

Child reactivity moderates the over-time association between mother–child conflict quality and externalizing problems

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Abstract

Constructive parent–child conflict interactions that teach children to problem-solve and negotiate can enhance children’s social adjustment. This paper identifies constructive and destructive qualities of mother–child conflict and explores whether child temperament moderated associations with changes in externalizing problems over time. One hundred and ninety mothers and their 5- to 7-year-old children participated in a laboratory conflict discussion rated on aspects of maternal sensitivity, child mood, and mothers’ and children’s contemptuous and planning comments. Mothers also reported on children’s negative reactivity and their externalizing behavior problems concurrently and one year later. Structural equation modeling revealed that constructive conflict quality was related to decreases in children’s externalizing problems, but only among children low in negative reactivity.

Keywords

Mother–child conflict, externalizing behavior problems, temperament

Introduction

Parent–child conflict commonly occurs in families and has been associated with behavioral, social, and academic difficulties among children (see Smetana, 1996). Rarely acknowledged is that although conflict that is argumentative and hostile can be destructive, conflict in which both mothers’ and children’s goals are recognized can be a constructive learning experience for children (Rinaldi & Howe, 1998). Constructive conflict has been associated with positive child outcomes, such as greater independence, self-esteem, and problem-solving (Dunn, 2004; Dunn & Munn, 1987). A better understanding of the factors that discern constructive and destructive exchanges is needed and has important implications for families.

Additionally, research is needed that recognizes the role children’s dispositional characteristics play in the potential outcomes of constructive versus destructive parent–child conflict interactions. Children who are highly reactive respond intensely when experiencing negative emotion (Thomas & Chess, 1977) and may have difficulty learning from any conflict experience, regardless of quality, because conflict discussions are likely to be emotional and challenging interactions. The current paper examines qualities of mother–child conflict discussions in relation to children’s later externalizing problems, and investigates whether children’s negative reactivity moderates the extent to which social benefits can be derived from constructive conflict and consequences from destructive conflict.

Constructive and destructive conflicts were originally differentiated by Deutsch (1973). Constructive conflict has been defined as a negotiation that incorporates the goals of both parties in solving a dispute (Rinaldi & Howe, 1998; Stein & Albro, 2001). Destructive conflict, in contrast, includes argumentative, manipulative, or hostile attempts to assert one’s own position at the expense of others (Forgatch, 1989; Rinaldi & Howe, 1998). Both constructive and

destructive conflict include mutual opposition, but are considered separate dimensions representing unique goals (Recchia, Ross, & Vickar, 2010).

There are a number of noteworthy advantages to constructive conflict, aside from coming to an agreeable resolution to a dispute. Problem-solving and negotiating with parents encourages children to develop justifications for their points of view (Dunn & Munn, 1987). Additionally, constructive exchanges give children the opportunity to try to understand others’ emotions and goals (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992). In this way, children are able to learn about social rules and increase their perspective-taking skills (Stein & Albro, 2001), enabling children to manage their frustration and thus display fewer aggressive behaviors during social encounters.

Researchers have identified different characteristics of parent–child conflict exchanges that can be considered productive. One key characteristic is future-oriented planning (Cummings, Faircloth, Mitchell, Cummings, & Schermerhorn, 2008; Recchia et al., 2010). This has been defined as efforts to plan future strategies that will be enacted to prevent or solve the problem at the next occurrence. Future-oriented planning between parents and children has been shown to result in more compromises and fewer standoffs during conflict discussions (Nelson, Boyer, Sang, & Wilson, 2014), because discussions focused on the future deal primarily with accomplishing goals, rather than recounting blame for past disagreements.

Researchers have also suggested that positive affect creates a more productive conflict experience for children. When positive

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affect and warmth are used during conflicts, individuals are less combative and more likely to negotiate (Carnevale & Isen, 1986). A supportive parent creates a context of acceptance and respect for the child's perspective during conflict (Laursen & Hafen, 2010); this may encourage children to participate in negotiations and justify their points of view, as demonstrated in research linking conflict in positive parent-adolescent relationships to better social and academic adjustment (Adams & Laursen, 2007). Hostility during problem-solving, in contrast, is associated with less cooperation, and more blame and avoidance among family members (Rueter & Conger, 1995). These behaviors elicit subsequent contempt from others and decrease the likelihood that family members will resolve problems amicably. Children's negativity can also impede resolution. Children who express more contemptuous behavior have been shown to be less likely to reason during arguments (Dunn & Brown, 1994).

A characteristic that likely affects children's ability to constructively engage and learn from conflict discussions is the intensity of their emotional reactions to disagreements. Negative reactivity is a temperamental characteristic of children that refers to their tendency to respond to frustration and negative emotion frequently and intensely (Thomas & Chess, 1977). Situations that are particularly likely to initiate intense emotional reactions from children high in negative reactivity include a failure to attain a goal (Rothbart & Jones, 1998). Blocking children's goals is a common element in parent-child conflicts, as parents typically assert power over children, even during negotiations (Emery, 1992; Vuchinich, 1987).

Children who are unable to maintain their emotional reactions within a manageable range in response to social conflict have been found to have lower social competence (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1995). For example, children with high negative reactivity are hypothesized to have more angry and aggressive outbursts, experience more self-focused emotion, and engage in fewer prosocial behaviors (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). It has also been suggested that children's negative reactivity hinders problem-solving and increases defensive tendencies (Rothbart & Jones, 1998), all important factors in the ability to navigate social conflicts and control aggressive responses.

Temperament characteristics are thought to support or undermine children's adaptation by altering the impact of aversive environments (Rothbart & Ahadi, 1994). High negative reactivity may cause children to have stronger negative reactions to parent-child conflict, whereas low negative reactivity may result in fewer negative reactions, and therefore greater use of problem-solving. This is due to the fact that children with high temperamental reactivity are likely to have greater sensitivity to disagreement and more difficulty coping with the negative emotions associated with conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Easterbrooks, Cummings, and Emde (1994) found that children with difficult temperaments were more reactive in response to marital disputes, even when the disagreements were constructive in nature.

This paper investigates observed aspects of parent-child conflict that have the potential to differentiate constructive and destructive conflict, and associations with children's behavior problems over time. Constructive conflict characteristics were expected to relate to decreases in children's behavior problems over one year; destructive conflict characteristics were expected to relate to increases in behavior problems. Children with high negative reactivity were not expected to experience the proposed benefits of constructive conflict that children with low negative reactivity would,

due to greater anger and defensiveness preventing children from learning from problem-solving exchanges.

Early school-aged children were examined in the current study because of their developing social cognitive ability to discuss their point of view and negotiate during conflict (Kerns, 2008). Children were observed during interaction with their mothers, who are typically considered the primary socializers of children's behavior and tend to be responsible for their management and discipline (Finley, Mira, & Schwartz, 2008).

Method

Sample

Participants included 190 5- to 7-year-old-children ($M = 77.64$ months, $SD = 9.48$ months) and their mothers. Families were primarily recruited through letters sent home by kindergarten and first-grade teachers in a metropolitan public school district in the South-western United States. Eighteen percent of the letters distributed to schools were returned, and of those returned, 70% of families agreed to participate in the study. Although the percentage of returned forms is low, active parental consent methods are typically characterized by low response rates (Fletcher & Hunter, 2003). Approximately half (47%) of participating children were female, 56% were European American, 15% were African American, 8% were Hispanic, 3% were Asian American, and 18% were of mixed or other ethnicities. Median education of mothers was a four-year college degree. Based on family income-to-needs ratios that take into account poverty thresholds at a given year for a given family size, 36% of families were considered low-income (ratios < 2), 52% were middle-income (ratios 2-5), and 12% were high-income (ratios >5).

Procedure

Mothers and children visited the laboratory for one hour. They gave consent and assent after being provided written and verbal details about the procedure. Children engaged in tasks with a research assistant while mothers completed surveys in an adjacent room. Pairs participated in a discussion task together which is described below. One year after the laboratory visit, 163 mothers (86% retention) completed questionnaires online about the child's behavior.

Measures

Observed conflict quality. Mothers and children separately completed the Issues Checklist (Robin & Foster, 1989) during the laboratory visit. The measure lists 36 common parent-child conflict topics, such as lying, doing homework, and fighting with siblings. For each topic, participants were asked to indicate whether they had disagreed about the issue with the child/mother during the last month. For each topic that was endorsed as a source of opposition, mothers were asked to indicate on a 4-point scale how they felt during discussions ($1 = calm$, $4 = angry$). Children were assisted by a research assistant and asked to point to one of four facial expressions that best represented how the disagreement made them feel ($1 = calm$, $4 = angry$). Mother and child reports were compared by a research assistant. Two topics were selected that both participants reported as sources of conflict with high distress. If more than two overlapping conflict topics were identified, topics with the highest common negative affect ratings were selected. For example,

topics rated as a 4 on both the mother and child forms were given priority, followed by topics rated as a 4 by one partner and a 3 by the other. For mothers, selected topics were rated an average of 2.63 on anger, which was significantly higher than the average anger rating across all endorsed conflict topics of 1.76 ($t(189) = 14.75, p < .01$). For children, selected topics were rated as 3.04 on anger, which was also significantly higher than their average anger rating of 2.07 ($t(188) = 16.08, p < .01$). Mother-child pairs were asked to talk about the two topics for a total of 8 minutes as they normally would at home.

Conflict discussions were recorded and later coded from the videos by two trained research assistants. Six of the recordings were omitted due to equipment failure, families' use of a language other than English, or mothers' refusal to be filmed. The first coding scheme, based on the Parent Instruction Coding Manual (Neitzel & Stright, 2003), was used to rate mothers' emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, and negativity and the child's negative mood on a 5-point scale. A high score on emotional responsiveness was rated when mothers respected and valued their child's opinions, encouraged their child to contribute, and demonstrated clear enjoyment of the child. A high score on intrusiveness was defined as interrupting the child, controlling the conversation, and undermining the child's attempts to speak freely. A high score on negativity was rated when mothers were irritated, insulting, or disrespectful toward their child. Children with high scores on negative mood were irritated, shameful, or cried during the discussion. Approximately 25% ($n = 45$) of the videos were rated by both coders for reliability. Intra-class correlations were acceptable for maternal emotional responsiveness ($ICC = .77$), intrusiveness ($ICC = .81$), negativity ($ICC = .88$), and child negativity ($ICC = .86$).

The second coding scheme, based on Recchia et al. (2010), was a frequency rating of future-oriented planning comments and contemptuous comments used by mothers and children during the discussions. Each distinct idea was coded as a separate comment, regardless of number of words or length of utterance. In accordance with past research (Cummings et al., 2008; Recchia et al., 2010), planning comments included proposing, discussing, modifying, and asking questions about plans to resolve similar conflicts in the future. Examples of planning comments are, 'And when I'm done playing with my toys, I'll put them back,' and 'Do you have any ideas of what we could do in the future so we don't argue about the TV?' On average, mothers made 23.70 ($SD = 15.99$) distinct planning comments during the 8 minute discussions, and children made 8.33 ($SD = 7.70$) planning comments. Contemptuous comments were used to argue one's perspective by making accusations or disagreeing with the other person or by criticizing, challenging, or dismissing the other's perspective (Recchia et al., 2010). Examples of contemptuous comments are, 'You never listen to me' and 'You think you should get money to clean up your room? Do I get allowance to pick up my room? No.' On average, mothers made 19.72 ($SD = 20.91$) distinct contemptuous comments during the 8 minute discussions, and children made 4.19 ($SD = 7.88$) contemptuous comments. Approximately 25% ($n = 44$) of the videos were rated by both coders for reliability. There was no ceiling on the number of possible coded comments; thus, Pearson correlations were computed to establish reliability between coders on planning ($r_{\text{mothers}} = .86, r_{\text{children}} = .91$) and contemptuous ($r_{\text{mothers}} = .77, r_{\text{children}} = .74$) conflict strategies.

Child negative reactivity. Mothers completed the Children's Behavior Questionnaire Very Short Form (CBQ-VSF; Putnam &

Rothbart, 2006) to report on child temperament. The CBQ-VSF includes 36 behaviors for which mothers are asked to indicate how characteristic each is of their child on a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely untrue*, 2 = *quite untrue*, 3 = *slightly true*, 4 = *neither true nor false*, 5 = *slightly true*, 6 = *quite true*, 7 = *extremely true*). Three broad dimensions of temperament are measured. The negative affect subscale, which includes 12 items, was used to assess children's negative reactivity ($\alpha = .71$). An item example from this subscale is 'Gets quite frustrated when prevented from doing something s/he wants to do'. Higher scores refer to more temperamental negative reactivity.

Child behavior problems. Mothers reported on the child's behavior problems using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). The CBCL asks parents to report on how well a range of behaviors describes their child currently, or within the last six months, on a 3-point scale (0 = *not true*, 1 = *somewhat or sometimes true*, 2 = *very true or often true*). Internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors were scored at year 1 ($\alpha_{\text{internalizing}} = .84, \alpha_{\text{externalizing}} = .88$, and year 2, $\alpha_{\text{internalizing}} = .85, \alpha_{\text{externalizing}} = .86$). The raw externalizing behavior score, a sum of 33 aggression and delinquency items, was used in the analyses; higher scores indicate more aggressive and delinquent child behaviors. Raw scores were used rather than age- and sex-normed standardized scores, so that change could be evaluated.

Covariates. Family income-to-needs ratio and child internalizing problems at year 2 were selected as covariates in order to control for socioeconomic status and comorbidity. Child externalizing behaviors at year 1 were controlled to examine change over time. Child age and gender were examined as potential demographic covariates, but were not significantly related to externalizing problems, and thus, were not included in the models. Mothers reported on demographic information during the laboratory visit and on child internalizing problems using the CBCL during the online year 2 follow-up.

Results

Structural equation modeling was conducted in Mplus version 7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). The average percent of missing data across variables was 4.65%, ranging from 0% (family income-to-needs ratio) to 14.2% (externalizing and internalizing problems at year 2). Data were missing completely at random according to Little's MCAR test ($\chi^2(60) = 73.306, p = .116$). A maximum likelihood robust estimator that approximates parameters based on available and implied values with skewed variables was used to account for missing data.

Descriptive data and correlations among study variables are shown in Table 1. Across the two observed coding schemes, there were eight measures of conflict quality from the discussion task. Planning comments made by mothers and children and mothers' emotional responsiveness during discussions were considered aspects of positive conflict quality. Correlations between these positive measures ranged from .18 to .57, all $ps < .05$. Contemptuous comments made by mothers and children, mothers' intrusiveness and negativity, and children's negativity were considered aspects of negative conflict quality. Correlations between these measures ranged from .18 to .70, all $ps < .05$. In 92% of observations ($n = 170$), some form of negativity or opposition was expressed by the

Table 1. Descriptive information and correlations among study variables.

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Mother emotional responsiveness	3.39	1.03	–											
2. Mother intrusiveness	3.19	1.42	–.40**	–										
3. Mother negativity	2.95	1.35	–.47**	.66**	–									
4. Child negativity	2.62	1.28	–.22**	.26**	.41**	–								
5. Mother planning	23.70	15.99	.28**	–.03	–.16*	–.05	–							
6. Child planning	8.33	7.70	.18*	–.16*	–.17*	–.20**	.57**	–						
7. Mother contemptuous	19.72	20.91	–.42**	.52**	.70**	.41**	–.10	–.14	–					
8. Child contemptuous	4.19	7.88	–.22**	.18*	.29**	.43**	–.03	–.05	.41**	–				
9. Child negative reactivity	4.09	.87	–.07	.01	.06	.04	.02	–.08	.17*	–.01	–			
10. Child externalizing Y2	8.22	6.17	–.15	.00	.17*	.18*	–.18*	.04	.12	.14	.26**	–		
11. Child externalizing Y1	10.45	7.30	–.11	.05	.14	.20**	–.03	.05	.22**	.07	.38**	.70**	–	
12. Family income Y1	2.87	1.59	.07	–.04	–.11	–.06	.09	.10	–.00	.17*	–.12	–.10	–.11	–
13. Child internalizing Y2	5.50	5.77	–.00	–.14	.00	.04	–.07	.04	.06	.04	.33**	.53**	.35**	–.09

Note. Mother emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, negativity, and child negativity ($n = 184$) were scored from 1 (none) to 5 (highly). Frequency count variables ($n = 184$) ranged from 0 to 81 (mother planning), 36 (child planning), 124 (mother contemptuous), and 68 (child contemptuous). Child negative reactivity ($n = 190$) was scored from 1 (extremely untrue) to 7 (extremely true). Child externalizing and internalizing problems ($N_{Y1} = 190, N_{Y2} = 163$) were scored from 0 (not true) to 2 (very true or often true) with a possible scale range of 0–66. Family income-to-needs ratio ($n = 190$) could range from 0 (no income) to many times the poverty threshold. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

mother and the child, suggesting that the overwhelming majority of discussions were conflictual, as defined by mutual opposition.

A measurement model was tested with observed characteristics of the mother–child discussions as indicators. A model with two latent variables, constructive conflict and destructive conflict, fits significantly better than a one factor model ($\chi^2\Delta(1) = 212.37, p < .01$). Maternal planning comments ($\beta = .29, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI}(.15-.43)$), child planning comments ($\beta = .19, p = .012, 95\% \text{ CI}(.04-.34)$), and maternal emotional responsiveness ($\beta = .97, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI}(.88 - 1.05)$), were significant indicators of constructive conflict. Maternal contemptuous comments ($\beta = .83, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI}(.73-.93)$), child contemptuous comments ($\beta = .41, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI}(.24-.58)$), maternal intrusiveness ($\beta = .69, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI}(.64-.73)$), maternal negativity ($\beta = .86, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI}(.79-.93)$), and child negativity ($\beta = .49, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI}(.31-.66)$), were significant indicators of destructive conflict. The two latent variables were allowed to correlate, and three error terms were correlated for conceptual reasons. Two task-specific indicators of the mother’s behavior and two indicators of the child’s behavior were correlated to recognize individual characteristics of each participant not included in the model. Additionally, the mother and child planning comments were correlated to account for the fact that these dialogs were often sequential. The measurement model had good fit to the data (RMSEA = .065 (90% CI = .024–.101); CFI = .962; TLI = .942).

Prior to introducing the hypothesized interaction terms to the model, the main effects of the constructive and destructive conflict latent variables were examined in predicting child externalizing problems at year 2, controlling for internalizing problems, income-to-needs, and externalizing problems at year 1. The model had acceptable fit to the data (RMSEA = .056 (90% CI = .031–.079); CFI = .947; TLI = .931). However, neither the constructive conflict ($b = -.43, \beta = -.07, p = .329$), nor the destructive conflict ($b = .16, \beta = .03, p = .737$), main effect was significant.

Next, a random effects model was required to create an interaction between each of the latent variables with the standardized child negative reactivity variable. When using a random effects model in Mplus, fit indices traditionally available with structural equation modeling are not produced. Instead, a log-likelihood value was provided for the model (ll(50) = –3013.46). The log-likelihood is an

absolute fit index; although lower values indicate better fit, the value is only meaningful when comparing multiple models (Bollen, 1989).

As seen in Figure 1, when controlling for internalizing problems, income-to-needs, and externalizing problems one year earlier, the interaction between constructive conflict quality and child negative reactivity was significantly related to changes in child externalizing problems ($b = .64, \beta = .11, p = .041, 95\% \text{ CI}(.002-.21)$). The interaction was probed using tests of simple slopes at one standard deviation above and below the moderator mean. As seen in Figure 2, greater constructive conflict quality was related to decreases in children’s externalizing behaviors at year 2, after controlling for year 1 behaviors, only among children low in negative reactivity ($b = -1.09, \beta = -.19, p = .044, 95\% \text{ CI}(-2.16- -.03)$). There was no significant effect of constructive conflict quality on changes in child externalizing problems among those high in negative reactivity, nor was there a significant interaction between destructive conflict quality and negative reactivity.

Discussion

Constructive conflict exchanges between parents and children have been shown to support children’s adjustment (e.g., Adams & Laursen, 2007; Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992); however, few researchers have differentiated constructive versus destructive parent–child conflict interactions and empirically evaluated different relations to children’s social behaviors. Conflicts commonly occur in parent–child relationships; thus, understanding how disagreements can be navigated in ways that benefit children is an important goal. In this paper, mothers’ emotional responsiveness during conflict discussions and the frequency of mothers’ and children’s planning comments regarding what to do when the conflict occurs in the future are significant indicators of constructive conflict quality. Mothers’ intrusiveness and negativity toward children during conflict discussions, children’s negative mood, and the frequency of mothers’ and children’s contemptuous comments were significant indicators of destructive conflict. Significantly related, yet distinct measures of quality were constructive and destructive conflict.

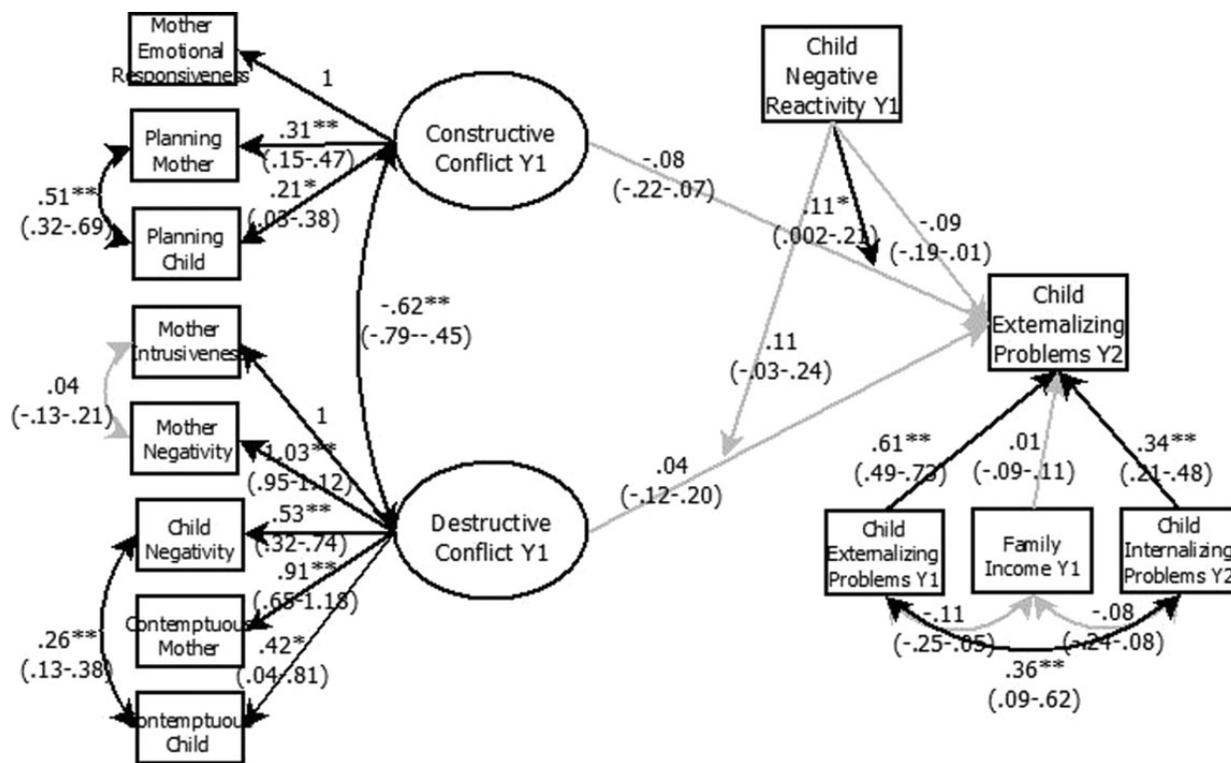


Figure 1. Structural model of interactions between mother–child constructive and destructive conflict quality and children’s negative reactivity predicting changes in children’s externalizing problems. Standardized path estimates are displayed with 95% confidence intervals in parentheses ($n = 190$). ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

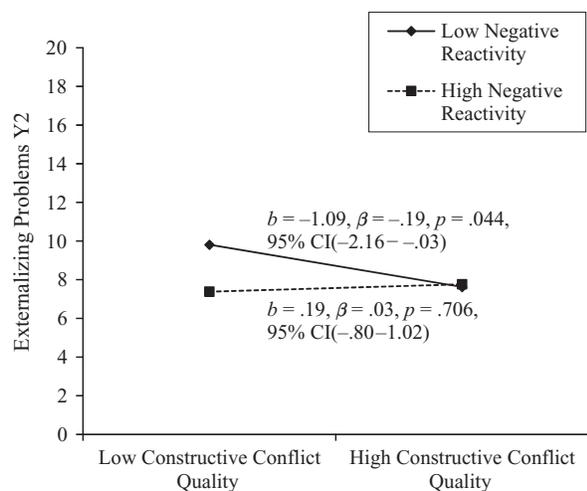


Figure 2. Tests of simple slopes for the interaction between mother–child constructive conflict quality and child negative reactivity predicting later externalizing problems controlling for earlier externalizing problems, concurrent internalizing problems, and family income ($n = 190$).

In addition to differentiating conflict quality, a goal of this paper was to recognize the child’s active role in parent–child socialization in order to further elucidate this family process. The child’s temperamental negative reactivity was thought to be particularly relevant during parent–child conflict discussions, where children are

likely to experience anger, sadness, and frustration. Negatively reactive children have been shown to have more difficulty working through conflict situations due to greater sensitivity and defensiveness, and poorer problem-solving and coping during disagreements (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Rothbart & Jones, 1998). Indeed, results showed a significant interaction between constructive conflict and negative reactivity in predicting changes in children’s externalizing problems over one year, after controlling for earlier behavior problems and concurrent internalizing symptoms. This finding draws support for the importance of fit between children’s temperament and environmental demands (Thomas & Chess, 1977). Engaging in parent–child conflict is socially and cognitively challenging for early school-aged children; thus, to experience greater declines in externalizing symptoms, children needed to be able to attend to the discussions without becoming overly frustrated or aroused. Children low in negative reactivity were better able to meet this challenge and experienced fewer externalizing symptoms one year later, when mother–child conflict discussions were of greater constructive conflict quality. It is also likely that children who have fewer externalizing problems, such that they are better regulated, more cooperative, and less aggressive, are more engaged in challenging conversations with mothers.

Contrary to the hypotheses of this study, destructive conflict quality did not predict changes in externalizing problems for children high or low in temperamental reactivity. It is possible that destructive conflict behaviors may be representative of an interaction style that, after controlling for earlier and concurrent problems, is more predictive of outcomes over a longer period of time. It is also possible that negative and critical qualities of parent–child

conflict interactions may be a less useful predictor of changes in externalizing problems than the frequency of hostile exchanges or family stress, particularly if these children do not experience normative declines in externalizing behaviors to the same extent as other children (Gilliom & Shaw, 2004).

The current study is limited in a few noteworthy ways. First, in 8% of cases, conflict discussions in the laboratory did not include mutual opposition between mothers and children. For these participants, the interactions were discussions of topics rated as sources of conflict, rather than conflicts themselves. Although results did not change when excluding these dyads, future research should explore differences between constructive and destructive conflict quality in a home setting versus a laboratory setting. Second, children's conflict interactions with a father or sibling were not available. These interactions also serve as important socialization influences above and beyond mother-child conflict. Future research that examines multiple dyads can better estimate how conflict is navigated at a family level. Third, one specific social outcome was examined—externalizing problem behaviors—but other cognitive and emotional outcomes specific to the skills gained during constructive conflict interactions are also likely to be important, such as problem-solving or emotion regulation. Finally, a longer time frame would provide more information about how conflict quality is related to rates of change in children's behaviors, as well as how parents' conflict strategies change in relation to children's development. Additionally, if temperament in childhood is thought of as a developmental precursor of later personality, those with disagreeable dispositions may continue to have difficulty with conflict resolution. Long-term longitudinal research could shed light on the continuity of these effects, as well as circumstances under which caregiving produces changes in children's reactive behaviors (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Sullivan-Logan, 1998).

This paper has important implications for research and practice. Its findings suggest that there are qualitative differences in parent-child conflicts that should be considered. Pairs who work through conflicts constructively likely interact in a positive manner across many situations; however, this does not negate the fact that constructive strategies can be learned and improved upon in families that face frequent conflict. Families can create an environment that not only prevents excess distress during conflict, but also has later implications for children's externalizing behaviors.

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