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The Family Context of Parenting in Children's Adaptation to Elementary School

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For our children by birth and by marriage:
Joanna, Kennen, Dena, Tom, Jon,
Jennifer, Eli, Sam, Abby, and Noa.

And for our grandchildren:
Kailey, Kiegan, Alexandra, Jordyn,
Caitlin, Jamie, and Spencer.

7

When Parents Conflict or Disengage: Children's Perceptions of Parents' Marital Distress Predict School Adaptation

Jennifer C. Ablow

During the past decade, research on the links between parents' marital conflict and children's outcomes has moved from demonstrating that marital conflict is a general risk factor for both internalizing behaviors (Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987; Peterson & Zill, 1986) and externalizing behaviors (Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Miller et al., 1993) to investigating specific aspects of marital conflict that may prove problematic for children (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1993; Jenkins & Smith, 1991; McHale, Freitag, Crouter, & Bartko, 1991). Two defining themes have emerged from these studies: (a) Not all parents express conflict in the same way, and (b) not all children react to marital distress in the same way.

This chapter focuses on some of the mechanisms that underlie the association between different types of marital conflict between parents and young children's socioemotional adjustment in kindergarten. In chapter 5, we examined the quality of the marriage as measured by parents' own reports of their marital satisfaction or adjustment and their division of labor in the daily care of their child. In chapter 6, we included our observers' perceptions of the couples as they worked and played with their children in our laboratory playroom. Here we add children's perceptions of conflict between their parents. We shall see, as we did in chapter 6, that young children's social cognitions—in this case their perceptions of their parents' relationship—add to our understanding of the links between familial dynamics and children's psychosocial adjustment as they enter elementary school.

The links between family processes and children's adaptation seem especially salient as children confront the academic and interpersonal challenges

that accompany their initial adjustment to elementary school. We expected that family environments characterized by high levels of ineffectively negotiated marital tension might leave young children vulnerable to developing problematic ways of relating to others. Using structural equation modeling, we examined the overarching hypothesis that parents' overt and covert styles of handling marital conflict would be related to their children's perceptions of, and style of making sense of, their parents' conflict. In turn, we expected that the children's perceptions would be related to individual differences in their internalizing and externalizing symptomatology as they faced the challenges of starting school.

THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL NATURE OF MARITAL CONFLICT

Researchers have begun to acknowledge that marital conflict is not unidimensional and that not all marital conflict is expressed overtly through shouting or fighting (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Fincham, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Katz & Woodin, 2002). In fact, disengagement from conflict has been identified by some marital investigators as one of the best predictors of marital distress and dissolution (Bradbury & Karney, 1993; Gottman, 1993; Levenson & Gottman, 1983). Disengagement has been identified as a style of handling conflict that may also reflect parents' attempts to manage their negative affect when their children are present or can overhear them. Some parents who hope to protect their children from their conflict by delaying their attempts to deal with their impasses "for the sake of the children" are curt, short, or silent with one another, at least when their children are present. We thought it possible that disengagement or conflict avoidance might lead to generalized tension in the family environment, which could contribute as much to children's distress or troubling behavior as overt, unrelieved bickering and shouting.

Children notice more about their parents' relationship than whether parents fight overtly. Several studies reveal that nonverbal expressions of anger are as distressing to children as verbally expressed anger (Ballard & Cummings, 1990; Cummings, Ballard, & El-Sheikh, 1991). However, we know little about how children make sense of hostility between their parents when it is not articulated or expressed directly. Because chronic, nonverbal anger between parents is difficult to identify or label, it may be a source of ongoing stress for children, but the effect of this stress requires further exploration. In this report, distinctions were made between strategies for handling marital conflict by overt disagreement, shouting, or hostility, and strategies that involved disengagement and withdrawal when the parents experienced tension

between them. We hypothesized that overt and covert conflict strategies would be associated in different ways with children's expression of internalizing and externalizing symptomatology during their first year of school.

YOUNG CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF MARITAL CONFLICT

Young children have been a relatively neglected group in examinations of the effects of marital conflict on children's perceptions. Clearly, developmental age and ability play a role in how children make sense of and are affected by their parents' distress. Despite the fact that preschoolers are able to make inferences about why events happen, the sophistication of their causal reasoning is limited (Miller & Aloise, 1989). Older children are more likely to understand that a variety of factors might lead to their parents' conflict and be more adept at making appropriate causal attributions about conflict between their parents. Children who are at an egocentric level of thought (Piaget, 1967) may not understand that their parents' conflict may have little to do with them. Thus, children who are approaching the transition to school when they are between 4 and 6 years of age may be at heightened risk for blaming themselves and assuming that they created the difficulty between their parents, even if they actually play little or no role in their parents' distress. This vulnerability may be especially pronounced when parents' style of conflict is taken into consideration, with covert marital conflict strategies associated with young children's increased confusion as to who is responsible for the tension they perceive. Children entering kindergarten may be particularly vulnerable to family relationship problems as they make the transition from home to elementary school. As they enter kindergarten and face new and challenging social situations, they often call on the coping strategies they have witnessed at home or in their preschool environments. Thus, some children may be able to negotiate conflict successfully as they form new peer relationships, others may withdraw or disengage, whereas others still may resort to more antisocial, aggressive strategies.

To date, most researchers have relied on at least one parent's report to assess how much their children are exposed to or are aware of the parents' conflict as a couple (for exceptions, see Grych et al., 1992). Parents' reports may not provide the most accurate account of their children's awareness of conflict because some parents overestimate and others underestimate their children's exposure to, or awareness of, conflict between them. Although stress and coping theorists emphasize the mediating role of an individual's appraisal of stressful events in the genesis of emotional responses (Lazarus, 1992), there are surprisingly few empirical studies of children's interpretations of their parents' conflict as a couple.

Most hypotheses advanced to explain the relation between parents' marital conflict and children's adjustment assume that marital conflict affects children negatively. Lazarus (1992) suggested that stress responses must be viewed in terms of a transaction between the individual and the environment, and that the meaning, appraisal, and ultimate impact of the event are intrinsic to its significance. Accordingly, the same event may be perceived differently by different individuals. For example, some children may perceive their parents' conflict as benign and not relevant to them, whereas others may experience it as threatening and potentially harmful.

Grych and Fincham (1990) emphasized the central role of children's cognitive appraisal in shaping their response to, or interpretation of, their parents' marital conflict. In their investigations, Grych and his colleagues (1992) suggested that several kinds of appraisals, such as the perceived threat posed by parental conflict, the efficacy of the child's coping and the child's causal attributions concerning the source of the conflict and ascription of blame, may be particularly salient in the impact of marital conflict on children, their response to the conflict, and the risk for developing behavioral or emotional problems. Questionnaire measures that assess how children appraise marital conflict in these studies of older children were not appropriate for children below the age of about 8. In this study, we used the Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI; see also chapter 6, this volume; Ablow & Measelle, 1993; Measelle, Ablow, Cowan, & Cowan, 1998)—a method developed to assess younger children's perceptions of their parents' marriage—to evaluate whether kindergarten children's perceptions were associated not only with their parents' particular styles of handling marital conflict but also with specific forms of adaptation or difficulty in adjusting to the first year of elementary school.

GIRLS VERSUS BOYS

In addition to considering individual children's appraisals of their parents' marital conflict, we explored the possibility that marital conflict may affect girls and boys differently (Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993; Osborne & Fincham, 1996). Not only is there evidence that mothers and fathers argue differently depending on whether they are in the presence of sons or daughters (Ablow & Suh, 1997; Hetherington, 1993), but some studies suggest that boys and girls have different ways of processing and responding to marital conflict (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Osborne & Fincham, 1996). To examine sex-specific associations between marital conflict and young children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors following entry into school, we tested separate structural models for sons and daughters.

INTERNALIZING AND EXTERNALIZING

Reviews of research on factors involved in children's mental health outcomes point to marital processes as significant predictors of behavior problems (Gotlib & Goodman, 1999; Sheeber et al., 1997). Although marital discord has been linked to academic difficulties, children from high conflict homes are particularly vulnerable to both internalizing and externalizing problems (Davies & Forman, 2002; Goodman, 2002; Ingoldsby, Shaw, Owens, & Winslow, 1999). Many children will outgrow early mood dysregulation and problem behaviors arising in high conflict homes, but the presence of these behaviors around the transition to school is a strong predictor of mental health trajectories that reflect chronic maladaptation. The analyses in this chapter focus on explicating some of the marital and familial processes that might function as early antecedents or risk factors that predict difficulties in children's initial adjustment to school in typically developing children.

HYPOTHESES

1. With the use of structural equation models, we expected to find that high levels of overt and covert marital conflict combine with data on children's reports of parental fighting, and whether they blame themselves for the fights, to predict internalizing and externalizing behavior in kindergarten. Although structural models cannot establish the direction of effects, we expected that models consistent with a family socialization perspective (marital interaction → child perception → child adaptation) would be more useful than alternative models that give primacy to children's adaptation as the engine driving the system.

2. We predicted that overt and covert parental fighting during a family interaction task would have different path links to children's perceptions and kindergarten outcomes.

3. Without being able to make specific predictions, we explored the possibility that there would be different pathways for girls and boys linking marital conflict, children's perceptions, and adaptation to school.

METHOD

Participants

Because one of the central constructs in this investigation—children's perceptions of their parents' conflict—was not assessed at prekindergarten (PRE) for children in the first of the three waves of families in the larger study, data

for the 80 families (46 boys and 34 girls) included in this report were drawn from the kindergarten (POST 1) assessments. In the context of this study, it would have been preferable to obtain children's perceptions of their parents' marriage before they entered school, but the BPI items on the family were not created in time to be administered to the whole sample, resulting in the present shorter-term longitudinal design (fall kindergarten family observations to spring kindergarten teacher reports of children's internalizing and externalizing symptomatology). It seems unlikely that children's experiences in school could color their perceptions of their parents' marriage, but because this possibility exists, it would be helpful to replicate the findings within a longitudinal design and reexamine the hypotheses to test for more complex models of mediation or moderation.

Children's mean age was 5.9 (SD = .38) at the time of the kindergarten teachers' spring assessments of them. Both children and parents in this subsample were similar in age, income, and ethnicity to those in the larger study (see chapter 2 for recruitment procedures and demographic details), and the parents did not differ in level of marital satisfaction.

Measures

Marital Interaction. At the conclusion of the family visit in the fall of the kindergarten year, trained observers provided global ratings of husbands' and wives' behavior toward one another as they worked and played with their child in a number of structured and open-ended tasks (chapter 2 provides a detailed description of the tasks and the global rating system). The fall ratings of the couple during the whole family visit were used as an index of the marital tension to which children were exposed during their first year of elementary school. Because we were interested in both overt and covert conflict for this chapter, we combined the ratings of marital tension in a slightly different way than that described in chapter 2, by using two conceptually distinct aspects of conflict expression. The first, overt conflict expressed between the parents through the direct exchange of anger, included measures of competition, anger, disagreement, coldness, and displeasure. The second, disengaged conflict, reflected covert tension expressed between the parents through behaviors such as withdrawing from interaction or not responding to one another; this factor included reverse scored measures of pleasure, warmth, interactiveness, and responsiveness.

A Principal Components Factor Analysis was conducted next to test the degree to which overt and disengaged forms of conflict were identifiable and separable. When rotated to a varimax solution, the results yielded clearly identifiable overt and disengaged factors that together accounted for 73.1% of the total variance in the factor structure (46.0% and 27.1%, respectively). As an additional test, separate overt and disengaged scale scores were computed by taking the average of each factor's respective subscale scores. The correlation between the overt and disengaged scales was considerable, $r(78) = .56$, $p < .001$, but the two were not redundant.

Children's Perceptions and Processing of Marital Conflict. The BPI (Ablow & Measelle, 1993) was used to measure children's perceptions of their parents' relationship during a home visit in the summer before they entered kindergarten. Here, we report on two BPI parent relationship scales: (a) children's perceptions of marital conflict scale, and (b) children's self-blame scale. The children's perception of marital conflict scale was selected to provide an index of the degree of conflict children perceive and acknowledge to occur between their parents. The scale is comprised of three items from the BPI: (a) "My parents have fights"/"My parents don't have fights," (b) "My parents fight a lot."/"My parents don't fight a lot," and (c) "When my parents have a fight, they stay mad for a long time"/"When my parents have a fight, they don't stay mad for a long time," $\alpha = .55$. The children's self-blame scale, designed to assess children's tendency to blame themselves for the conflict they perceive between their parents, was included to assess one way that children process their parents' fights (e.g., "It's my fault when my parents have a fight"/"It isn't my fault when my parents have a fight"). Because young children are particularly vulnerable to blaming themselves for family tensions, it was thought that this measure of cognitive processing might be particularly salient for most children in this 5- to 6-year-old age group. Four items from the BPI address children's tendency to blame themselves for their parents' conflict, $\alpha = .69$. Despite the relatively low alpha of the children's perceptions of marital conflict scale, earlier studies using the BPI showed consistent patterns of association between children's perceptions of parents' fighting and ratings of the marital interaction by adult observers (Ablow, 1997b). Furthermore, the items from this scale loaded highly when included in the larger structural equation measurement model as manifest variables (see Table 7.2).

The Child's Adaptation to School. We used kindergarten teachers' ratings of the children's behavior during the spring semester on the Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory (CABI) as measures of children's adjustment to the first year of school. The latent variable representing depressed, anxious, internalizing behavior included scales assessing depression, anxiety, and somatization. The latent variable representing aggressive externalizing behavior included scales assessing antisocial, oppositional, and hostile behavior.

RESULTS

Overview

Results of path models examining both observers' and children's reports of parents' styles of handling marital conflict were consistent with a socialization hypothesis: how parents expressed their conflict as a couple was related to children's perceptions of their parents' conflict, which, in turn, was linked to internalizing and externalizing behavior at the end of the kindergarten year. The models suggested that overt and covert marital conflict have differential links with children's perceptions of conflict, and that perceptions of conflict have different connections with internalizing and externalizing for girls and boys.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 7.1 presents the means, standard deviations, and *t* tests for differences between boys' and girls' manifest variables in the various models. There were no statistically significant mean differences between mothers and fathers of 5- to 6-year-old boys and girls in terms of observed marital conflict or between daughters' and sons' perceptions of their parents' marital conflict, and no differences in teachers' perceptions of the degree to which boys and girls expressed anxious and depressed behavior in kindergarten (see also chapter 3). Nevertheless, as was the case for externalizing scores reported in chapter 3 (analyses based on the same data), kindergarten teachers rated boys as exhibiting higher mean levels of aggressive externalizing and hostile behavior than girls. There were no differences in teachers' ratings of boys' and girls' oppositionality. Separate models for boys and girls were run to determine whether the patterns of associations among the tested constructs varied with the sex of the child.

Analytic Strategy

Latent Variable Path Analysis with Partial Least Squares estimation (LVPLS; Falk & Miller, 1992; Lohmoeller, 1989; Wold, 1982) was used to examine the relations among observers' ratings of parents' conflict resolution strategies as a couple, children's perceptions and processing of their parents' conflict as a couple, and children's problem behaviors during their first year of elementary school. By using this analytic technique (see chapter 2 for detailed discussion of LVPLS), we were able to explore the hypothesis that parents' marital conflict and children's behavioral adjustment are linked through children's perceptions of their parents' conflict, and to describe the potentially different patterns of connections among these constructs for girls and boys.

TABLE 7.1
Descriptive Statistics and Results of *t* Tests of Differences Between Girls' and Boys' Manifest Variables

		Girls		*Boys*		
Variable	*Range*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*
Overt marital conflict						
Competition	1–4.5	1.94	.81	1.93	.80	–.05
Disagreement	1–4.5	1.82	.80	1.81	.84	–.06
Coldness	1–4.5	2.24	1.01	2.21	.78	–.17
Displeasure						
Covert marital conflict						
Pleasure (reverse scored)	2–6	3.24	.84	3.42	.90	.91
Warmth (reverse scored)	2–6	3.57	.92	3.55	.94	.12
Interactiveness (reverse scored)	1–4	2.13	.77	2.38	.63	1.59
Responsiveness (reverse scored)	1–4	2.17	.75	2.24	.57	.43
Children's perceived marital conflict						
Parents have fights	1–6	3.46	1.56	3.12	1.51	–1.07
Parents fight a lot	1–6	2.45	1.25	2.47	1.26	.09
Parents stay mad for a long time	1–6.5	2.94	1.58	2.95	1.67	.05
Children's perceived self-blame						
My fault	1.5–5.75	2.53	1.03	2.27	.67	–1.39
Mad at me	1.75–6	2.88	1.18	2.62	1.00	–1.11
Anxious and depressed behavior						
Depressed	1–3.83	1.55	.67	1.67	.72	.80
Anxious	1–3.60	1.83	.67	1.94	.78	.68
Somatic complaints	1–3.40	1.74	.70	1.56	.59	–1.31
Aggressive externalizing behavior						
Antisocial	1–3.0	1.26	.39	1.61	.64	3.18**
Oppositional	1–3.17	1.58	.57	1.80	.57	1.65
Hostile	1–3.75	1.40	.54	1.71	.71	2.35*

Note. $N = 80$. $n = 34$ (girls). $n = 46$ (boys).
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$.

Testing Four LVPLS Models

LVPLS models were used to examine the linkages among five latent constructs created from 16 manifest variables selected for each structural equation (see Table 7.2): (a) overt marital conflict, (b) covert marital conflict, (c) children's perceptions of how much their parents fight, (d) children's tendency to blame themselves for parents' fighting, and (e) teachers' ratings of children's adaptation. Four models were constructed to predict girls' and

TABLE 7.2
Latent Variable Path Analysis With Partial Least Squares:
Loadings on Manifest Variables

	Outcome			
	Anxious and Depressed		*Aggressive Externalizing*	
Latent Variable (LV)	*Girls*	*Boys*	*Girls*	*Boys*
LV1: Overt marital conflict				
Competition	.85	.91	.86	.89
Disagreement	.80	.87	.80	.85
Coldness	.89	.91	.89	.92
Displeasure	.90	.89	.89	.91
LV2: Covert marital conflict				
Pleasure (reverse scored)	.86	.65	.86	.60
Warmth (reverse scored)	.90	.91	.90	.91
Interactiveness (reverse scored)	.90	.93	.89	.93
Responsiveness (reverse scored)	.84	.91	.84	.91
LV3: Children's perceived marital conflict				
Parents have fights	.80	.87	.80	.90
Parents fight a lot	.74	.65	.74	.61
Parents stay mad for a long time	.98	.99	.99	.99
LV4: Children's perceived self-blame				
My fault	.99	.98	.98	.94
Mad at me	.60	.73	.60	.77
LV5: Anxious and depressed behavior				
Depressed	.77	.82		
Anxious	.87	.74		
Somatic complaints	.68	.77		
LV6: Aggressive externalizing behavior				
Antisocial			.90	.85
Oppositional			.88	.93
Hostile			.93	.92

boys' internalizing and externalizing in kindergarten (see Fig. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, and 7.4).

The Measurement Models. Each latent variable comprised a minimum of two measures from the same source, with three different sources included in each model (staff observers, the child, the teacher). Correlations among couple interaction, children's perceptions, and teachers' ratings of classroom behavior were not inflated by coming from the same source.

Examination of the measurement model revealed that the manifest variables in all four models were reasonable indicators of their latent constructs. The mean communality index in both boys' and girls' models ranged from .70

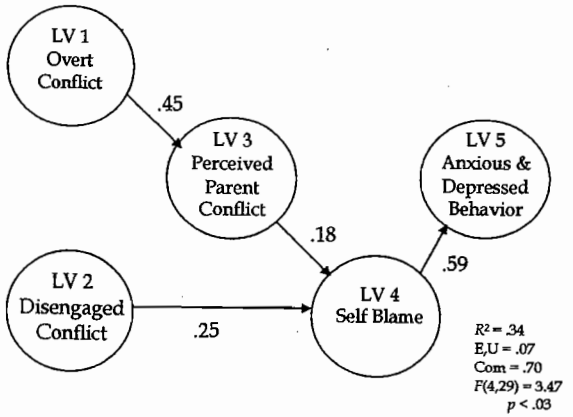

FIG. 7.1. Path model with girls' anxious and depressed (internalizing) behavior as outcome.

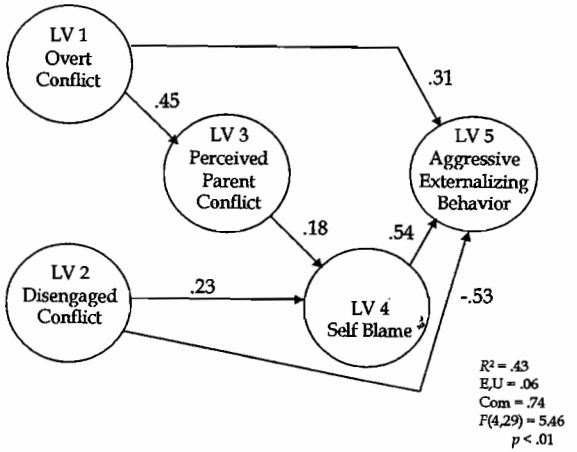

FIG. 7.2. Path model with girls' aggressive externalizing behavior as outcome.

to .76, indicating adequately derived latent constructs (Falk & Miller, 1992). The manifest loadings for each of the child gender and outcome models are presented in Table 7.2. All path models in this study yielded Root Mean Square Covariance (RMS COV [E,U]) coefficients from .06 to .07, indicating a good fit between model and data.

The Structural Models. For girls, the models accounted for a statistically significant 34% of the variance in internalizing behavior, $F(4, 29) = 3.73$, $p < .05$, and a statistically significant 43% of the variance in externalizing be-

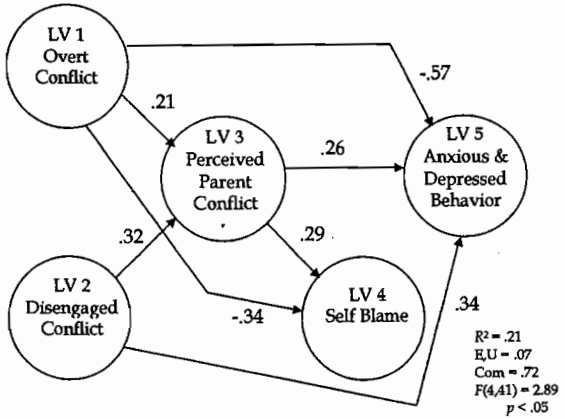

FIG. 7.3. Path model with boys' anxious and depressed (internalizing) behavior as outcome.

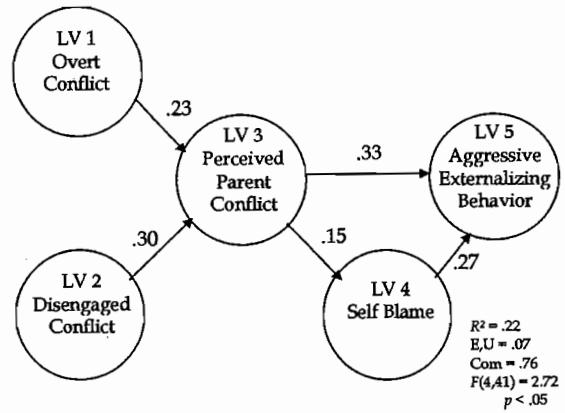

FIG. 7.4. Path model with boys' aggressive externalizing behavior as outcome.

haviors, $F(4, 29) = 5.46$, $p < .01$, as reported by kindergarten teachers. For boys, the models accounted for a statistically significant 22% of the variance in externalizing behavior, $F(4, 41) = 2.89$, $p < .05$, and a statistically significant 21% of the variance in internalizing behaviors, $F(4, 41) = 2.72$, $p < .05$. In other words, as hypothesis 1 suggested, a combination of observations of the parents' interactions as a couple while they worked with their children on challenging tasks during the preschool visit to our laboratory, and their daughters' or sons' perceptions of the parents' patterns of handling conflict, accounted for moderate to high proportions of the variance in children's anxious, depressed or angry, aggressive behavior at the end of the kindergarten year.

Comparison of the Socialization Perspective With Other Approaches. Although we recognize that children can contribute to both the frequency and content of their parents' conflict, the arrangement of the latent variables in Fig. 7.1 to 7.4 is consistent with theories of socialization in which parents' characteristics and behaviors (overt and disengaged conflict) predict outcomes in their young children (perceptions of parent conflict, self-blame, and behavioral adjustment in school).[1]

Because other processes might provide competing explanations for the associations among the variables presented in Fig. 7.1, two alternative models were tested and compared to the socialization model. In the first comparison model, we reasoned that marital conflict could explain variance in children's behavior, which, in turn, would contribute to children's perceptions. Because children's developing social perceptions and self-related appraisals may be abstracted from actual experience, it is plausible that both marital conflict and children's actual classroom behaviors might shape their perceptions of themselves and their parents. The second competing model tested a child-effects hypothesis in which children's behavior contributes to marital conflict and to children's perceptions. Child temperament research (e.g., Bates, 2001) provides support for the notion that hard-to-manage children can contribute to marital discord. Despite the theoretical plausibility of these competing models, neither the models' fit indexes (total variance explained and root mean squared) nor the path weights provided stronger explanations of the data than the socialization models depicted in Fig. 7.1 to 7.4.

Overt and Covert Couple Conflict and Children's Perceptions

The pattern of results supports hypothesis 2, that there are different pathways between the two styles of handling couple conflict and children's perceptions. Furthermore, the patterns differed for girls and boys. When parents engaged in higher levels of overt conflict with each other during the family interaction with their daughters in our playroom, as observers described it (Fig. 7.1 and 7.2), the daughters reported that their parents had higher levels of marital conflict and they tended to blame themselves for their parents' fights. When parents engaged in higher levels of disengagement or covert conflict, daughters did not report that their parents fought a lot, but the girls were more likely to blame themselves for any parental conflict that did occur.

[1]In chapter 11, we demonstrate that the quality of parents' marital interaction does indeed affect the school outcomes under discussion here.

By contrast, boys' reports of higher levels of fighting between parents were associated with both overt and covert couple conflict observed during the family interaction with their sons in our playroom (Fig. 7.3 and 7.4). Although the effect sizes[2] were small, it was the case in all four structural equations that, the more children described their parents as fighting a lot, the more they tended to blame themselves for their parents' conflict.

Sex Differences in Pathways Linking Marital Conflict, Children's Perceptions, and Children's Adaptation to School

Now, we turn to similarities and differences among the models connecting couple conflict, 6-year-old children's perceptions of that conflict, and children's behavior in the classroom at the end of the kindergarten year. As expected, girls' and boys' models revealed different pathways from parents' marital conflict to daughters' and sons' problem behaviors at school. Pathways reflect path weights (PW; standardized beta weight between variables) that met criteria specified in chapter 2.

Girls' Anxious and Depressed Behavior. In Fig. 7.1, different pathways linked observers' ratings of parents' overt and covert marital conflict with girls' tendency to blame themselves, but regardless of its source, self-blame assessed in the fall of the kindergarten year predicted anxious, depressed, internalizing behaviors 6 months later. Higher overt marital conflict during the family interaction tasks was associated with girls' perceptions that their parents fought a lot (pw = .45). In turn, girls' perceptions of higher levels of conflict between their parents were associated with their tendency to blame themselves for their parents' arguments (pw = .18). We reported earlier that parents who were disengaged were not seen by their daughters as having high conflict, but the girls tended to blame themselves for any conflict their parents displayed (pw = .25). Finally, girls' tendency to feel responsible for their parents' fighting was linked with their teachers' views of them as exhibiting higher levels of anxious and depressed behavior in the spring of the kindergarten year (pw = .59).

Girls' Aggressive Externalizing Behavior. Similar to the path model for girls' depressed and anxious behavior, Fig. 7.2 showed that marital conflict was indirectly connected to aggressive externalizing behavior through links with the girls' perceptions of their parents' marriage. However, in this case, there were also direct links from the couples' marital conflict to their daughters' aggressive externalizing behavior in kindergarten. As hypothesized, a higher level of overt conflict between the parents during the playroom visit was related to a higher level of aggressive externalizing behavior in kindergarten (pw = .31). Unexpectedly, high ratings of withdrawn and disengaged behavior between parents were associated with lower levels of externalizing behavior in kindergarten girls (pw = –.53).

[2]The effect size—amount of variance explained—is the product of the path weight times the correlation between the two latent variables.

Boys' Anxious and Depressed Behavior. Paths linking observers' and sons' reports of marital conflict with teachers' ratings of boys' anxious and depressed behavior in kindergarten are presented in Fig. 7.3. As in the models for girls, when parents of boys engaged in more overt marital conflict in our project playroom, their sons reported more conflict between their parents (pw = .21) and their teachers were more likely to report that the boys showed anxious and depressed behaviors at the end of kindergarten year (pw = .26). However, contrary to expectations, observations of overt conflict between parents in front of their sons in our project playroom were linked directly with teachers' descriptions of boys as less anxious and depressed in kindergarten (pw = –.57). Also unexpected was the fact that parents' high overt conflict was associated with sons' reports of less self-blaming (pw = –.34). Boys' self-blame concerning their parents' conflict was not associated with teachers' ratings of internalizing behavior as it was for girls.

The paths from more covert or disengaged conflict between parents of boys provided a contrasting pattern with overt conflict and with the models for parents of girls. First, as hypothesized, parents' disengaged style of handling conflict was associated directly with boys showing more anxious and depressed behavior at school according to their teachers' descriptions on the CABI (pw = .34). The second pathway revealed an indirect connection. When observers noted parents' tendency to disengage from conflict as a couple, their sons were more likely to report higher levels of conflict between the parents (pw = .32) and that, in turn, was related to teachers' reports of more internalizing behavior in the spring of the kindergarten year (pw = .26).

Boys' Aggressive Externalizing Behavior. The path model linking observers' and sons' reports of marital conflict with teachers' ratings of aggressive externalizing behavior was different from the model of boys' depressed and anxious behaviors. As shown in Fig. 7.4, observers' reports of marital conflict behaviors were not associated directly with boys' externalizing classroom behaviors. Rather, observers' ratings of spouses' overt and disengaged conflict styles were linked to sons' perceptions of more conflict between their parents (pw = .30), which, in turn, were associated with their teachers' reports of higher levels of aggressive externalizing behavior in kindergarten (pw = .23).

The second major difference between boys' internalizing and externalizing models occurred in relation to boys' perceptions of their parents' conflict.

Boys' tendency to blame themselves for their parents' conflict was not related to their internalizing behavior in kindergarten. However, perceptions of conflict between their parents were linked both directly (pw = .33) and indirectly to sons' externalizing behavior. When boys perceived higher conflict between their parents, they were more likely to blame themselves for these problems (pw = .18) and to engage in more externalizing behaviors at school later that year (pw = .27).

DISCUSSION

Explaining Variance in Internalizing and Externalizing Behavior

Hypothesis 1, that staff-observed marital conflict and children's perceptions of it would combine to explain variance in kindergarten adaptation, was supported. The four Latent Variable Partial Least Squares (LVPLS) models presented in Fig. 7.1 to 7.4 yielded statistically significant regression coefficients that accounted for 21% to 43% of the variance in children's internalizing and externalizing behavior. Furthermore, although we could not test the statistical significance of the differences, models that assumed a socialization perspective in which parents' conflict was the independent variable and children's behavior in kindergarten was the dependent variable fit the data better than models that posited children's problem behavior as the independent variable affecting parents' level of conflict.

The general pattern of results linking parents' styles of handling conflict and their young children's perceptions of those patterns is consistent with findings of connections between parents' marital conflict and older children's behavior outside the family (see Cummings & Davies, 1994). In this study, we found such links in families with 5- to 6-year-olds setting out on their school careers. Consistent with a family systems orientation to children's development, the findings highlight the importance of the parents' marital atmosphere—and their children's appraisal of it—to the children's development of relationships with others during their early days at school. The main focus of the analyses was on how this linkage occurs.

Children's Perceptions of Marital Conflict in Couples With Overt and Disengaged Patterns

Across all models, observers' ratings of the parents as argumentative and angry with one another during the family's visit to our project were consistently related to children's perceptions that their parents fight or have arguments. Just as trained observers who were unfamiliar with the family noticed overt

conflict between parents when they were working and playing with their children, children as young as 5 to 6 years old were aware of their parents' conflict and described it to the puppets during the BPI. With parents who disengaged or withdrew, boys reported that they fought a lot, but girls did not. That is, if we can assume that the differences lie in perceptions and not in willingness to report, we could conclude from these data that boys may be more sensitive to the unspoken tensions between their parents than are girls. Of course, such a conclusion requires further exploration and replication.

Regardless of the parents' style of handling conflict during the laboratory visit, higher levels of perceived conflict between parents were associated with higher levels of self-blame for both girls and boys about to enter kindergarten. In only one of the four analyses was there a direct link between observed conflict and self-blame, and that was in a direction opposite to the general trends (high overt conflict, low self-blame for boys). Perhaps parents' open expression of their conflict may lead some boys to conclude that the conflict between their parents is a "parent" problem that has nothing to do with them; for these boys, overt conflict appears to be associated with lower levels of self-blame and lower levels of internalizing problems. The results provide some support for Lazarus's (1999) conclusion that it is not only whether parents actually fight, but whether children appraise their behavior as fighting, that plays a role in whether children feel responsible for their parents' marital distress.

Pathways to Aggressive and Depressed Behaviors in Kindergarten

Direct Connections: Marital Conflict and Kindergarten Adjustment. Parents' overt and covert styles of handling conflict were directly linked with teachers' ratings of girls' aggressive externalizing behavior but not their anxious and depressed behavior. Overt marital conflict, as we observed it in the fall of the kindergarten year, was associated with higher aggression shown by the girls in the spring of that year, but covert conflict predicted lower aggression. In brief, parents with high levels of overt fighting during a family interaction task tended to have girls who fought with others in kindergarten.

By contrast, covert and overt marital conflict were directly linked with teachers' ratings of boys' anxious and depressed behavior, but not their externalizing, aggressive behavior. Parents who were more disengaged had sons who were more anxious and depressed in the classroom 6 months later, whereas boys whose parents fought overtly were less anxious and depressed. In brief, parents with high levels of covert fighting had sons who were likely to be more withdrawn in the classroom.

Social learning theory would suggest that the direct link between children's tendency to be disobedient, uncooperative, and argumentative in the

classroom is based on imitation. The children may be employing tactics learned from their parents to get something that they want to play with, to get others to do something for them, or to resolve problems with peers or teachers. From the point of view of emotion regulation dynamics, direct links between ratings of parents' overt handling of conflict and their children's aggressive behavior support the "spill-over" hypothesis, in which conflict in the marital system spills over and acts as a palpable stressor for the child. Children experiencing stress in their key family relationships may begin to rely on dominant, well-learned coping responses that are less mature or adaptive (Spielberger, 1979). Exposure to their parents' anger may be experienced as internally disequilibrating, leading children to act out in more oppositional, hostile ways or to hesitate to form new relationships, which could result in social isolation and signs of depression.

Indirect Connections: Marital Conflict, Self-Blame, and Children's Adaptation. There were different links between girls' and boys' tendency to blame themselves for their parents' conflict as a couple and their own problem behaviors in kindergarten. When parents tended to fight overtly, daughters reported higher levels of marital conflict, tended to blame themselves for it, and were more likely to show anxious and aggressive externalizing behavior in the first year of elementary school. When the parents had more disengaged ways of handling the conflict between them, their daughters tended to blame themselves and show more anxious or antisocial behavior at school. Thus, young daughters appeared to feel responsible for conflict between their parents regardless of how their parents handled it, and those perceptions were associated with more troubling behavior in their first year of school. This suggests that daughters' intrapsychic processing of their parents' conflict may serve as a critical link between parents' withdrawal or disengagement and their daughters' symptoms of anxiety or depression as they begin their schooling.

An unexpected finding was that, despite the fact that most theories tend to associate self-blame with depression (e.g., Beck, 1963), children in this study who blamed themselves for their parents' fighting were as likely to be aggressive as they were to be anxious or depressed at the beginning of their school careers. This finding is counter to results from studies of older children (e.g., Grych et al., 2000), but we could not find studies of this issue in girls in the early years of elementary school. It is possible that the link between self-blame for parents' distress and children's depression becomes solidified only after the children develop the self-consciousness associated with adolescence (Elkind, 1985). Before that time, blaming oneself for parents' fighting may be equally likely to lead to social withdrawal or anger and peer aggression, or both.

Sex Differences in Patterns. Self-blame for their parents' fights played a different role in explaining boys' externalizing and internalizing behaviors than it did in girls' problem behavior in the kindergarten classroom. When parents handled their conflict overtly, their sons were less likely to feel responsible for the parents' problems and less likely to be anxious or depressed at school. But, when parents avoided engaging directly in their marital differences in the presence of their sons, the boys were more likely to report that their parents had a good deal of conflict and more likely to blame themselves for the difficulties. Their teachers, in turn, were more likely to describe them as anxious or depressed at school. Despite parents' attempts to hide their conflict when the child was present, it is possible that the boys especially were preoccupied with their parents' struggles.

CONCLUSIONS

Whatever the explanation of the linking mechanisms, there are implications for parents and for intervention in these results. It appears that parents' withdrawal or disengagement from conflict in front of their young children does not protect them from the negative effects of parents' troubling differences. Parents' withdrawal or disengagement from conflict was associated with sons' tendency to be anxious and depressed and daughters' tendency to blame themselves and show signs of depression or aggressive behavior at school. These findings suggest that parents' conflict strategies would be a fruitful family arena to target in preschool interventions so that girls and boys can enter school with less vulnerability to problems in relating to others. Chapter 11 describes the results of such an intervention offered to some of the parents in the larger study.

The PLS models in this chapter explained between 21% and 43% of the variance in the children's outcome variables, but a substantial portion of the variance in their kindergarten adaptation remained unexplained. Some of the limitations in explanatory power may have been due to the measures used here. Although the study employed multiple informants and multiple measures of marital conflict, only single scales were used here to define the child's perception of parents' conflict and their tendency to blame themselves for its occurrence. Observers were used to rate parents' interaction as a couple, but the rating scales were global in nature and did not allow us to assess microanalytic sequences such as patterns of escalating negative conflict that have been shown to be detrimental to couples and to their children (Katz & Gottman, 1993).

In this investigation, the scores reflecting parents' interaction as a couple were scores for the couple. Future investigations might fruitfully consider

ratings of each partner's behavior toward his or her spouse, rather than relying solely on ratings of the parents' behavior as a couple. Independent scores for husbands and wives could make a significant contribution to our understanding of the role of gender in parents' management of conflict and their children's experience of it. Those data would allow us to examine whether mothers and fathers express conflict in front of their children differently, and whether those differences have differential effects on sons' and daughters' perceptions, behavior, or overall adaptation. Observations of each parent separately would also further our understanding of whether the same sex or opposite sex parent's approach to conflict explains additional variance in children's experience of conflict—between their parents and in their own relationships with others.

We draw several conclusions from the present findings in the context of previous chapters. The general topic is understanding the links between parents' marital quality and children's emotional and social adaptation to kindergarten. The results in chapter 5 suggest that sex-stereotyped parenting that follows from an unsatisfying marriage plays a role in understanding variations in children's internalizing and externalizing. Chapter 6 focuses on observed coparenting during a family interaction task and the ways in which parent–child relationships and children's self-perceptions predict adaptation to kindergarten. Here in chapter 7, we considered the possibility that children's perceptions of their parents' conflict and their attributions about the source of this conflict also account for variation in children's adaptation to kindergarten. Perhaps the most significant implication of the findings in this chapter is that young children appear to be keenly aware of conflict between their parents, and more specifically, that they are actively working to make sense of the conflict they perceive; both are related to their behavioral adjustment as they make their transition to elementary school.

The results also emphasize the need to take different aspects of marital conflict into account rather than treat all conflict alike. Despité the fact that marital researchers have identified the tactics of disengagement from conflict and "stonewalling" as serious predictors of marital distress, most investigators of child development have focused solely on parents' overt marital conflict. By including observational ratings of couples' level of both overt and disengaged styles of handling marital conflict, this study helped elucidate relationships among parents' marital conflict, their children's perceptions of it, and the children's subsequent adjustment to school.

8

Parents' Working Models of Attachment: The Intergenerational Context of Parenting and Children's Adaptation to School

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This chapter adds an intergenerational dimension to our examination of parent–child and marital relationships as they predict children's adaptation to elementary school. A common belief, buttressed by empirical data, is that patterns of parenting tend to be repeated from one generation to another (Smith & Drew, 2002; Van IJzendoorn, 1992). To examine this belief, we did not have an opportunity to meet the parents of the parents in our study (the children's grandparents) or to observe the interactions among grandparents, parents, and children, although the grandparents often seemed psychologically present in the interviews we conducted with the children's parents at each follow-up. Instead, we obtained information about the parent participants' early and current relationships with their parents using a partially-structured 90-min Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) created by George et al. (1985). We found that AAI codes representing qualities of the early and current relationships between parents and grandparents added significantly to our ability to predict early school outcomes for children, over and above our observations of the parents' marital interaction and parenting style as they worked and played with their child in our project playroom.

A growing body of research demonstrates that parents' narrative accounts of relationships with their parents are highly correlated with the observed quality of relationships they have with their children. For example, studies find relatively high concordance between mothers' working models of attachment, based on their responses to the AAI about relationships in their families of origin, and their infant's security of attachment after a brief separation