Constructive and destructive conflict, parenting, and co-parenting alliance

Interparental conflict has been classified as either constructive (i.e., mutual respect and progress toward resolution) and/or destructive (i.e., hostile and verbal aggression; Cummings & Davies, 2002). In relation to parenting, destructive conflict has predicted parents’ emotional unavailability (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006) and hostility (McCoy et al., 2013). Constructive interparental conflict is less studied, but sparse evidence suggests that constructive interparental conflict relates to parental sensitivity (McCoy et al., 2013). Despite differential effects of constructive and destructive conflict on parenting behaviors, there is a shortage of studies advancing our understanding of links between interparental conflict and parenting behaviors for both mothers and fathers. Additionally, current literature is lacking regarding how these forms of conflict, particularly constructive interparental conflict, relate to co-parenting behaviors (e.g., the degree to which parents work together as team with regard to their parenting roles; Gable et al., 1994). Accordingly, the goal of this study was to examine mothers’ and fathers’ constructive and destructive conflict in relation to parenting (i.e., supportiveness and harshness) and co-parenting practices.

Rooted in family systems theory, which suggests that family members are interrelated, and family subsystems such as interparental romantic relationships, co-parenting relationships and parent-child relationships are distinct yet related systems, the spillover hypothesis purports that the relationship quality of one family dyad transfers over to impact the relationship quality of the other family dyad (Cox & Paley, 2003). Consistent with this perspective, three hypotheses were tested. We hypothesized that: a) destructive conflict would relate to increased harshness and low supportiveness; and b) constructive conflict would be associated with high supportiveness and low levels of harshness for mothers and fathers. In terms of co-parenting
alliance, we expected that parents who score high on destructive conflict would rate their coparenting alliance lower than parents who score high on constructive conflict.

Sample

Data were drawn from the Building Strong Families (BSF) project, which provided relationship-strengthening education and services to low-income unmarried couples that were expectant or new parents (see Amato, 2014). Couples were recruited from hospitals and clinics from eight cities across the United States and were randomly assigned to the intervention or control group. BSF consisted of three waves of data: baseline (W0), and when children were approximately 15 (W1) and 36 (W2) months-old. Current analyses were based on W2 data, which included 5,105 participants drawn from the six locations that included observations of parenting. Approximately 31%/26% mothers/fathers were Caucasian, 63%/68% mothers/fathers identified as African American, and 24%/24% mothers/fathers were Hispanic. Nearly 32%/33% mothers/fathers did not have high school equivalency.

Measures

Mothers and fathers reported on their own perception of conflict behaviors with their partners by completing a 9-item measure of destructive conflict behaviors (e.g., “When we argue, I feel personally attacked my partner”; $\alpha = .88$) and an 8-item measure of constructive conflict behaviors (e.g., “I feel appreciated by my partner”; $\alpha = .87$), which were rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = often happen to 4 = never happen) (Hershey et al., 2008). Responses were reverse-coded so that higher scores indicated greater use of given conflict behaviors. Mothers’ and fathers’ parenting behaviors were observed separately during the semi-structured Two Bag parent-child interaction task (adapted from NICHD ECCRN, 1999). Parents’ observed supportiveness consisted of means of sensitivity (parent considers child’s perspective), positive
regard (shows admiration), cognitive stimulation (teaching), and detachment (lack of engagement), which was reverse-coded to represent parental involvement; parents’ observed harshness was assessed through parental negative regards (rejection) and intrusiveness (overcontrol). The internal consistency of parental supportiveness was \( \alpha = .84/.68 \) and of harshness was \( \alpha = .86/.70 \) for mothers/fathers. Finally, the co-parenting relationship was assessed through a 10-item Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; e.g., “My child’s other parent and I are a good team”; Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Mothers (\( \alpha = .95 \)) and fathers (\( \alpha = .94 \)) rated their answers using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree), which were reverse-coded for higher scores to indicate greater levels of perceived parental agreement. A separate score for mother and father parenting alliance was created by averaging across items for each parent.

Results

The model (Figure 1) was tested through a path model analysis in Mplus version 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2014), using Full-Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) to account for missing data. We controlled for program site, intervention status, race, and symptoms of depression as reported by mothers and fathers. The model fit the data well, CFI = .98; RMSEA = .046. As hypothesized, the results indicated that when mothers (\( b = -.06, p < .01 \)) and fathers (\( b = -.10, p < .01 \)) reported high levels of destructive conflict, they scored low on co-parenting alliance. Conversely, higher scores on constructive conflict for mothers (\( b = .71, p < .01 \)) and fathers (\( b = .51, p < .01 \)) were significantly associated with increased co-parenting alliance. No other significant differences were found.

Conclusions
The current study is the first to report on the role of destructive and constructive conflict on co-parenting alliance for mothers and fathers. Unlike parents who experienced high levels of destructive interparental conflict, parents who scored high on constructive conflict were likely to have a favorable view of how they function as a team with respect to child-related challenges. These findings highlight the importance of interparental relationship quality and individual conflict behaviors, and support the spillover hypothesis for links between inter-parental romantic and co-parenting relationship subsystem. Contrary to our predictions and past research findings, there was no support for the spillover hypothesis between interparental conflict and parenting behaviors. Lack of support for these associations, particularly the spillover of negative behaviors, may be due to the sample characteristics (e.g., low income, unmarried predominantly ethnic minority couples). The majority of findings in support of the spillover hypothesis in the context of interparental conflict comes from predominately Caucasian middle-class married families (e.g., McCoy et al., 2013; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Understanding how these processes differ across diverse samples is of importance for prevention work.
References


Figure 1. Mother and father destructive/constructive conflict relate to co-parenting alliance, $\chi^2(20) = 132.99, p < .01$; 
*p < .05, **p < .01;