07$, helplessness, $F(1, 97) = 3.80$, $p < .06$, and shame, $F(1, 97) = 3.00$, $p < .09$, in the high-intensity conflict condition.

Cognition.—The two-way MANOVA for the cognitive variables yielded only a main effect for explanation, $F(10, 186) = 3.42$, $p < .001$. Subsequent ANOVAs showed that this effect occurred for ratings of being drawn into the conflict, $F(2, 98) = 10.69$, $p < .001$, judgments of the extent to which Chris is to blame for the disagreement, $F(2, 98) = 3.61$, $p < .05$, and beliefs about being able to help end the conflict, $F(2, 98) = 5.14$, $p < .01$. These effects were examined further using Tukey's HSD test. When a parent-blaming explanation was given, children were less concerned about being drawn into the conflict and felt less able to help end the conflict than in the child-blaming or no explanation conditions, which did not differ from each other. Similarly, less child blame occurred in the parent-blaming condition than in the child-blaming condition, but neither condition differed significantly from the no explanation condition.

Coping.—Loglinear analysis revealed that the best fitting model for the coping responses included only a main effect of explanation, $\chi^2(12) = 10.18$, $p = .60$. The simple effect of explanation was marginally significant ($p < .07$). Compared to the child blam-

ing and no explanation conditions, children in the parent-blaming condition were less likely to endorse direct (parent blaming = 9, child blaming = 18, no explanation = 14) and indirect forms of intervention (parent blaming = 7, child blaming = 11, no explanation = 10) and more likely to "do nothing" (parent blaming = 12, child blaming = 4, no explanation = 6) or withdraw (parent blaming = 6, child blaming = 2, no explanation = 3). Overall, children's responses when no explanation was given were similar to those to the child-blaming explanation.

Relations among Affective and Cognitive Responses

As in Study 1, correlations were computed between cognitive and affective variables. These analyses revealed a similar pattern of correlations between children's affective responses and their perceptions of threat, coping efficacy, and blame. Table 5 shows that perceptions of being drawn into the conflict and of conflict escalation were related to both distress and feelings of helplessness. However, these cognitive variables were not significantly correlated with ratings of shame. As in Study 1, however, blame was positively related to shame and distress. Finally, consistent with the results from Study 1, neither rating of coping efficacy was related to the affective variables.

Discussion

Understanding the effect of marital conflict on children requires examination of the conditions which increase or decrease its stressfulness and of the processes that mediate its impact. Guided by Grych and Fincham's (1990) cognitive-contextual framework, the present studies therefore investigated children's appraisals of different types of marital conflict. Discussion of the findings focuses on three main issues: (a) the effects of conflict intensity, content, and explanations on children's appraisals, (b) the

association between cognitive and affective aspects of appraisals, and (c) the relations between conflict characteristics and appraisals and children's coping strategies.

Previous studies investigating the characteristics of conflict most salient to children have documented the effects of its intensity (e.g., Cummings et al., 1981, 1989) and resolution (Cummings et al., 1989; Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991) on children's emotional and behavioral responses. Study 1 extends these findings in two ways. First, it showed that, in addition to creating greater negative affect, conflict characterized by anger and hostility leads to greater self-blame and increases fears that the conflict will escalate and involve the child. Second, we found that, unlike intensity, which had a generalized negative effect on children's affect and cognitions, the content of conflict affected only certain types of appraisals. Compared to conflict concerning topics unrelated to the child, child-related conflicts led to greater fear of the child being drawn into the conflict, shame, and self-blame. Content was not related to feelings of anger, sadness, or worry. Child-related conflict thus affected those variables most closely related to the self and self-evaluation, which suggests that one reason child-related conflict is stressful for children is because it implies some wrongdoing on their part; consequently, children feel more to blame and are more ashamed, and fear becoming directly involved in the conflict.

One implication of Study 1 is that variations in the content and intensity of marital conflict alter the meaning of conflict for children, and their evaluations of threat and blame inform them about the likely course and consequences of the disagreement and suggest particular ways of responding. Study 2 further examined the meaning of conflict by having parents provide a reason for the disagreement. Even though the content of the conflicts concerned the child, hearing an explanation that absolved the child of fault reduced perceptions that the child was to blame, that they would be drawn into the conflict, that they would be able to help resolve the disagreement, and the tendency to endorse intervention as a coping strategy. When blame was attributed to the child, children reported feeling more sad, angry, and ashamed, but absolving the child of blame did not reduce these feelings compared to hearing no explanation. This study indicates that the nature of a conflict episode alone does not determine children's re-

sponses; why a conflict is occurring also is important. The meaning of the conflict to the child—in this case, whether they bear responsibility for it—had a significant effect on their responses.

Although these data do not address the causal relation between marital conflict and child adjustment, they suggest that one process by which conflict may lead to child problems is by eliciting self-derogating cognitions and feelings of threat that children may not be able to regulate effectively. If intense and/or child-related conflict is frequent or if children tend to ruminate about the conflict after it has ended, making these types of appraisals may lead to the development of anxiety or depression. While speculative, such processes are consistent with a recent study suggesting that general appraisals of threat and blame may mediate the association between exposure to marital conflict and internalizing problems (Grych et al., 1992). Cummings and Davies (in press) similarly argue that young children's regulation of responses to anger between adults lays the foundation for their developmental trajectory, and it appears that this domain of inquiry is likely to prove particularly fruitful for understanding developmental psychopathology.

A second issue addressed in these studies is the relation between children's perceptions of conflict and their affective responses. The cognitive-contextual framework proposes that appraisal is both cognitive and affective in nature and thus perceptions of threat, self-blame, and coping efficacy should correlate with negative affect. Accordingly, both perceptions of threat and of blame were found to correlate with children's affective responses to conflict. The pattern of correlations was similar in the two studies, but their magnitude generally was smaller in Study 2. This may be attributable to the use of only one vignette in Study 2; in comparison, combining responses across four vignettes in Study 1 provided a more stable estimate of the relations between variables. The fact that Study 2 inquired about a third person might also have affected the association between cognition and affect. Contrary to prediction, coping efficacy was not related to children's affective responses. It is possible that the artificial nature of the setting reduced variance in children's responses to the coping efficacy items; most children indicated a high level of confidence in their ability to cope that may not repre-

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sent their efficacy expectations when confronted with actual marital conflicts.

These studies also examined the strategies that children generated for coping with conflict. Factors that predict children's coping strategies are of particular interest because they are likely to be an important determinant of whether children become involved in their parents' conflicts. Our findings suggest that certain types of appraisals and characteristics of conflict, especially its content, increase the probability that children will get drawn into their parents' disagreements. Children reported feeling more able to help resolve the conflict and more willing to intervene when the conflict was child related; however, whether they actively involve themselves in the conflict or intervene indirectly appears to depend on the degree of anger expressed by parents and on children's perceptions of the conflict. When conflict is low in intensity children feel less helpless and may tend to break into the conflict. Children who feel they are to blame for the conflict (which is more common when conflicts are child related) also are more likely to intervene directly. In contrast, when child-related conflict is high in intensity and children fear being drawn into it they may be more likely to try to address the cause of the conflict without interrupting the parents.

Efforts to intervene indirectly reflect a more adaptive form of problem-focused coping than direct intervention because they are less likely to turn marital conflict into parent-child conflict. However, the impact of such efforts is likely to depend on both the child's specific strategy and the parents' reaction to it. Unlike Cummings et al. (1989), who found that girls proposed more direct interventions for videotaped conflict vignettes than did boys, we did not find gender differences in children's coping responses. Our finding is consistent with Vuchinich, Emery, and Cassidy's (1988) report that girls were more likely to get involved in all kinds of family conflict except marital conflict.

One unexpected null finding concerns the absence of significant differences between the responses of children selected to represent different levels of exposure to marital conflict. Appraisals are proposed to be influenced by contextual variables, such as prior experience with conflict, and other studies indicate that the degree to which children have been exposed to interparental aggression does affect how they re-

spond to specific conflict episodes (Cummings et al., 1981; O'Brien et al., 1991). It is plausible that the nature of our sample may have reduced any such effect. Parents of the children in Study 1 completed the Short Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) as part of a larger study, and analysis of this measure showed that very few met the standard criteria for marital distress. Consequently, the range of marital conflict may have been restricted, which would attenuate the relationship between exposure to conflict and children's responses.

Although these studies provide interesting findings regarding children's perceptions of and responses to conflict, they also have a number of limitations. As noted earlier, audiotaped vignettes of conflict between actors are less engaging and arousing than actual marital conflict. This may restrict the generalizability of the findings and also may have attenuated relations between variables. Even though the external validity of analog studies such as these is open to question, their value lies in testing theory and in documenting relations between variables that would be difficult to assess in natural settings (see Mook, 1983). Nevertheless, the findings from analog studies need to be complemented by data on children's responses to actual conflict between their parents. Given ethical and practical constraints in exposing children to conflict in experimental studies, naturalistic observation is likely to be the most promising approach for addressing this issue.

A second limitation is that children's cognitive, affective, and coping responses were all assessed via self-report. Whereas self-report may be useful for assessing cognition, including additional indices of affect and coping (e.g., physiological, behavioral) would provide more complete assessment of these constructs. Use of such measures is also important to establish patterns across response domains and thereby to integrate the present findings with the response styles identified in prior research on children's reactions to conflict between adults (see Cummings & Davies, in press). Third, the use of a single vignette in each experimental condition provides a limited assessment of the effects of intensity, content, and explanations on children, and greater confidence in the present findings will be gained by investigating these factors in the context of multiple conflict episodes. Finally, the present data do not speak to the stability of appraisals across time. Establishing the stabil-

ity of responses identified in experimental studies such as the present ones is critical to understanding the hypothesized mediational role of children's immediate responses to conflict in the relation between marital conflict and child adjustment.

Despite these limitations, the present research is a promising foray into investigating children's appraisals of conflict and identifies a number of issues that deserve further investigation. First, it is important to examine aspects of the family context that may shape children's appraisals of and responses to conflict. For example, factors such as parents' level of marital satisfaction, how recently they have fought, parent-child relations, and children's prior experience with divorce may significantly affect children's perceptions and interpretation of conflict. Second, future work on appraisals should consider developmental differences in children's understanding of conflict and how these differences may affect children's responses to conflict. For example, older and younger children may have differing views of what makes a conflict intense or what constitutes resolution, and so different kinds of conflict may be associated with perceived threat and child functioning. Third, research with clinical populations may reveal differences in how these children appraise and respond to marital conflict and may provide insight into maladaptive family processes such as triangulation. For example, children in families experiencing serious marital distress may perceive greater threat and intervene more directly when conflict occurs in order to distract the parents' attention from the conflict. Such research will also need to consider parents' response to children's interventions in marital conflicts.

In sum, the present findings expand our understanding of the factors that make interparental conflict stressful for children and illustrate the role that conflict intensity and content play in shaping their responses. They also indicate that children's appraisal and understanding of interparental conflict is important and suggest that further exploration of the links between affect, cognition, and coping will advance our understanding of the effect of angry, conflictual environments on children.

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