

Pathways from marital aggression to infant emotion regulation: The development of withdrawal in infancy

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Abstract

Associations between marital conflict and infant emotion regulation exist, but explanatory pathways have not been explored. For older children, parental behavior partially mediates this association through a “spillover” process. We test: associations between mothers’ and fathers’ verbally aggressive marital conflict, infant temperament, and infant withdrawal; mediating effects of negative maternal behavior, and moderating effects of infant temperament, exposure to marital arguments, and contact with father. Eighty mothers, 73 fathers, and their 6-month-old infants participated; parents reported marital aggression prenatally, mothers reported infant exposure to arguments, direct caregiving by father, and infant temperament at 5 months. Negative maternal behavior, infant withdrawal, distress to novelty, activity, and look away were observed at 6 months. Mothers’ and fathers’ aggressive marital conflict predicted infant withdrawal, interactively with exposure to marital arguments and extent of father caregiving, as did infant temperament and negative maternal behavior. Maternal behavior did not mediate between marital conflict and withdrawal.

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Keywords: Family systems; Marital conflict; Emotion regulation; Distress to novelty; Negative maternal behavior; Father caregiving

1. Marital aggression, parenting, and infant withdrawal

Researchers have linked emotion regulation behaviors concurrently with reductions and increases in negative affect and predictively to later behavior, indicating their developmental significance. To date, research on the origins of emotion regulation has focused predominantly on proximal caregiver behavior as a likely developmental influence. More recently, in conjunction with a systems theory approach to development (Cox & Paley, 1997; Sameroff, 1994), investigators have become interested in the links between marital conflict and infant emotion regulation, although the pathways by which marital conflict and infant emotion regulation are connected have yet to be explored. In studies of older children, parental behavior mediates between marital conflict and child behavior through a “spillover” process (Crockenberg & Covey, 1991; Erel & Burman, 1995) that may also operate in infancy. In this study, we extend this research to infants, testing: (1) associations between mothers’ and fathers’ marital conflict and infant withdrawal, a specific and arguably maladaptive type of infant emotion regulation; (2) the mediating effect of negative maternal behavior on that association; (3) the moderating effects of infant temperament, infant exposure to marital arguments, and extent of father caregiving on the links between parents’ marital conflict and infant withdrawal.

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1.1. *Withdrawal as a type of emotion regulation*

Infant behaviors that begin to develop during the first year of life are thought to regulate negative infant emotions (Rothbart, Ziaie, & O'Boyle, 1992). These include self-comforting and redirecting attention, considered adaptive regulation behaviors because they are associated with reductions in negative affect (Buss & Goldsmith, 1998; Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2004; Stifter & Braungart, 1995) that allow infants to remain engaged with their environment. As a consequence, infants are available for social interaction and other experiences that promote learning.

In contrast, withdrawal occurs when infants avoid a distressing event by moving away from it bodily, closing their eyes, or some combination of these behaviors that restrict their engagement with the environment, not just with the distressing event. Although withdrawal is sometimes effective in reducing negative affect in 6-month-old infants and in toddlers (Buss & Goldsmith, 1998; Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2004; Diener & Mangelsdorf, 1999), and is adaptive in that sense, it does so at the expense of restricting social contact and experiences that foster learning. Thus, infants who learn early to use withdrawal as a predominant response to stress associated with novel events miss out on opportunities to develop more adaptive regulation behaviors, such as attention shifting, contributing to continuity over time in their tendency to withdraw. In a recent study, Crockenberg and Leerkes (2006) reported that among negatively reactive infants, those who at 6 months withdrew to a greater extent from a novel toy were more anxious at 2.5 years than comparable infants who withdrew less. This supports the view of withdrawal as maladaptive developmentally, albeit sometimes effective in reducing distress. It indicates also the importance of identifying the conditions that foster withdrawal in infants.

1.2. *Marital predictors of differences in infant emotion regulation*

Marital conflict, more specifically marital aggression, characterized by loud exchanges and expression of anger, is thought to impact children's emotions by virtue of the emotional/physiological reactions it triggers (direct effects) and through the spillover of angry feelings from the marital to the parent–child relationship (indirect effects). Empirical support for both types of effect is consistent during early childhood and beyond, though less extensive in infancy.

1.2.1. *Direct effects*

Several investigative teams have reported inflated levels of specific negative emotions, such as anger, sadness, and fear, among children exposed to verbally aggressive marital arguments between their parents (e.g., Crockenberg & Forgays, 1996; Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001; El-Sheikh, 1997; O'Hearn, Margolin, & John, 1997). In Crockenberg and Langrock (2001), children's specific negative emotions were associated with later behavioral problems that reflect poor emotion regulation, and anger predicted externalizing behavior only for 6-year-old girls who lacked good regulation skills. To our knowledge, there is no evidence linking marital conflict directly with poor emotion regulation or maladaptive coping in this age group (Kerig, 2001), although some children avoid marital conflicts between their parents, presumably in an effort to reduce their own distress.

In contrast, in recent studies with infants, marital conflict was associated with insecure attachment relationships, a correlate of poor emotion regulation (Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 2000), and directly with poor infant emotion regulation. The latter effect was apparent in atypical patterns of vagal regulation (i.e., higher vagal suppression, a presumed regulation response, during the normal play and reunion episodes of the still-face procedure) reported by Moore, Calkins, Propper, Mariaskin, and Hutchinson (2004), and in lower ratings of emotion regulation observed during a developmental assessment (Porter, Wouden-Miller, Silva, & Porter, 2003). However, the pathways by which these effects occur have yet to be explored. In this study, we test direct and indirect effects of marital conflict on infant emotion regulation, specifically infant withdrawal. In our view, withdrawal is likely to be elevated among infants whose parents engage in aggressive marital conflicts because, during the first half-year of life, they often lack regulatory behaviors available to older children exposed to marital conflicts.

Additionally, infant temperament, specifically infant negative reactivity, which refers to the infant's predisposition to react negatively and intensely, may increase the likelihood of a negative impact of marital conflict on infant withdrawal. This could happen if negatively reactive infants respond more quickly to arousing events, increasing the need for regulation and reducing opportunities for infants to learn more adaptive ways of regulating negative emotion. Ingoldsby, Shaw, Owens, and Winslow (1999) reported such an effect at 24 months for males; marital conflict interacted with infant negative emotionality, as measured on the Infant Characteristics Questionnaire (ICQ), to predict both distress and

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