

# The Vulnerability of Fathering to Marital Conflict and Some Unique Qualities of Father-Child Attachment

Presented by:

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# Presenter Background

- B.A. University of Rochester 2004
- NIH IRTA Post-baccalaureate Fellowship 2006-2008
- PhD Clinical Psychology Arizona State 2008-2014
- Clinical Internship U NM 2013-2014
- Postdoctoral Fellowship University of Michigan Fall 2014-2016
  
- Research interests: Father-child relationships, role of fathers in the family, impact of family risk on fathering, marital conflict, divorce, father-child attachment, development of children's self-regulatory skills, social skills, and psychopathology, diversity of fathering across cultures

# Objectives

- At the end of this presentation participants will be able to:
  1. Discuss theory on how marital conflict impacts children
  2. Describe mechanisms of the vulnerability of fathering to marital conflict
  3. Describe father-child Activation Theory

# Overview

- Part 1
  - Brief introduction and background
  - Theories and mechanisms of marital conflict impact on children
  - Fathering vulnerability to marital conflict
- Part 2
  - Unique characteristics of fathering
  - Father-child Activation Theory
  - Some evidence for impact of Activative fathering on young children's outcomes

## Part 1

# The vulnerability of fathers to marital conflict

# Background

- Why study fathers and family risk?
- Major societal changes since the 1960's
  - Feminist movement
  - Cultural norms and expectations of fathers
  - Changes in family work roles
  - Increased father involvement
  - Child rearing and caregiving

# Background

- Marital conflict is a major risk factor for children
  - About half of all marriages end in divorce in the U.S.
  - Associated with
    - Poor parenting
    - Negative outcomes for children
      - Poor academic performance
      - Drug usage
      - Behavior problems
      - Psychopathology
      - Serious long term health consequences

# Impact on children

- Marital conflict impacts children through both direct and indirect influences
  - Direct
    - witnessing conflict, domestic violence, internalization and perception of conflict, blame, attempts to stop parental conflict
  - Indirect:
    - Marital conflict → Parenting → Children



# Direct Impact of Marital Conflict

- Sensitization
  - Children experience *increased* emotional arousal and reactivity
  - Including HPA axis reactivity, cortisol
- Emotional Security Theory
  - Children have emotional security about parental marriage
  - Concerns about emotional security impact children's emotion regulation
  - Over time, response processes and representations of parental relations are internalized
  - Thus, emotion security represents experiential history of marital conflict and future responding

# Direct Impact of Marital Conflict

- Cognitive Contextual Framework

Marital Conflict → Understanding of the conflict → Outcomes

- Children create cognitive representations of conflict to understand what is happening
- Shaped by cognitive, contextual, developmental factors
- Increased arousal, primary processing of the threat
- Secondary processing – understanding why conflict is occurring, planning responses, attribution of blame, attempts at coping responses

# Indirect Impact of Marital Conflict

- Conflict → Parenting → Child
- Two Hypotheses:
  - Compensatory Hypothesis
    - Deficits in one system lead parent to seek out satisfactory experiences in another
    - ↓ Love & affection in the marriage → parents seek more involvement and love with child
  - Spillover Hypothesis:
    - Feelings and behaviors transfer across family systems
    - Interparental conflict → parenting with conflict, negativity, harsh discipline, emotional unavailability

# Indirect Impact of Marital Conflict

- Compensation or Spillover?
  - Meta-analyses and large body of empirical work support Spillover Hypothesis
  - Thus, feelings, emotions, conflict transfer between family systems

Marital Conflict → Negative parenting → Child problems

# Father Vulnerability Hypothesis

- Fathering more influenced by marital conflict than mothering
  - Societal norms still hold a central role for mothers in child rearing and family
  - Maternal role more salient for mothers than paternal role for fathers
  - Mothers better able to compartmentalize roles as spouse and parent

# Father Vulnerability Hypothesis

- Fathering more impacted by marital conflict
  - Supported by two large literature reviews that found stronger effects of marital quality on fathers; strongest effects for conflict
  - Large body of literature finds larger effects for fathers when parenting of both mothers and fathering included
  - Fathers and father child relationships also more impacted by divorce
    - Policy and courts more likely to award primary custody to mothers

# Long Term?

- So marital conflict spills over into harmful parenting practices due to the transmission of negative affect from the parent-parent system to the parent-child system
- Parents fight → parents interact with a child already angry, hurt, less emotional resources
- This makes sense for the short term (minutes, hours, days) but what about long term maintenance of father vulnerability to spillover process?

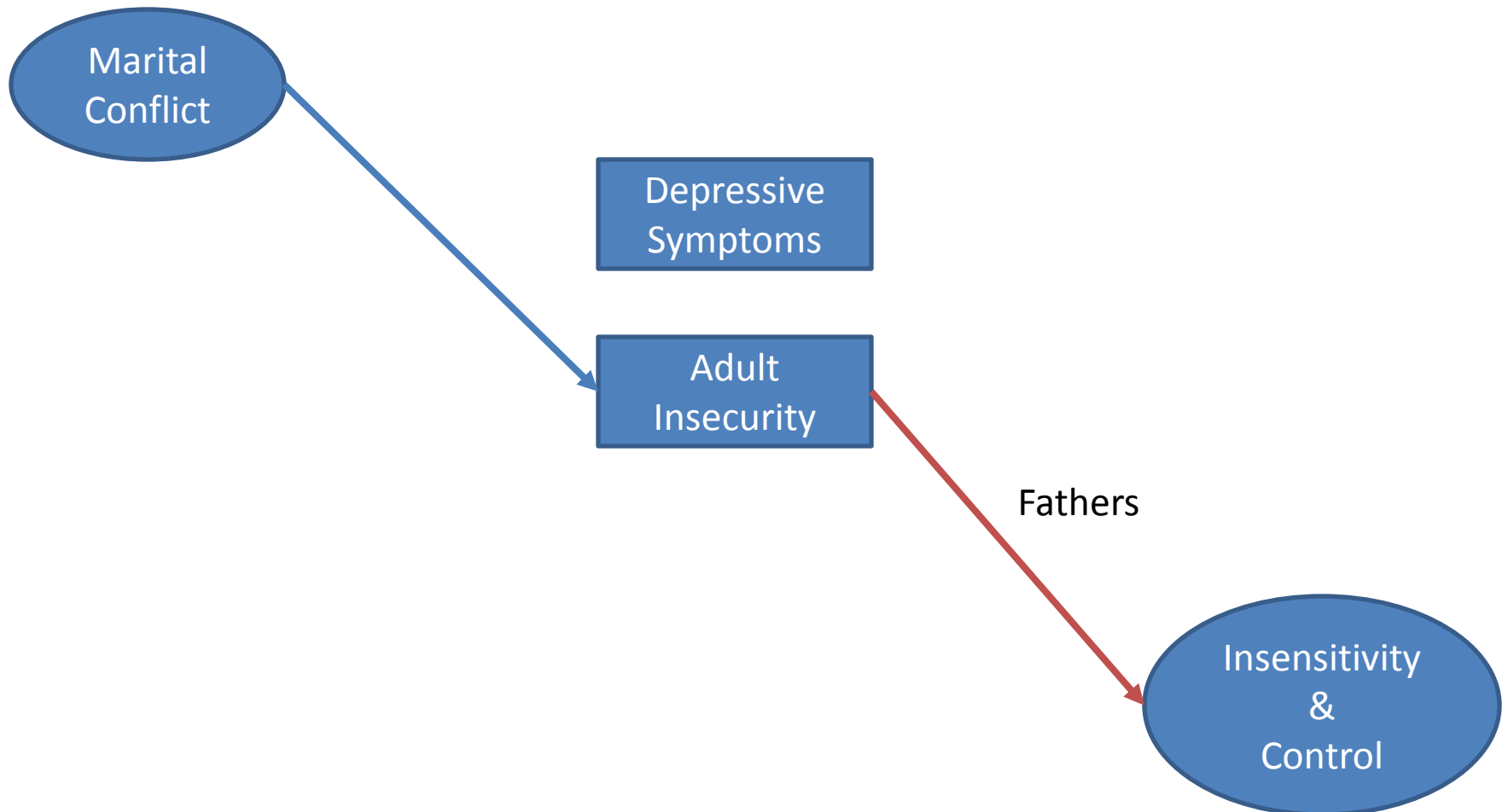
# Long Term Father Vulnerability

- Simple transfer of affect less likely to explain years rather than immediate effects
- A move towards a “process-oriented approach”
  - E.g. Identify underlying mechanisms that maintain spillover effects (esp. for fathers)
  - “Mediation”
    - $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$
  - Need longitudinal studies over the course of *years*



# Long Term Father Vulnerability

Davies, Sturge-Apple, Woitach, & Cummings (2009)



# Explanatory Mechanisms

- Fathers evidence *long term* vulnerability to conflict spillover effects via
  - Increased adult attachment insecurity
    - Mothers do too, but keep that from impacting parenting
    - Support for mothers compartmentalizing
  - Increased maternal gatekeeping
    - Mothers do not compartmentalize and actively allow conflict to spillover into coparenting relationship

# Questions

- Marital conflict impacts children both directly and indirectly. Research on the indirect effects of marital conflict through parenting practices indicates that:
  - a. Parents who lack love and affection in the marriage compensate by showing children more love and affection
  - b. Parents prevent conflict from affecting their relationships with children
  - c. Parents who have marital conflict also have conflict, negativity and harsh parenting spill over into the parent-child relationship
  - d. Marital conflict shows no negative impact on mother-child or father-child relationships

# Questions

- A large body of research provides evidence that fathering is more vulnerable to marital conflict than mothering. Name two recently identified mechanisms for LONG TERM father vulnerability to marital conflict.
  - a. Paternal depression, Maternal aggression
  - b. Maternal gatekeeping, Father's interpartner attachment insecurity
  - c. Maternal gatekeeping, Father depression
  - d. Paternal aggression, Maternal gatekeeping

## Part 2 (as time permits)

- Unique aspects of fathering and father-child attachment

# Unique Elements of Fathering with Young Children

- Increased childcare and involvement by fathers in recent decades
- Mothers maintain greater time in caregiving and involvement with children
- Fathering
  - Large proportion of father-child interaction spent in play
  - True of western, industrial societies
  - Not true for some cultures (e.g. Aka)

# Unique Elements of Fathering with Young Children

- How do fathers differ from mothers with young children?
  - Varied language use
  - Increased play
  - Rough & tumble play (RTP)
    - Throwing and catching infants
    - Wrestling
    - Tickling
    - Roughhousing
    - Playing “horsey”
    - Physical activity (e.g. teaching to ride a bike)

# Activation Theory (Paquette, 2004)

- Complimentary to mother behavior for attachment
  - Mothers: comfort, soothing, secure base
  - Fathers: stimulating, challenging, destabilizing
    - “Open children to the world”
- RTP → Child emotional arousal → Practice emotion regulation in challenging environment
  - Leads to improved risk taking
  - Improved social skills, socially appropriate aggression, less violent responses



# Father-Child Activation

- Little data yet, some studies show promise
- “Risky Situation” to identify activation classifications (Paquette, 2010)
- Activative fathering →:
  - Improved self-regulation during a problem solving task
  - Increased social behavior
  - (Stevenson & Crnic, 2013)

# Father-Child Activation

- Some early support, more studies needed that
  - Establish intergenerational transmission
  - Prove link to emotion regulation, risk taking, use of socially appropriate aggression, reduced violence
  - Complementary to mothers role for attachment
  - Evolutionarily adaptive theoretical development

# Question

- Father-child Activation Theory predicts that:
  - a. Rough and tumble play is harmful for children
  - b. Fathers do not form attachment relationships with young children
  - c. Fathers do not provide secure base and comfort for young children
  - d. Rough and tumble play provided by fathers stimulates children and provides a challenging environment to practice and improve emotion regulation

# Clinical Implications

- Fathering Vulnerability to Marital Conflict:
  - *Include fathers* in all aspects of intervention
  - Assess quality of marital relationship when working with two parent families
  - Educate families on impact of marital conflict on fathering (and parenting)
  - Target intervention to improve marital functioning will increase father involvement and better fathering
  - Target maternal gatekeeping, help mothers prevent marital disharmony from impacting coparenting with child (likely fathers too!!)

# Clinical Implications

- Fathering Vulnerability to Marital Conflict
  - Strengthening interparental attachment security as prevention for negative, punitive fathering
  - Recognize divorce as a serious risk factor for father-child relationships

# Clinical Implications

- Father-Child Activation relationships
  - Rough and tumble play is developmentally normal
  - Fathers help children learn to regulate emotions with rough play
  - Assess fathers play with children
    - Likely too little = no practice risk taking and regulating emotions
    - Likely too much = overstimulation
  - May be beneficial, depending on child, to teach mothers how to engage in rough, stimulating play to improve emotion regulation

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