The Benefits of Marital Conflict
Constructiveness and Resolution as Predictors of Positive Child Outcomes

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Destructive Marital Conflict and Child Adjustment

- Marital conflict linked with
  - child psychopathology (Cummings & Davies, 1994)
  - poorer peer relationships (Du Rocher Schudlich, Shamir, & Cummings, 2004)
  - academic problems (El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Keller, Cummings, & Acebo, 2007)
  - physiological and health symptoms (Koss, George, Cummings, & Davies, 2014)

- However, this research focused on destructive marital conflict

- Marital conflict traditionally assumed to be a homogeneous and negative family event
Destructive Marital Conflict

- Includes behaviors such as:
  - Verbal or physical aggression
  - Stonewalling
  - Withdrawal or avoidance
  - Hostility

- Moreover, destructive conflict us often left unresolved
Constructive Marital Conflict

- **Includes behaviors such as:**
  - Problem solving
  - Compromise
  - Support
  - Affection
  - Apology
  - Parental humor

- **In addition, constructive conflict works toward a** resolution
Constructive Conflict Tactics
Video Clips
Constructive Conflict Tactics
Problem Solving
Constructive Conflict Tactics
Resolution
Importance of Distinguishing Types of Conflict and Conflict Endings

• Type of conflict and how it ends determine the effect on children who are exposed to it

• Consistent body of work indicates the importance of resolution
  • “Silver bullet”
Can resolution ameliorate the impact of anger?
Children's responses to anger were examined as a function of:

a) the mode of anger expression (nonverbal, verbal, verbal-physical)

b) whether others’ anger was resolved

Children between 4- and 9-years-old watched videotaped interactions between adult actors and were asked questions concerning their responses.
Importance of Resolution
Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, and El-Sheikh (1989)

- All angry interactions were perceived as negative and elicited negative responses

- *Unresolved* anger was perceived as much more negative than resolved

- Children reacted negatively to any unresolved expression of anger, including nonverbal
Importance of Resolution
Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, and El-Sheikh (1989)

- As children aged, they increasingly perceived hostile anger as the most negative.
- Boys reacted more angrily than girls to depictions of anger.
- Older children responded with more distress to unresolved anger rather than resolved.

Children are highly sensitive to whether conflicts are resolved.

–Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, and El-Sheikh (1989)
Importance of Resolution
Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, and Lake (1991)

• Children's responses to interadult conflict were examined as a function of degree of resolution of conflict
  • Resolved (compromise, apology)
  • Partially resolved (submission, topic change)
  • Unresolved (continued fighting, silent treatment)

• Children between 5- and 19-years-old watched videotaped conflicts between actors and responded to questions
Importance of Resolution
Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, and Lake (1991)

• For all ages, resolved anger was perceived as least angry while unresolved anger was perceived as most angry

• Partial resolution was perceived as better than unresolved, but worse than complete resolution
  • Therefore, the relative negativity of children’s responses correspond to the degree of resolution

The impact of interadult anger on children is ameliorated by resolution.

–Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, and Lake (1991)
Does resolution have to occur in front of children?
Conflict Resolution in Front of Children
Cummings, Simpson, and Wilson (1993)

• Children between 5- to 6-years-old and 9- to 10-years-old watched videotaped interactions with:
  • Unresolved anger in front of child
  • Resolved anger in front of child
  • Resolved anger behind closed doors

• Upon returning to the room, parents either acted friendly toward each other (implicit) or briefly mentioned the resolution (explicit)

Conflict Resolution in Front of Children
Cummings, Simpson, and Wilson (1993)

• Most (53% of the 5- to 6-year-olds and 90% of 9- to 10-year-olds) inferred that the adults were making up or in the process of resolving their differences when they were out of the room.

• Children's reactions to unobserved resolution were indistinguishable from responses to resolutions that could be directly observed.

Conflict Resolution in Front of Children
Cummings, Simpson, and Wilson (1993)

• Explanation was an adequate means for communicating information about resolution, although apparently unnecessary if children had observed the resolution

• Children can infer resolution from changed emotional interaction between adults

• Children appreciate an explanation of resolution even in the absence of observing changes in interadult interaction

Children don’t have to see resolution firsthand to benefit from it.

–Cummings, Simpson, and Wilson (1993)
Constructive Conflict Tactics
Resolution Behind Closed Doors
Does exposure to all kinds of conflict elicit negative responses from children?
Parents of children between 4- and 11-years-old completed daily diaries describing specific instances of their marital conflict.

Parents’ destructive conflict elicited negative reactions from children, while parents’ positive emotionality and use of constructive conflict tactics led to increased positive emotionality in children.

Constructive conflict elicits positive responses from children.

–Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, and Dukewich (2002)
Diary Studies and Longitudinal Work
Cummings, Goeke-Morey, and Papp (2004)

- Immediate aggressive responding to marital conflict of children between 8- and 16-years-old was examined using daily diaries and responses to videotaped conflicts.

- Identified constructive and destructive conflict strategies in relation to children’s reactions to them.

• Destructive conflict tactics increased the likelihood of aggressive behavior in children, as did topics related to the marital relationship or child

• Fights about the child in front of the child—whether constructive or destructive—led to increased aggression

Constructive conflict tactics and positive parental emotionality decreased the probability of aggression...

–Cummings, Goeke-Morey, and Papp (2004)
...unless the conflict was about the child, in front of the child.

–Cummings, Goeke-Morey, and Papp (2004)
• Using a three-wave longitudinal design beginning when children were 6-years-old, constructive and destructive conflict were examined with regards to children’s prosocial behavior

• Children’s emotional security mediated the relationship between constructive and destructive conflict and children’s prosocial behavior

Children of parents who handle conflicts constructively are more likely to exhibit prosocial behavior themselves and be more emotionally secure.

–McCoy, Cummings, and Davies (2009)
Benefits of Marital Conflict

• Models effective communication and resolution strategies

• Increases security in the family and parent–child relationships

• Improves children’s positive outcomes, like prosocial behavior and emotional security

• Decreases children’s negative outcomes, like aggression or negative emotionality
Application of findings to applied work and recommendations to practitioners/parents

- **Happy Couples for Happy Kids/Family Communication Project**
  - Faircloth, Schermerhorn, Mitchell, Cummings, and Cummings (2011)
  - Cummings and Schatz (2012)

- **Communication and Family Relations Project**
It isn’t *whether* parents fight, but *how* parents fight that matters.

–Goeke-Morey, Cummings, and Papp (2007)
Thank you!

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