Trajectories of Parent-Child and Friend-Child Conflict over Middle Childhood

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Purpose

Across middle childhood, children become increasingly independent from their parents (Albert & Steinberg, 2011), while beginning to rely more on their peers and establishing quality relationships with them into the transition to adolescence (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). However, children's interactions with their parents still play a significant role in their lives during this period. The quality of parent-child interactions may play a particularly important role in children's ability to form positive relationships with their friends, especially as they encounter a transitional period, such as entering middle school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Morison, Rimm-Kauffman, & Pianta, 2003). Specifically, during this transition, parent-child conflict is on the rise (Montemayor, 1983), and conflict with friends is declining (Miller, 1993). Therefore, how much conflict children experience with parents may diminish the decline of friend-child conflict. Using the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, this study examines relations between trajectories of mother-child, father-child, and friend-child conflict leading up to the transition to middle school.

Participants & Procedure

Participants included 687 families from 3rd to 6th grade enrolled in the NICHD SECCYD with a father or partner living in the home. Parents were not required to be married.

- 50% female children
- 86% European American, 5% Hispanic, 5% African American, 4% other ethnicities
- Income-to-needs ratio: 11% considered low-income (< 2), 51% middle-income (2 - 5), and 38% high-income (> 5).

Across the 10 research sites for the SECCYD, demographic information was collected from mothers during a home visit when the child was 1 month old. In a laboratory, mothers and fathers reported on conflict with their child and children reported on conflict with their best friend when they were in third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade.

Measures

Mother-Child and Father-Child Conflict

Mothers and fathers reported on conflict interactions with their child using the Child-Parent Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1992; Pianta, 1994) at third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, a 15-item measure with responses ranging from 1 (*definitely does not apply*) to 5 (*definitely applies*). The scale was reliable for mothers (α = .83 - .85) and for fathers (α = .79 - .84) across the four assessment points.

Friend-Child Conflict

Children reported on their conflict behaviors with a best friend using the Friendship Quality Questionnaire (Parker & Asher, 1993) at third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, a 21-item measure with responses ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*really true*). The measure assess children's perceptions about their friendship with a best friend; the conflict and betrayal subscale was used in this study. The conflict and betrayal subscale showed adequate reliability (α = .72 - .80) across the four assessment points.

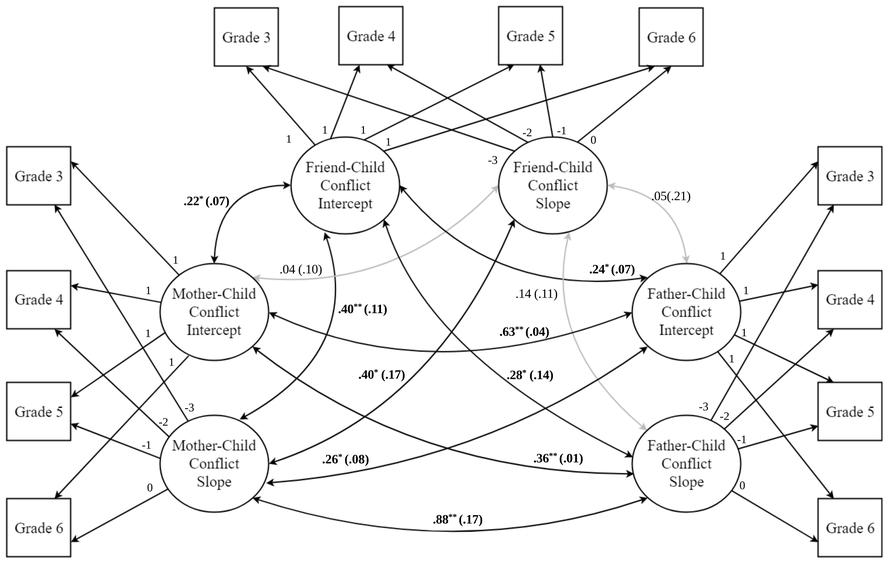
Results

Using Mplus v7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2015), a trivariate linear growth curve model tested trajectories of mother-child, father-child, and friend-child conflict from third to sixth grade, with the intercept set at sixth grade.

Three univariate growth curve models were tested to ensure significant variability existed in the intercepts and slopes. In each univariate model, the linear model fit well and better than the quadratic model, and there was significant variability in the intercepts and slopes.

The trivariate linear growth curve model fit well, $\chi2(90)=219.12$, $p<.001$, RMSEA=.046, 90% CI[.030-.053], CFI=.966, TLI=.954, SRMR=.042. Relevant demographic information and variables related to missingness (a condition of FIML estimation method) were included as covariates; these included family income-to-needs ratio, child gender, negative life events, and neighborhood safety.

The model revealed associations between parent-child and friend-child conflict. Greater mother-child and father-child conflict was associated with more friend-child conflict at sixth grade. Additionally, children who experienced faster increases in conflict with their mothers across middle childhood tended to experience slower decreases in conflict with their best friend. Children who experienced faster increases in conflict with their mothers and fathers across middle childhood tended to experience more conflict with their best friend at sixth grade. The model also revealed associations between mother-child and father-child conflict. Conflict between children and their mothers was associated with more conflict between children and their fathers at sixth grade. Children who experienced faster increases in mother-child conflict also tended to experience faster increases in father-child conflict. Finally, children who experienced more rapid increases in conflict with one parent across middle childhood tended to experience more conflict with the other parent at sixth grade.



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

Figure 1. Trivariate latent growth curve model for mother-child, father-child, and friend-child conflict. Standardized coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. Covariates (income-to-needs ratio, gender, negative life events, and neighborhood safety), residuals and within-reporter associations were modeled but are not pictured.

Conclusions

The current study highlights the importance of parent-child relationships as children enter adolescence and how these relationships are associated with adolescents' ability to establish positive and healthy relationships with their peers. Associations between mother-child and father-child conflict suggest spillover may be occurring from one parent-child dyad to the other across middle childhood. Associations between parent-child and friend-child conflict suggest that children who experience more conflict with their best friend in sixth grade may be more likely to have a home environment characterized by negative interactions across middle childhood and may not have learned the skills to properly navigate conflict with their peers. These children who experience more conflict with their best friend may benefit from skills training that improves their ability to successfully navigate conflict with their friends and family.

Limitations & Future Directions

Findings from the current study may not generalize to other populations because the current subsample consists of primarily middle-income, European American families. Families of lower socioeconomic status may be more likely to experience higher levels of family conflict overall (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994). Furthermore, the current study is limited to two-parent families. Single parents may experience different types of stressors, such as more financial and social stressors, that can influence how they interact with their children (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Lastly, SECCYD data were collected from the early 1990's to the early 2000's; the information collected on peer conflict may be somewhat outdated with the wide adoption of electronic communication.

Future studies should examine parent-child and friend-child links among samples with more ethnic, socioeconomic, and family structure diversity. An examination of whether parent-child and friend-child conflict links vary when considering conflict navigated over electronic communication is also needed. Results from this study suggest homes characterized by conflict may decrease children's opportunities for positive social interactions with peers. Therefore, future research should examine the potential role of social-emotional skills in the children's trajectories of conflict.

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