

Relations Between Mothers' Daily Work, Home, and Relationship Stress With Characteristics of Mother–Child Conflict Interactions

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This study examined whether daily variations in levels of mothers' work, home, and relationship stress were related to collaborative and oppositional qualities of mother–child conflict interactions across 1 week. Mothers reported on 1 specific conflict interaction with their 5- to 8-year-old child and their work, home, and relationship stress through online surveys each day for 7 consecutive days. Diary data from 142 mothers were analyzed in 6 multilevel models, each including within- and between-family levels of a stressor predicting collaborative or oppositional conflict qualities. Results suggested that families in the sample differed from each other, and also varied during the week, in collaborative and oppositional conflict qualities as well as stress in all 3 domains. Mothers reported a greater degree of oppositional conflict qualities on days characterized by higher perceptions of home chaos. Additionally, mothers who reported higher average levels of negativity in romantic relationships endorsed oppositional conflict qualities to a greater extent than mothers with lower relationship negativity. Two multilevel models including all 3 stressors in relation to collaborative and oppositional conflict revealed that for mothers managing multiple roles, average romantic relationship stress was the most important unique contributor to mother–child conflict qualities and daily relationship stress was particularly influential among mothers with sons compared to those with daughters. Results support the spillover hypothesis of stress within the family system and are discussed in terms of mothers' coping mechanisms and emotional engagement.

Keywords: mother–child conflict, family stress, daily diary

Conflicts between parents and children are common occurrences characterized by opposing viewpoints. Early school-age children, who are developing the cognitive ability to negotiate (Kerns, 2008), often disagree with parents about topics such as chores, sibling relationships, evening/morning routines, and lying (Nelson, Boyer, Sang, & Wilson, 2014). Despite these commonalities, there is great variability in how parents and children navigate conflicts. Collaborative conflict interactions emphasize negotiation and constructive engagement, whereas oppositional conflict interactions emphasize blame and power differentials (Rinaldi & Howe, 1998). The extent to which conflict exchanges include collaboration or opposition may be a consistent feature of the parent–child relationship, or may vary based on parents' daily experiences. This study investigated daily fluctuation in collaborative and oppositional characteristics of mother–child conflict interactions and

whether mothers' daily stressful experiences at work, at home, and in their relationships were related to these conflict qualities.

Collaborative and Oppositional Conflict Characteristics

Parent–child conflict can be hostile and contentious, where partners focus on blaming each other and asserting their own position (Forgatch, 1989; Rinaldi & Howe, 1998). Deutsch (1973) referred to these types of conflict qualities as *destructive* because of an emphasis on the harmful consequences of these behaviors for family relationships. We refer to these qualities of parent–child conflict as *oppositional*, a term that emphasizes conflicting goals and power differentials and includes behaviors like criticizing, challenging, and dismissing. Oppositional conflict qualities have been associated with a lower likelihood of reaching a resolution (Nelson et al., 2014) along with more social, academic, and behavioral problems among children (see Smetana, 1996). Although oppositional conflict has received the most attention in the literature, it is not the only way parents and children work through disagreements. Partners can negotiate, problem solve, and value each other's goals. Deutsch (1973) labeled this style *constructive* because of its utility in finding a solution and preventing future conflict. We use the term *collaborative* to describe these qualities of parent–child conflict interactions, which includes behaviors like future-oriented planning, parental emotional responsiveness, and child contributions. Collaborative parent–child conflict qualities are related to a higher likelihood of compromise (Nelson et al., 2014), fewer child behavior problems (Nelson, 2015), and greater independence and self-esteem among children (Dunn, 2004; Dunn

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& Munn, 1987). Although collaborative and oppositional conflict qualities may be negatively correlated, they are considered separate dimensions with unique goals (Nelson, 2015; Recchia, Ross, & Vickar, 2010). For example, the absence of contention does not necessarily imply the presence of responsiveness.

Family characteristics that predict the likelihood of engaging in collaborative or oppositional conflict are unclear. The benefits associated with collaborative conflict warrant a better understanding of how various attributes of families are associated with greater use of collaborative strategies. Two possibilities are examined: 1) the extent to which parents and children engage in collaborative and oppositional behaviors represents a characteristic way of responding to conflict, or 2) collaborative and oppositional behaviors vary based on daily family stressors that relate to parents' ability to sensitively engage with their children during disputes.

The first possibility—that collaborative and oppositional conflict characteristics are a consistent feature of parent–child relationships—suggests that parents' behaviors are consistent across settings and may be part of their broader beliefs regarding child rearing. In their meta-analysis investigating how parenting is affected by time and context, Holden and Miller (1999) found significant similarity in positive and negative dimensions of parenting across multiple settings, particularly among parents of school-age children compared to infants and toddlers. This finding is consistent with theories of socialization suggesting the management of conflict is learned in the home context and predicted by features of the family ecology, such as roles, goals, and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Patterson (1982) suggested that conflict style may become part of the family ecology via bidirectional relations between parents' negativity and children's aggressive behavior. This is also demonstrated through similarity in conflict behaviors across family relationships; relations have been found between the features of marital conflict and parent–child conflict within the same families (Fauchier & Margolin, 2004).

Furthermore, child rearing beliefs, which include ideas about the child's role in the family, are likely to affect how parents approach conflict interactions with their children. A parent with child-centered beliefs tends to value the child's opinions and perspectives. These beliefs may result in more sensitive parental responses during conflicts with children that assist in children's emotion regulation and more incorporation of children's goals. Similarly, teachers' beliefs regarding greater perceived control of child misbehavior have been shown to relate to less oppositional teacher–child conflict interactions even after accounting for the child's behavior problems (Doumen, Verschueren, & Buyse, 2009). Alternatively, traditional child rearing beliefs emphasize child obedience and are associated with more restrictive and harsh parenting, and with less supportiveness and tolerance for child autonomy (Luster, Rhoades, & Haas, 1989). A greater emphasis on parental authority and the power differential between mothers and children increases the likelihood that the resolution will be one-sided favoring mothers (Recchia et al., 2010), providing fewer opportunities for children to practice collaborative skills. Child-rearing beliefs tend to be stable across time (McNally, Eisenberg, & Harris, 1991); thus, it is possible collaborative and oppositional conflict characteristics vary more between- than within-parents.

The second possibility—that collaborative and oppositional conflict characteristics fluctuate based on parents' daily experienc-

es—suggests parents are better able to engage in sensitive and constructive exchanges with their children when they have the time and emotional resources to do so. Families' daily lives are often filled with everyday hassles, which are defined as relatively minor, routine strains (Helms, Walls, & Demo, 2010). According to family stress and systems theories (Erel & Burman, 1995; Peterson & Hennon, 2005), these daily hassles can disrupt individual and family functioning when parents are unable to adapt and prevent negative affect from spilling over into parent–child interactions. Stressful experiences throughout the day can deplete parents' self-regulation (Baumeister, 2002), impacting their ability to be emotionally present, patient, and positively engaged with their children during disagreements. The most common hassles reported by midlife adults are those stemming from work, family labor, and household routines, and tensions with spouses or partners (Helms et al., 2010). Next, we elaborate on each source of stress and its relation to parent–child interactions.

The Effect of Stress on Conflict Characteristics

Approximately 71% of mothers with children under 18 are employed outside the home (Cohn, Livingston, & Wang, 2014). Busy work schedules, job role dissatisfaction, and negative interactions with colleagues contribute to stress and fatigue among parents. In one study, parents who experienced more time pressure and less challenging stimulation and complexity at work reported using harsher and inflexible discipline with their 5- to 7-year-old children (Greenberger, O'Neil, & Nagel, 1994). Observers also rated these parents as less responsive and descriptive when providing explanations during a laboratory behavioral restriction task.

Perceiving that the home is disorganized, chaotic, and lacks a predictable routine is another source of stress for parents. This is particularly true among mothers, who are likely to be primarily responsible for managing children and household tasks. Reports of greater home chaos have been linked to mothers' greater use of dismissive and punitive responses to their 7-year-old children's negative emotions (Nelson, O'Brien, Blankson, Calkins, & Keane, 2009), as well as less cooperation and less effective discipline with their preschoolers (Dumas et al., 2005).

The final stressor examined in the current study involves negative affect and tension in parents' romantic relationships. Difficulties in the marital relationship are expected to drain the energy, attention, and emotional resources parents need to respond to children in a sensitive manner (Belsky & Jaffe, 2006). Among mothers, both hostility and withdrawal following marital conflict have been shown to predict more insensitivity with their 6-year-old children (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). Marital conflict has also been linked to parents' use of harsh discipline with children and a lack of acceptance (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000).

Intensive longitudinal designs, or daily diary studies, have provided further evidence that parents' stressful experiences affect the quality of interactions with their children. Repeated measures of everyday family experiences explore within-subject variability and test how short-term change in one behavior or relationship relates to concomitant change in another (Repetti, Wang, & Saxbe, 2011). The most noteworthy benefit of measuring family interaction using diary methods involves the ability for researchers to explore family events and processes in their natural, spontaneous environment

(Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005). This greatly decreases the amount of time between the event and the account of the experience, thus reducing retrospection bias (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). Furthermore, these studies can test whether variation in parents' stress is related to variation in parent-child interaction quality.

Overall, research on parents' daily stress experiences has mirrored concurrent results demonstrating stress spillover to parent-child interactions. On days when mothers reported a greater workload, they were rated as less attentive and affectionate with their preschoolers immediately following childcare pickup (Repetti & Wood, 1997). Mothers' daily ratings of the emotional quality of their marital relationship have been related to same-day ratings of parent-child relationship quality (Kouros, Papp, Goetze-Morey, & Cummings, 2014), and daily marital conflict has been linked to more hostile and conflictual behaviors toward children even after accounting for parents' negative mood (Sears, Repetti, Reynolds, Robles, & Krull, 2015). Finally, wives with more stressful home environments reported more depressed mood across the day (Saxbe & Repetti, 2010), which may impair the quality of family interactions.

Child Gender

In addition to daily stress, mothers' patience with and response to children's negative emotions during conflicts may vary depending on child gender. Parents tend to have different expectations for boys' and girls' regulation of emotion. Casey (1993) found that parents preferred their boys to inhibit sad and fearful reactions, whereas they preferred their girls to inhibit angry reactions. In addition, research has suggested that girls may be more sensitive to the emotional climate in the home (Denham, Mitchell-Copeland, Strandberg, Auerbach, & Blair, 1997). This is not surprising considering mothers discuss emotions more with daughters than sons and, in turn, girls use more emotion language than boys (Fivush, 1989). Past research has also shown that negative comments made during mother-child conflict discussions decreased the likelihood of mother-son pairs reaching a resolution compared to mother-daughter pairs, suggesting negativity is more of a hindrance for boys (Nelson et al., 2014). Taken together, parents' great tolerance for boys' anger, their understanding of girls' sensitivity to emotion in the home, and the difficulty boys experience in working through negativity may increase the likelihood of stress spillover among mother-son pairs compared to mother-daughter pairs.

The Current Study

There were two research questions in the current study. First, we investigated whether collaborative and oppositional conflict qualities were consistent features of mother-child dyads or whether these conflict characteristics varied in each interaction. In other words, what was the proportion of variance attributable to between- and within-person effects? The existence of within-person variability enables us to proceed with our second research question testing whether mothers' daily stress experiences account for variability in collaborative and oppositional conflict with their early school-age children. This developmental period was examined due to children's increasing cognitive capacity for problem-solving and negotiation (Kerns, 2008). We focused on mother-child interactions because mothers are typically responsible for the management and discipline of children's

behavior (Finley, Mira, & Schwartz, 2008). Interactions between each stressor and child gender were incorporated at both the between- and within-person levels to examine whether stress is differentially related to boys' and girls' conflict interactions.

Taken together, findings from previous studies demonstrate that mothers' experiences at work, at home, and in their romantic relationships are related to negativity, responsiveness, and disciplinary strategies during interactions with their children. Although this study is the first to examine links between family stress and collaborative and oppositional qualities of mother-child conflict, we predicted greater stress would relate to fewer collaborative and more oppositional characteristics of mother-child conflict interactions, particularly among mother-son dyads.

Method

Participants

One hundred forty-two mothers of 5- to 8-year old children ($M = 84.10$ months, $SD = 13.90$) participated in the study. Mothers were recruited through public elementary schools and through community and university flyers in a large metropolitan area. Research ethics committee approval was received for this study by the university office of research compliance (protocol 14-27, "Daily Stress Study"). Approximately half (52%) of the children were female; 59% were Caucasian, 20% Hispanic, 9% African American, and 6% identified as mixed or other ethnicities. Family income-to-needs ratios were calculated using poverty thresholds for a given family size during the year of data collection; 44% of families were considered low income (ratios <2), 47% were considered middle income (ratios 2-5), and 9% were considered high income (ratios >5). Mothers were 35.32 years old on average ($SD = 6.16$), 88% had a romantic partner (70% married), and 58% were employed (62% full-time, 38% part-time). Mothers in the current sample were highly educated; approximately 97% had attended at least some college, and almost half (49.2%) had a 4-year college degree.

Procedure

Before mothers were enrolled in the study, research assistants spoke with them on the phone to obtain basic contact and eligibility information. Mothers were asked to select a typical week to participate during which the parents and study child would be in the home together. During this phone call, we let mothers know what to expect during the study, provided our definition of conflict along with several examples of conflict interactions ranging from mild to severe, and answered any questions mothers had regarding participation. Mothers received an email the day before they began the study reminding them of this information.

When the study began, mothers completed questionnaire measures online using Qualtrics survey software for 8 consecutive days. On the first day, mothers received an email containing a link to an initial survey, which included a Web-based consent form and questionnaires assessing demographic information, parenting beliefs, and children's behavior. The initial survey link was active for 1 week to give mothers time to complete this lengthy survey. In the 7 days immediately following the initial survey, mothers completed brief measures each evening assessing one specific mother-child conflict interaction and daily stress experiences. Mothers

received emails each morning containing separate links to the day's online conflict and stress surveys, which expired at 3:00 am the following morning to maximize the likelihood that mother reports reflected events that happened that day.

For the conflict measure, we asked mothers to report on their behavior and their child's behavior during a conflict interaction that day. Consistent with past definitions of parent-child conflict (Laursen & Hafen, 2010), we informed mothers that "conflicts occur when parents and children express opposing viewpoints. They can range from serious arguments (e.g., getting in trouble at school, fighting with siblings) to minor disagreements (e.g., cleaning their room, doing homework)." We told mothers that "we are only inquiring about one parent-child conflict per day; we ask that you pick the conflict that seems most salient to you." If a single conflict topic was repeatedly discussed, we asked mothers to think of the longest or most significant portion of the conflict when answering the questions. We encouraged mothers to complete the conflict questionnaire as soon as possible following the chosen conflict interaction. If mothers indicated that they did not have a conflict with the study child that day, the conflict measure was not displayed. Thus, findings regarding conflict qualities should be interpreted as occurring only when conflicts arose. Mothers who did not report a conflict on a given day received a reminder in the next day's email about the range of interactions included in our definition of conflict, and all mothers saw this definition of conflict at the start of each daily survey.

Daily stress measures included brief surveys assessing work pressure, home stress, and negative relationship behaviors. Mothers were instructed to complete the stress survey at the end of the day so that they could reflect upon stressful experiences that occurred throughout the day. The daily stress surveys included display logic in which mothers who answered "yes" to the question "Are you currently working outside the home?" were displayed the question "Did you complete any work for this job today?" If mothers answered "yes," then the work stress measure was displayed. Thus, the work stress measure was not displayed to mothers who reported they did not work outside the home or did not complete work for their jobs on a given day (i.e., a weekend). Similarly, the relationship stress measure was not displayed to mothers who indicated that they were not currently involved in a romantic relationship.

Mothers were compensated \$5 for each day they completed surveys and were entered into a gift card drawing if all surveys were completed. Research assistants monitored survey completion on a daily basis and contacted participants with reminders. Mothers in the current sample were highly compliant, completing six out of the seven daily diaries on average.

Measures

Conflict characteristics. When a conflict occurred, collaborative and oppositional qualities of the specific conflict interaction were assessed using a measure developed for the current study. Items were created based on past observational research of mother-child conflict discussions that facilitated resolution (Nelson, Boyer, Sang, & Wilson, 2014) or positive child adjustment (Nelson, 2015). The majority (69%, $n = 98$) of mothers experienced at least one conflict with their children across the 7-day period; on average, mothers reported a conflict on 4 of the 7 days. Common conflict topics reported by mothers included not listening to parents, bedtime routines, conflicts with siblings, and eating behaviors.

Mothers who reported experiencing a conflict with their child that day were asked to complete a measure describing the interaction. The first section of the measure assessed structural elements of the conflict (e.g., time of day, duration). Next, the measure contained a list of 34 behaviors mothers and children may have exhibited during the conflict interaction in question, including items describing collaborative qualities and oppositional qualities (see the appendix). Mothers were asked to report the degree to which each behavior was present during the interaction ranging from 1 (*not present at all*) to 4 (*clearly present*). The collaborative conflict scale included 14 items measuring mothers' emotional responsiveness, openness to the child's perspective, tendencies toward solutions, and support of the child's negative emotions. This scale was reliable both within and between mothers, $\alpha_w = .79$, $\alpha_B = .95$. The oppositional conflict 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. This scale was reliable within and between mothers, $\alpha_w = .85$, $\alpha_B = .90$.

Work stress. Mothers who worked outside the home and engaged in work activities that day completed an adapted version of the Busy Day Scale (Repetti, 1993) to assess work stress. The measure contained five statements describing rushed or demanding work days (e.g., "There were more demands on my time than usual," "I felt like I barely had a chance to breathe," and "It was a very busy shift") and asked mothers to report on how accurately each of the statements reflected the working conditions they experienced that day from 1 (*completely inaccurate*) to 4 (*completely accurate*). The scale was reliable within and between mothers according to Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha_w = .85$, $\alpha_B = .97$.

Home stress. Mothers' perceptions of home stress were assessed using an adapted version of the Chaos Hubbub and Order Scale (Matheny et al., 1995). This adapted measure contained six statements describing disorganization and a lack of routine in the home (e.g., "We were unable to find things we needed in our home," "We were rushed throughout the day," and "The plan for our day didn't seem to work out") and asked mothers to report whether each statement reflected their perceptions of the home environment that day (0 = *false*, 1 = *true*). Reliability was measured within and between mothers, $\alpha_w = .61$, $\alpha_B = .60$.

Relationship stress. Mothers who were involved in a romantic relationship completed an adapted version of the Relationship Behaviors Checklist (Buck & Neff, 2012) to assess relationship stress. This adapted measure contained a list of five negative relationship behaviors (e.g., "You dismissed your partner's feelings or opinions," "You showed anger or impatience toward your partner," "You criticized or blamed your partner"), and mothers reported on whether or not they engaged in each behavior that day (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha_w = .72$, $\alpha_B = .81$.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive information for between-level study variables are included in Table 1. Mothers reported moderate amounts of collaborative and oppositional conflict characteristics, which were normally distributed in the sample. According to bivariate corre-

Table 1
 Descriptive Statistics for Conflict Qualities, Stressors, Income-To-Needs Ratio, Relationship Length and Child Age at the Between-Family Level

Variable	Full sample ($n = 142$)				Subsample ($n = 70$)			
	N_i	M	SD	Range	N_i	M	SD	Range
1. Income-to-needs ratio	966	2.45	1.45	.08–5.98	476	2.91	1.53	.15–5.98
2. Relationship length (years)	798	11.62	5.48	.83–27	455	11.47	5.77	.83–27
3. Age of child (months)	987	84.10	13.90	35.25–107.76	490	85.72	14.31	35.25–107.76
4. Collaborative conflict	569	34.35	9.49	14–56	268	34.10	9.22	14–53
5. Oppositional conflict	569	35.37	10.27	20–70	268	35.38	9.57	20–65
6. Work stress	440	6.55	6.95	0–20	375	6.83	7.05	0–20
7. Home stress	755	1.19	1.37	0–6	372	1.27	1.46	0–6
8. Relationship stress	652	.83	1.26	0–5	370	.84	1.25	0–5

Note. Descriptives for daily diaries were calculated based on participants' sum scores averaged across the 7 days. N_i was calculated across time and participants. The subsample includes mothers that were working and in a relationship and was used for the full stressor model.

lations, collaborative and oppositional conflict means were marginally related, $r = -.08$, $p = .065$, supporting the idea that these are distinct dimensions. Daily survey completion rates ranged from 78.87 to 88.73% for the conflict survey and 72.54 to 80.99% for the stress surveys across the week.

Home chaos was the only stressor related to the occurrence of conflict; on days when families reported greater home stress than usual, they were also more likely to report that a conflict occurred, $t(746) = -2.43$, $p = .015$. Families who reported conflicts on a greater number of days reported lower levels of collaborative characteristics, $r = -.20$, $p = .018$. Conflicts lasting a longer amount of time tended to have higher levels of collaboration, $r = .09$, $p = .039$. For example, one mother dealt with her son's repeated requests to buy ice cream alone by compromising:

We went to the . . . aquatic center almost all day, and [child] knows at some point we usually buy a [sic] ice cream before we leave. He was wanting to go and buy it all by himself, but I wanted to go with him. . . . In the end, I walked him halfway and then watched him buy his own ice cream. I was happy he was safe and he was happy he got to be a "big kid!"

Conflicts of a longer duration also tended to have more oppositional characteristics, $r = .37$, $p < .01$. One mother experienced heightened negative emotional arousal due to her child's repeated refusal to comply with her request: "Child was asked to do something simple, and refused three times causing significant frustration—[request] was simply to look at herself in the mirror." Relative to other conflicts the dyad experienced, those rated by mothers as more intense were characterized by higher levels of opposition, $r = .45$, $p < .01$. One mother described her child's outburst during an escalating conflict interaction: "[Child] got upset because I was talking to her grandmother while she ask me [sic] help with homework and since I told her to wait and continued talking, she [threw] everything and began screaming that nobody ever helps her." Conflicts occurring later in the day were characterized by fewer collaborative qualities, $r = -.09$, $p = .035$; for example, one mother described withdrawing from a frustrating situation with her son at bedtime:

Told him to brush his teeth. He didn't. Told him again and he argued with me that bedtime was too early. Told him a third time to brush his teeth and he started to cry. I walked out of the room.

Covariate analyses tested whether demographic variables should be included in the models as controls. Collaborative qualities were more

common in conflicts involving male children $t(567) = -2.09$, $p = .037$, and oppositional qualities were more common in conflicts involving female children, $t(567) = 2.19$, $p = .029$. Income-to-needs ratio was negatively associated with collaboration, $r = -.13$, $p < .01$. Thus, child gender and family income-to-needs ratio were included as between-family covariates in all models. In addition, missing value analyses revealed that data in the current sample were missing at random (MAR); missingness on study variables was related to child age, maternal relationship length, and full-time or part-time employment status. Full-time mothers also reported more work stress than part-time mothers, $t(413) = -4.47$, $p < .01$. Consistent with recommendations for the use of full information maximum likelihood (FIML) with MAR data (Hofer & Hoffman, 2007), we included these variables as additional covariates in all models.

Substantive Analyses

Eight multilevel models with random intercepts and slopes were tested in Mplus v.7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012): two models for each stressor type (work stress, home stress, and relationship stress) and a model containing all three stressors simultaneously predicting oppositional conflict and collaborative conflict separately. Each model contained two levels: the daily, or within-family level (Level 1), and the person, or between-family level (Level 2). Level 1 variables were group-mean centered around the respective family mean, and Level 2 variables were grand-mean centered. Each model included regressions of conflict on stress at Level 2, with significant path estimates reflecting associations among between-family stress and between-family conflict. Random intercept and slope parameters were included to describe Level 1 change in conflict across the week; significant slope mean estimates indicate associations of within-family variation in each stressor with conflict, and significant slope variances indicate variation between families in associations among within-family stress and within-family conflict. To account for missing data, analyses used FIML estimation to approximate parameters based on available and implied values.

Unconditional models were tested to determine whether there was variability in conflict qualities and daily stressors at Level 1 and Level 2. These models revealed Level 2 differences in both types of conflict strategies and all three daily stressors, indicating that families in the current sample differed in their average levels of collaborative, $b = 44.34$, $p < .01$, and oppositional conflict qualities, $b = 31.19$, $p < .01$,

as well as work, $b = 4.43, p < .01$, home, $b = .27, p < .01$, and relationship stress, $b = .19, p < .01$. Significant variance at Level 1 indicated that mothers' use of collaborative, $b = 47.09, p < .01$ and oppositional conflict strategies, $b = 74.44, p < .01$, along with work, $b = 19.67, p < .01$, home, $b = 1.60, p < .01$, and relationship stress, $b = 1.39, p < .01$, also varied during the week. Approximately 52% of the variance in collaborative conflict, 70% of the variance in oppositional conflict, 82% of the variance in work stress, 86% of the variance in home stress, and 88% of the variance in relationship stress was found at Level 1.

Individual stressor models. After controlling for family income-to-needs ratio, child age, and maternal relationship length and full-time/part-time employment at Level 2, mothers' perceptions of home disorganization were positively related to oppositional conflict at Level 1 in the home stress model (see Table 2). In other words, mothers reported more opposition during conflicts with their children on days when they reported greater home chaos.

In the relationship model, stress related to mothers' interactions with a romantic partner was positively associated with oppositional conflict at Level 2 after accounting for covariates. This indicates that mothers who reported higher average levels of negative interactions with a romantic partner also reported higher average levels of oppositional mother-child conflict qualities across the week. Relationship stress was also marginally related to oppositional conflict at Level 1, indicating that mothers were more likely to report oppositional conflict qualities on days in which they also reported more negative interactions with a romantic partner. In the work stress model, no significant associations emerged for collaborative or oppositional conflict.

All stressor model. As seen in Table 3, when work, home, and relationship stress were included in the same model, stress related to the home environment demonstrated trend-level relations with oppositional conflict qualities at Level 1; mothers reported marginally higher levels of opposition in conflicts with their children on days when they also reported more home chaos. Also, relationship stress was positively related to collaborative and op-

positional conflict at Level 2, indicating that when mothers reported higher average levels of negative interactions with a romantic partner, they also reported higher average levels of both collaborative and oppositional conflict qualities. No significant associations emerged for work stress in this model.

A significant interaction emerged between mothers' relationship stress and child gender predicting oppositional conflict at Level 1. We used simple slopes to probe this interaction, finding that for conflicts with sons, $b = 1.98, p = .025$, but not daughters, $b = -1.41, p = .140$, mothers described more oppositional conflict on days characterized by more negative interactions with a romantic partner.

Discussion

The current study used an intensive longitudinal design to evaluate whether collaborative and oppositional qualities when a mother-child conflict interaction occurred varied within families across a 7-day period and whether these variations were related to mothers' daily stressful experiences at work, in their home environments, and in their romantic relationships. Findings suggested that maternal reports of collaborative conflict qualities, characterized by sensitive responding and cooperative negotiation, and oppositional qualities, characterized by hostility and negative reactions, significantly vary across the week. Overall, conflicts tended to be more oppositional on days when mothers reported higher stress. Our consideration of positive and negative characteristics of family conflict that vary based on everyday family experiences is a novel contribution to family psychology.

Collaborative and Oppositional Conflict Qualities

The conflict measure was designed to assess collaborative and oppositional aspects of a specific mother-child conflict interaction as it occurs naturally within the home. On average, mothers reported having a conflict with their children on four of the seven diary days, as conflict is a common and developmentally normative experience within families (Eisenberg, 1992). Findings sug-

Table 2
Multilevel Estimates for Work, Home, and Relationship Stress Models Predicting Oppositional Conflict Characteristics

Variable	Null model	Work stress model	Home stress model	Relationship stress model
	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)
Intercept	35.40 (.77)**	34.86 (.74)**	35.02 (.61)**	34.84 (.61)**
Child gender	—	-.35 (1.28)	.17 (1.18)	-1.77 (.95)†
Relationship length	—	-.06 (.16)	-.22 (.13)†	-.13 (.12)
Full/part time employment	—	.96 (1.64)	.54 (1.78)	1.68 (1.74)
Child age	—	-.08 (.06)	-.08 (.04)†	-.09 (.04)*
Income-to-needs ratio	—	-.83 (.52)	-.32 (.44)	-.19 (.43)
General level of stressor	—	-.03 (.31)	1.23 (.82)	3.44 (.91)**
General Level of Stressor × Child Gender	—	.03 (.26)	-.58 (.83)	1.14 (.89)
Variation in stressor	—	.14 (.17)	.93 (.31)**	.83 (.46)†
Variation in Stressor × Child Gender	—	.12 (.13)	-.06 (.31)	-.47 (.30)
Level 1 intercept variance	74.44 (4.47)**	57.75 (6.29)**	67.25 (5.44)**	61.37 (5.14)**
Level 2 intercept variance	31.19 (7.14)**	23.75 (6.87)**	27.77 (5.95)**	23.28 (5.48)**

Note. Null model N on Level 1 (day-level) = 569, N on Level 2 (person-level) = 140; work stress model N on Level 1 = 440, N on Level 2 = 83; home stress model N on Level 1 = 755, N on Level 2 = 135; relationship stress model N on Level 1 = 652, N on Level 2 = 118. The model fit index (log likelihood) for the work stress model is $ll(36) = -2,860.53$, the home stress model is $ll(36) = -4,774.75$, and the relationship stress model is $ll(36) = -4,199.274$.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3
Multilevel Estimates for the Model Including All Stressors Predicting Conflict Characteristics

Variable	Collaborative conflict		Oppositional conflict	
	Null model	All stressors model	Null model	All stressors model
	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)
Intercept	34.66 (.92)**	34.57 (.82)**	35.47 (.90)**	34.66 (.79)**
Child gender	—	-2.42 (2.05)	—	-.28 (1.98)
Relationship length	—	-.26 (.18)	—	-.04 (.17)
Full/part time employment	—	-.63 (1.93)	—	1.53 (1.76)
Child age	—	-.01 (.06)	—	-.07 (.06)
Income-to-needs ratio	—	-.80 (.59)	—	-.43 (.57)
General level of work stress	—	-.19 (.39)	—	-.04 (.37)
General Level of Work Stress × Child Gender	—	-.30 (.33)	—	-.01 (.32)
Variation in work stress	—	-.08 (.12)	—	.09 (.14)
Variation in Work Stress × Child Gender	—	-.13 (.12)	—	.07 (.14)
General level of home stress	—	-1.78 (1.33)	—	-.76 (1.30)
General Level of Home Stress × Child Gender	—	1.25 (1.24)	—	-.65 (1.19)
Variation in home stress	—	-.37 (.39)	—	.80 (.43) [†]
Variation in Home Stress × Child Gender	—	-.09 (.40)	—	.67 (.44)
General level of relationship stress	—	3.92 (1.26)**	—	3.94 (1.22)**
General Level of Relationship Stress × Child Gender	—	1.77 (1.27)	—	.76 (1.27)
Variation in relationship stress	—	.04 (.65)	—	.33 (.61)
Variation in Relationship Stress × Child Gender	—	-.18 (.54)	—	-1.61 (.61)**
Level 1 intercept variance	43.80 (3.78)**	36.79 (2.15)**	64.26 (5.88)**	48.40 (7.13)**
Level 2 intercept variance	41.74 (11.61)**	28.06 (7.29)**	26.58 (7.26)**	21.31 (6.52)**

Note. Null model N on Level 1 (day-level) = 268, N on Level 2 (person-level) = 69; all stressor model N on Level 1 = 363, N on Level 2 = 69. The model fit index (log likelihood) for the all collaborative conflict stressor model is $ll(61) = -2,517.40$ and the oppositional conflict model is $ll(61) = -2,541.69$.

[†] $p < .10$. ** $p < .01$.

gested that the measure produced reliable mother reports of these conflict qualities across the weeklong period of investigation, although future work is needed to examine measure validity. We speculate that the high compliance rates and reliable mother reports we found may be partially attributed to our level of involvement with mothers. Research assistants spoke with mothers about our definition of conflict, providing examples of common mild to severe conflicts, and sent reminders in response to incomplete surveys. We suspect that attending to these practical considerations enhanced the quantity and quality of data collected, providing a good indication of the measure's utility.

Descriptive characteristics of conflicts were associated with collaborative and oppositional conflict qualities. Mothers who reported conflicts on a greater number of days throughout the week also described these conflicts as less collaborative, on average. Although our instructions for mothers to report on only one conflict per day did not allow us to obtain a true measure of conflict frequency, these preliminary findings suggest that repetitive conflicts with children are a significant source of stress for mothers that may deplete their patience for engaging in cooperative problem-solving discussions (see Baumeister, 2002). This idea is consistent with our findings that mothers also described longer-lasting and more intense conflicts, along with conflicts occurring later in the day, as more oppositional in nature than conflicts that were relatively brief, mild, or occurred earlier in the day. Interestingly, mothers also described longer-lasting conflicts as more collaborative in nature. This may be due to the techniques associated with collaboration, including clarifying and incorporating children's ideas, requiring additional time and effort. Because

collaborative and oppositional conflict are conceptualized as distinct dimensions, an idea supported by the lack of bivariate associations between these scales in the current study, it is important to note that conflicts are dynamic discussions that likely involve elements of both cooperation and frustration.

Daily Stressors and Collaborative and Oppositional Conflict Qualities

Significant variance existed for collaborative and oppositional conflict characteristics between families and within families across the week. Between-parent differences in mother' use of conflict strategies reflects diversity in behavioral tendencies among mothers in our sample. Tactics mothers use during disagreements with their children may stem from beliefs regarding parenting roles, children's autonomy, or appropriate emotional expression. For example, because parents with child-centered beliefs tend to value children's opinions and perspectives, they may be more likely to encourage children's active participation in negotiations or incorporate children's ideas into conflict resolutions.

Within-parent differences in collaborative and oppositional conflict suggest that although parents differ in their general approaches to interacting with their children, the strategies parents use to navigate specific conflict interactions with their children vary throughout the week. Our first set of substantive analyses used separate models for each stressor to test how daily variation in stressors from distinct life domains were related to these within-parent differences in conflict qualities. Results of these models suggested that overall, mothers described conflict interactions with their children as more opposi-

tional on days characterized by higher levels of stress. These findings support the spillover hypothesis of family stress, which states that emotions and behaviors experienced in one situation or familial relationship can transfer to another within the family system (Erel & Burman, 1995).

Mothers may use more oppositional conflict strategies on more stressful days because dealing with demanding situations depletes self-regulatory resources. According to self-regulation theories, self-control is a limited resource that can become drained after use, undermining the ability to exert self-control in subsequent situations (Baumeister, 2002). Avoiding oppositional behaviors during conflict is both emotionally and cognitively demanding; mothers must maintain composure when faced with children's negative emotions, inhibiting the impulse to react in a hostile or antagonistic manner. Managing feelings of frustration associated with commotion in the home or dealing with interpersonal negativity in a romantic relationship may deplete mothers' self-regulatory resources, resulting in a diminished capacity to prevent feelings of anger and irritation from escalating into expressions of derision or destructive behaviors during conflicts with their children (Baumeister, 2002).

On days with greater home stress, mothers were more likely to report a conflict occurred, and these conflicts were characterized by more opposition. This suggests that feeling rushed or flustered by high levels of commotion within the home introduces additional negativity into mother-child interactions. Nelson and colleagues (2009) found similar relations between higher levels of home chaos and mothers' tendencies to punish children, downplay children's emotional reactions, or become distressed by children's negative emotions. Disorganized home environments may also influence parental perceptions of children's behavior. Children from chaotic homes score higher in teacher-rated externalizing behavior problems than children from low-chaos homes (Dumas et al., 2005). Because children's misbehavior contributes to the level of commotion within the home, daily fluctuations in children's behavior may be associated with daily variations in home chaos and maternal negativity during conflict interactions. Future research should attempt to elucidate these processes by measuring daily variability in children's problem behaviors along with conflict behaviors and home chaos.

Mothers in the sample reporting higher average levels of negative behaviors in their romantic relationships tended to use more oppositional conflict strategies with their children. These findings are in line with other work demonstrating associations of more frequent marital conflict with negative parenting behaviors (e.g., harsh discipline and rejection; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). In addition, mothers described conflicts with their children as marginally more oppositional on specific days that were also characterized by more frequent displays of negativity toward their romantic partners, suggesting that mothers may be more likely to use tactics like criticism, blame, or dismissal during a disagreement with their children if interactions with their romantic partners that day included similar negative behaviors. Previous studies using diary methods demonstrate comparable results; Almeida, Wethington, and Chandler (1999) found that marital tension one day contributed to tension within the parent-child relationship the following day, and Kouros and colleagues (2014) found that mothers' daily reports of lower marital quality were associated with lower parent-child relationship quality.

In the individual stressor models, we found no evidence for relations between stress and collaborative conflict characteristics.

This may be due to the fact that only about half of the variance in collaborative conflict was explained by within-family variation, in contrast to 70% of the variance in oppositional conflict. Thus, perhaps variability in collaborative conflict is better explained by more stable characteristics of the family not accounted for in the present study, such as parents' beliefs about children's autonomy or emotional expression. The presence of collaborative techniques during conflict interactions likely requires more of a deliberate child-centered orientation than the absence of oppositional techniques.

Our second set of substantive analyses tested the relative importance of each stressor after accounting for the impact of the other stressors and included only families for whom all three stressors were relevant (i.e., working mothers who were also in a romantic relationship). Results were largely consistent with the individual stressor models with some interesting additions. Unexpectedly, families with higher average relationship negativity had more collaborative conflict qualities compared to other families. This finding is in line with the compensatory hypothesis of family stress (Erel & Burman, 1995), where family members strive for positive interactions within one relationship in an attempt to compensate for suboptimal interactions within another relationship. Although this idea has generally not received as much empirical support as the spillover hypothesis, Nelson and colleagues (2009) did find evidence for compensatory relations with mothers and fathers providing more support in response to their children's negative emotions when their spouses reported elevated depressive symptoms. Perhaps our compensatory finding operates in a similar way; negative interactions with partners in front of their children may have motivated mothers to devote extra attention and effort to enhancing their emotional support during conflicts with children.

Another interesting finding when all stressors were examined together was that mothers reported more oppositional conflict qualities with sons, but not daughters, on days they experienced higher levels of relationship negativity. Because girls tend to be more sensitive to the familial affective climate than boys (Denham et al., 1997), perhaps mothers attempt to insulate daughters from additional negativity during conflict interactions on days in which the emotional environment is strained by negative relationship interactions. Evidence of the opposite-gender spillover hypothesis has shown that interparental conflict is more strongly associated with mother-son than mother-daughter negativity possibly because the opposite gender child is more reminiscent of the spouse (Osborne & Fincham, 1996). However, on average, we found that mothers tended to use more collaborative strategies in conflicts with sons and more oppositional behaviors in conflicts with daughters. Taken together, these findings suggest that this attenuation of maternal hostility in mother-daughter conflicts may only occur on days or in situations characterized by a sense of heightened emotional distress within the family unit. On days that are not particularly stressful, mothers' gender-specific emotion socialization practices may dictate conflict behaviors to a greater degree. Parents tend to believe anger is a more normative emotional expression for boys than girls (Casey, 1993). Thus, boys' anger during conflict may be more likely met with mothers' comfort and understanding, whereas girls' anger may be more likely met with punishment or heightened maternal distress.

In sum, results from the all stressor models suggest that among mothers managing multiple roles as employees, home organizers, and romantic relationship partners, stress within the romantic relationship domain appears to be the most important predictor of the quality of

conflict interactions with children. Compared to stress within the home and workplace domains, the interpersonal nature of romantic relationship stress may make it particularly difficult for mothers to prevent these experiences from affecting and being affected by interactions with their children. Indeed, *Sears and colleagues (2015)* found evidence for direct spillover of negative behaviors from interparental to parent–child relationships, which they define as the increased likelihood of negative parental behaviors during parent–child conflict following a difficult marital interaction. Importantly, this direct spillover effect remained even after accounting for indirect effects through elevated parental negative mood. To ascertain whether negative interpersonal interactions in other domains and relationships demonstrate similar direct spillover effects, future research should assess interpersonal negativity among coworkers or friends and examine relations with subsequent parent–child conflict interactions.

Limitations and Implications

There are some noteworthy limitations to the current study. First, we cannot rule out the possibilities that conflicts with children influenced mothers' perceptions of stress and daily stress contributed to mothers' choice of the "most salient" conflict to report. Future work should collect conflict and stress measurements at a more minute level of analysis (e.g., experience sampling techniques triggered by time intervals or specific events like conflictual or stressful interactions) to allow for an examination of bidirectional relations between parent–child conflict and parents' daily stressors. This design would also address the limitation that only one salient conflict—if a conflict occurred at all—was reported on by mothers. Further, negative mood may be partially responsible for associations between stress and parent–child interactions within the same day (*Sears et al., 2015*). Future studies should include measures of mood to evaluate whether this explains stress spillover or affects parents' reporting. Second, the analyses only include mothers' reports of daily conflict and stress. Previous work suggests that mothers and fathers may be differentially impacted by home and relationship stress (*Nelson et al., 2009; Saxbe & Repetti, 2010*). In addition, we only measured mother reports of conflict due to concerns with late preschool and early school-age children's reliable reporting; however, children likely have different perceptions of family stress and conflict. Future work with older children would allow researchers to better understand the daily stressors children experience, children's perceptions of conflict with their parents, and relations of stressors from different life domains (i.e., school and home) with collaborative and oppositional conflict qualities. Third, not all mothers worked outside the home or were in romantic relationships, so these models were tested with a subsample of mothers and should be replicated with larger, diverse samples. Finally, there are some design limitations; the additional reminder mothers received on the definition of conflict after not reporting a conflict the day before may have inadvertently encouraged them to overreport conflict on the next day, and we do not know mothers' specific number of work hours which are likely related to mothers' work stress.

Because of the universality of conflict between parents and children and the importance of navigating these potentially difficult interactions in a sensitive and supportive manner, it is critical for us to better understand the family processes that may contribute to collaborative and oppositional aspects of mother–child conflict. Maximizing social engagement, warmth, and patience and minimizing hostility and punitive reactions during conflict interactions with

children has the potential to benefit children's capacity to regulate negative emotions, improve social problem solving skills, and provide children with experiences they can draw upon to more effectively navigate disagreements with peers (*Wolchik & Sandler, 2013*).

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Appendix

Items Comprising the Collaborative and Oppositional Conflict Scales

Collaborative	Oppositional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I provided my child with behavioral options he/she could pick from in order to resolve the dispute. • It was not necessary for me to listen to my child's opinion on the conflict.* • I asked my child to provide suggestions for how we should resolve the conflict. • I encouraged my child to justify his/her perspective on the problem. • My child contributed to the solution we came up with. • During this conflict, I discussed with my child what we can do in the future to make sure this problem doesn't happen again. • I helped my child think of ideas when he/she could not come up with his/her own. • When my child became upset/frustrated during the conflict, I comforted him/her. • When my child became upset/frustrated during the conflict, I let him/her know that it was okay to be upset. • When my child became upset/frustrated during the conflict, I helped him/her feel better by solving the problem. • I showed my child affection during or immediately following the conflict. • I tried to see the problem from my child's perspective. • I showed my child that I valued his/her opinion. • Working through this conflict ultimately benefited my relationship with my child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Child) Started crying during the conflict. • (Child) Screamed or yelled during the conflict. • (Child) Displayed aggression (e.g., slamming doors, hitting objects or people, throwing or breaking things). • (Child) Remained calm during the conflict.* • (Child) Engaged in whining or pouting. • (Parent) Screamed or yelled during the conflict. • (Parent) Displayed aggression (e.g., slamming doors, hitting objects or people, throwing or breaking things). • (Parent) Remained calm during the conflict.* • (Parent) Were affected at a physical level (e.g., flushed face, heart pounding, holding your breath). • Warned your child of a potential punishment if he/she did not comply. • Took away your child's privileges. • Used a gentle tone of voice.* • Threatened your child. • When my child became upset/frustrated during the conflict, I punished him/her for getting too worked up. • When my child became upset/frustrated during the conflict, I thought he/she was overreacting. • When my child became upset/frustrated during the conflict, it made me angrier. • This conflict has led to additional problems with my child. • This conflict with my child put me in a bad mood. • This conflict with my child affected my ability to concentrate on other activities. • This conflict with my child created negativity in my other relationships.

* Item was reverse-coded.

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