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 $\rightarrow$ Parenting $\rightarrow$ Child

• Two Hypotheses:
  – Compensatory Hypothesis
    • Deficits in one system lead parent to seek out satisfactory experiences in another
    • $\downarrow$ Love & affection in the marriage $\rightarrow$ parents seek more involvement and love with child
  – Spillover Hypothesis:
    • Feelings and behaviors transfer across family systems
    • Interparental conflict $\rightarrow$ 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 → B → 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
References

