

Associations between Child Behavior Problems and Mother-Child Conflict Mediated by Parental Distress

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Purpose

The majority of research on parent-child interactions and child behavior problems has focused on how parents affect children. However, parents' behaviors may be a reaction to child characteristics. Children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors have been shown to contribute to oppositional conflict behaviors and volatility in mother-child interactions (Gardner, 1989). Children's behavior problems have been shown to increase parenting distress (Baker, Blacher, Crnic, & Edelbrock, 2002), and mothers experiencing more distress tend to be more punitive with children (Crnic & Greenberg, 1987). Thus, the level of distress related to parenting a child exhibiting behavior problems might explain the relation between children's behaviors and characteristics of mother-child conflict interactions. The current study examined whether parenting distress mediated associations between children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors and oppositional mother-child conflict characteristics, examined both in terms of average oppositional levels during conflict and the fluctuation in oppositional levels across conflicts during one week.

Participants & Procedure

Participants were 142 mothers of a five- to eight-year-old child.

- 52% female children
- 59% European American, 20% Hispanic, 9% African American, 6% mixed or other ethnicities.
- Income-to-Needs Ratio: 44% considered low-income (< 2), 47% middle-income (2 - 5), and 9% high-income (> 5).
- Mean maternal age of 35.32 years ($SD = 6.16$)
- Mean child age of 84.10 months ($SD = 13.90$)

Mothers reported on parenting distress and their child's behavior using an online survey. For the next seven days, if a conflict occurred with their child that day, they reported on characteristics of the conflict interaction.

Measures

Child Internalizing & Externalizing Behaviors

Mothers reported on their child's internalizing ($\alpha = .74$) and externalizing ($\alpha = .86$) behaviors using the Child Behavior Problems Index (Peterson & Zill, 1986), a 28-item measure assessing childhood behavior problems. Responses ranged from 1 (*sometimes true*) to 4 (*not true*).

Oppositional Conflict

Mothers reported on oppositional conflict behaviors ($\alpha = .79 - .88$) during a specific mother-child conflict interaction each day for seven days using a measure designed for this study. The scale included 20 items measuring negative emotional reactivity of mothers and children, along with mothers' dismissal of the child's negative emotions, punitive behaviors, and lingering negativity. Responses ranged from 1 (*false*) to 4 (*true*). We calculated a mean across the seven days to assess the average level of opposition and a standard deviation to assess variability in opposition across the week.

Parenting Distress

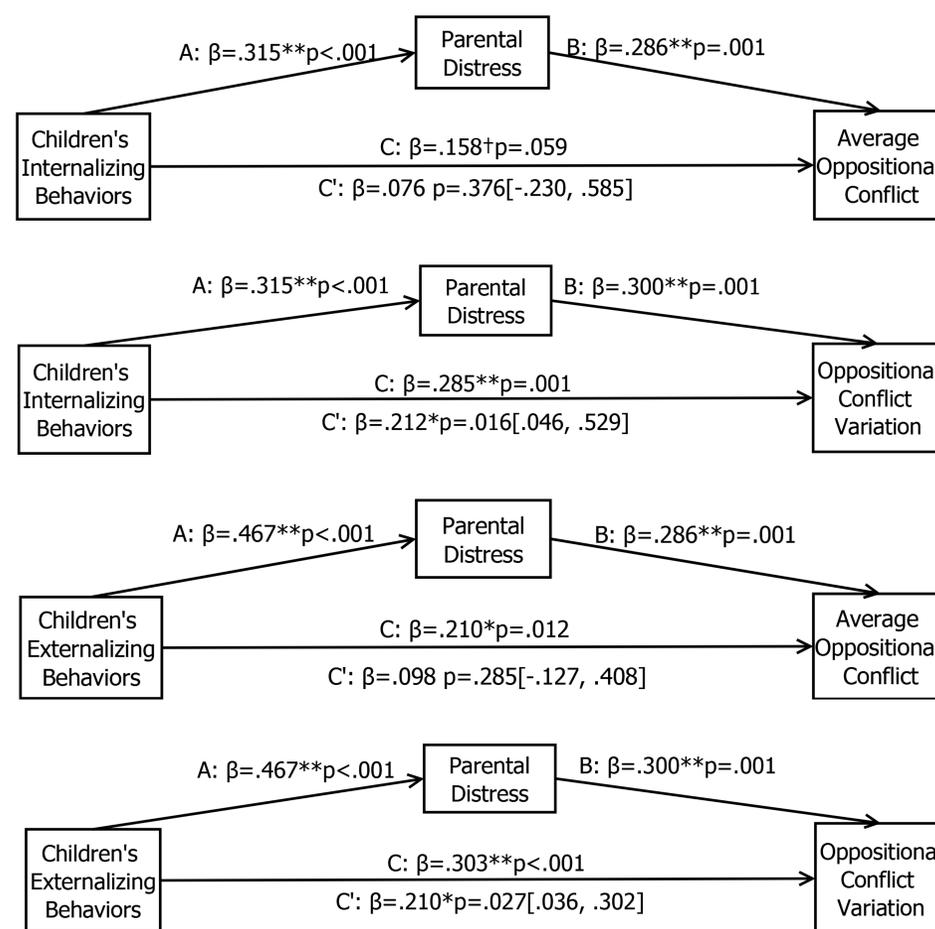
Mothers reported on their parenting distress, or negative emotions towards the child, and demands, or parental isolation, using the Challenges to Parenting Questionnaire (Hill, Burdette, Regnerus, & Angel, 2008). The full measure is 11 items; the parenting distress subscale is 3 items and demands subscale is 4 items with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). A total parental distress score ($\alpha = .73$) was created by averaging the two subscales ($r = .44, p < .001$).

Results

Using SPSS v24, we analyzed four regression models to determine whether parenting distress mediated the influence of externalizing and internalizing behaviors on the average and variation of oppositional conflict across seven days with mother's marital status and education level as covariates (Figure 1; Baron & Kenny, 1986). The indirect effects were bootstrapped and tested using the Sobel test. Missing data were handled using the MLR estimator.

Children's internalizing behaviors were associated with more variation in oppositional conflict characteristic throughout the week, as well as greater parenting distress. Additionally, parenting distress was associated with more variation in oppositional conflict characteristics. After accounting for parenting distress, the association between children's internalizing symptoms and variation in mother-child oppositional conflict was no longer significant. The indirect effect was significant according to the Sobel test, $b = 2.22, p = .027$.

Children's externalizing behaviors were associated with higher average oppositional conflict and more parenting distress, and parenting distress was associated with higher average oppositional conflict. After accounting for parenting distress, the association between children's externalizing behaviors and average levels of oppositional conflict was no longer significant. The indirect effect was significant, $b = 2.40, p = .016$.



* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1. Regression models using parenting distress to mediate the relationship between child problem behaviors with oppositional mother-child conflict. Marital status and mothers' education are included as covariates. The brackets next to C' pathways denote bootstrapped confidence intervals.

Results Cont.

Additionally, children's externalizing behaviors were associated with more variation in oppositional conflict and more parenting distress, and parenting distress was associated with more variation in oppositional conflict interactions. After accounting for parenting distress, the association between children's externalizing symptoms and variation in mother-child oppositional conflict was no longer significant. The indirect effect was significant, $b = 2.01, p = .045$.

Conclusions

The current study shows the level of distress mothers experience in their role as a parent may partially explain the process by which children's behaviors relate to characteristics of mother-child conflict interactions. This study provides preliminary support for the influences that children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors may have on mother-child interactions through increasing mothers' distress. Externalizing behaviors are more easily observed by parents, and therefore, may influence their average level of oppositional conflict interactions through higher levels of distress. Mothers experiencing parenting distress may not consistently recognize their child's internalizing emotional cues, which may lead to varying degrees of opposition from one day to the next, but not necessarily overall higher levels of oppositional mother-child conflict interactions.

Limitations & Future Directions

Our study is primarily limited by collecting parenting distress and child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors concurrently. Further, multiple time points of these study variables were unavailable to control for prior levels to test unfolding mediation processes over time. Second, our study relied on only mothers' reports for all study variables which raises the potential for single-reporter bias. Children's reports of their own behavior problems, as well as their perceptions of parenting distress and conflict interactions could be useful.

One parent's conflict interactions may look different than their partner's conflict interactions with the child. Further, each parent's perceptions of parenting distress may be influenced by the degree to which their child's externalizing behaviors disrupt the family's daily routine. Thus, future research should examine these processes at a family level, incorporating partners' perceptions of distress and conflict. Additionally, future research should examine these processes longitudinally to provide further support for the influence of child effects on parenting distress and parent-child interactions.

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