Marital Conflict, Ineffective Parenting, and Children’s and Adolescents’ Maladjustment

Data from the 1988 National Survey on Families and Households were analyzed to examine the associations among marital conflict, ineffective parenting, and children’s and adolescents’ maladjustment. Parents’ use of harsh discipline and low parental involvement helped explain the connection between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment in children aged 2 through 11. Parent-child conflict was measured only in families with a target teenager and also was a significant mediator. Although ineffective parenting explained part of the association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment, independent effects of marital conflict remained in families with target children aged 2 through 11 (but not for families with a teenager). With a few exceptions, this pattern of findings was consistent for mothers’ and fathers’ reports, for daughters and sons, for families with various ethnic backgrounds, and for families living in and out of poverty.

Exposure to marital conflict is associated with a range of indicators of children’s maladjustment (c.f., Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1995; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992; Harold, Fincham, Osborne, & Conger, 1997; Katz & Gottman, 1993). Scholars suggest that marital conflict affects children’s socioemotional development directly by shaping children’s cognitions and perceptions (Davies & Cummings, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1990), their ability to regulate their emotions (Gottman & Katz, 1989), and their particular coping responses (Jenkins, Smith, & Graham, 1989; O’Brien, Margolin, & John, 1995). Scholars also suggest that marital conflict affects children’s maladjustment indirectly by altering parenting practices and the quality of parent-child relations (Erel & Burman, 1995; Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wier, 1999). The purpose of this study is to examine this proposition that marital conflict is associated with children’s maladjustment, in part through its association with ineffective parenting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea that marital conflict might shape ineffective parenting (and ultimately children’s maladjustment) often is referred to as “spillover.” Spillover is defined as the direct transfer of mood, affect, or behavior from one setting to another (Engler, 1988; Erel & Burman, 1995; Repetti, 1987). Our interest in examining the potential spillover from conflictual marital interactions to ineffective parenting comes from two sources. The first is Fincham’s (1994) belief that it is time to move onto “second-generation” research in the area of marital conflict. One of the aims of second-generation research is to explain how and why marital conflict and children’s maladjustment are associated by examining it in conjunction with other risk factors. Within the context of marital
conflict, ineffective parenting is one of these salient risk factors (Fauber & Long, 1991). A second inspiration for this theoretical proposition comes from Belsky’s (1984) model of the determinants of parenting. In this model, he suggested that parenting is a central, proximal socialization influence in children’s development and that child and parental characteristics shape parenting. One of the salient predictors of parenting is the quality of the marital relationship. Theoretically, support from one’s marital partner facilitates effective parenting, whereas marital conflict disrupts it.

Several recent reviews of marital conflict research discuss the idea of spillover and the potential mediating role of ineffective parenting (Crockenberg & Covey, 1991; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Emery & Tuer, 1993; Erel & Burman, 1995; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Sanders, Nicholson, & Floyd, 1997; Wilson & Gottman, 1995). Most recently, Krishnakumar and Buehler (2000) documented an association between marital conflict and ineffective parenting in a meta-analysis of 138 effect coefficients from 39 studies. They reported that the average weighted effect size (d) was .62 (r = .30). Associations were strongest when correlating marital conflict and parental harsh punishment or lack of acceptance of the child. Using daily checklists to record marital conflict and parent-child conflict, Almeida, Wethington, and Chandler (1999) corroborated the findings from the meta-analysis by reporting that both mothers and fathers are about 50% more likely to have tense interaction with their children on the day after there had been some marital tension.

The idea that marital conflict shapes ineffective parenting and ultimately children’s maladjustment is fairly widely accepted in the marital conflict literature. In their review, Crockenberg and Covey (1991) stated that “there is little question at this point that marital conflict affects child externalizing behavior indirectly, through its link with parental behavior. Whether it has a direct effect on the child as well is less certain” (p. 250). Given the strength of this statement, we were surprised to find only 12 published or in press articles or book chapters that have examined the mediating effects of ineffective parenting (Acock & Demo, 1999; Cowan, Cowan, Heming, & Miller, 1991; Gonzales, Pitts, Hill, & Roosa, 2000; Harold & Conger, 1997; Harold et al., 1997; Harrist & Ainslie, 1998; Mann & MacKenzie, 1996; Miller, Cowan, Cowan, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1993; Osborne & Fincham, 1996; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Stone, Buehler, & Barber, in press; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Three of these studies presented data from two samples, so the total number of examinations was 15; 13 of 15 found evidence of a positive association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment.

Seven of the studies provided support for the proposition that ineffective parenting at least partially mediates the association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment (Acock & Demo, 1999; Harold & Conger, 1997; Harold et al., 1997; Harrist & Ainslie, 1998; Mann & MacKenzie, 1996; Osborne & Fincham, 1996; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Depending on the particular analysis, parenting was both a partial and full mediator: The fact that some analyses suggested full effects and others only partial effects did not seem to be a function of children’s ages (although only a few studies examined children under the age of 10), type of problem behavior (internalizing or externalizing), nor specific indicator of parenting (although most studies just examined the affective nature of parent-child relations, such as rejection, hostility, or conflict).

In six of these analyses at least some of the analyses refuted the idea that parenting mediates the association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment (Harold & Conger, 1997; Miller et al., 1993; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Stone et al., in press). Thus, mediating effects might exist, but they are not a foregone conclusion based on the empirical literature.

Three of the studies found support for indirect effects rather than mediating. Marital conflict, ineffective parenting, and children’s maladjustment were linked, but either the direct effect between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment did not exist (Gonzalez et al., 2000; Harold & Conger, 1997) or the direct effect did not diminish when parenting was considered (Stone et al., in press [two samples]). A few other studies that did not establish empirically an association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment before considering parenting also have documented indirect effects (Anderson, Lindner, & Bennion, 1992; Fauber et al., 1990).

As a whole, this literature is limited in that (a) studies including young children are few; (b) most studies use regionally based, convenience samples (although some demonstrate representativeness at the local level), and (c) most studies focus on only one aspect of ineffective parenting. This study strengthens the relatively small extant literature on the indirect role of parenting in four ways: (a) data
from a fairly large, nationally representative sample of families are analyzed, (b) families with children aged 2 through 18 are examined, (c) parenting is measured as a multidimensional construct, and (d) competing models to the spillover hypothesis are examined (i.e., the redundant model, the independent-additive model, the interactive model).

We hypothesize a hybrid of the spillover and direct effects model in which ineffective parenting partially mediates the positive association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment. We hypothesize that this model fits for children of varying ages (across ages 2–18) and applies equally well to sons and daughters. Buehler et al. (1997) found no systematic age differences in the 68 studies analyzed in their meta-analysis, supporting Cummins and Davies’ (1994) earlier conclusion that children of varying ages seem to be equally vulnerable to the effects of marital conflict. In terms of gender, some scholars believe that boys and girls see and interpret their socializing environment through a gender filter (for a review, see Peterson, Bodman, Bush, & Maddendorf, 2000) and that the strength of this filter might increase as youth move into adolescence (Linner & Silverberg, 1997). However, the prevailing ideas regarding the nature and effect of these filters often contradict. For example, some theorists (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) suggest that daughters might be more vulnerable to family stressors because they are socialized to caretake and safeguard family relationships. Theoretically, this caretaking will bring them into the family and marriage during a time when marital tension is elevated. On the other hand, others (e.g., Reid & Crisafulli, 1990) have speculated that sons might be more vulnerable because of their sensitivity to and greater difficulty in handling arousal and stress. There has been some empirical support for sons’ vulnerability to disrupted family relationships (Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994). Thus, different theoretical and empirical positions regarding child gender would predict different moderational effects. Because existing research on age and gender differences in correlations (rather than means) have produced null or conflicting results, we hypothesized similar pathways for sons and daughters (Buehler et al.; Kim, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Lytton & Romney, 1991).

Alternative models to the spillover hypothesis also are examined. Three additional models are examined: the redundancy model, the independent-additive model, and the interactive model. In the redundancy model, marital conflict and ineffective parenting would measure similar phenomenon (e.g., the inability to function well in intimate relationships). The two would be highly correlated and would not explain unique portions of variance in children’s maladjustment. In the independent-additive model, marital conflict and ineffective parenting would be distinct characteristics (although somewhat correlated because both are central aspects of family functioning). Each would uniquely explain variance in children’s maladjustment, and the variance explained by the two would be greater than that explained by either one considered by itself. In the interactive model, the relationship between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment would be conditioned by the level of ineffective parenting. The pattern most often suggested in this literature is that the positive association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment might be smaller when effective parenting is present.

METHOD

Sample

The sample for this study was selected from subjects who participated in the 1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). Data were collected from a probability sample of 13,017 households in 1987 and 1988. The main sample consists of a random selection of 9,643 households. The over sample consists of a double sample of African Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, Mexican Americans, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, and cohabiting or recently married couples. The response rate was 73.5% for the main sample and 76.8% in the over sample (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1992).

The weighted sample for this study includes 2,541 married parents with a target child aged 2 to 18 living in the household. Stepfamilies and single-parent families were not included so that the data on marital conflict could be interpreted accurately as information about the marriage to which the child was exposed on a regular basis. Parents provided all of the information in the NSFH. Data were analyzed with provided sample weights to ensure a sample representative of the married, nonstepfamily U.S. population.

Because the parenting and children’s maladjustment measures varied slightly with the age of
the target child in the NSFH, the sample was divided into three groups: families with a target child aged 2 through 4 (unweighted \( n = 586 \); weighted \( n = 623 \)), families with a target child aged 5 through 11 (unweighted \( n = 815 \); weighted \( n = 974 \)), and families with a target child aged 12 through 18 (unweighted \( n = 684 \), weighted \( n = 944 \)). Looking first at the families with a target child aged 2 through 4 and using weighted data, 54% of the respondents were mothers, 48% of the children were daughters, 83% were European American, and 7% of the families were poor (i.e., lived below the poverty line). In the families with a target child aged 5 through 11, 51% of the respondents were mothers, 50% of the children were daughters, 78% were European American, and 7% of the families were poor. In the families with a target child aged 12 through 18, 51% of the respondents were mothers, 48% of the children were daughters, 83% were European American, and 7% of the families were poor.

**Measures**

*Marital conflict.* Marital conflict was measured using nine items. Six of these asked respondents to report the frequency of various disagreements during the past year. Two of the items measured the frequency of arguing and hitting. One item measured the frequency of calm discussions (reverse coded). Items were standardized because the response formats differed; a mean score was calculated, and higher scores represented higher levels of marital conflict. Cronbach’s alpha was .77.

*Ineffective parenting.* Based on the availability of measures, two aspects of ineffective parenting were measured in the sample of families with a target child aged 2 through 4: harsh discipline and involvement. Harsh discipline was measured using three items. These questions addressed respondent’s self-reports of spanking and slapping behavior. Items were standardized, a summed score was calculated, and higher scores represented higher levels of harsh discipline (true for the three age-based subsamples). Cronbach’s alpha was .89. Involvement was measured using three items. These questions addressed the amount of time the respondent spent playing with or reading to the child. Items were standardized, a summed score was calculated, and higher scores represented greater involvement with the child (true for the three subsamples). Cronbach’s alpha was .64. A factor analysis that included the three harsh discipline and the three involvement items indicated two factors, providing evidence of discriminant validity of these two aspects of parenting. In addition, the two were not correlated (see Table 1). Construct validity was indicated by significant correlations in the expected direction with parental depressive affect (harsh discipline \( r = .18, p < .001 \); involvement \( r = -.15, p < .001 \)).

Three aspects of parenting were measured in the sample of families with a target child aged 5 through 11: harsh discipline, involvement, and parental presence. Harsh discipline was measured using three items (same items as for families with preschoolers). Cronbach’s alpha was .93. Involvement was measured using 6 items. These questions addressed the frequency of shared activities, projects, and private talks, as well as helping the child with reading, praising, and hugging. Cronbach’s alpha was .70. Parental presence was measured using five items that addressed how often the child was left alone at various times during the day and night. Items were standardized, a summed score was calculated, and higher scores represented greater parental presence (true for both older age groups of families). Cronbach’s alpha was .79. A factor analysis that included the three harsh discipline, the six involvement items, and the five parental presence items indicated three factors, providing evidence of discriminant validity. The correlations among parenting measures were statistically significant but low (see Table 1). The construct validity of the involvement measure was indicated by a significant negative correlation with parental depressive affect (\( r = -.16, p < .001 \)).

Four aspects of parenting were measured in the sample of families with a target child aged 12 through 18: harsh discipline, parent-adolescent conflict (parent-child conflict was not measured in the NSFH in families with younger children), involvement, and parental presence. Harsh discipline was measured using 2 items. These questions addressed respondent’s self-reports of spanking, slapping, and yelling behavior. The correlation between the two items was .31 (\( p < .01 \)). Parent-adolescent conflict was measured using 10 items that addressed how frequently the parent and teen argued about various issues such as friends, the teen’s behavior, school, chores, and getting along with family members. A mean score was created, and high scores indicated more frequent conflict. Cronbach’s alpha was .73. Involvement was measured using the same six items as those used in the families with a child aged 5.
TABLE 1. INTERCORRELATIONS AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Parent Gender</th>
<th>Child Gender</th>
<th>Child Age</th>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Poverty Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent gender</td>
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<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>−0.3</td>
<td>−0.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.02−01</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.06/02</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty status</td>
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<td>0.07/06</td>
<td>0.08/03</td>
<td>−0.10/04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child maladjustment</td>
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<td>−0.07/01</td>
<td>0.08/03</td>
<td>−0.10/04</td>
<td>0.01/09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital conflict</td>
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<td>−0.08−03</td>
<td>−0.04/04</td>
<td>−0.04/04</td>
<td>0.04−03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harsh discipline</td>
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<td>−25.00±14±06</td>
<td>−0.02/01</td>
<td>0.04/07</td>
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<td>Parental involvement</td>
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<td>−0.0604</td>
<td>13±0±10±06</td>
<td>−12±0±07−03</td>
<td>10±0±06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental presence</td>
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<td>0.08/05±05</td>
<td>−44±0±17±06</td>
<td>0.09/0±22±0±5</td>
<td>0.05/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-Adolescent Conflict</td>
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<td>NA/04</td>
<td>NA/05</td>
<td>NA/05</td>
<td>NA/05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (SD) Child 2–4</td>
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<td>.48 (.50)</td>
<td>2.91 (.83)</td>
<td>.17 (.37)</td>
<td>.07 (.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (SD) Child 5–11</td>
<td>.51 (.50)</td>
<td>.50 (.50)</td>
<td>7.63 (1.94)</td>
<td>.22 (.42)</td>
<td>.07 (.26)</td>
</tr>
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<td>M (SD) Teen 12–18</td>
<td>.51 (.50)</td>
<td>.48 (.50)</td>
<td>14.89 (1.83)</td>
<td>.17 (.37)</td>
<td>.07 (.25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Decimals are omitted from correlations. Correlations for families with child aged 2–4 are in upper triangle. Correlations for families with child aged 5–11 are first estimates in the lower triangle. Correlations for families with a teen aged 12–18 are second estimates in lower triangle. Parent gender is coded 0 = father, 1 = mother. Child gender is coded 0 = son, 1 = daughter. Parent ethnic background is coded 0 = European American, 1 = other. Poverty status is coded 0 = not in poverty, 1 = in poverty.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

through 11. Cronbach’s alpha was .76. Parental presence was measured using four items that addressed how often the child was left alone at various times during the day and night (same items as used in families with a child aged 5 through 11, but one item was dropped because of low internal consistency). Cronbach’s alpha was .87. A factor analysis that included the 2 harsh discipline items, the 10 parent-adolescent conflict items, the 6 involvement items, and the 4 parental presence items indicated factors. Providing evidence of discriminant validity, the correlations among parenting measures ranged from nonsignificant (parent-adolescent conflict and parental presence—r = .01, p = .31) to moderate in strength (parent adolescent conflict and harsh discipline—r = .31, p < .001). Construct validity was evident for measures of harsh discipline, parental presence, and parent-adolescent conflict because of significant correlations with parental depressive affect. .15, .09, .27, respectively.

Children’s maladjustment. Global maladjustment was measured using nine items in families with a target child aged 2 through 4. The questions addressed the parent’s perception of the child’s tendencies to lose his or her temper, be fearful and anxious, be fussy or irritable, to mean to others, try new things (reverse), be cheerful and happy (reverse), be compliant (reverse), and to be sociable (reverse). The three response categories were: not true, sometimes true, and often true (true for all three subsamples). These items were taken from the Child Behavior Checklist, one of the most widely used and well-validated measures of child problem behaviors in the field (Achenbach, 1991). A mean score was calculated for each child, and a higher score represented greater maladjustment (true for all three subsamples). Cronbach’s alpha was .53.

Global maladjustment was measured using eight items in families with a target child aged 5 through 11. The questions addressed the parent’s perception of the child’s tendencies to lose his or her temper, be unhappy, be mean to others, try new things (reverse), be cheerful and happy (reverse), be compliant (reverse), be sociable (reverse), and to be responsible (reverse). Cronbach’s alpha was .60.

Global maladjustment was measured using 10 items in families with a target child aged 12 to 18. The questions addressed the parent’s perception of the child’s tendencies to lose his or her temper, be unhappy, be mean to others, be fearful or anxious, try new things (reverse), be cheerful and happy (reverse), be compliant (reverse), be sociable (reverse), keep busy (reverse), and be responsible (reverse). Cronbach’s alpha was .64.

Analytic Procedures

There was little missing data (i.e., less than 5% for most items). Missing data were imputed using
the expectation maximization (EM) method in SPSS. This is a full information method of imputing missing values by iterating through the existing data and fitting the best values. This method of handling missing values produces less bias in the results than deleting cases or using the sample mean for imputation (Acock, 1997). Some of the parent involvement items had more missing data in the sample of families with a target child aged 2 through 4, and so, in addition to the imputation of values using EM, a mechanism variable marking cases with missing values was included in the regression analysis for these families. The inclusion of the mechanism variable helps remove bias that might be present in the estimation of parameters (Acock).

The spillover model was examined using hierarchical regression. Two regression models were fitted in each subsample of families. The first model provided estimates for the unmediated and mediated effects of marital conflict and for the association between ineffective parenting and children’s maladjustment. Block 1 included five variables: parent (respondent) gender, child gender, race, family poverty status, and the missing data mechanism variable (only in the analyses of families with preschoolers). Block 2 included the marital conflict variable. Block 3 included the parenting variables. The second model provided estimates for the association between marital conflict and parenting (the first leg of the spillover pathway). Block 1 included the control and mechanism variables, as well as the parenting measures not being used as the dependent variable. For example, when the association between marital conflict and harsh discipline was examined in families with a child aged 5 through 11, the measures of parental involvement and presence were included in Block 1 as control variables, along with the background variables. Block 2 included the marital conflict variable.

Within each group of families, additional regression analyses were conducted to “contextualize” the basic test of the spillover hypothesis. This was done to see if the model fit equally well for (a) mothers’ and fathers’ reports, (b) focal sons and daughters, (c) parents with European American ethnic backgrounds and parents with other ethnic backgrounds, and (d) families living in poverty and families not living in poverty. Interaction terms were created between each contextual variable and each indicator of marital conflict and parenting. These interaction terms were entered into the various regression equations as the last block or step.

### Results

The descriptive data and zero-order correlations are in Table 1. As hypothesized, marital conflict was associated positively with child and adolescent maladjustment, positively with parents’ use of harsh discipline, and inversely with parental involvement in families with a target child younger than 12. Harsh discipline was associated positively and parental involvement negatively with child and adolescent maladjustment. Parent-adolescent conflict was associated positively with marital conflict and adolescent maladjustment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Maladjustment</th>
<th>Marital Conflict</th>
<th>Harsh Discipline</th>
<th>Parental Involvement</th>
<th>Parental Presence</th>
<th>Parent-Adolescent Conflict</th>
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<td>10***</td>
<td>-18***</td>
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</tr>
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<td>NA/31***</td>
<td>NA/06</td>
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<td>1.50 (.24)</td>
<td>.00 (.58)</td>
<td>.00 (.91)</td>
<td>.00 (.76)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.42 (.27)</td>
<td>.00 (.60)</td>
<td>.00 (.94)</td>
<td>.00 (.63)</td>
<td>.00 (.74)</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.41 (.55)</td>
<td>-.01 (.55)</td>
<td>-.05 (.80)</td>
<td>-.05 (.67)</td>
<td>-.06 (.81)</td>
<td>1.63 (.53)</td>
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</table>
Families with Preschoolers (2–4-year-olds)

Spillover model. The association between marital conflict and preschooler’s maladjustment was examined first. As hypothesized, marital conflict was associated with greater maladjustment (Beta = .21, p < .001), controlling for background factors (see the first set of estimates in parentheses in Figure 1). Harsh discipline (i.e., spanking or slapping) and parental involvement (i.e., playing with and reading to) partially mediated the association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment. Although the association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment dropped in half (from .21 to .11), it remained statistically significant. About 11% of the variance in children’s maladjustment was accounted for by marital conflict and ineffective parenting (net of background factors). The results for the relationships between the background factors and child maladjustment can be obtained from the first author.

Contextualizing the model. Except for moderational effects of ethnicity, most of the interactions with background factors were not significant (i.e., 14 of 20 interaction terms were not significant, 70%). The model fit equally well for sons and daughters. The model was contextualized by the parent’s ethnic background, parent’s gender, and family poverty status. Ethnic background had the strongest effect. In families with a European American parent, the direct effect of marital conflict became nonsignificant when harsh discipline and parental involvement were considered (see the second set of estimates in Figure 1). Parenting completely mediated the effects of marital conflict on preschooler’s maladjustment. In families with a parent with an ethnic background other than European American, the direct effect of marital conflict was moderate and neither harsh discipline nor parental involvement intervened (see the third set of estimates in Figure 1). This group of families included primarily Hispanic American or African American parents.

Parent’s gender contextualized (i.e., moderated) the model by shaping the association between harsh discipline and preschooler’s maladjustment. The relationship was statistically significant for both mothers (β = .30, p < .001) and fathers (β = .16, p < .001), but was stronger for mothers. Family poverty status contextualized the model by shaping the association between marital conflict and parental involvement. The relationship was statistically significant in both groups of families but was stronger for families living in poverty (β = −.51, p < .01) than for families not living in poverty (β = −.23, p < .001).

Alternative models. The redundancy model did not fit well for families with preschoolers. Marital conflict and ineffective parenting were correlated, but only in the .20s (about 5% shared variance). Both accounted for unique variance in preschooler’s maladjustment and therefore were tapping different familial characteristics. The independent additive model did not fit the data well given the results of the moderating effects of ethnic background. In European American families, parenting was most salient, whereas in families with other ethnic backgrounds, marital conflict was most salient. There was some support for the interactive
model. Harsh discipline moderated the association between marital conflict and preschooler’s maladjustment. Marital conflict was statistically significant under most levels of harsh discipline but was slightly stronger when harsh discipline was lower. Thus, physical punishment of the child slightly buffered the deleterious effects of marital conflict, even though marital conflict and physical punishment were positively correlated. Regardless of the direction of effects, the moderating effects were small.

Thus, the spillover model fit these data the best, but only in families with a European American parent. In this group of families, the association between marital conflict and preschooler’s maladjustment was mediated completely by ineffective parenting (i.e., greater use of harsh discipline as measured by spanking or slapping and lower levels of parental involvement as measured by playing with or reading to).

Families With Children in Middle Childhood
(5–11-year-olds)

Spillover model. The association between marital conflict and middle childhood children’s maladjustment was examined next. Before including the parenting measures, marital conflict was associated with greater maladjustment (β = .20, p < .001), controlling for background factors (see Figure 2). Harsh discipline and parental involvement partially explained the association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment. Parental presence was not significant. Although marital conflict also was associated with children’s maladjustment through ineffective parenting, the direct effect remained relatively unchanged (dropped slightly from .20 to .16). About 12% of the variance in children’s maladjustment was accounted for by marital conflict and ineffective parenting (net of background factors).

Contextualizing the model. The great majority of interaction terms with background factors were not significant (26 of 28 interaction terms were not significant, 93%). The model fit equally well for mothers’ and fathers’ reports and for families with sons and daughters. Two of the interaction terms were statistically significant—one between family poverty status and parental involvement in predicting child maladjustment (the second leg of the pathway) and one between race and parental involvement in predicting children’s maladjustment (the second leg of the pathway). The association between parental involvement and child maladjustment was statistically significant only for families not living in poverty (not poor β = -.19, p < .001; poor β = -.05, p > .05). The association between parental involvement and children’s maladjustment was statistically signifi-

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**Figure 2. Marital Conflict, Ineffective Parenting, and Maladjustment in Middle Childhood Children**

![Diagram showing the relationship between marital conflict, ineffective parenting, and maladjustment in middle childhood children.]

- **Harsh Discipline**
  - .13***
- **Marital Conflict**
  - .16*** (.20***)
  - -.09**
- **Involvement**
  - .01
- **Parental Presence**
  - -.04
- **Maladjustment**
  - R² = .12

*Note: Number in parentheses represents marital conflict estimate before parenting variables are entered.*
FIGURE 3. MARITAL CONFLICT, INEFFECTIVE PARENTING, AND MALADJUSTMENT IN ADOLESCENTS

Note: Number in parentheses represents marital conflict estimate before parenting variables are entered.

cant both for European American families and minority families (EA $\beta = -.14, p < .001$; non-White $\beta = -.28, p < .001$), but was stronger in non-White families. The pathway from marital conflict to harsh discipline to children’s maladjustment was similar for mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, families with varying ethnic backgrounds, and families living in and out of poverty.

Alternative models. The redundancy model did not fit well for families with a target child in middle childhood. Marital conflict and ineffective parenting were correlated, but only in the .20s (about 5% shared variance). Each accounted for unique variance in maladjustment and were therefore tapping different familial characteristics. The independent-additive model fit the data. Marital conflict and ineffective parenting each explained children’s maladjustment, and together they explained more variance in maladjustment than did either domain on its own.

There also was some evidence of an interaction between marital conflict and ineffective parenting. The association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment was stronger when parental involvement was higher ($\beta = .24, p < .001$) than when it was lower ($\beta = .18, p < .001$). Although this interaction provided some detail about the interconnections between marital conflict and parenting, the effects were not strong. Marital conflict was associated with children’s maladjustment at both levels of parental involvement, and neither harsh discipline nor parental presence interacted with marital conflict.

Thus, in families with a child in middle childhood, there was evidence of (a) spillover effects, in the form of indirect effects of ineffective parenting; (b) independent-additive effects, in which both marital conflict and ineffective parenting affected children’s maladjustment; and (c) interactive effects, with the exacerbating effect of parental involvement being fairly weak.

Families With Adolescents (12-18-year-olds)

Spillover model. The association between marital conflict and adolescent’s maladjustment was significant ($\beta = .32, p < .001$; see Figure 3). Harsh discipline and parent-adolescent conflict fully mediated the association between marital conflict and adolescent’s maladjustment. About 35% of the variance in adolescent’s maladjustment was ac-
accounted for by marital conflict and ineffective parenting (net of background factors).

**Contextualizing the model.** Most of the interaction terms with background factors were not significant (28 of 36 terms, 78%). The direct path from marital conflict to adolescent maladjustment was similar for mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, families with parents of various ethnic backgrounds, and families living in and out of poverty. The pathway from marital conflict to parent’s harsh discipline to adolescent maladjustment differed by child gender, family poverty status, and parent gender. The path differed for daughters and sons because the association between marital conflict and harsh discipline (the first leg and controlling for the three other parenting variables) was stronger for sons (β = .33, p < .001) than for daughters (β = .19, p < .001). The path differed for poor and less poor families because the association between marital conflict and harsh discipline (the first leg) was statistically significant in families not living in poverty (β = .30, p < .001) but not for families living in poverty (β = .09, p > .05). The path differed for mothers and fathers because the association between harsh discipline and adolescent maladjustment (the second leg) was significant for mothers (β = .23, p < .001) but not for fathers (β = .02, p > .05). The pathway was similar for families with different ethnic backgrounds.

The pathway from marital conflict to parental involvement to adolescent maladjustment differed by parent gender. The path from marital conflict to involvement (the first leg) was statistically significant for fathers (β = -.11, p < .001) but not for mothers (β = -.07, p > .05). Conversely, the path from involvement to adolescent maladjustment (the second leg) was stronger for mothers (β = -.25, p < .001) than for fathers (β = -.08, p < .05). The pathway was similar for daughters and sons, for parents with different ethnic backgrounds, and for families living in and out of poverty.

The pathway from marital conflict to parental presence to adolescent maladjustment differed by ethnic status. The path from marital conflict to presence (the first leg) was statistically significant for non-European American families (β = -.17, p < .001) but not for European American families (β = .02, p > .05). The pathway was similar for daughters and sons, for families living in and out of poverty, and for mothers and fathers.

The pathway from marital conflict to parent-adolescent conflict to adolescent maladjustment was similar for mothers’ and fathers’ reports and for poor and less poor families, but differed for sons and daughters and for European American and non-European American families. Adolescent gender moderated the association between marital conflict and parent-adolescent conflict because it was stronger for daughters (β = .45, p < .001, controlling for other parenting variables) than for sons (β = .32, p < .001). This association also was stronger for European American families (β = .43, p < .001) than for minority families (β = .21, p < .001).

**Alternative models.** The redundancy model did not fit well for families with adolescents. The correlations between marital conflict and ineffective parenting were low, and each accounted for unique variance in adolescent maladjustment. The independent-additive model fit the data. Parent-adolescent conflict, harsh discipline, and involvement each were associated with adolescent maladjustment and the measures of parenting explained an additional 25% of variance in maladjustment, above that explained by marital conflict (i.e., 10%).

There also was some support for the interactive model. The interactions between marital conflict and harsh discipline, marital conflict and parental involvement, and marital conflict and parental presence were not significant. The interaction between marital conflict and parent-adolescent conflict was significant, however. The association between marital conflict and adolescent maladjustment was significant both when parent-adolescent conflict was above the mean (β = .21; p < .01) and lower (β = .11; p < .05) but was stronger when parent-adolescent conflict was higher.

In summary, the spillover and the independent-additive models best fit the data on families with an adolescent. There was little support for the redundancy and interactive (particularly buffering) models. There was some support for the idea that particular aspects of ineffective parenting exacerbate the association between marital conflict and adolescent maladjustment.

**Discussion.** There are several useful findings in this study. The first is the confirmation that marital conflict is associated with greater use of harsh discipline by parents, with reduced levels of parental involvement, and with more frequent parent-adolescent
conflict. These, in turn, are associated with greater levels of maladjustment in children and adolescents. With only a few exceptions, the spillover from marital conflict to child maladjustment through ineffective parenting characterizes sons and daughters, poor and less poor families, and from mothers’ and fathers’ perspectives. One of the strengths of this research design is that we were able to examine these spillover patterns across a wide age range of children, and the pattern fit across ages and developmental stages. This pattern described families across the three age groups with the exception of non-European American families with a target child aged 2 through 4. Thus, one of the deleterious aspects of marital conflict, specifically disagreement and verbal aggression, is that parents also tend to spank, slap, or yell at their children, as well as argue more frequently with their child. This type of physical and verbal hostile behavior by parents, although clearly not abusive in most families, covaries with children’s and adolescents’ maladjustment.

Another deleterious aspect of marital conflict is that it is associated with lower levels of parental involvement. Parents are less likely to praise their children, read to them, play with them, and spend time with them engaging in relational and social activities. This reduced involvement also covaries with children’s and adolescents’ maladjustment. The picture that emerges from these findings is consistent with an aversive chain of events described by Patterson (1982). As marital conflict escalates, parents might become increasingly absorbed by marital problems, less available to their children, more prone to forceful and punitive disciplinary practices, and more likely to argue with their child. As a result of this withdrawal and coercive, hostile behavior, youth might develop a pattern of behavior that is outwardly aggressive and defiant.

A second important finding is that in families with a target child aged 2 through 11, parenting only partially explained the association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment. Crockenberg and Covey (1991) believed that it was unclear whether marital conflict still would be associated with children’s maladjustment when parenting effects were simultaneously considered. In this study, direct effects remained. Emery et al., (1992) contended that the effects of marital conflict cannot be reduced to parenting disruptions. The findings from this study support their contention. There seem to be at least two plausible explanations for these findings. First, because of the limited measurement of parenting in the NSFH, we might not have included enough of the important dimensions of parenting. Although the use of harsh discipline and reduced parental involvement are central components, we regret not having a measure of inconsistency. One of the hallmarks of emotional arousal that accompanies marital conflict is that thinking and behavior become more disorganized (Davies & Cummings, 1994). This disorganization makes it more difficult for a parent to respond consistently to a child’s misbehavior. Thus, a measure of parental inconsistency would have strengthened this study and might have resulted in a further reduction of the association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment. Given the strength of the association between marital conflict and parent-adolescent conflict in families with a target teen, it also is unfortunate there wasn’t a measure of parent-child conflict in families with a target child younger than 12. A second reason for the existence of direct effects might be that marital conflict, in and of itself, might be associated with children’s adjustment difficulties. This might be through the direct modeling of aggressive ways of handling relational problems, through emotional and physiological arousal, and through increasing emotional insecurity (Davies & Cummings, 1998).

The existence of direct effects, unmediated by parenting, was present in non-European American families with a target child aged 2 through 4. So little previous research has examined the patterns of marital conflict, parenting, and children’s maladjustment through the lens of ethnicity that it is difficult to interpret this finding. We conducted follow-up analyses to determine whether this interaction was influenced by differences in economic standing and it was not. Perhaps ethnic families are better at compartmentalizing their relational distress and not allowing the negative affect from their marriage influence their parenting. This is an area in need of further research.

The spillover model was similar for mothers and fathers in families with a target child aged 2 through 11. However, the model differed for mothers and fathers with a target child in adolescence because the inverse association between marital conflict and parental involvement was statistically significant only for fathers. Previous literature reviews have suggested that marital conflict might affect fathering more than mothering (Crockenberg & Covey, 1991; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). The thinking behind this possible
gender difference is that mothering might be less contextual than fathering. Recent literature reinforces this notion. In their narrative review of the fathering literature, Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson (1998) concluded that fathering is influenced by family and community factors to a greater degree than is mothering. These authors provided evidence that residential father involvement is contingent on several external factors including mother’s attitudes toward, expectations of, and support for the father. Thus, when marital tension is high, fathers might feel unsupported by their spouse and consequently disengage from active involvement with their children. The restriction of this finding to adolescents suggests that the general pattern of reduced father involvement during adolescence (Pleck, 1997) might be triggered, in part, by marital strain.

The pathway from marital conflict to child maladjustment through harsh discipline existed for sons and daughters from ages 2 through 18. The significant indirect effects through parental involvement also were similar for sons and daughters in families with a child aged 2 through 11. The path through parent-adolescent conflict was stronger for daughters than sons, however. At a time when identity issues and peer relationships become more salient in the child’s life, marital conflict placed daughters in greater jeopardy. This is consistent with Gilligan’s (1982) theoretical suggestions that daughters might be more vulnerable to family stressors (i.e., marital and parent-adolescent conflict) because they are socialized to caretake and safeguard family relationships.

In addition to the differences already noted between European American and non-European American families with a target child aged 2 through 4, the leg between marital conflict and parental presence was significant in non-European American families with an adolescent but not in European American families. Marital conflict was associated with reduced parental presence. In addition to reduced time spent together, marital conflict is a risk factor for minority youth because it is associated with parents not being at home.

The pathways from marital conflict to children’s maladjustment through harsh discipline were similar for families living in and out of poverty except in families with a target teen. In these families, the link between marital conflict and harsh discipline only existed in families with incomes above the poverty line. If this finding replicates in other studies, additional research is needed to explain how poor families with a teenager are able to compartmentalize their marital conflict.

The linkage through reduced parental involvement also did not differ by poverty status except for families with a target child aged 5 through 11. In these families, the pathway through reduced parental involvement existed only for families not living in poverty. Perhaps this was a function of number of hours employed, with families not living in poverty working more in the face of marital conflict. Increased employment activity might occur to avoid one’s spouse or to bolster economic well-being in the case of a future separation. Future longitudinal research needs to include employment activity in the model because it is an alternative use of time, when considering spending time with children.

A final point of discussion addresses the utility of the spillover model as compared with other ways in which marital conflict, ineffective parenting, and children’s maladjustment can interrelate. The results of this study suggest that the spillover model is a reasonable way to model interconnections. For the most part, marital conflict is associated with higher levels of ineffective parenting, and this pattern is robust when various background characteristics are taken into consideration.

Because ineffective parenting does not fully account for the association between marital conflict and children’s maladjustment, the independent-additive model also represented the data fairly well. Both marital conflict and ineffective parenting were associated with children’s adjustment difficulties, and each contributed uniquely to the explanation of these difficulties. Neither the redundant model nor the buffering model fit the data well.

Although this study of the interconnections among marital conflict, parenting, and children’s maladjustment in two-parent families overcame many of the methodological limitations of previous research, it, too, had limitations. The internal consistency reliabilities of child maladjustment were low. Although these measures of maladjustment have been used in previous research using the NSCFH and have demonstrated evidence of construct validity (Acock & Demo, 1994), they contain random error that might serve to depress the covariances. Low reliability on the dependent measure does not create instability in the predictor estimations (as low reliability on the independent variables can) but reduces the amount of variance explained (Maruyama, 1998). Thus, the variance...
explained in children’s (13% and 12%) and adolescents’ (36%) maladjustment is underestimated.

The cross-sectional design also presents limitations in making causal inferences. The significant patterns among correlations can be examined, but the time ordering among variables is not clear. Thus, in terms of the model tested in the present study, we cannot be certain that marital conflict preceded the ineffective parenting nor that the ineffective parenting preceded the children’s difficulties. Although longitudinal evidence is scant, studies that have examined the causal ordering between marital conflict and parenting, as well as marital conflict and child maladjustment, have reported that marital conflict seems to proceed each (Acock & Demo, 1999; Fincham, Grych, & Osborn, 1994; Floyd, Gilliom, & Costigan, 1998). Again not tested thoroughly, there is at least some evidence that child maladjustment proceeds ineffective parenting in some families (particularly for sons and externalizing problems; Lytton, 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1994; Simons et al., 1994; Zahn-Waxler, 1996). Clearly, three-wave longitudinal research is needed to ensure that the variables are time ordered in such a way that the causal ordering of the spillover effects can be examined more carefully.

This study makes an important contribution to the literature on marital conflict and youth maladjustment by delineating ways in which parenting is susceptible to the influence of negative marital interaction patterns. Although the marital relationship has long been recognized theoretically as a primary determinant of parenting quality and a principal support system to parents (Belsky, 1984), research has been limited by insufficient tests of the spillover hypothesis. Findings from this study can be used to inform clinicians and family life educators about the specific ways in which hostile marital interactions can compromise the quality of parental caregiving and, ultimately, children’s developmental growth. This information has important implications for direct intervention and the planning of effective programs for populations at risk. Future research can supplement this information by examining the role of ethnicity in the relationships among marital conflict, parenting quality, and youth maladjustment and by examining these associations over time and across the life span.

**NOTE**

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**REFERENCES**


