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Marital conflict and parental responses to infant negative emotions: Relations with toddler emotional regulation

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ABSTRACT

According to family systems theory, children's emotional development is likely to be influenced by family interactions at multiple levels, including marital, mother–child, and father–child interactions, as well as by interrelations between these levels. The purpose of the present study was to examine parents' marital conflict and mothers' and fathers' distressed responses to their infant's negative emotions, assessed when their child was 8 and 24 months old, in addition to interactions between parents' marital conflict and their distressed responses, as predictors of their toddler's negative and flat/withdrawn affect at 24 months. Higher marital conflict during infancy and toddlerhood predicted both increased negative and increased flat/withdrawn affect during toddlerhood. In addition, toddlers' negative (but not flat) affect was related to mothers' distressed responses, but was only related to father's distressed responses when marital conflict was high. Implications of this study for parent education and family intervention were discussed.

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1. Introduction

Children's development of the ability to regulate their emotional distress enables them to cope with frustration, fear, and anxiety, so they may effectively explore their environment and engage in positive social interactions (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994). Although young children's ability to regulate negative emotion is influenced by their inborn temperament (Goldsmith et al., 1987), the family environment is also recognized as a major contributor to children's emotional expressivity. According to family systems theory, the marital and parent–child subsystems are interdependent predictors of toddlers' later emotionality (Cox & Paley, 1997); for example, marital conflict can spill over to create increased tension and negativity in parent–child interactions (Cummings & Davies, 1994) and increase risk for insecure attachment (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 2000). Research indicates that children's emotional dysregulation has been linked to both marital conflict (Katz & Gottman, 1993) and to negative patterns of parent–child interaction, including negative emotional socialization (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). However, studies have not yet examined whether marital conflict and both mothers' and fathers' emotional socialization of their infants predict children's later emotional expressivity. Moreover, emotional dysregulation includes not only underregulation of emotions, characterized by frequent display of

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negative emotions, but also overregulation or suppression of emotions, characterized by flat affect or emotional withdrawal (Cole et al., 1994); yet little is known about family antecedents of flat/withdrawn affect in young children (Martins, Soares, Martins, Tereno, & Osório, 2012). Thus, the goal of the present study is to investigate the unique contributions and interactions of marital conflict and both parents' emotional socialization during infancy to predicting their toddlers' later negative and flat emotional expressivity in family interactions.

1.1. *The influence of marital conflict on infants' emotional expressivity*

Numerous studies done with older children indicate that marital conflict often has particularly deleterious effects on children's emotional expressivity and regulation (Katz & Gottman, 1993). Marital conflict is also likely to have negative effects on the development of emotion regulation in infancy; for example, in one study, infants whose parents reported high levels of conflict displayed poorer emotion regulation (Porter, Wouden-Miller, Silva, & Porter, 2003). Studies with older children indicate that marital conflict can have *direct* effects on children's emotional development when children witness marital conflict, as well as *indirect* effects through spillover of tension from the marital relationship to parent–child interactions (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Erel & Burman, 1995). However, few studies have examined the pathways that connect marital conflict to emotion regulation and expression in infancy.

Several studies have found that simply observing marital conflict can be stressful to infants, leading to emotional dysregulation. For example, infants scanned using fMRI while sleeping showed greater neural responses to angry vocal tones when mothers reported higher marital conflict, indicating that these infants had been primed by previous experiences of high levels of marital conflict between their parents to experience future negative tones more intensely (Graham, Fisher, & Pfeifer, 2013). Although few studies have examined the relation of marital conflict to emotional expressivity in infants and toddlers, results of one study indicated that infants showed more negative emotions when parents were engaged in destructive conflict with each other than when they were involved in constructive conflict (Du Rocher Schudlich, White, Fleischhauer, & Fitzgerald, 2011). In addition, parents' reports of verbally aggressive marital conflict, in combination with reports that infants were exposed to marital conflict, have been associated with higher levels of infants' withdrawn emotion regulation (Crockenberg, Leerkes, & Lekka, 2007). These studies suggest that direct exposure to marital conflict during infancy is associated with higher levels of both negative and flat/withdrawn emotional expressivity.

There is also considerable evidence that parents' distress due to high marital conflict can spill over into their interactions with their children, possibly leading to greater emotional dysregulation in their children (Erel & Burman, 1995; Katz & Gottman, 1996). However, the study by Crockenberg et al. (2007), cited above, is the only study we know of that has examined direct versus indirect relations between marital conflict and infant emotionality. Although results of this study indicated that infants' withdrawn emotionality was directly predicted by their exposure to aggressive marital conflict, maternal caregiving quality did not mediate this relation. Although father involvement moderated the relation between marital conflict and infant withdrawal, father–infant interaction was not examined, so indirect effects for fathers could not be assessed.

Inclusion of fathers may be particularly important since spillover effects from marital conflict to parenting have often been found to affect fathers more than mothers, a phenomenon termed the fathering vulnerability hypothesis (Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2007). For example, lower sensitivity (Owen & Cox, 1997) and lower synchrony (Lundy, 2002) in parent–infant interactions has been found to mediate the relation between marital conflict and insecure attachment for fathers, but not for mothers. This may be because mothers are usually primary caregivers and as such, they may be less able to withdraw from the parenting relationship than fathers (Crockenberg et al., 2007), and may even become more invested in parenting to compensate for decreased marital quality (Wang & Crane, 2001).

1.2. *Parents' distressed responses to infants' negative emotions*

The development of infants' ability to regulate their negative emotions is highly related to the quality of their early interactions with their caregivers (Kopp, 1989). Caregivers' sensitivity to infant distress has been found to predict infant's later security of attachment to the caregiver (van IJzendoorn, 1995), which has in turn been linked with more effective emotion regulation during early childhood (Gilliom, Shaw, Beck, Schonberg, & Lukon, 2002). But what if parents display distressed emotions themselves when they respond to their infant's emotional distress? Numerous studies of emotional socialization done with older (preschool or school-aged) children using self-report measures have shown that when parents report responding to children's emotional distress by displaying emotional distress themselves, children show greater emotional negativity and dysregulation (Buck, 1984; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1994; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001). Surprisingly, however, very little research has examined how parents' distressed responses to their infants' distress relate to their children's later emotion expressivity, even though parents' distressed responses may have an even greater impact during infancy than later in childhood.

Infants may not understand the meaning of their parents' verbalizations, but they do react to the emotional tone of the parents' nonverbal communications, including their facial expressions and voice tone (Mumme, Fernald, & Herrera, 1996; Sorce, Emde, Campos, & Klinnert, 1985). Thus, if an infant pulls a vase off the table and gets hurt, and the parent rushes to pick the child up and says, "It's okay, your okay", but uses an agitated tone of voice and displays an alarmed or angry facial expression, the infant is unlikely to be comforted. Rather, the parents' distress may signal to the infant that he or she has good reason to be upset, serving as type of social referencing (Campos, Sorce, Emde, & Svejda, 2013). Moreover, distressed

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