



# Influence of marital conflict on young children's aggressive behavior in South Korea: The mediating role of child maltreatment

Hyun-Sim Doh <sup>a,\*</sup>, Nana Shin <sup>b,1</sup>, Min-Jung Kim <sup>a,2</sup>, Jun Sung Hong <sup>c,3</sup>, Mi-Kyung Choi <sup>d,4</sup>, Sangwon Kim <sup>a,5</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Child Development, College of Social Science, Ewha Womans University, Daehyun-dong 11-1, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, 120-750, Republic of Korea

<sup>b</sup> Auburn University, Human Development and Family Studies, 203 Spidle Hall, Auburn, AL 36849, USA

<sup>c</sup> University of Illinois, School of Social Work, 1010 W. Nevada Street, Urbana, IL 61801, USA

<sup>d</sup> Department of Child and Family Studies, College of Social Science, Duksung Women's University, Ssangmun-dong 419, Dobong-gu, Seoul, 132-714, Republic of Korea

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between marital conflict, child maltreatment, and young children's aggressive behavior in South Korea. Of particular interest is whether child maltreatment mediated the pathway between marital conflict and children's aggression. The participants consist of 349 mothers with 3-year-old children attending 20 daycare centers in Seoul. The mothers completed a questionnaire, which was composed of marital conflict, mothers' maltreatment, and children's aggression. Structural equation modeling was used to examine the mediating roles of mothers' maltreatment in the relationship between marital conflict and children's aggressive behavior. Results suggest that the effect of marital conflict on children's aggressive behavior was fully mediated by mothers' maltreatment. This model was invariant across both boys and girls. Findings from this study have major implications for research, practice, and policy regarding family violence and young children's aggressive behavior in South Korea.

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## 1. Introduction

For the past several decades, childhood aggression has been one of the most widely studied topics in child development. Longitudinal investigations have demonstrated that aggression is an important risk factor for future social, emotional, and psychological problems (Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006; Mathieson & Crick, 2010). As a result, a bulk of research has been dedicated to understanding factors associated with the development of aggressive behavior in children. Studies inspired by social learning theory (Bandura, 1973) emphasize social-environmental influences on the onset and development of aggressive behavior in children. Among possible social-environmental influences, family conflicts including marital conflict and child maltreatment have received considerable attention. Studies have reported that family conflicts are major predictors of children's aggression.

Marital conflict has been found to be associated with a wide range of children's adjustment problems (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000; Hetherington, Bridges,

& Insabella, 1998). Children who are frequently exposed to marital conflict between parents are at heightened risk of adjustment and behavioral problems (Becker & McCloskey, 2002; McDonald, Jouriles, Tart, & Minze, 2009; Roode, Dickson, Herbison, & Paul, 2009). Research on children's aggression has also provided significant support for the correlation between children's aggressive behavior and lack of family cohesion (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Zelli, & Huesmann, 1996) and inter-parental violence (Baldry, 2003). These findings are in line with Bandura's (1973) social learning theory, which proposed that children, particularly girls who witnessed their mother being abused by her spouse or intimate-partner might learn that aggression and violence are appropriate responses to interpersonal conflict (Baldry, 2003; Bauer et al., 2006). These findings also support Widom's (1989) proposition that exposure to conflict at home is antecedent to the development of aggressive and antisocial behavior in children (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990).

Negative parenting practices are significant risk factors contributing to the development of children's aggressive behavior. Cullerton-Sen et al. (2008) argued that maltreatment may adversely affect children's internal working models (i.e., the perception of themselves as worthy and competent and of others as caring and responsive) and their emotional regulation abilities. These children may internalize feelings of hostility, fear, and rejection, which can contribute to difficulties in regulating anger and frustrations (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001). As a result, they are at increased risk of developing an angry and hyper-vigilant style of interpersonal interactions outside the home (Dodge, 1991). In fact, a number of studies have shown that both harsh parenting

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +82 2 3277 3104.

E-mail addresses: [simdoh@ewha.ac.kr](mailto:simdoh@ewha.ac.kr) (H.-S. Doh), [nzs0002@auburn.edu](mailto:nzs0002@auburn.edu) (N. Shin), [longmin@hanmail.net](mailto:longmin@hanmail.net) (M.-J. Kim), [jhong23@illinois.edu](mailto:jhong23@illinois.edu) (J.S. Hong), [dmkchoi@duksung.ac.kr](mailto:dmkchoi@duksung.ac.kr) (M.-K. Choi), [swkim@ewha.ac.kr](mailto:swkim@ewha.ac.kr) (S. Kim).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 205 753 0477.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +82 10 5493 2906.

<sup>3</sup> Tel.: +1 217 244 9208.

<sup>4</sup> Tel.: +82 10 4696 0531.

<sup>5</sup> Tel.: +82 2 3277 4384.

(Herrenkohl, Egolf, & Herrenkohl, 1997; Shields & Cicchetti, 1998; Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994) and lack of parental involvement (Knutson, Degarmo, & Reid, 2004) could put children at higher risk of developing aggressive behavior. In a study directly testing the pathway from child maltreatment to aggression, Manly, Kim, Rogosch, and Cicchetti (2001) found that maltreated children were more aggressive than non-maltreated children.

The association between marital conflict and negative parenting has been also well documented (Casaneuva et al., 2009; Edelson, 2004; Kelleher et al., 2008). Mothers who frequently experience marital conflict or violence are more likely to maltreat their children (Mohr & Tulman, 2000; Osofsky, 2003; Shin, 2001; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009), as they are also more likely to experience mental and emotional health problems, which compromise their parenting practices (Belsky & Vondra, 1987). The parenting style of these mothers is normally characterized as coercive and restrictive (Park & Koh, 2004), as they tend to exhibit physically abusive (Hart et al., 1998) and neglectful (Youn et al., 2005) parenting behaviors. A meta-analytic study conducted by Erel and Burman (1995) also reports that marital conflict between parents was significantly and negatively linked to the quality of parenting.

Although the pathway from marital conflict to harsh and neglectful parenting, and subsequently to aggression has been established, little research has examined the role of parenting in the association between marital conflict and child aggression. Despite the significance of research findings and theoretical support linking marital conflict and young children's aggression, it is unlikely that children who experience marital conflict at home immediately display aggressive behavioral tendencies (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). Instead, violence emerges in some children through complex pathways where the child's risk for aggressive behavior occurs. This raises a hypothesis that parenting styles associated with marital conflict might account for the link between marital conflict and child aggression. Considering that different types of family conflict might co-occur in the same family, and the presence of one type of family conflict can be a strong predictor of the other (Tomison, 2000), we examine mothers' maltreatment (including physical and emotional abuse, and neglect) as a potential mediator that explains the association between marital conflict and child aggression, which can vary depending on the gender of the child.

In addition, this hypothesized relationship was tested in a sample of South Korean mothers with young children. Research on aggressive and problem behaviors of young children is relatively recent in South Korea (Jung, 2005; Kim, Doh, Hong, & Choi, 2011; Park & Doh, 2006; Park & Lee, 2002), and few studies have examined the association between family conflict (i.e., marital conflict between parents and maltreatment) and young children's aggressive behavior. Existing findings reveal that children exposed to inter-parental conflict (Kim, 2007; Kim et al., 2011; Yim, 2004) and abused at home (Kim, 2006; Kim et al., 2011; Park, 2000) are at risk of exhibiting aggressive behavior. A limited number of researchers in South Korea have also found significant support for the association between marital conflict between parents and maltreatment (Park & Koh, 2004; Youn, Kang, & Lee, 2005). We expect that findings from a South Korean sample will add more insight to the pathways between marital conflict and aggression via mothers' maltreatment.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design and sample

We conducted a cross-sectional study on the association between marital conflict and young children's aggressive behavior in South Korea. Considering the importance of developing primary prevention and intervention strategies for aggressive behavior, young children were selected for this study. Of the 421 surveys, 359 were completed and returned. Exclusionary criteria included incomplete surveys and

children who either did not reside with their mothers, and children who were not three years of age. Three hundred and forty-nine three-year old children ( $M = 42$  months,  $SD = 3.32$ ; 184 boys and 165 girls) met the criteria for aggressive behaviors as indicated in Child Behavior Checklist, such as 'getting in fights with other kids', 'bullying', and 'feeling of anger and rage' (see Verhulst & Van der Ende, 1993).

### 2.2. Measures

The study instruments comprised measurements on marital conflict, mothers' maltreatment, and children's aggression. All measures used a four-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = almost never, 3 = sometimes, 4 = always).

#### 2.2.1. Marital conflict

Marital conflict was measured using items from the Children's Perception of Inter-Parental Conflict (CPIC) scale developed by Grych, Sied, and Fincham (1992) and translated into Korean by Lee and Kwon (1997). The K-CPIC scale consists of 44 items, which are divided into eight subscales consisting of frequency, severity, contents, solution, perceived threat, coping strategies, self-blame, and triangular relationships. Eleven items were used for this study: seven on frequency and four on severity. Because the K-CPIC scale measures children's perceptions of inter-parental conflict, the questions were revised to measure parents' perceptions of marital conflict. Examples of the items include, 'We often argue' and 'We complain about one another at home' from the frequency subscale; and 'We get very angry when we argue' and 'We throw things while arguing' from the severity subscale. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of internal consistency was .85 for frequency and .82 for severity.

#### 2.2.2. Mothers' maltreatment

Mothers' maltreatment was measured using the Parent-to-Child version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus et al., 1998), which was translated into Korean by the researchers and back-translated into English in order to ensure the same meaning. This scale comprises 24 items: four on non-violent childrearing, five on psychological abuse (e.g., 'Threaten to send away or kick out the child' and 'Threaten to beat the child'), ten on physical abuse (e.g., 'I hit the child on the buttock with my hands', 'I hit the child on the buttocks with a hard object, such as a belt, comb, or a stick', and 'I hit the child in the face or ear'), and five on parental neglect (e.g., 'I do not feed the child' and 'I do not express my love to the child due to personal difficulties'). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of internal consistency was .66 for psychological abuse, .88 for physical abuse, and .62 for parental neglect.

#### 2.2.3. Children's aggression

Children's aggression was measured using items from the Preschool Social Behavior Scale – Parent Form (PSBS-P; Crick, Casas, & Mosher 1997). PSBS-P measures children's aggressive and pro-social behaviors as rated by parents. The scale was translated into Korean and back-translated into English (Kim et al., 2011). PSBS-P subscales are composed of overt aggression, relational aggression, pro-social behavior, and depression. For this study, six items from overt aggression (e.g., 'This child kicks or hits others', 'This child pushes or shoves other children', and 'This child breaks other children's things') and six from relational aggression (e.g., 'This child tells others not to play with or be a peer's friend' and 'This child excludes another child') were utilized. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of internal consistency was .81 for overt aggression and .85 for relational aggression.

### 2.3. Procedure

The survey was administered from December 2010 to January 2011 to children in 20 daycare centers. Because universities and research

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