



Testing the long-term efficacy of a prevention program for improving marital conflict in community families

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ABSTRACT

Family-focused prevention programs for community samples have potentially broad, clinically relevant implications but few studies have examined whether any program benefits continue to be observed over the long term. Although benefits of a marital conflict focused parent education program, the Happy Couples and Happy Kids (i.e., HCHK) program, were supported in a study based on pre-test, post-test, 6-month follow-up, and 1-year follow-up assessments, the longer-term stability of treatment effects has not been established. Couples with children between 4 and 8 years of age who had previously participated in the HCHK study completed a two-year follow-up, including a parent-only group (PO, $n = 12$); parent-child group (PC, $n = 15$); and a self-study group (SS, $n = 12$). Greater knowledge about the effects of marital conflict on families and behavioral improvements in constructive conflict, and specifically in problem-solving behaviors, were observed at the two-year follow-up for couples who received the HCHK program. Reflecting an innovative analysis of mediating mechanisms, change-to-change analyses showed that these changes were linked with improvements in other family processes over time, including marital satisfaction, parenting and child adjustment. The findings support the relatively long-term efficacy of brief, psychoeducational programs for educating community samples about marital conflict and family processes.

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The capability of marital partners to handle their disagreements is pertinent to long-term viability of marriages and the well being of all members of the family. Marital distress predicts emotional distress, depression and other psychological difficulties, and parenting efficacy (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Marital discord is also stressful to children and increases their risk for psychological maladjustment (Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Because of the implications of family functioning for the well being of parents and children, prevention programs have been developed to improve family processes. However, relatively few of these programs for families targeted couples with children who are beyond infancy, and even fewer are based on empirical information for helping couples engage in more constructive conflict for the sake of the children as well as the parents (Morgan, Nu'Man-Sheppard, & Allin, 1990).

To address this gap, Cummings, Faircloth, Mitchell, Cummings, and Schermerhorn (2008) tested the effectiveness of a four-session psychoeducational program designed to foster more constructive inter-

parental conflict practices. Their findings indicated that the program resulted in improvements in marital functioning, as well as improvements in other areas of family functioning, with effects lasting for about one year after completion of the program (see also Faircloth & Cummings, 2008). However, an important question is whether these positive outcomes remain stable over relatively long periods of time.

Thus, a longer-term follow-up with the same sample of families is needed to further examine questions of program impact in improving marital, parenting and child outcomes. Such data also allows for testing the proposed theory of change that participation in psychoeducation will improve parents' understanding of how their conflict affects their children. This increase in knowledge is expected to lead, over time, to changes in marital conflict and parenting behavior, which in turn will impact child adjustment. The current paper describes results of a 2-year follow-up test of the outcomes of the prevention program.

Marital conflict and adjustment in families

Marital conflict is linked with adverse outcomes for a wide cross-section of the population (Amato & Booth, 2001; Cowan, Cowan, & Schulz, 1996; Emery, 1999; Liberman, Van Horn, & Ippen, 2005). Associations are found with a host of adjustment problems, including depression, alcohol problems, and divorce in adults, and behavioral, emotional and academic problems in children (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Therefore, improving marital conflict might be expected to

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improve family processes, such as parenting, and enhance child adjustment (Grych & Fincham, 2001). Additionally, the effects of marital conflict on children (e.g., internalizing, externalizing, grades) may depend on the child's developmental level (Malone et al., 2004; Lansford et al., 2006).

Marital conflict behaviors and patterns of handling conflict develop over time as a result of experiences and histories of conflict. Many families without severe problems may be unwilling to participate in lengthy or intensive interventions. Such interventions may be unnecessarily costly and impractical for many community families with sub-clinical relationship or adjustment problems, whereas brief, non-intensive interventions may be optimal for these families (Pehrson & Robinson, 1990). Psychoeducational programs are designed to lead to improvements in behavior by increasing knowledge, and improving problem management skills (Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008; Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004; Morgan et al., 1990). However, few existing programs (a) report data documenting their effectiveness, (b) are guided by basic research in the area of marital conflict, child development and family functioning, (c) address consumer satisfaction with participation, or (d) include long-term assessments of developmental trajectories for children and their parents (Grych, 2005; Grych & Fincham, 1992; Wolchik et al., 2002; Wolchik, West, Westover, & Sandler, 1993). The present approach addresses these gaps.

Although few programs with these characteristics have been advanced, there are several important exceptions. Although not focusing on parenting or children, Markman, Stanley and colleagues have provided evidence for the long-term effectiveness of the PREP intervention, a program for teaching couples communication and conflict resolution skills derived from behavioral marital therapy (e.g., Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998; Laurenceau, Stanley, Olmos-Gallo, Baucom, & Markman, 2004; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). In addition, among couples expecting their first child, Shulz, Cowan, and Cowan (2006) found marital satisfaction was less negatively affected among participants in a couple support program in the transition to parenthood than among comparison participants, indicating the effectiveness of the preventive group intervention. Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Kahen-Johnson, and Measelle (2005) reported multiple long-term beneficial effects of a 16-week preventive intervention with a marital or parenting emphasis, respectively, for children in the transition to elementary school.

Developmental implications

Previous research has established relationships between marital discord and parenting (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Erel & Burman, 1995), and between marital discord and children's psychosocial adjustment (Jouriles, Bourg, & Farris, 1991; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). Evidence from numerous studies supports that the conflict and hostility in the interparental relationship will "spill over" into the parent-child relationship, so that parents become less emotionally responsive, monitor their children's behavior less, and use less effective disciplinary strategies (Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 1998, 2000; Jouriles & Farris, 1992; Kitzmann, 2000; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Thus, we expect that providing parents with evidence-based information regarding marital conflict will lead to increases in constructive marital conflict, and those improvements will lead to positive changes in other family processes over time, including improved developmental trajectories for children. For example, Cowan et al. (2005) showed that improvements in marital conflict as a function of preventive interventions targeting marital conflict were also linked with improvements in parenting and child outcomes. Thus, in the current study, parents assigned to the self-treatment group could be expected to evidence improvements in parenting as a result of ob-

served improvements in their knowledge of marital conflict, consistent with our developmental theory of change.

From a process-oriented perspective, children develop over time as a result of the multiple, complex processes that arise from the ongoing interactions between the child and the environment within and outside the family (Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000). This transactional relationship between parenting behaviors and children's functioning is both affected by, and has implications for children's developmental level (Cummings et al., 2000). Longitudinal methodology allows for the testing of such dynamic models of family and child functioning over the course of development (Cowan et al., 2005; Zhou, Sandler, Millsap, Wolchik, & Dawson-McClure, 2008).

Specifically, modeling the trajectories of change across repeated assessments of marital conflict, parenting, and parent and child functioning allows for testing the proposed theory of change. Reflecting an advance over past approaches to testing longitudinal outcomes of preventative interventions, the change-to-change model approach proposed by Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Connell (1998) provides an innovative and sophisticated approach for addressing these questions. The change-to-change model examines changes in one trajectory (e.g., knowledge of marital conflict) as a function of changes in another (e.g., parenting). This data analytic approach is particularly sensitive to relations between changes in 1) marital functioning and parents' thought processes and 2) the potential family-wide implications of these changes over time. Change-to-change models are consistent with the transactional model of parent and child development in that they examine the development of the target variable as a function of changes in the antecedent variable over time (Skinner et al., 1998). In this way, we will examine the relationship between improvements in parents' knowledge of marital conflict and any changes in their parenting practices, observed marital conflict characteristics, and reports of child functioning.

Conceptualization and rationale for the HCHK Prevention Program

Research on distinctions between constructive and destructive marital conflict guided the development of our psychoeducational program (Cummings & Davies, 2002). A consistent finding is that it is not *whether* couples have conflict, but *how* they handle conflict, that is most pertinent to the well being of adults, children, and families. With regard to developmental processes, distinctions between constructive and destructive marital conflict behaviors have significant implications for the well being of couples and children (e.g., Cox et al., 2001; Notarius & Markman, 1993; Sturge-Apple, Davies & Cummings, 2006). Recent work suggests that verbal and nonverbal hostility, defensiveness, and negative emotionality may be classified as destructive conflict behaviors, as indexed by children's negative emotional and behavioral responding, and by children's negative cognitions about the marital relationship (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold, & Shelton, 2003; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). In turn, these negative cognitive responses to destructive conflict have been associated with behavior problems (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003, 2004; Laurenceau et al., 2004). By contrast, support, problem solving, positive emotionality, conflict resolution, and constructiveness are classified as constructive conflict behaviors, based on children's positive or neutral reactions (Cummings et al., 2003; Goeke-Morey et al., 2003; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Papp, 2007).

The present psychoeducational program was further guided by theoretical models based on emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994) and attachment theory (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999) emphasizing the significance of developing and maintaining strong emotional bonds during marital conflict. For both adults and children, secure relationships are linked with a greater sense of well being, safety, and confidence in the stability of family relationships (Feeney, 1999; Waters & Cummings, 2000). Previous research has also

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