

## Marital Conflict and Child Adjustment: What About Gender?

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Within the field of marital conflict, a variety of theoretical frameworks have been developed attempting to explain the causal mechanisms connecting marital conflict to child adjustment. At the same time, there has been an accumulation of findings indicating that gender may be playing a significant and complex role in the relationship between marital conflict and child adjustment. However, the majority of the frameworks which have been proposed have largely overlooked these complex gender findings. The main theoretical frameworks in the field are summarized, and the implications of the accumulated gender findings for each framework are outlined. It is argued that gender may be a moderator of many of the mechanisms outlined in existing theoretical frameworks linking marital conflict to child adjustment and needs to be more effectively incorporated in future research. © 1998 Academic Press

For nearly two decades, researchers have been actively attempting to understand what happens to children who are raised in homes with chronic marital conflict. Questions about whether there was a connection between conflict and child adjustment were put to rest with Emery's 1982 review of the field, in which he made it clear that the two factors were connected. What that relationship was, and the direction in which it traveled, however, was unknown. Since then, we have increased our knowledge of the area tremendously, learning more about the various types of conflict and the connections conflict has with different types of child adjustment issues. The past 5 years has seen an explosion of work in the field, as well as a renewed focus on the nuts and bolts of the relationship between marital conflict and child adjustment. However, we are still unable to say with certainty just how marital conflict affects child adjustment.

The purpose of this paper is to propose that gender may moderate many of the factors that affect the way marital conflict affects child adjustment, and that theories designed to explain the relationship will result in incomplete knowledge unless gender is incorporated into their framework. Recent theoretical frameworks within the field have often given gender effects short shrift; it is possible that gender is more central to their work than previously

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suspected. To explore this issue, theoretical frameworks which posit mechanisms by which marital conflict may affect child adjustment are summarized. Then the literature on gender differences, both in studies of family relationships and in studies of marital conflict, are reviewed. The theoretical frameworks will then be reexamined in terms of their ability to incorporate the existing gender findings as a moderating variable of the causal mechanisms connecting marital conflict to child adjustment. It is proposed that the literature on gender differences will have widespread implications for the application and predictive ability of existing theoretical mechanisms and that these implications have not received the attention they deserve from researchers in the field.

It is now clear that marital conflict is associated with a wide variety of child adjustment and outcome problems (see Davies & Cummings, 1994; Emery, 1982; and Grych & Fincham, 1990 for reviews). These include externalizing problems such as conduct disorder (e.g., Johnson & O'Leary, 1987; Jouriles, Murphy, & O'Leary, 1989), noncompliance (Jouriles & Farris, 1992), aggression (e.g., Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987), and antisocial behavior (e.g., Emery & O'Leary, 1984; Peterson & Zill, 1986). Marital conflict has also been linked to children's internalizing problems such as depression (Johnston et al., 1987; Peterson & Zill, 1986), withdrawal or anxiety (e.g., Long, Slater, Forehand, & Fauber, 1988), children's self concept (Bishop & Ingersoll, 1989), and social competency (Burman, John, & Margolin, 1987), as well as being predictive of behavior problems in children of divorce (Emery, 1988; Rutter, 1979).

Before entering more deeply into this review, it should be noted that associations between marital conflict and child adjustment are much stronger in families of clinic-referred children than in "normative" families drawn from the local community. Early work by Porter and O'Leary (1980) and Emery and O'Leary (1982) reported correlations as high as .40 between marital conflict and child adjustment problems for clinical populations, whereas similar measures used with nonclinic populations (e.g., Emery & O'Leary, 1984) rarely report correlations higher than .35 (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Although the association between marital conflict and child adjustment is not as strong in these populations as in clinical samples, understanding the impact of normative marital conflict upon child adjustment and development is an important goal. Therefore, the current review limits its examination to studies which draw almost entirely from normative populations. In addition, it will not attempt to incorporate the related bodies of literature examining the impact of violence in the family of origin. The impact of extreme violence on child development is a conceptually different issue than the impact of normative, day-to-day marital and family conflict, and only the latter is addressed here.

Within the context of marital conflict in normative, nonclinical populations, there is clear evidence that children's social and emotional develop-

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