

# Evaluating a parent education program for preventing the negative effects of marital conflict

W. Brad Faircloth, E. Mark Cummings\*

*Department of Psychology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, United States*

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## Abstract

The effects of marital conflict on children are well documented. This study evaluated a prevention program for changing marital conflict for children's sake. Fifty-five couples were randomly assigned to either an immediate treatment ( $n = 41$ ) or a six-month waitlisted control ( $n = 14$ ) group, with assessments at pretest, posttest, and 6-month and 1-year follow-ups. Results indicate effectiveness in improving parents' knowledge regarding marital conflict across all assessment periods. Couples reported displaying less hostility in front of their children at 6-months, and showed improvement in conflict tactics and parenting practices at the 6 month and one-year follow-up assessments. Findings of this study provide promise for further development of marital conflict focused parent education.

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## 1. Introduction

Increasing attention at the federal, state, local, and academic levels is being paid to strengthening marriages (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004; Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Goddard & Olsen, 2004). Recent issues of *Family Relations* (October, 2004), *Family Psychology* (March, 2005), and *American Psychologist* (June, 2003) underscore interest in providing theoretically-based and empirically-evaluated programs to engaged, marrying, and established couples, towards the goal of educating couples about optimal ways to address everyday challenges. Extending beyond concern only with the marital relationship, the present program also addresses concerns about, and implications for, broader family functioning, especially the children in the family.

A substantial literature has developed over the past 20 years on the processes by which interparental conflict affects children (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Despite this extensive literature, the findings and relevant theory are not widely known and have not been translated into accessible parent programs for improving marital conflict for the sake of the children. This study is an initial evaluation of a newly developed, evidence-based program for educating parents about ways to better handle everyday interparental conflicts.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [ecumming@nd.edu](mailto:ecumming@nd.edu) (E.M. Cummings).

### 1.1. Marital conflict and children

Children of all ages are at risk for adjustment and developmental problems due to conflict between their parents (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Exposure to marital conflict affects children's adjustment, placing them at risk for internalizing (e.g., depression), externalizing (e.g., aggression), and academic problems (Emery, 1982; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987).

Children are affected both directly and indirectly by marital conflict. Direct exposure to conflict heightens children's physiological arousal and provides children with destructive examples of conflict management. Children exposed to repeated interparental conflict do not get "used to" it, but become sensitized, making them more vulnerable to its effects, rather than more tolerant (Cummings & Cummings, 1988; Davies, Sturge-Apple, Winter, Cummings, & Farrell, 2006; Gordis, Margolin, & John, 1997). Children sensitized to conflict have lower thresholds for distress and aggression, increasing risk for the development of adjustment problems.

Children may also be affected indirectly through compromised parenting practices that result from destructive marital conflict (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). Furthermore, destructive marital conflict has been linked with negative parenting practices (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Erel & Burman, 1995). For example, negativity in the marital relationship can spillover to the parent-child relationship, resulting in overreactivity and verbal criticism during parenting situations (Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Preoccupation with marital conflict may also lead to lax or inconsistent disciplining (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

However, the mere occurrence of marital conflict does not necessarily increase children's risk for maladjustment. It is normal for couples to disagree, and avoidance of actual areas of conflict can be detrimental for adults (Gottman, 1994) and for children (Davies et al., 2006). Consistent with these points, children react differently depending on how parents handle their conflicts, supporting the necessity for distinguishing between constructive and destructive conflict to better understand and predict effects of conflict on children (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold, & Shelton, 2003). Based on this emerging theoretical and empirical literature, destructive conflict responses are those behaviors which elicit negative emotions, behaviors, and cognitions from witnessing children and that have been linked with adjustment problems in children, including physical aggression, verbal anger, non-verbal anger, defensiveness, fear, sadness, and withdrawal. By comparison, constructive conflict responses are those behaviors that elicit positive emotions, behaviors and cognitions from witnessing children and have not been associated with children's behavioral problems, including calm discussion, positive emotionality, support, physical affection, and conflict resolution (e.g., Cummings, 1998; Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991; Cummings et al., 2003, 2004; Cummings et al., 2002; Cummings, Simpson, & Wilson, 1993; Goeke-Morey et al., 2003; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Papp, 2007).

Despite clear implications of these findings for family-based intervention and prevention programs, no systematic attempts have been made to develop programs derived from this literature that educate parents about how their conflicts affect their children. The goal of the present program is to educate parents about distinctions between, and effects of, constructive and destructive conflict responses, on both the marital relationship and children. The "active ingredients" are to (a) increase parents' knowledge about the effects of marital conflict on children and adults, (b) increase parents' understanding of the best problem-solving skills for handling everyday marital conflicts, and (c) provide practical training for improving parental strategies for negotiating differences of opinion.

Optimal marital intervention programs are informed by empirical research and guided by a theoretical framework (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Goddard & Olsen, 2004; Nation et al., 2003). This program uniquely provides parents with (a) a didactic training component, that is, education about empirically-based information for expressing and negotiating marital conflict for the sake of the children, and (b) a skills training component, that is, "hands-on training" in techniques derived from principles in couples' therapies for transforming destructive arguments into constructive discussions. An assumption is that educating parents about the effects of conflict and better methods of conflict management will lead to increases in constructive marital conflicts, decreases in destructive marital conflicts and to positive changes in other aspects of family functioning over time due to well-established links between marital conflict, parenting and child adjustment (Davies & Cummings, 2006).

In addition to a foundation in research on the effects of interparental conflicts on children (Cummings & Davies, 2002), this program was also developed from and informed by the Emotional Security Theory (EST, Davies & Cummings, 1994). EST stresses that children appraise conflict for threat to the stability, intactness, and well-being of the family. According to EST, repeated exposure to destructive marital conflict undermines children's security about

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