



UNIVERSITY OF  
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# 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 is often left *unresolved***

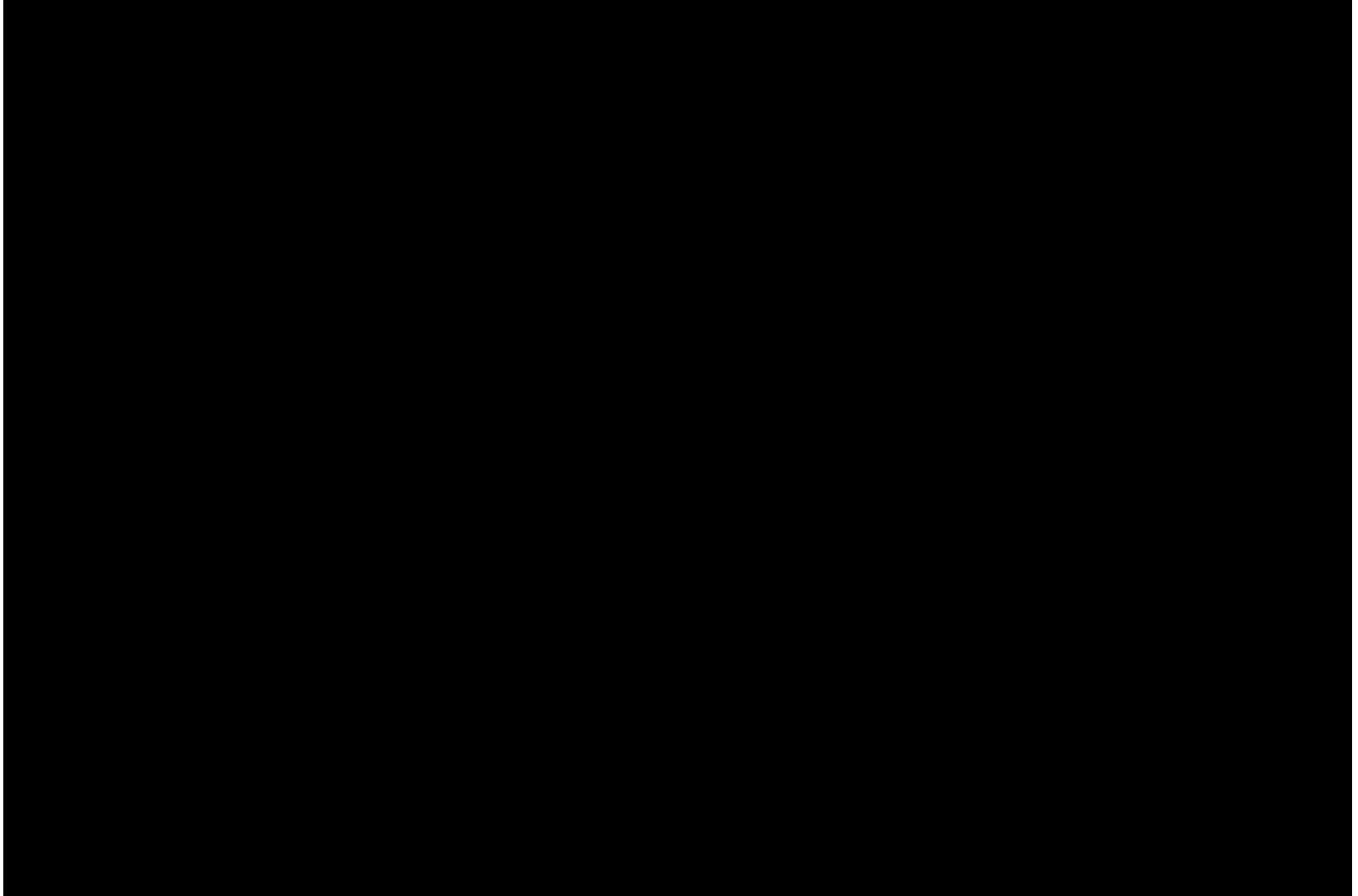
# Constructive Marital Conflict

- **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

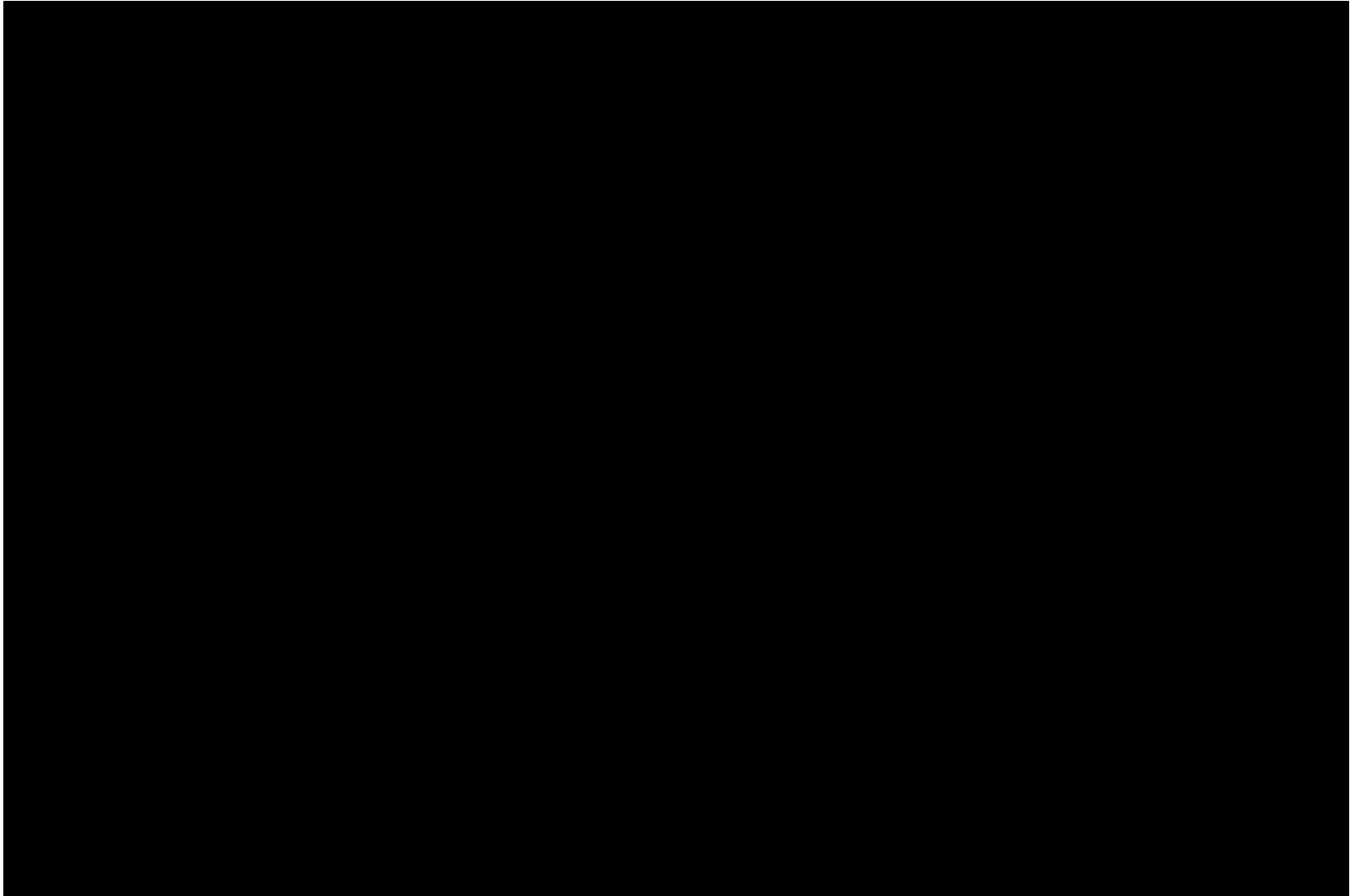
# Constructive Conflict Tactics

## 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?

# Importance of Resolution

Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, and El-Sheikh (1989)

- **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)

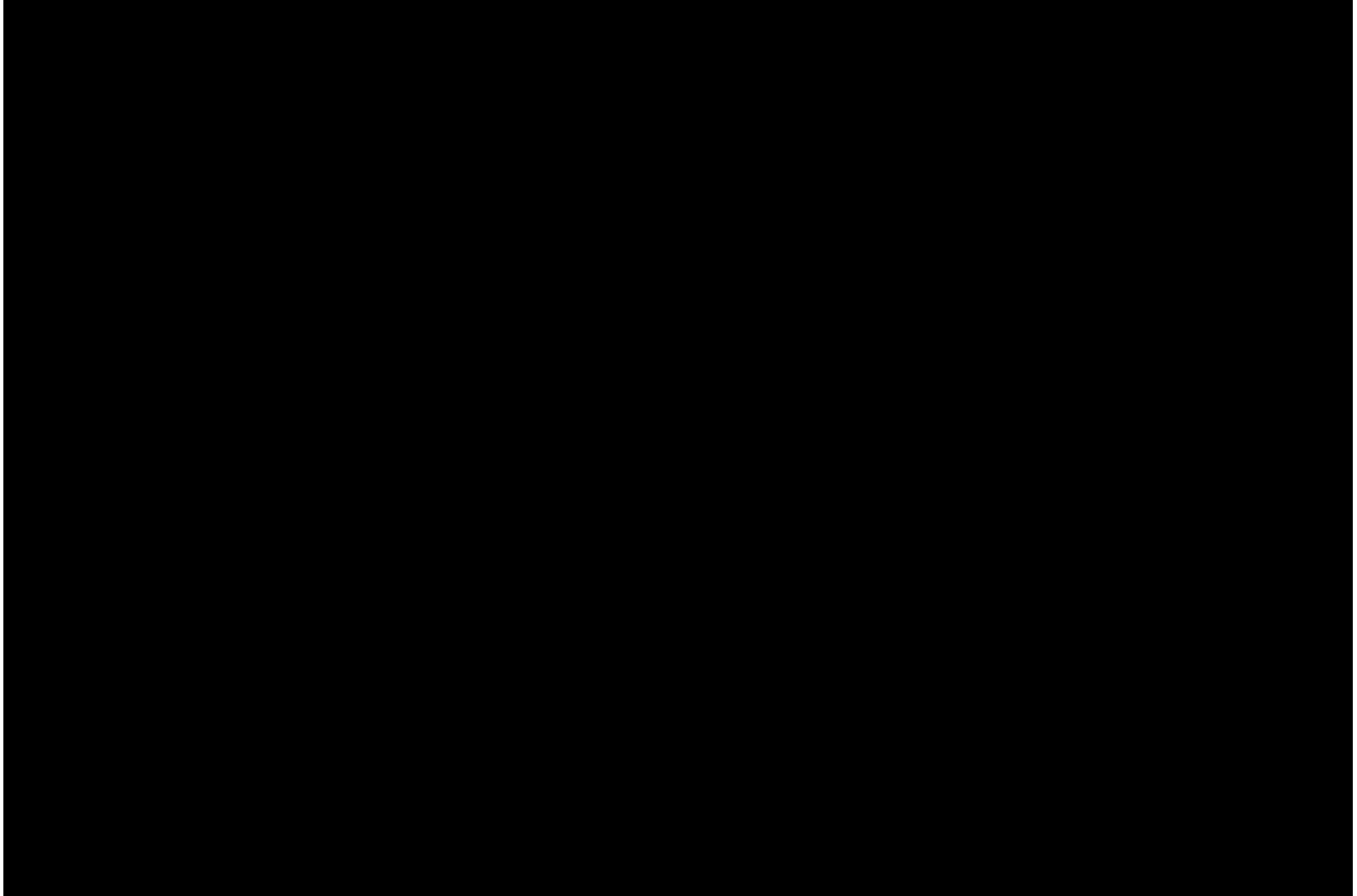
- **Explanation was an adequate means for communicating information about resolution, although apparently unnecessary if children had observed the resolution**
- **Children can infer resolution from changed emotional interaction between adults**
- **Children appreciate an explanation of resolution even 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?

# Diary Studies and Longitudinal Work

Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, and Dukewich (2002)

- **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**

# Diary Studies and Longitudinal Work

Cummings, Goeke-Morey, and Papp (2004)

- **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)

# Diary Studies and Longitudinal Work

McCoy, Cummings, and Davies (2009)

- **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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