

Understanding the Association Between Marital Conflict and Child Adjustment: Overview

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To highlight advances in the literature linking marital discord and child adjustment, a heuristic distinction is drawn between first and second generation research. A review of first generation research documenting the existence of an association between marital and child functioning points to the need for second generation research on why this association exists. Several issues that will facilitate research on the mechanisms linking marital and child functioning are therefore discussed. This discussion provides a framework for outlining how each of the contributions to the special section advances understanding of the impact of marital discord on child adjustment.

Concern over the impact of the family on children's behavior has been evident for more than a century (Broderick & Schrader, 1991). During this time a large body of clinical literature has emerged that emphasizes the association between marital discord and child adjustment. For example, case studies illustrating this relation and theoretical accounts of its existence can be found in the literatures of psychodynamic, family systems, and social learning therapies (cf. Emery, Joyce, & Fincham, 1987). Beginning in the 1940s, researchers began to empirically document the association (Baruch & Wilcox, 1944), and numerous studies since then have provided evidence of a relation between marital discord and child adjustment (for reviews see Cummings & Davies, in press; Emery, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Jouriles, Farris, & McDonald, 1991; Reid & Crisafulli, 1990). However, compared to the empirical findings that have emerged to date, clinical observation suggests a far stronger association between marital discord and child adjustment. This disparity between clinical and empirical literatures provides a challenge to practitioners and researchers, as the integration of clinical insight and empirical findings is critical to both informed research and practice.

This special section addresses this challenge by highlighting several issues at the cutting edge of contemporary research on marital dis-

cord and child adjustment. This introduction offers a rudimentary framework for the articles that follow by providing a snapshot of the literature on marital discord and child adjustment. Although necessarily incomplete, this snapshot highlights some important advances in the field and draws attention to several issues that require attention to further understanding of the impact of marital discord on child functioning.

Marital Conflict and Child Adjustment: A Snapshot

In this section, a heuristic distinction is drawn between first generation and second generation research. The former focuses on documenting an association between marital discord and child functioning, whereas the latter attempts to explain this relation.

First Generation Research

Considerable progress has been made in a more precise documentation of the association between marital behavior and child functioning. Researchers first showed a relation between overall marital discord or divorce and child functioning, then went on to identify marital conflict as the aspect of marital discord or divorce related to child adjustment, and have more recently identified overt interparental conflict to which children are exposed as most relevant for understanding child adjustment. Progress has also been made in understanding some of the aspects of conflict most delete-

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rious for children. For example, a large proportion of children (25%–70%) exposed to physical conflict between parents manifest clinically significant behavior problems (cf. McDonald & Jouriles, 1991) and child-rearing disagreements account for variance in indexes of child adjustment that is not attributable to general marital disagreements (e.g., Jouriles, Murphy, et al., 1991). Finally, interparental conflict is related not only to children's overall adjustment but also to their immediate responses to conflict (see Cummings & Davies, in press). A growing body of analogue research that examined children's immediate responses to conflict shows that several additional aspects of conflict increase children's negative responses, including its frequency (more frequent > less frequent), resolution (unresolved > resolved), verbal intensity (more intense > less intense), content (child related > nonchild related), and provision of a child-absolving explanation for the conflict (child-blaming explanation > child-absolving explanation).

Advances have also been made in ruling out factors that might account for the association between marital conflict and child adjustment. For example, parental depression does not appear to account for the correlation between marital conflict and child adjustment, though it may potentiate the relationship, and, although less clear-cut, disturbances in parent-child relations do not appear to be wholly responsible for the association between interparental conflict and child functioning (cf. Fincham & Osborne, 1993).

Notwithstanding these important advances, there is considerable variability in the size of the correlations obtained between marital functioning and child adjustment, with most studies yielding modest correlations ($r_s = .25-.40$). Variability in findings has been linked to several factors, including gender (boys > girls), source of data (single source > multiple sources), and samples (clinic > nonclinic). However, variability in results also occurs independently of these moderating variables and no doubt reflects, in part, shortcomings of the studies (e.g., small samples, use of unreliable instruments, and restricted response ranges). Not surprisingly, a recent meta-analysis of 33 studies yielded a mean effect size (.16) that was only slightly larger than what is considered a small effect size (.10) and that was about half the size of a moderate effect size (.30; Reid & Crisafulli,

1990). Another review showed that of 481 correlations from 26 studies, 77% were less than .30 (Jouriles, Farris, & McDonald, 1991). However, both of the reviews included broadly defined indexes of marital discord, and it is possible that results will be less variable when marital conflict per se is examined.

The picture to emerge from empirical studies therefore contrasts with that based on clinical observation, leading at least one prominent researcher to question the results of the research (O'Leary, 1984). Rather than choose between the two sources of information, Fincham and Osborne (1993) have argued that both share a common problem, namely, incomplete specification of the constructs investigated. This problem means that legitimate clinical observations made in specific circumstances result in inappropriate generalizations (often without conscious awareness), and at the same time this incomplete specification limits generalizations supported by research because multidimensional constructs are often unwittingly investigated as unitary constructs. In addition, there are likely to be numerous pathways linking marital conflict and child adjustment, a possibility that becomes more apparent when one considers the mechanisms that may account for their association.

Research relevant to explaining the relation between marital conflict and child adjustment can be thought of as second generation research in that the documentation of a reliable association raises the question of why the association exists. This special section highlights such inquiry in the belief that it will facilitate reconciliation of the pictures that emerge from clinical and research literatures.

Second Generation Research

Research that might explain the existence of an association between marital conflict and child adjustment is relatively underdeveloped. For example, modeling has been posited as a mechanism that may account for the association between marital conflict and child adjustment, yet data allowing the evaluation of this mechanism are still relatively rare. Thus, rather than review data relevant to explaining the association between marital conflict and child adjustment, this section highlights four issues relevant to the facilitation of second generation research.

Getting down to specifics. Both marital conflict and child adjustment can take many forms, and hence an understanding of the association between them will increase to the extent that scholars differentiate various aspects of these central constructs. Rather than address the question of an overall relation between marital conflict and adjustment, the question needs to change to one that asks what specific aspects of conflict are related to what particular aspects of child adjustment. As the preceding overview shows, researchers have already made some progress in this regard, particularly in beginning to differentiate among dimensions of conflict. In addition to consolidating such progress, researchers need to focus equal attention on the child outcomes studied. To date, there has been virtually no research on potential positive outcomes of conflict and limited attention to how conflict may be related to outcomes that fall within the range of normal development. The importance of addressing these issues is emphasized by the fact that while all families experience conflict in one form or another, most children do not display clinically significant maladjustment. As developmental psychopathologists note, the understanding of pathological processes is enhanced by the study of non-pathological processes (Sroufe & Rutter, 1984).

Placing marital conflict in context. Understanding why marital conflict and child adjustment are related is also likely to entail attention to the context in which conflict occurs. Any given level or form of conflict may have different consequences as a function of familial and nonfamilial contextual factors. For example, Jenkins and Smith (1990) found that a good relationship with an adult outside the family moderated the relation between marital discord and child adjustment. However, the importance of intrafamilial relations is emphasized by the decreased role of this moderator in the presence of a good mother-child relation. There already has been some progress in the contextualization of conflict, as it has been investigated in combination with other potential risk and protective factors, particularly with parent-child relations. However, the range of contextual factors studied is quite limited, and there is little information on the possible unique properties of marital conflict as a risk variable that can potentiate pathological child outcomes.

Viewing children as active agents. An impediment to understanding the possible impact

of marital conflict on children is the assumption implicit in most studies that the child is a *tabula rasa* upon which marital conflict may leave its imprint. Although individual differences such as temperament and gender have been studied, children's individual appraisal of the marital conflict and their own coping strategies have received, until recently, remarkably little attention. The importance of viewing children as active agents is underscored by the observation that children can influence their experience of marital conflict. For example, children might construe interparental conflict in a manner that leads them to intervene in it (e.g., as a conflict for which they are responsible), resulting in a quite different experience than that of children who appraise the conflict differently and avoid such intervention (e.g., views the conflict as something that is not their business). Including the child's perspective in research also highlights topics that have not received attention, such as child effects and the differential impact of marital conflict on siblings, topics that will need investigation to increase understanding of the association between marital conflict and child adjustment.

Moving from correlation to causation. For obvious practical and ethical reasons, experimental manipulation is not feasible in this area of inquiry, a factor that may contribute to the paucity of research on causal mechanisms relating marital conflict and child adjustment. However, the logic that supports causal inferences should not be confused with the controlled, experimental studies so familiar to psychologists. Flexible use of that logic allows for the study of causal mechanisms by means of data collection methods that are viable in the study of families (e.g., treatment outcome data, natural experiments, and longitudinal research). Unfortunately, theoretical specification of causal mechanisms linking marital conflict and child adjustment has not kept pace with increased expertise in methods to study such mechanisms. Although several causal mechanisms have been mentioned in the literature, the need for theoretical development in this area of inquiry is particularly striking. It is doubtful whether significant advances can be made in research on the association between marital conflict and child adjustment without further theoretical development.

Coda. Lest it appear otherwise, no simple, linear relation is intended among the issues dis-

cussed in this section. Rather, the relations among them are seen as dialectal. For example, getting specific about conflict and adjustment will not only facilitate explanation of their association but also be facilitated by such explanation. Similarly, theoretical statements regarding causal mechanisms will facilitate data collection and, in turn, be improved as a result of such data collection. Finally, highlighting the above four issues does not imply that they are the only ones requiring attention or that more fine-grained distinctions within each are unprofitable. However, they suffice as a backdrop for introducing the articles in this special section, a task to which I now turn.

Marital Conflict and Child Adjustment: Toward a More Complete Understanding

Each article in this series addresses one or more of the issues outlined in the last section, thereby highlighting developments in the progress of second generation research. The idea for this set of articles arose from a symposium presented at the Society for Research in Child Development in March 1993, and consistent with its origin, the series comprises four papers followed by an article that comments on these articles and the field in general. In view of Rutter's (1994) comments, only a brief description of the articles is offered here.

Noting the paucity of data showing that marital conflict causes child maladjustment, Fincham, Grych, and Osborne (1994) discuss the utility of longitudinal research to address this lacuna. Because theory is critical for researchers to maximize the utility of longitudinal research, Fincham et al. outline how marital conflict may lead to child adjustment problems, focusing on constructs that are likely to be critical to any theory on this topic. In the second major portion of the article, they identify several issues that need to be addressed in longitudinal research designed to examine such theory.

Kitzmann and Emery's (1994) article provides a useful complement to the case made in the preceding article, as it reminds us that experimental methods can be used to address issues of causation in this field. The most recent in an impressive series of studies on divorce mediation, this article presents data on the adjustment of children whose parents experienced an intervention designed to decrease interparen-

tal conflict during and after the divorce process. Although children 1 year after a litigated parental divorce did not differ in adjustment from those after a mediated parental divorce, decreased interparental conflict over this period was associated with better child adjustment.

The importance of research examining specific aspects of child adjustment and of children's appraisals and coping responses is illustrated well by Cummings, Davies, and Simpson's (1994) article. They found that some indexes of conflict relate differently to internalizing and externalizing problems and that boys' perceptions of conflict accounted for more unique variance in their adjustment than did maternal reports of marital conflict. Interestingly, gender differences emerged in the appraisals and coping responses related to child adjustment, suggesting that possible mediators of the association between marital conflict and child adjustment may differ for boys and girls.

Easterbrooks, Cummings, and Emde (1994) attempt to broaden the boundaries of research on marital conflict and child adjustment by investigating children's responses to constructive marital disputes. Their longitudinal study is among the first in this area to focus on normal adjustment and is one of only a few that investigates the impact of marital disagreements on very young children. This exploratory study suggests that an important task in such families is the coordination of marital and parental roles, a process that could potentially be disrupted by more severe conflict and thereby result in child maladjustment.

In this special section's final article, Rutter (1994) comments on the preceding articles, but his work is much more than a commentary. Rather, his comments about the preceding articles serve as the springboard for an original and important contribution to the literature. Although Rutter focuses on conduct disorder, his observations apply to child outcomes more generally. Drawing on data from a wide variety of sources, Rutter focuses on three issues: the conceptualization of risk mechanisms associated with family discord, the measurement of discord and of conduct disorder, and the means whereby causal hypotheses can be tested. This article provides a particularly appropriate ending for this special section in that it illustrates the breadth of scholarship required to understand the association between marital conflict and child adjustment, thereby reminding us that

this series highlights, rather than exhausts, both the progress of and the challenges in second generation research.

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