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Familial predictors of sibling and romantic-partner conflict resolution: comparing late adolescents from intact and divorced families

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Abstract

The present study examined whether predictors of romantic-partner conflict may vary as a function of family structure. Using a cross-sectional design, we tested a mediation model of conflict resolution behaviours among late adolescents from intact ($n = 185$) and divorced ($n = 87$) families. Adolescents rated conflict resolution behaviours in five dyadic relationships: interparental, mother–adolescent, father–adolescent, sibling, and romantic partner. Mother–adolescent and father–adolescent conflict resolution behaviours mediated the relationship between interparental and sibling conflict resolution. Moreover, both mother–adolescent and sibling conflict resolution behaviours mediated the relationship between interparental and romantic-partner conflict resolution behaviours. This model was supported for both positive and negative behaviours, and it applied equally well to adolescents from intact and divorced families. Results are discussed in the context of social learning theories and support conflict resolution behaviours within the family spilling over into romantic relationships for adolescents from both intact and divorced families.

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Introduction

Almost all close, personal relationships will experience conflict, and the successful resolution of conflict is essential to relationship satisfaction and well-being. The family is often the primary context for learning and practicing effective conflict resolution behaviours (Patterson, 1982). Research suggests that parents' methods of resolving conflict within the family are imitated by their adolescents within sibling relationships (Reese-Weber, 2000) and romantic relationships (Martin, 1990; Reese-Weber & Bartle-Haring, 1998). Such research has typically been based on adolescents from intact families only, which does not provide information about how conflict resolution behaviours develop in divorced families. Studies have found that late adolescents from divorced families have more negative attitudes regarding romantic relationships than late adolescents from intact families (Giuliani, Iafate, & Rosnati, 1998; Summers, Forehand, Armistead, & Tannenbaum, 1998); however, differences in predictors of family and romantic-partner conflict resolution behaviours between adolescents from divorced versus intact families have not been examined. The present study provided such a test.

Social learning theory suggests that parents serve as models to their children, and that children imitate their parents' behaviours in their own relationships (Bandura, 1989). As such, observing and practicing conflict behaviours within the family provides a number of possible learning opportunities. Adolescents can observe two parents engaging in conflict with each other (termed *interparental conflict*), note the conflict resolution behaviours that are effective and ineffective, and then practice conflict resolution behaviours with their parents and siblings. Indeed, research indicates that children's positive behaviours with siblings are predicted by low levels of overt interparental conflict, and negative sibling behaviours are predicted by high levels of overt interparental conflict (Brody, Stoneman, & Burke, 1987). In addition, higher frequencies of interparental conflict are related to higher frequencies of sibling conflict concurrently and 1 year later (Brody, Stoneman, McCoy, & Forehand, 1992).

The relationship between interparental conflict and sibling conflict may be mediated by the parent-child relationship (Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1994; Erel, Margolin, & John, 1998). Reese-Weber (2000) found that the relationship between interparental and sibling conflict resolution was mediated by both mother-adolescent and father-adolescent conflict resolution behaviours for both positive and negative conflict behaviours. This mediation relationship is not surprising given the direct association between parent-adolescent conflict behaviours and sibling behaviours that has been consistently found in Patterson's (1982, 1986) work. Patterson's coercive family model indicates that parent-adolescent interactions in which parents fail to stop their child/adolescent from escalating conflict and continue to engage with their adolescent may result in increasingly negative exchanges. Furthermore, the coercive exchanges between parents and adolescents can lead to similar interactions between adolescents and their sibling (Patterson, 1986). In sum, the conflict behaviours expressed within the interparental dyad are likely to spill over into the parent-adolescent dyadic relationship (Erel & Burman, 1995), and behaviours displayed in the parent-adolescent relationship are likely to be displayed in sibling conflict.

Understanding the expression of conflict within the family is paramount not only because of the importance of effective family functioning but also because family behaviours have been linked to behaviours in personal relationships outside the family. One personal relationship outside the family that becomes increasingly important during adolescence is the romantic relationship

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