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## Understanding children's emotional processes and behavioral strategies in the context of marital conflict

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### ABSTRACT

Marital conflict is a distressing context in which children must regulate their emotion and behavior; however, the associations between the multidimensionality of conflict and children's regulatory processes need to be examined. The current study examined differences in children's ( $N = 207$ , mean age = 8.02 years) emotions (mad, sad, scared, and happy) and behavioral strategies to regulate conflict exposure during resolved, unresolved, escalating, and child-rearing marital conflict vignettes. Children's cortisol levels were assessed in relation to child-rearing and resolved conflict vignettes. Anger and sadness were associated with escalating and child-rearing conflicts, fearfulness was related to escalating and unresolved conflicts, and happiness was associated with resolution. Anger was associated with children's strategies to stop conflict, whereas sadness was associated with monitoring and avoidant strategies. Cortisol recovery moderated the link between fearfulness and behavioral regulation. These results highlight the importance of children's emotions and regulatory processes in understanding the impact of marital conflict.

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### Introduction

The development of emotion regulation skills is an important developmental task for children (Thompson, 1994). The ability to successfully regulate emotional experiences has been linked to

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children's social competence and psychopathology (Zeman, Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006). Emotion regulation is a multifaceted system of component processes that includes emotional, behavioral, and biological components (Cicchetti, Ganiban, & Barnett, 1991; Thompson, Lewis, & Calkins, 2008). As Thompson and colleagues have highlighted, there is much need for understanding the interactive nature of the multiple regulatory processes involved in emotion regulation, including emotional, physiological, and behavioral components, as well as the context in which they occur. Moving beyond examining children's general emotional tendencies, the current study examined the role of children's emotional responses, physiological arousal, and behavioral regulation strategies in the context of interparental conflict.

Destructive interparental conflict provides a distressing context for children, eliciting the experience of negative emotion and subsequent regulation of children's exposure to the conflict. Although marital conflict proves to be distressing for children, it is a normative recurrent stressor occurring on a regular basis in families, providing a specific context in which children are repeatedly engaged in regulating their emotional experiences. Moreover, the impact of marital conflict on children's adjustment is partly related through associations with children's emotional experience and regulatory abilities in response to conflict.

Interparental conflict is a multidimensional construct (Cummings & Davies, 2010); couples' disagreements may take different forms and have different meanings for children based on the specific aspects of how couples manage their conflict. Destructive conflict, characterized by hostility, anger, and aggression, undermines children's sense of security, leaving children threatened and worried about the stability of the family. On the other hand, constructive conflict, characterized by the use of affection, problem-solving strategies, and compromise during conflict, may leave children with a sense of security about the family. An extensive body of research supports that marital conflict can affect children differently depending on whether the conflict is handled using destructive or constructive behaviors (Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold, & Shelton, 2003), the degree of conflict resolution that occurs (Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991), the perception of parent emotion during the conflict (De Arth-Pendley & Cummings, 2002), and the topic of the dispute (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004). Marital disagreements explicitly about children or child rearing can be especially threatening or distressing for children (O'Leary & Vidair, 2005); child-related conflict has been linked to children's use of more intervening strategies during conflict (Shelton, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006). Destructive conflict has been linked to children's experience of negative emotionality, whereas constructive conflict has been linked to children's neutral or positive emotionality (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003). Davies and Woitach (2008) highlighted the importance of distinguishing the effects of different forms of destructive conflict on children's regulatory processes. However, little is known about the specific role of different contexts of destructive conflict in understanding the interrelatedness of children's emotional, physiological, and behavioral responses used to regulate their exposure to marital conflict. The current study examined children's emotional responses to distinct forms of marital conflict, children's physiological responses to conflict, and associations with the behavioral strategies children use to regulate their exposure to marital conflict.

Emotional security theory (EST) (Davies & Cummings, 1994) posits that children need to feel safe and secure in the family; destructive marital conflict directly threatens this goal and undermines their sense of security. When conflict threatens children's security, children are motivated to reestablish their goal of security. EST suggests that children's insecurity about the marital relationship is manifested through multiple regulatory processes, including children's emotional reactivity, behavioral regulation of exposure to the conflict, and internal representations of the family system. EST further states that children's manifested responses to conflict are reflective of a higher order organization of response processes (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Research indicates that children's emotional reactivity to conflict may include a variety of distressed responses, including anger, sadness, and fearfulness. Furthermore, children may respond to conflict with a variety of behavioral strategies to regulate their exposure to conflict; specific emotional responses mobilize children to react in ways to avoid or involve themselves in the conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007). To alleviate the threat of conflict and restore security, children may involve themselves in the marital dispute as an attempt to end the disagreement. Children may attempt to resolve the source of conflict as one

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