Emotional Expression in the Family as a Context for Children’s Appraisals of Interparental Conflict

Gregory M. Fosco and John H. Grych
Marquette University

The cognitive contextual framework proposes that the emotional climate in the family plays a role in shaping how children perceive and evaluate interparental conflict. This hypothesis was tested in a sample of 144 8- to 12-year-old children and their parents. Children in families that expressed high levels of negative affect and low levels of positive affect reported greater self-blame for conflict, but parents’ expressiveness did not predict children’s threat appraisals. Positive and negative expressiveness moderated the association between exposure to parental conflict and children’s internalizing and externalizing problems. These data suggest that the broader family context can shape the meaning of conflict to children and increase understanding of the conditions under which parental discord leads to child maladjustment.

Keywords: interparental conflict, context, emotional climate, emotional expressiveness, children’s maladjustment

Conceptual models seeking to understand the effects of interparental conflict on children have emphasized cognitive and emotional processes as mediators. In the cognitive-contextual framework, children’s appraisals of interpersonal conflict play a central role in explaining how witnessing parental discord can lead to child maladjustment (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Appraisals are children’s subjective evaluations of the interaction and capture the meaning of the conflict in terms of its perceived cause, course, and consequences. Although appraisals are often viewed as purely cognitive constructs, they have affective elements as well. For example, threat appraisals involve both the perception that something important to the child is at risk and the feeling of fear. Appraisals are proposed to mediate the impact of parental disagreements on children, and empirical studies of children from age 7 through age 18 provide support for their role as an intervening process linking exposure to interparental conflict and adjustment problems (e.g., Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums, & Lendich, 1999; Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003; Jouriles, Spiller, Stephens, McDonald, & Swank, 2000). In particular, children who perceive conflict as more threatening have elevated levels of internalizing problems, and those who report greater self-blame for conflict have greater internalizing and externalizing problems.

Other conceptual models also underscore the importance of children’s perceptions of the meaning of conflict for understanding its effects. The emotional security hypothesis conceptualizes children’s emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to interparental discord as indications that conflict is perceived as a threat to the stability of the marriage (Davies & Cummings, 1994, 1998; Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002). Children who exhibit greater emotional insecurity in response to conflict, in turn, have elevated levels of internalizing and externalizing problems (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1998; Davies et al., 2002). Finally, the specific emotions model holds that the type of emotion children experience when they observe parental discord reflects their appraisal of its potential effect on important goals (Crockenberg & Forgays, 1996; Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001). For example, anxiety arises when a goal is threatened, whereas sadness occurs when a goal is perceived as lost (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001). Specific emotional reactions, in turn, have been proposed to give rise to particular kinds of adjustment problems.

Given the central role accorded to children’s appraisals for explaining the effect of interparental conflict on their adjustment, it is critical to understand the reasons that children make particular kinds of appraisals. One salient influence on their perception of conflict is the way in which it is expressed. Children report more threat, self-blame, and emotional distress when parents exhibit higher levels of hostility and aggression, fail to resolve their disagreements, and discuss child-related topics (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Duchewich, 2002; Grych, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1993). How-
ever, the behavior of and emotion expressed by parents do not fully account for the appraisals children make; there are individual differences in children’s appraisals even when they are presented with identical, standardized conflict vignettes in laboratory settings (e.g., Grych & Fincham, 1993). Therefore, it is necessary to consider other factors that may influence how children perceive and evaluate interparental conflict.

According to the cognitive-contextual framework, appraisals are also influenced by the broader context in which conflict occurs (Grych, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Grych and Fincham (1990) identified four factors that could affect how children perceive and respond to parental disagreements. Two, gender and temperament, are characteristics of children. Several studies have examined the role of gender in children’s appraisals, and although there is some evidence that girls are more sensitive to conflict than are boys (e.g., Grych, 1998), most studies have failed to find gender differences in the nature of the associations between conflict, appraisals, and adjustment (for a review, see Davies & Lindsey, 2001). Only one published study has examined children’s temperament in relation to their response to parental conflict (Davies & Windle, 2001). Davies and Windle (2001) assessed several dimensions of temperament in early adolescents and found that poor task orientation and poor rhythmicity (irregularity in sleep, sleep and daily habits) were related to delinquent behavior but that adaptability and activity level did not moderate the association between conflict and adjustment.

The other two contextual factors identified by Grych and Fincham (1990) are characteristics of the family. Children’s history of exposure to conflict in the family has been studied extensively, and this work has shown consistently that children who have witnessed hostile, aggressive parental conflicts tend to find disagreements to be more threatening and distressing (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1998; Davies et al., 2002; Grych, 1998; Gordis, Margolin, & John, 1997). This sensitizing effect may reflect a process in which past experiences set up expectations for how new conflicts will unfold, thus priming children to respond more intensely than may be called for in the situation (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001).

The final hypothesized context factor is the family’s emotional climate. Grych and Fincham (1990) proposed that emotional qualities of family interactions and relationships could shape how children perceive a particular parental disagreement. For example, a disagreement occurring in a family characterized by warm and supportive relationships is proposed to be less threatening to children than is a conflict occurring in a family marked by critical and hostile interactions because it is less likely to be perceived as jeopardizing the harmony and stability of the family. The only study to examine indices of family functioning as potential moderators of children’s response to conflict was conducted by Davies et al. (2002). They found that the link between exposure to parental discord and children’s emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to conflict was stronger when families were less stable and parents reported poorer marital quality and communication; in contrast, family cohesion and parent–child attachment did not moderate this association.

Thus, there is preliminary evidence that broader qualities of family functioning are related to children’s perceptions of interparental conflict. Much work remains to be done, however, in identifying which family processes are important for shaping children’s appraisals and responses to parental disagreements. Because conflict typically involves the display of negative affect, parents’ general style of expressing emotion is likely to be particularly relevant for appraising the meaning of a specific interparental interaction. Research on emotional expressiveness supports its potential significance in this context. This literature indicates that the manner in which parents display their emotions plays a major role in shaping the affective climate of the family (Eisenberg et al., 2003) and that the quality and intensity of parents’ affective expression are associated with children’s expression, experience, and regulation of emotion (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2003; Halberstadt, Crisp, & Eaton, 1999; Halberstadt & Eaton, 2002; King & Emmons, 1990). The goal of the present study was to examine parents’ emotional expression in the family as a contextual factor for understanding children’s appraisals of interparental conflict and the association between conflict and child adjustment. We begin by considering how emotional expressiveness may affect children’s perceptions of threat and self-blame.

**Emotional Expression as a Contextual Factor**

Theory and research on parents’ expression of affect in the family indicate that it shapes children’s beliefs about what kinds of emotional displays are normal and expected in close relationships (Denham, 1998; Dunsmore & Halberstadt, 1997; Tomkins, 1963). One implication of this idea is that children will become accustomed to particular styles of emotional expression, which in turn could affect how salient and distressing a particular interaction would be perceived to be. For example, if it is common for family members to yell at each other, then hostility expressed during a parental disagreement may not strike children as particularly threatening or meaningful, and consequently, they may pay little attention to it. On the other hand, if anger is rarely expressed in the family, then the same hostile interaction is likely to be highly salient and potentially upsetting to children. Given that attributional processing is elicited by events that are unexpected, personally relevant, and distressing, children are more likely to try to figure out why the conflict is happening in the latter case than in the former. This “normalization” hypothesis thus leads to the prediction that children whose parents rarely express negative affect would perceive parental conflict as more threatening and would be more likely to make an attribution for the event.

In contrast, it is possible that the sensitization effect documented for children’s exposure to parental discord is more global: Seeing their parents exhibit hostility in situations other than conflict may also increase children’s expectations that interparental disagreements will escalate. Thus, parental discord may be perceived as more threatening when parents frequently express anger toward other family members than in homes where the expression of negative affect is less common. The finding that children exposed to
high levels of negative affect in the family tend to experience more negative affect and regulate affect more poorly (Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2003) supports this hypothesis. The effect of high baseline levels of negative affect on children’s attributions is less clear but may decrease self-blame if anger is attributed to something stable about parents’ personalities or the quality of their relationship.

Whether frequent expressions of negative affect normalize interparental conflict or sensitize children to it may depend on the level of positive affect in the family. The tendency to experience and display positive affect is largely independent of the expression of negative affect, and therefore families could be high or low on either dimension (Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke, & Fox, 1995). In families that express high levels of both positive and negative affect, displays of anger may imply very little about the status of the marriage. Rather, anger simply reflects the family’s tendency to express affect demonstratively and most likely would be balanced by equally demonstrative displays of love and affection. However, anger may mean something quite different in families that exhibit high levels of negative affect and low levels of positive affect. The climate in these homes may be chronically critical and unsupportive, and expressions of anger that are not balanced by expressions of love may lead to sadness, fear, and uncertainty because they are further evidence that relationships are tenuous and unstable. Children in these families may also be more likely to blame themselves for discord in the marriage because frequent expressions of parental hostility and criticism may make them feel responsible for problems that arise in the family.

The Present Study

Guided by the cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990), the present study examined the idea that the meaning of interparental conflict is shaped by broader patterns of negative and positive affect in the family. We first tested the hypothesis that emotional expressiveness in the family is related to children’s perceptions of threat and self-blame when parental conflict occurs. We considered two possible effects of negative affect expression: that it would normalize conflict and thus be associated with lower perceived threat and self-blame or that it would further sensitize children to conflict, making it more threatening and increasing children’s feelings of self-blame. We assessed positive and negative affect separately to determine whether the relation between negative affect and appraisals depends on the level of positive affect in the family. Then, we considered whether patterns of emotional expression in the family moderated the association between children’s exposure to interparental conflict and their adjustment.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from several ethnically diverse elementary schools in a midsized, midwestern city. The sample included 144 families with children (48% girls) in the fourth or fifth grade (median age = 10 years, range = 8–12) whose parents had been cohabiting for at least 2 years. Eighty-five percent of the couples were married. On average, parents had been living together for 14 years ($SD = 5.35$). The sample was composed of children who described themselves as Caucasian (56.7%), African American (25.9%), Latino (6.3%), Asian (1.4%), biracial (7.0%), and “other” (2.8%). Family socioeconomic status was reported in $10,000 increments and ranged from under $10,000 per year to over $90,000 per year (mean = $50,000–$60,000).

Procedures

Children and their parents came to a university research lab together to participate in the study. After consent was obtained from each participant, they were given packets of questionnaires to fill out independently as part of a broader study. Two researchers were present while they were filling out surveys to answer any questions they had.

Measures

Interparental conflict. Children’s reports of parental conflict were assessed with the Conflict Properties scale from the Children’s Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Questionnaire (CPIC; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). This scale consists of 19 items measuring the frequency, intensity, and resolution of the conflicts children witness. Children rated items such as “I often see my parents arguing” and “My parents get really mad when they argue” on a three-point scale (1 = false, 2 = sort of true, 3 = true). The Conflict Properties scale has been shown to correlate with parental reports of conflict (e.g., $rs = .30–.39$; Grych et al., 1992) and with measures of child internalizing and externalizing problems (e.g., $rs = .19–.33$; Grych et al., 2003). It demonstrated acceptable reliability in the present sample ($C = .88$).

Appraisals of interparental conflict. Children completed the Threat and Self-Blame scales from the CPIC to assess their appraisals of parental conflict (Grych et al., 1992). The Threat scale consists of 12 items measuring level of threat felt by children and their perceived ability to cope with the conflict. Sample items include “I don’t know what to do when my parents have arguments” and “When my parents argue I worry that one of them will get hurt.” The Self-Blame scale consists of nine items and assesses children’s beliefs that they are at fault for the conflict and the extent to which they perceive it to be about them and includes items such as “Even if they don’t say it, I know I’m to blame when my parents argue” and “My parents’ arguments are usually about me.” The Threat and Self-Blame scales demonstrated adequate reliability in the present sample ($Cs = .78$ and .79, respectively).

Emotional expressiveness. Mothers and fathers filled out the Self-Expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire, Short Form (SEFQ; Halberstadt et al., 1995), which assesses the frequency with which they express positive and negative affect toward other family members. The Negative Expressiveness scale includes 12 items and is weighted toward what Halberstadt and Eaton (2002) called “negative-dominant” emotions (e.g., anger, criticism, disapproval) rather than toward “negative-submissive” emotions (e.g., disappointment, not handling tension well). Sample items include “Showing contempt for another’s actions,” “Showing dislike for someone,” and “Putting down other people’s interests.” Only one item refers directly to conflict (“Quarreling with another family member”); thus, there is little content overlap with the measure of interparental conflict used in the study. The Positive Expressiveness scale has 12 items, including “Telling family members how
happy you are,” “Praising someone for good work,” and “Expressing deep affection or love for someone.” All items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (rare occurrence) to 9 (frequent occurrence). The SEFQ has been shown in lab settings to correlate significantly with observations of parents’ emotional expressiveness (Halberstadt et al., 1995) and had adequate reliability for mothers (positivity $\alpha = .89$, negativity $\alpha = .86$) and fathers (positivity $\alpha = .86$, negativity $\alpha = .80$) in the present sample. To obtain more global measures of affect expression across parents, maternal and paternal reports were summed to form composites labeled parental positivity and parental negativity.

Children’s internalizing problems. Internalizing problems were assessed from both parent and child perspectives. Children filled out the Internalizing scales of the Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach, 1991a, 1991b), consisting of 12 items, and parents responded to the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991a), consisting of 21 items. Both scales capture symptoms of anxiety, depression, and withdrawn behaviors. Sample items include “I am too fearful or anxious” and “I cry a lot.” These scales had adequate reliability in the present sample ($\alpha_{YSR} = .85$; $\alpha_{CBCL: mom} = .85$, $\alpha_{dad} = .85$). Parent and child reports were combined to create a single variable representing internalizing problems. Consequently, mothers’ and fathers’ raw scores were first averaged together and then transformed to a z score, which was added to z-score values of children’s scores. This was done so that the scores reflect a balanced representation of parent and child reports and to avoid unduly weighting parents’ scores.

Children’s externalizing problems. Parents and children also reported on children’s externalizing behavior. Children responded to the YSR Externalizing scale, which consists of 16 items (Achenbach, 1991a, 1991b), and parents filled out the CBCL Externalizing scale, which consists of 35 items (Achenbach, 1991a). Sample items include “I argue a lot” and “I am mean to others.” Both scales had adequate reliability in the present sample ($\alpha_{YSR} = .80$; $\alpha_{CBCL: mom} = .92$, $\alpha_{dad} = .90$). Again, mothers’, fathers’, and children’s scores were combined by averaging the parents’ scores and using z-score transformations of the raw scores.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables were computed and are presented in Table 1.

Consistent with prior research, interparental conflict was associated with greater perceived threat and self-blame as well as higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems. It is not surprising that the degree of conflict between parents was related to broader patterns of affect expression in the family, but the expression of positive and negative affect were uncorrelated. Finally, children’s appraisals also were associated with the emotional climate, with ratings of threat and self-blame higher in more affectively negative families and lower in more positive families.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. IP-Conflict</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Threat</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Blame</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Positivity</td>
<td>—20*</td>
<td>—23**</td>
<td>—24**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Negativity</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>—12</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Internalizing</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>—26**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Externalizing</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>—21*</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Child age</td>
<td>—11</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>—12</td>
<td>—.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>12.77</td>
<td>10.33</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>168.17</td>
<td>89.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>10.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>20.60</td>
<td>21.72</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. IP Conflict = Children’s Perceptions of Interpersonal Conflict Questionnaire (CPIC) Conflict Properties scale; Threat = CPIC Threat scale; Blame = CPIC Blame scale; Positivity = Self-Expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire (SEFQ) Positive Expressiveness (mother + father); Negativity = SEFQ Negative Expressiveness (mother + father); Internalizing = internalizing problems (mother, father, child); Externalizing = externalizing problems (mother, father, child).

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Emotional Expression and Children’s Appraisals

The first goal of the present study was to examine the role of family positivity and negativity as contextual factors for children’s appraisals of interparental conflict. Hierarchical regression analyses were computed in which the Conflict Properties subscale of the CPIC and the Parental Positive and Parental Negativity subscales of the SEFQ were entered simultaneously in the first step. In the second step, the interaction terms for conflict and positivity, conflict and negativity, and positivity and negativity were entered to assess whether the link between conflict and appraisals differed depending on the level of positive or negative affect in the family and whether relations between negative affect and appraisals were moderated by positive affect. In the third step, a three-way interaction term was tested to account for a possible interaction between conflict, positivity, and negativity.

As shown in Table 2, children’s perceptions of threat were predicted by interparental conflict only ($\beta = .54, p < .01$); no other direct effects or interactions were significant. Self-blame, in contrast, had unique associations with both dimensions of affect expression (negative: $\beta = .17, p < .05$; positive: $\beta = -.18, p < .05$) and interparental conflict ($\beta = .24, p < .01$). Self-blame was higher in families expressing more conflict and negative emotional expression and lower in families reporting higher levels of positive affect expression. The interaction between positivity and negativity also was significant. We decomposed this interaction by com-
puting regressions between negative affect expression and self-blame at high (.5 SD) and low (-.5 SD) levels of positive affect (see Aiken & West, 1991). Also, consistent with Holmbeck’s (1997) guidelines, interparental conflict was included in the regression equations as a covariate because it had been tested as an interaction term and found to be nonsignificant. For children from families expressing low levels of positive affect, negative emotional expression was associated with increased levels of self-blame (β = .32, p < .05). However, in families expressing high levels of positive affect, negative affect was uncorrelated (β = .05) with self-blame.

To further illustrate how the combination of positive and negative affect relates to self-blame and to address the possibility that high negative families who were low in positivity were simply more negative than were those displaying more positive affect, we formed four groups based on median splits for negative and positive expression. First, we found that the high negative/high positive and high negative/low positive groups did not differ in their mean levels of self-blame (β = .32, p < .05). However, in families expressing high levels of positive affect, negative affect was uncorrelated (β = .05) with self-blame.

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression Analyses Examining Positivity and Negativity as Moderators of IPC and Children’s Adjustment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Blame</th>
<th>Threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>Adj. R²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 Direct effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPIC Conflict Properties</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEFQ Positivity</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEFQ Negativity</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2 Interaction effects</td>
<td></td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Properties × Positivity</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Properties × Negativity</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity × Negativity</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3 Three-way interaction effects</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict × Positivity × Negativity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4 Negativity predicting blame</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At low levels of positivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. In Step 4, simple slopes presented above are from an equation including conflict properties as a direct effect variable. IPC = interparental conflict; CPIC = Children’s Perceptions of Interparental Conflict; SEFQ = Self-Expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire.

*p < .05. **p < .01.

The second goal of this investigation was to examine the possibility that family emotional expressiveness moderated the relation between conflict and adjustment. Given that expressiveness was related to self-blame appraisals, and that appraisals have been found to mediate the association between conflict and child maladjustment (e.g., Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000), we integrated emotion expression into a model specifying paths between interparental conflict, appraisals, and adjustment (see Figure 2). This allowed us to test whether any association between the family’s emotional climate and adjustment operated through children’s appraisals and whether emotional expressiveness accounted for additional unique variance beyond appraisals. Children’s age was also entered in the model as a covariate, to account for any developmental differences in adjustment problems.

Figure 1. Mean levels of children’s self-blame in four patterns of parental emotional expressiveness. Group comparisons were conducted using groups formed by median splits to illustrate the interaction between positive and negative expressiveness predicting children’s self-blame.
Maximum likelihood path models were computed with AMOS software (Version 5; Arbuckle, 2003). The first model, shown in Figure 2, predicted children’s internalizing problems. This model yielded good fit statistics, $\chi^2(27) = 27.954, p = .41$, goodness of fit (GFI) = .96, adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI) = .92, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .016. Consistent with the regression analyses reported above, parental conflict, negative affect expression, positive affect expression, and their interaction uniquely predicted children’s self-blame appraisals. Self-blame, in turn, predicted child and parent reports of internalizing problems. Consistent with past research (e.g., Grych et al., 2000, 2003), conflict predicted threat, which was associated with children’s internalizing problems. Parents’ positive expressiveness also was associated directly with lower levels of internalizing problems. The interaction of positive and negative affect expression did not account for additional variance in internalizing problems.

The interactions between interparental conflict and both positive and negative affect expression also were significant, indicating that each acts as a moderator of the link between conflict and internalizing problems. To better understand the nature of these interactions, regression lines were plotted between conflict and internalizing problems at high (1 SD) and low (−1 SD) levels of parental conflict and affect expression and included mean levels of the covariates from the path model. The association between parental conflict and internalizing problems was stronger for families with high levels of negative affect ($b = .35$) than for families with low levels of negativity ($b = .22$; see Figure 3). Thus, the expression of high levels of negative affect appears to exacerbate the effect of interparental conflict on internalizing problems. Figure 3 also presents regression lines for the interaction between conflict and positive affect. Interparental conflict is positively associated with internalizing problems at both high and low levels of family warmth and positive affect. It is interesting that the association is stronger in families with higher levels of positivity ($b = .59$) than in families with low levels of positive affect ($b = .46$). These plots suggest that positivity does not buffer children from the effects of parental conflict but, rather, seems to serve as a factor that strengthens the association between parental conflict and internalizing problems.

The second path model predicted children’s externalizing problems and also fit the data well, $\chi^2(26) = 25.393, p = .50$, GFI = .97, AGFI = .93, RMSEA = .00 (see Figure 4). The relationship between interparental conflict, emotional climate, and appraisals remained the same as in the model predicting internalizing problems, and both conflict ($\beta = .28$) and blame ($\beta = .24$) had unique direct paths to children’s externalizing problems. As in most prior studies, threat was not significantly associated with externalizing problems ($\beta = -.13, ns$). The interactions between conflict and negative ($\beta = .24$) and positive ($\beta = .21$) affect expression and conflict also significantly predicted children’s externalizing problems. The regression lines representing the association between conflict and externalizing problems, accounting for mean levels of the covariates, are plotted at low and high levels of affect expression (see Figure 5). The patterns that emerged for externalizing problems are similar to those found for internalizing problems. In particular, when families were high in negativity, a stronger association was found between parental conflict and externalizing problems ($b = .26$) than when parental negative expressiveness was less common ($b = .18$). Externalizing problems were positively associated with parental conflict across the range of positive affect. The association between conflict and externalizing problems was stronger in families with higher levels of positive affect ($b = .46$) than in families with lower positivity ($b = .34$).
Much of the recent research on interparental conflict and child adjustment has focused on identifying mediating processes that explain how exposure to conflict can give rise to adjustment problems. Less attention has been paid to understanding why some children appraise parental conflict in ways that increase their risk for maladjustment and others do not. Guided by the cognitive-contextual framework, the present study investigated the idea that broader patterns of emotional expression in the family may shape the meaning of conflict for children and moderate its association with child adjustment problems (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

We found that parents’ expression of positive and negative affect was associated with children’s appraisals of self-blame but not threat. In particular, children were more...
likely to blame themselves for interparental conflict when
the family emotional climate was characterized by high
levels of negative affect and low levels of positive affect.
Although both positive and negative expression were
uniquely associated with self-blame, it was the combination
of the two dimensions that best accounted for differences in
self-blame. Parents who score high on negative and low on
positive affect on the SEFQ frequently exhibit anger, con-
tempt, and criticism toward other family members and
rarely express affection, praise, or happiness (Halberstadt et
al., 1995). Children living in these predominantly negative
homes are likely to feel criticized and denigrated and con-
sequently may be more prone to believe that they did
something wrong or somehow are at fault when their par-
ents become angry at each other. In addition, anger may be
poorly regulated in these families and may spread easily
between marital and parental subsystems, creating an envi-
ronment in which children perceive interparental hostility as
directed at them as well. If children anticipate being drawn
into parental conflicts, they may feel responsible for ending
these disagreements before they escalate.

Self-blame was significantly lower when families exhib-
ited high levels of both positive and negative affect; it is
noteworthy that these groups did not differ in the overall
level of negative affect displayed by parents. Further, chil-
dren in high positive/high negative families did not differ on
self-blame from those in families that displayed high levels
of positive affect and low levels of negative affect. These
findings suggest that the emotional climate is qualitatively
different in families that frequently express positive and
negative emotions compared with families that are equally
high in negative affect but express positive emotions more
rarely. Rather than being critical and unsupportive, the
former families are characterized by demonstrative displays
of the full range of emotions. The frequent expression of
warmth, praise, and happiness among family members con-
veys acceptance, respect, and love, and in that context, the
expression of anger may mean something different than it
does in families that express negative affect in the relative
absence of positive affect. Anger may be perceived as a sign
of parents’ investment in or passion about a particular issue
rather than as an indication of wrongdoing or serious prob-
lems in a relationship. Consequently, children may be more
likely to attribute interparental conflict to the family’s gen-
eral style of relating than to something that they did or did
not do.

The self-blame findings support the idea that the presence
of high levels of positive and negative affect result in
children accommodating to parental conflict, whereas high
levels of negative affect in the presence of low positive
affect sensitize children to conflict. In contrast, the lack of
an association between emotional expression and children’s
perceptions of threat supports neither possibility. Children’s
threat appraisals were predicted only by their exposure to
parental discord, which suggests that their expectations
about the course and consequences of conflict are linked
specifically to their experiences with parental conflict rather
than being a function of the family climate more broadly.
Perhaps children have enough experience with their parents’
approach to resolving conflict that expressions of affect in
other relationships or contexts add little new information.
The case may be different in situations where children
rarely witness their parents resolving a disagreement; in that
case, children may use their experience observing their
parents’ affect with other family members to form expec-
tations about the likely outcome of the disagreement.

The present study also indicates that parents’ general
pattern of expressing emotion is related to child adjustment

---

**Figure 4.** Maximum likelihood path model predicting externalizing problems. Fit indices:
\[ \chi^2(26) = 25.393, p = .50, \text{GFI} = .97, \text{AGFI} = .93, \text{RMSEA} = .00. \text{Pos} = \text{positivity}; \text{Neg} = \text{negativity}; \text{CP} = \text{conflict properties.} \]
problems beyond its association with self-blame appraisals. Both positive and negative affect independently moderated the association between interparental conflict and adjustment, and positive affect also had a direct association with internalizing problems. Children living in families that expressed higher levels of negative affect exhibited greater maladjustment in general and a slightly stronger association between interparental conflict and both internalizing and externalizing problems than did those in families expressing low levels of negative affect. The fact that this association held after accounting for the relation between emotional expression and self-blame indicates that there is another pathway by which the emotional climate affects children. Discord in the marriage may be especially deleterious for children when tension and hostility pervade the family system because children lack supportive relationships with their parents that could buffer the impact of parental conflict, or because family relationships seem less stable and

Figure 5. Plots of interactions between parental expressiveness and conflict predicting children’s externalizing problems. Interactions for negativity (top) and positivity (bottom) are presented using unstandardized slopes reflecting the regression line using high and low values for interparental conflict and moderators and including mean levels of the covariates from the path model. Neg = negativity; Pos = positivity.
secure (see Davies & Cummings, 1994; Davies et al., 2002). The latter explanation is consistent with Davies et al.’s (2002) finding that parental discord was more strongly related to decreased emotional security in children when families were less stable and parents reported poorer marital quality and communication. Family environments in which negativity is pervasive may offer little reprieve to children who become upset by parental conflict episodes. It also is possible that parents’ styles of expressing emotion influence children’s adjustment by undermining their emotion regulation capabilities (Eisenberg et al., 2001, 2003). Highly negative parents may not be teaching children appropriate means of regulating their emotions, whereas children in more balanced and positive emotional households may be more adept at managing the negative affect that arises during parental conflict episodes.

Positive affect also appears to play a role in children’s adjustment to parental conflict. In addition to greater positivity predicting fewer internalizing problems, it had a small but statistically significant moderating effect on internalizing and externalizing problems. Children in both low and high positive affect families exhibited more maladjustment at higher levels of interparental conflict, but the magnitude of this association was slightly stronger for families marked by greater warmth and positivity. This finding indicates that positive affect did not serve to buffer children from the effects of parental conflict and may actually exacerbate the impact of conflict. This finding was unexpected, and given that the slopes for the high and low positive affect groups were quite similar, caution should be exercised in interpreting this interaction until it can be replicated. However, it raises the possibility that children in warmer, more positive family environments may find parental conflicts to be particularly distressing because they are more discordant from the family’s usual emotional climate.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research describes intriguing associations between the family’s emotional climate, children’s appraisals of interparental conflict, and their psychological adjustment, but as a cross-sectional study it cannot provide any information about causal relations among the variables. Patterns of emotional expressiveness tend to be relatively stable over a 2-year period (Eisenberg et al., 2003), but a longitudinal design would provide the opportunity to examine how conflict and more general patterns of emotional expression influence each other over time as well as to investigate the impact of child behavior on the family’s emotional climate.

A second limitation of this study is the reliance on parents’ self-reports of emotional expressiveness. The fact that parental reports of positive and negative affect were independent and had unique relations with self-blame argues against the possibility that the measures of emotion expression were not distinct or differentiated from the measure of conflict, but obtaining child reports or observational data would provide a richer assessment of the ways that parents and children contribute to the family’s emotional climate.

Finally, the results suggest that it would be valuable to expand the focus on emotion in the cognitive-contextual framework and, in particular to explore affective processes occurring outside of the context of children’s appraisal of interparental conflict. For example, the emotional security theory posits that witnessing parental discord undermines children’s ability to regulate their emotion, which in turn is related to greater internalizing and externalizing problems (Davies & Cummings, 1998). As family emotional expressiveness is hypothesized to be a significant contributor to children’s emerging regulatory capabilities (Eisenberg et al., 2003), investigating the role of children’s regulation of emotion could provide further insight into the processes by which interparental conflict increases children’s risk for maladjustment.

Conclusion

The present study supports the proposal that emotional expressiveness in the family provides a salient backdrop for children’s perceptions and appraisals of interparental conflict and builds on Davies et al.’s (2002) examination of family factors that may influence children’s response to parental discord. Although these two studies assessed different aspects of family functioning, together they suggest that broader family processes affect the meaning of interparental conflict for children. In particular, evidence was provided that supports parental positive and negative expressiveness as working in concert to shape children’s appraisals of self-blame and to moderate the association between interparental conflict and children’s adjustment problems. These processes underscore the importance of the family emotional climate as a contextual factor that shapes the meaning children attribute to parental disputes. By placing children’s experiences with parental discord in a wider family context, we are likely to develop a richer understanding of how exposure to conflict affects children’s socioemotional development.

References


