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Prospective Effects of Interparental Conflict on Child Attachment Security and the Moderating Role of Parents' Romantic Attachment

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of parents' observed conflict behavior on subsequent child attachment security, both as a main effect and as moderated by parents' romantic attachment. Participants were 80 heterosexual couples involving men from the Oregon Youth Study and their first-born children. We used hierarchical linear modeling to predict child security with each parent. Interparental psychological aggression predicted lower child security with father, regardless of romantic attachment. If the father was insecure, interparental positive engagement predicted lower child security with him. If either the mother or father was avoidant, interparental withdrawal did not predict lower child security, though it did for more secure parents. Results are discussed in terms of implications of attachment-(in)congruent behavior for parents' emotional availability.

Keywords

attachment; couples interaction; conflict behavior; family system

Families can be conceptualized as dynamic systems with mutually regulating levels of organization (see van Geert & Lichtwarck-Aschoff, 2005); within the family, dyadic relationships develop and influence each other to impact the adjustment of each member and of the family as a whole. Dysregulation or deterioration within one relationship can be expected to impact other relationships negatively, though the nonlinearity principle allows for differing effects depending on contextual factors. In keeping with these principles, conflict within the parents' relationship has generally been shown to harm parent-child relationships (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1994; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006), but a meta-analysis also revealed considerable heterogeneity in these associations (Erel & Burman, 1995). Isolating moderating factors that explain why interparental conflict would damage parent-child relationships in some families and not in others remains an important task for family researchers (Davies, Sturge-Apple, & Cummings, 2004).

Both the parent-child and interparental romantic relationship are characterized as attachment relationships that serve important functions for regulating distress and maintaining a sense of felt security (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Differences in parents' romantic attachment security may shape the impact of other aspects of the parents' relationship, including conflict behavior, on their child's developing attachment. By identifying parent characteristics that exacerbate or buffer the effect of particular conflict behaviors within the family system,

family researchers may help clinicians to more effectively target high-risk couples and suggest avenues for intervention, interrupting the transmission of emotional and behavioral dysregulation from parents to children. We set out to address this issue by investigating parents' romantic attachment as a possible moderator of interparental conflict behavior in predicting child attachment security with parents.

Effects of Interparental Conflict on Child Attachment

Numerous studies have demonstrated negative effects of interparental conflict on parent-child relationships, particularly when parents' conflict behaviors involve hostility and aggression or withdrawal (e.g., Cox, Paley, Payne, & Burchinal, 1999; Katz & Gottman, 1996; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Although only a handful of studies have focused on child attachment outcomes, these have shown effects of both positive and negative dimensions of couples' conflict styles on child attachment; whereas greater marital conflict both before and after the birth of the child was found to predict insecure infant attachment to parents (Owen & Cox, 1997), positive marital engagement has been associated with more secure child-father attachment (Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 2000).

According to Davies and Cummings' (1994) emotional security hypothesis, the child strives for emotional security within the family both through cultivating a secure attachment with the parents and through exposure to a secure interparental relationship. Besides compromising child emotional security with respect to the parents' relationship, interparental conflict may disrupt the formation of parent-child attachment by interfering with sensitive parenting and/or by undermining the child's confidence in the parent as a secure base (see El-Sheikh & Elmore-Staton, 2004). This theoretical frame contextualizes the results of the above parenting studies as pieces of a larger mediational model from interparental conflict to parenting to child attachment; whereas an aggressive or withdrawing conflict style may carry over into overly harsh or disengaged parenting that detracts from child security, a more positive conflict style should allow parents to maintain emotional availability for sensitive parenting, enhancing child security. In fact, recent work has lent support to the notion that ineffective parenting – in particular, high coercion and rejection, combined with low emotional support – mediates associations between marital conflict and child maladjustment for both mothers and fathers (Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006). Given the heterogeneity of interparental conflict effects alluded to earlier, we must go beyond these main effects to consider features of the parent or interparental relationship that may potentiate or dilute the transmission of disturbance from the parents' to the parent-child relationship (see Davies et al., 2004).

The Moderating Role of Parents' Romantic Attachment

Research on couples' conflict interactions suggests that romantic attachment shapes partners' experience of conflict and the consequences of their conflict behaviors. Partners high in attachment anxiety tend to use hyperactivating strategies of affect regulation that intensify emotional response in order to draw the partner closer, whereas partners high in attachment avoidance rely on deactivating strategies that suppress emotional response and maintain distance from the partner (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). The anxious style leads to greater distress in the face of conflict and more negative perceptions of the impact of conflict on the relationship (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). The avoidant style only works in minimizing distress when the partner can maintain the preferred emotional distance, and when forced into a situation that calls for engagement with a distressed partner, avoidant partners may show greater negative affect (Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999). Thus, romantic attachment styles dictate different preferred strategies for regulating affect during conflict, which may in turn alter the significance of particular conflict behaviors for parents' emotional adjustment and availability for their child.

There is some evidence that parents' attachment styles can moderate the effect of interparental conflict on family adjustment. One study showed that fathers' insecurity combined with couples' negative escalation of conflict led to lower positive and higher negative affect in whole-family interactions after the birth of the first child (Paley, Cox, Kanoy, Harter, Burchinal, & Margand, 2005). Security in this study referred to adult attachment security assessed by the Adult Attachment Interview, which is distinct from but has been found to relate to romantic attachment security (Shaver, Belsky, & Brennan, 2000). Another study by Davies and colleagues (2004) found that interparental discord led to lower acceptance of the child among insecure mothers only. Although these findings point to parents' insecurity as an amplifier of conflict effects thought to harm child attachment formation, other research suggests that parents' psychosocial vulnerability can actually dilute the impact of interparental discord on the parent-child relationship; Floyd, Gilliom, and Costigan (1998) found that marital negativity predicted more negative father-child interactions when fathers experienced high, not low, levels of marital satisfaction. None of these researchers measured child attachment, yet their results underline the moderating role of parents' attachment security and the mechanisms – disturbances in parenting and/or family interactions – by which parents' conflict and attachment styles could impact child security.

We propose that the effects of parents' positive and negative conflict behaviors on the family system may depend on the quality of their romantic attachment. Whereas the effects of extreme forms of aggression and hostility are likely to exert a broadly harmful effect on the family in general and child security in particular, the effects of more ambiguous aspects of conflict behavior may be conditional on parents' romantic attachment. We have little direct evidence to draw on for specific hypotheses, and indirect evidence from the family research cited above allows for the possibility that parents' attachment insecurity could potentiate or mitigate effects of their conflict behavior on parenting, and thus child attachment. Therefore, we approach moderating predictions by considering how the congruence of parents' conflict behavior with their attachment-related affect regulation strategies might protect their emotional resources for sensitive parenting that fosters child security.

Withdrawal from conflict discussions is generally regarded as a negative feature of couples' interactions (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995), yet it may serve as an adaptive alternative for avoidant parents to increasingly angry or aggressive interactions. Positive engagement is generally a beneficial component of conflict behavior, yet it is likely to require greater effort and yield fewer gains for insecure partners, either because they ruminate about and catastrophize the negative aspects of conflict or because they find positive interactions less rewarding. Given these considerations, withdrawal is more likely to conserve emotional resources and availability for parenting in avoidant parents, but may represent a more generally harmful family disengagement process in secure parents. Similarly, whereas positive engagement should bolster emotional resources in secure parents, it may tap the resources of insecure parents, leaving them less available to respond to their child's distress. Differences in the function and consequences of particular conflict behaviors for parents with different attachment styles may thus provide a key to explaining why such behaviors would be harmful for child security in some families and not in others.

The Present Study

The present study was designed to test the effects of parents' conflict behavior and moderating effects of parents' romantic attachment styles on child attachment security with each parent. In particular, we chose to examine psychological aggression, positive engagement, and withdrawal during problem-solving interactions, both as main effects and in interaction with parents' attachment styles. Drawing on a dynamic systems model of family processes and more specific propositions from Davies and Cummings' (1994) emotional security theory and Shaver

and Mikulincer's (2002) affect regulation model of romantic attachment, we made the following hypotheses: Greater psychological aggression in couples would predict lower child security, regardless of parent attachment, whereas the effects of positive engagement and withdrawal would depend on parents' attachment security. Conflict behavior that is congruent with the parent's attachment style – withdrawal for avoidant parents and positive engagement for secure parents – should allow for greater emotional availability for parenting and, thus, a more secure parent-child attachment. This means that positive engagement should relate to increased child security and withdrawal should relate to decreased child security only for parents who are secure in their romantic attachment. For insecure parents, positive engagement is not expected to increase (and may even decrease) child security, and for avoidant parents, withdrawal is not expected to decrease (and may even increase) child security.

Beyond introducing parents' romantic attachment as a moderator in the equation, we included several design elements that diverge from previous studies in the area of interparental conflict and parent-child relationships. Unlike the middle-class, married samples upon which most family studies are based, we examined a lower-class, at-risk sample of young parents who may or may not be married. Conflict behavior was assessed in a more fine-grained way through microsocial coding of observed interactions rather than the global ratings or self-report measures used in prior studies. Finally, we investigated child attachment to mother and father separately to explore the unique mechanisms contributing to these relationships. Each of these points should serve to refine our understanding of family processes relating to attachment and the transmission of emotion regulation skills, guiding recommendations for clinical prevention and intervention efforts with parents and children.

Method

Participants

The current sample draws from two companion studies to a larger longitudinal study (the Oregon Youth Study, or OYS) that has followed 206 boys from higher-crime areas of a medium-size metropolitan region in the Pacific Northwest since they were in Grade 4 (ages 9-10 years). When the men reached late adolescence, the Couples Study was started to examine the OYS men and their intimate partners' adjustment in young adulthood. Similarly, the Three Generational Study (3GS) began to investigate the men's children and the mothers of those children once the men became fathers. In other words, a subset of men from OYS participated in the Couples Study and/or 3GS; for the current investigation, they had to be participants in all three studies. Whereas OYS and Couples Study assessment waves were tied to the man's age, 3GS waves were based on the child's age. Eighty men participated in a Couples Study assessment with the woman who was also the mother of his first child in 3GS; these families were selected for inclusion in the present sample.

The present study involves assessments at two different time points. Information about the interparental relationship (conflict behavior and romantic attachment) was from a Couples Study assessment that took place prior to the 3GS assessment, which contained information about the parent-child relationship (child attachment to mother and father). For the purposes of this study, the Couples Study and 3GS assessments are designated as Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2), respectively. Whereas all of the T2 assessments coincided with 3GS Wave 1 (at which the child was age 2 years), the T1 assessment wave varied among study families on the basis of the age at which the couples bore their first child. The study parents' Couples Study wave closest to the birth of their first child (and prior to the birth, if possible) was selected for the present analysis. On the basis of this matching criterion, 21% of the parental dyads had their T1 assessment at Couples Study Wave 1 (at which the man was ages 17-20 years), 42% at Couples Study Wave 2 (man ages 20-23 years), 28% at Couples Study Wave 3 (man ages 23-25 years), and the remaining 9% at Couples Study Wave 4 (man ages 25-27 years).

Fathers' mean age at T1 was 21.9 years ($SD = 2.4$), and mothers' mean age was 21.2 years ($SD = 3.8$). A little over one third of the couples (36%) were married at T1 (18% dating or engaged, 46% living together), and they had been together on average for 2 years (105.7 weeks). The majority (84%) of couples were still together at T2, and comparisons of couples who remained intact from T1 to T2 with couples who separated in the interim showed nonsignificant differences on the T1 conflict and attachment variables. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (82% of women, 89% of men) and of lower socioeconomic status. At T2 the majority of mothers (74%) and fathers (71%) had a high school degree or less; of these, a substantial proportion had not finished high school (33% of mothers, 26% of fathers), with 10% of mothers and 14% of fathers reporting that they were working on a GED. A smaller proportion of mothers (21%) and fathers (24%) had completed 1-3 years of college, and only 5% each of mothers and fathers had completed a 4-year college degree. The majority of mothers (62%) and fathers (86%) worked at least part time, though 24% of mothers and 15% of fathers reported that they were currently looking for work. Of working mothers, the most common job classification was "semiskilled worker" (59%), followed by "clerical sales" (18%), and only 9% were in a "technical/semiprofessional" or "manager/minor professional" role. Similarly, most working fathers fell into the classification of "skilled manual worker" (31%) or "semiskilled worker" (26%), with 12% in "menial service" jobs, 10% in "clerical sales," and only 14% in "technical/semiprofessional." None of the study parents were in an "administrator" or "higher executive" work role. About one half (49%) of families reported a yearly household income of less than \$20,000, and only 10% reported a household income of \$50,000 or greater (mean earnings in the past year = \$7,709 for mothers, \$25,164 for fathers).

The mean time lag between the T1 Couples Study assessment and the first child's birth was 227 days ($SD = 399$; range 1156 days before birth to 821 days after birth). Seventy-eight percent of T1 assessments occurred prior to the child's birth, and all T1 assessments occurred before the T2 assessment. Characteristics of both the interparental relationship at T1 (i.e., partners' age, relationship status, and length of relationship) and of the family at T2 (parents together or not, child contact with mother and father) were tested as factors to control for in analyses; only father age was found to relate significantly to child attachment security and was included in all explanatory models. In addition, the time lag between the T1 assessment and the birth of the child was tested as both a main effect and as a moderator of interparental conflict effects; none of these was significant, so analyses were conducted without the time difference variable.

Procedures

Assessment for the Couples Study included a separate interview and questionnaires for the OYS men and their partners and a series of six videotaped discussion tasks. For the present study, coding of two problem-solving discussion tasks was used. The man and his partner were each directed to pick an issue in their relationship either from the list provided (the Partner Issue Checklist; Capaldi, Wilson, & Collier, 1994) or of their own choosing. The couples discussed each partner's issue for 7 minutes for a total of 14 minutes.

The 3GS assessment involved the OYS man, his child, and the mother of that child. The first wave of data collection, at which the child was approximately 2 years of age (age 17-32 months, $M = 21.8$ months), consisted of two laboratory sessions in which the parents completed a series of questionnaires and engaged in videotaped interactions with their child, including the Strange Situation. At the first session, the child was assessed with the mother and at the second session with the father. On average, these sessions were .69 months apart ($SD = 1.5$). The standard Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) was followed, in which seven 3-minute episodes of separation from and reunion with the parent and a stranger are used to assess the quality of the child's attachment to the parent.

Measures

Couples' conflict behaviors—The Family and Peer Process Code (FPPC; Stubbs, Crosby, Forgatch, & Capaldi, 1998) was used to code the Couples Study interaction tasks. This code, along with evidence of validity, has been described in a number of prior publications (e.g., Capaldi, Dishion, Stoolmiller, & Yoerger, 2001; Capaldi, Shortt, & Crosby, 2003). The Family Process Code, upon which this system is based, has also been described in numerous publications (e.g., Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). A computer was used to record, in real time, the interpersonal behavioral and emotive content of each couple's interaction. Twenty-four content codes described verbal, vocal, nonverbal, physical, and compliance behaviors that were considered to have a positive, neutral, or negative impact based on their interpersonal meaning. For example, name calling or hitting was negative, whereas reassurance or affectionate touch was positive. Six affective ratings described the participant's emotional tone: happy, caring, neutral, distress, aversive, and sad. An affect rating was assigned to each content code based on tone and inflection of voice, body posture, nonverbal gestures, and facial expressions. Content and affect ratings were independent so that any affect could modify any content code. Each partner's behavior was coded continuously with a particular content/affect code combination, which did not change until a change in content and/or affect occurred; in other words, behavior was coded by duration of a codeable state rather than by discrete events. All coders were professional research assistants who received an initial 3-month training. To assess coder reliability at each wave, a minimum of 14% of videotaped tasks were selected to be coded independently by two coders, and kappas were computed. Content and affect kappas for the waves used in the present study ranged from .75 to .85 (see www.oslc.org/resources/codingsystems.html for a complete description of the coding system).

In the present study, psychological aggression, positive engagement, and withdrawal constructs were created to reflect positive and negative conflict styles reported in the couples literature defined by pertinent combinations of content codes and affects. In general, the content of the behavior and/or the affect with which it was enacted had to be decidedly positive (in the case of positive engagement) or negative (in the case of psychological aggression) to be included in these codes, and withdrawal was defined less according to affect and more to behavioral disengagement (see below for further description of specific constructs). Each of these conflict behavior constructs was examined as a duration proportion (time spent exhibiting the behavior/total discussion time). Because conflict patterns are here conceptualized as characteristic of the interparental relationship (rather than specific to each partner) and because partners' behaviors within the interaction task were significantly associated ($r = .21-.52$), dyadic scores reflecting the mean of the man's and the woman's conflict scores were used in analyses. Comparisons of their conflict scores revealed nonsignificant differences between men and women on levels of psychological aggression and withdrawal, though the latter showed higher positive engagement.

Psychological aggression—This construct was defined by negative behaviors (negative verbal, verbal attack, coerce) combined with neutral, disturbed, aversive, or sad affect. Negative verbal behavior was blaming or disapproving of the partner (e.g., “You really blew that one, didn't you?”). Verbal attack was more extreme, including name calling, threats, and humiliation of the partner (e.g., “You're such a loser.”). Coerce was a demand for behavior change that implied impending physical or psychological harm (e.g., “You'll shut up if you know what is good for you.”).

Positive engagement—This construct included neutral behaviors (talk, tease, advise, vocal, neutral nonverbal) combined with positive (happy or caring) affect, as well as positive behaviors (positive interpersonal, endearment, self-disclose, positive nonverbal, touch/hold) combined with positive or neutral affect. Positive verbal behavior was generally approving or

supportive of the partner (e.g., “You did a great job on that”). Endearment was stronger, referring to personalized and unqualified approval of the partner (e.g., “I love you.”). Self-disclosure statements revealed important information about the speaker (e.g., traits, feelings, relationship issues, self-evaluations). Positive nonverbal behavior indicated acceptance, approval, agreement, or affirmation of the partner (e.g., smiling, thumbs-up sign) and touch/hold described affectionate positive physical contact with the partner (e.g., hugs, holding hands).

Withdrawal—This code was used as a qualifier of the interaction and was defined independent of the content codes as “a lack of engagement with or attention to ongoing interaction.” No single behavior defined withdrawal, rather it was defined from a gestalt of behaviors including such indicators as closed-off body language and failure to respond to partner. For example, a partner in withdrawal might turn away from the partner and ignore his/her questions. Withdrawal also included less obvious forms of disengagement, such as a partner showing intermittent eye contact or a “glazed” expression and making brief responses only after repeated prompting. At least 3 seconds of observed withdrawal were required before a state of withdrawal was coded. Kappas for the specific content and affect clusters comprising these constructs ranged from .89-.94 for positive engagement, from .59-.72 for psychological aggression, and from .95-.99 for withdrawal across the four time points.

Child attachment security—Children were assessed with their mother and father separately in the Strange Situation, and tapes were coded by a team trained in the Preschool Assessment of Attachment (PAA; Crittenden, 1992) at the University of Washington as part of an National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Child Care Study. Construct validity for this measure of attachment in preschool-aged children has been demonstrated in a variety of samples, including depressed mothers and low-income families (e.g., Crittenden, Claussen, & Kozłowska, 2007; Teti & Gelfand, 1997). This measure yields both discrete attachment classifications (i.e., secure, anxious, avoidant) and continuous scores on variables related to attachment (i.e., security and confidence). The Security score (on a scale of 1-8, higher numbers mean greater security) was used as an index of child security with each parent. To check the validity of this continuous measure of attachment security within the present sample, we tested differences in Security scores among attachment classification groups; as expected, children classified as Secure/B received higher Security ratings than children classified as one of the insecure categories. See Table 1 for descriptive information on study children's attachment. Interrater reliability for the PAA in the current sample was acceptable ($\kappa = .72$), and this reliability was used to weight outcome scores in the analyses that follow.

Parent romantic attachment—The Adult Attachment Scale (AAS; Collins & Read, 1990) was administered at one or more of the 3GS assessments. The AAS contains 18 items based on the attachment categories in the Hazan and Shaver (1987) measure (6 each from Secure, Anxious, and Avoidant descriptions), which participants rate from 1-5 on a Likert-type scale from “not at all characteristic of me” to “very characteristic of me.” Three subscales, based on a factor analysis conducted by the scale authors, are computed: Comfort Depending on Others (Depend); Comfort with Closeness (Close); and Anxiety (Anxiety). Items such as “I am comfortable depending on others” comprise the Depend scale, “I often worry that my partner does not really love me” exemplifies the Anxiety scale, and “I find it relatively easy to get close to others” is an item on the Close scale. As part of a series of three validation studies for this measure, Collins and Read compared results of a discriminant function analysis using their subscales with the Hazan and Shaver categorical classification and confirmed that Close and, to a lesser extent, Depend distinguish individuals with greater attachment avoidance, whereas Anxiety discriminates attachment anxious ambivalence. The authors further

demonstrated that their scale relates in expected ways to other measures of attachment and to mental representations of self, others, and relationships. A subsequent review of adult attachment measures (Stein, Jacobs, Ferguson, Allen, & Fonagy, 1998) clarified that the AAS not only measures an individual's orientation to romantic relationships generally, but also has implications for functioning in the present relationship, with partner of individuals scoring high on Close reporting greater satisfaction and partner warmth and responsiveness. Partners classified as insecure according to the AAS have further been found to show ineffective support seeking and caregiving behaviors in videotaped interactions with a current partner, as well as negatively biased perceptions of these interactions (Collins & Feeney, 2000). The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) in the present sample of mothers and fathers ranged from .76 to .82 across waves for Depend, .51-.71 for Close, and .50-.59 for Anxiety.

Because the AAS was not included in the 3GS from the beginning of the study, a substantial number of parents (27 mothers, 32 fathers) were not assessed at 3GS Wave 1 but were assessed at later waves. Given that adult romantic attachment should remain quite stable over time, we determined that a mean of available AAS scores from 3GS Wave 1 (father mean age 24.3, mother 23.7 years), wave 2 (father mean age 25.9, mother 25.2 years), and Wave 3 (father mean age 27.6, mother 27.0 years) constituted the best index of parents' attachment. The magnitude of the mean differences in subscale scores across time points (up to 1.5 for mothers, 1.0 for fathers) was less than the standard deviation of the subscale at any time point. A series of repeated-measures ANOVAs for mothers' and fathers' AAS scores across Waves 1-3 confirmed stability of these scores over time. In other words, participants' attachment scores did not change significantly over time, and scores were significantly related across time points.

Analytic Strategy

Multilevel modeling with hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) was selected as the analytic tool for testing associations between characteristics of the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship. The structure of the data – child attachment behaviors nested within families – lends itself to multilevel models, which separate within- and between-unit sources of variability. In this case, the family is the unit of analysis, with child attachment security with mother and father modeled as within-family outcomes at Level 1, and variability between families modeled at Level 2. This approach has the advantage of allowing us to acknowledge and test the interrelationship of the child's attachment to mother and father, as well as differences between the two attachment relationships. By including both outcomes at Level 1, we are further able to test predictive processes for each relationship simultaneously. The Level 2 equation includes both an intercept, representing the average security score for the sample, and a variance term that can be explained by adding between-family predictors such as parent characteristics. The two-level equation is as follows, using guidelines for dummy coding in a cross-sectional model for matched pairs (see Barnett, Marshall, Raudenbush, & Brennan, 1993) to distinguish father-child and mother-child outcomes:

Level 1 (within-family)

$$\text{Security} = \beta_1(\text{attachment to mother}) + \beta_2(\text{attachment to father}) + e$$

Level 2 (between-family)

$$\beta_1 = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}(\text{parent attachment}) + \gamma_{12}(\text{parent aggression}) + \gamma_{13}(\text{parent attachment} * \text{aggression}) + u_1$$

$$\beta_2 = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}(\text{parent attachment}) + \gamma_{22}(\text{parent aggression}) + \gamma_{23}(\text{parent attachment} * \text{aggression}) + u_2$$

Results

Descriptive Information and Correlations

Means and standard deviations for couples' conflict behavior and romantic attachment scores, as well as for child attachment security, are shown in Table 2. Correlations among these variables are found in Table 3. Both psychological aggression and withdrawal variables were positively skewed, so the analyses below were conducted with both raw and log-transformed scores (to correct for non-normality); the results were essentially the same, so the more easily interpretable raw score results are reported. *T*-tests showed only one significant difference between mothers and fathers; mothers reported greater attachment anxiety than fathers, $t(70) = 2.07, p = .04$.

HLM Analyses

First, we fit a baseline model of the outcome – child attachment security – with no explanatory predictors at Level 2. Then, three sets of models were estimated to address the primary study questions regarding main effects and moderation by parent romantic attachment for (a) psychological aggression, (b) positive engagement, and (c) withdrawal¹. Because attachment scales were not independent of one another within parents, separate models were fit for Depend, Close, and Anxiety as moderators of the conflict behavior. Only those models that provided a significant improvement in fit over the unconditional model are discussed further. Reported results are based on robust standard errors, which adjust for non-normality of the data.

Child attachment security baseline model—The unconditional HLM model offers important information about the outcome, including mean levels and variability within and between subjects, as well as about overall model fit, against which explanatory models can be compared. A planned contrast of the coefficients representing average child Security scores showed that children tended to show greater security with their mothers (4.86) than with their fathers (4.74), $\chi^2(2) = 557.60, p < .001$. At the same time, the tau matrix confirmed a significant moderate correlation of .34 between children's security with mother and with father. There was significant variability across children/families in security with mother, $\chi^2(49) = 159.45, p < .001$, and with father, $\chi^2(49) = 162.42, p < .001$, supporting the case for adding explanatory predictors at Level 2.

Psychological aggression models (Table 4)—A model including only dyadic psychological aggression as a predictor of child security with each parent proved a significant improvement in fit over baseline as shown by a reduction in the deviance statistic, $\chi^2(3) = 9.14, p = .03$, and it explained 18.9% of the variance in security with father. Greater dyadic psychological aggression predicted lower child security with the father but not with the mother (see Figure 1). In other words, men who were in more psychologically aggressive relationships had children who exhibited lower security with them. None of the models, including parent attachment x psychological aggression interactions, improved significantly over baseline, and there were no significant interaction effects.

Positive engagement models (Table 5)—Main effects models of positive engagement yielded nonsignificant fit changes, but models including parent Anxiety x positive engagement and Depend x positive engagement each resulted in a significant improvement compared to baseline, $\chi^2(7) = 16.82, p = .02$ and $\chi^2(7) = 16.61, p = .02$, respectively. The former model explained 24.0% and the latter explained 18.6% of the variance in child security with father.

¹To address the possibility that effects of partners' conflict/attachment fit could depend on the couple's level of relationship commitment, three-way interactions of couples' relationship status with conflict and attachment variables were tested as predictors of child security. These were all nonsignificant.

Significant interaction effects indicated that positive engagement could relate differently to child security with the father, depending on his own attachment security. Specifically, interactions of both father Anxiety and Depend by positive engagement showed that higher positive engagement within the dyad actually predicted lower child security when the father was insecure (see Figure 2 for an illustration of the Anxiety effect; the effect for Depend was essentially the same). Main effects of mother Depend and Anxiety were marginally significant, both in the direction of higher mother security predicting higher child security with her.

Withdrawal models (Table 6)—As for positive engagement, main effects models for withdrawal did not improve significantly over baseline, but models including parent Depend x withdrawal and Close x withdrawal each resulted in a significant improvement in fit, $\chi^2(7) = 19.28, p = .008$ and $\chi^2(7) = 16.34, p = .02$. The former explained 19.7% of the variance in child security with mother and 21.3% of the variance in security with father, whereas the latter explained 15.1% of the variance in child security with mother. A significant interaction of Depend by withdrawal for both parents revealed that couples' dyadic withdrawal related to lower levels of child security only if mothers or fathers were comfortable depending on others (see Figures 3 and 4). An interaction of mother Close by withdrawal reflected the same moderating effect of parent avoidance, although this effect was specific to the mother-child relationship; parents' withdrawal only predicted lower levels of child security if mothers were comfortable with closeness (effect was essentially the same as for Depend, shown in Figure 4).

Discussion

This study investigated prospective effects of parents' observed conflict behavior on child attachment security and the role of parent's romantic attachment as a moderator in these associations. In support of our hypotheses, couples' dyadic psychological aggression exerted a main effect on child security, whereas effects of their positive engagement and withdrawal depended on their own romantic attachment styles. In particular, dyadic conflict styles that were incongruent with partners' attachment-related affect regulation strategies were associated with less secure parent-child attachments. To interpret the present results, we consider how romantic partners' ways of interacting with one another and adapting to conflict as a couple lay the foundation for security-enhancing or security-eroding family dynamics with a child.

Couples who showed high psychological aggression in problem-solving interactions had children who were less securely attached to their father. A history of aggressive partner interactions may have fostered longer-term hostility within the parents' relationship that detracted from sensitive/attuned parenting and emotional availability, as found by Sturge-Apple et al. (2006). These parents may also be less able to act as a secure base for their children. A question that remains is whether aggression in the interparental relationship differentially impacts fathers' parenting, as suggested by some researchers (e.g., Coiro & Emery, 1998; Owen & Cox, 1997), or whether it affects child-father attachment, in part through effects on mothers' parenting, as found by Frosch and colleagues (2000).

In contrast to previous work in the area (Frosch et al., 2000), parents' positive engagement did not bolster child security. Our findings indicated that couples' prior positive engagement actually predicted lower levels of child's security with the father if he was insecure. We expected, on the basis of affect regulation models of attachment (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002), that an insecure parent would benefit less from positively engaged partner interactions; anxious hyperactivating strategies would give rise to high negative affect, whereas avoidant deactivating strategies would restrict the range of either positive or negative affect. The effort required for these insecure fathers to maintain positive engagement during conflict, as opposed to more attachment-congruent conflict-escalating or disengagement strategies, could in turn

leave them less emotionally available to respond to their child's distress and lead to insecure child-father attachment. We must also consider that the nature of "positive engagement" may vary across secure and insecure partners. Self-disclosure, a part of the positive engagement construct, would more likely involve actual or perceived negative evaluations of the self and the relationship for insecure partners. Rather than repairing the relationship and fostering closeness, such interactions are likely to be emotionally draining for both partners. Additionally, couples' positive engagement in the context of anxiety or avoidance may represent an attempt to ameliorate partner insecurity that is not only likely to be ineffective, but also may lead to enmeshment in the interparental relationship, leaving little availability for the child. The fact that fathers', but not mothers', attachment security interacted with positive engagement to predict family outcomes fits with prior research highlighting fathers' security as a determining factor in whether conflict engagement leads to positive or negative outcomes (Paley et al., 2005). Further investigation is needed to explore how secure vs. insecure fathers experience particular facets of positive couples engagement and how it affects their closeness or availability to their children.

In keeping with previous work demonstrating the costs of parents' withdrawal for child adjustment (e.g., Cox et al., 1999), secure couples' withdrawal from conflict related to lower child security; however, this association was not found for more avoidant parents. Again, these distinct patterns of adjustment may have to do with attachment-based differences in affect regulation and conflict management. For secure partners, withdrawal likely interferes with otherwise effective problem-solving and, as an attachment-incongruent strategy, represents a more generally disruptive process founded in and fostering disengagement from family relationships. For avoidant partners, on the other hand, withdrawal from conflict is likely to facilitate preferred deactivating strategies for regulating negative affect. The use of these strategies, although not regarded as adaptive in an absolute sense, may be relatively adaptive for the avoidant partner in preventing an escalation of negative affect that threatens their romantic and other relationships. By minimizing the stressfulness of partner interactions, withdrawal may leave avoidant parents more emotional resources for attending to their child, rather than promoting unavailability in the parenting relationship. Associations between withdrawal and affective tone in secure and avoidant partners' interactions, as well as associations with parenting behavior, should be more thoroughly investigated to understand how the function of this behavior and its consequences vary by romantic attachment style.

Overall, the above findings demonstrate more effects of couples' conflict and attachment characteristics on father-child attachment security, compared to mother-child security. It would appear that the child's developing relationship with the father is more vulnerable to difficulties in the parents' romantic relationship. The father-child bond may be inherently less robust because of less time spent together in early development and/or a less clearly defined fathering role. As suggested by other family researchers (Belsky, Rovine, & Fish, 1989), men's relationships with their partner and their child may also be more tightly interconnected, making spillover of distress more likely.

Beyond this difference in the number of effects, there may be a mother-father difference in the nature of attachment-style-related effects; whereas the strongest marker of avoidance (comfort with closeness) proved a significant moderator for women, anxiety exerted a significant (moderating) effect for men. Although tentative, this pattern may have to do with gender differences in the implications of attachment insecurity for physiological stress during conflict. Attachment avoidance has been found to predict faster neuroendocrine recovery following conflict in women, whereas attachment anxiety related to more extended stress response in men (Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer, 2006). It may be that the adaptive value of escape or withdrawal from conflict is greater for avoidant women, and that the toll of conflict (even in the context of relatively positive interactions) is greater for anxious men.

Although the present study offers important new directions for the study of longitudinal family processes, its limitations underscore the need for further research to confirm the explanations we have proposed. Intervening processes not examined in the present study, such as changes in the quality of the interparental relationship across the transition to parenthood and the development of parenting/coparenting styles, will further illuminate the basis of the predictive relationship discussed above. Also, although the variations in timing offer a naturalistic window on family system development in this at-risk sample, they preclude any clear conclusions about longitudinal vs. concurrent effects of couples processes on parent-child relationships. In particular, the mix of assessments before and after the birth of a child and under conditions of both intact and nonintact interparental relationships makes it difficult to disentangle the directions and mechanisms of effects. Although these factors (time lag between couples and parent-child assessments, interparental relationship stability) did not appear to make a difference in the current results, these contextual factors may be important to explore further. In keeping with a dynamic family systems perspective, reciprocal influences of the interparental and parent-child relationships over time should be tested with multiple assessments of couples', parent-child, and whole family interactions. The current sample was limited in size and scope, and more complex generalizable models of family process will require replication and extension with larger and more diverse samples. A consideration of note is that the present results may be influenced by the at-risk nature of this sample. For young parents living under the stress of low-wage, low-status jobs without the stability of a marital relationship, effects of attachment incongruence strain may be more pronounced than for parents who can draw on a greater socioeconomic buffer. Further work with samples experiencing a range of social and emotional risk factors should clarify under what conditions these attachment x behavior effects are present. Finally, we have established that the impact of parents' conflict behavior can depend on their romantic attachment, but there are likely to be other important moderating variables. Child characteristics such as temperament and cognitive development may help to determine which parent characteristics are destructive and to what extent, as well as developmental changes in what is adaptive/maladaptive for child security.

These limitations notwithstanding, the results of the present study support the interdependency of interparental and parent-child relationships and suggest that young couples are shaping the structure of the family system from the very start of a romantic relationship. Parents who are unable to contain aggression with each other and/or who employ conflict styles incongruent with their dominant affect regulation strategies appear to be less able to provide a secure base for their child. These findings argue for early prevention/intervention approaches to families that are tailored to the parents' characteristics. If parents to be are securely attached in romantic relationships, withdrawal from conflict should be discouraged, but not necessarily if one or both partners are avoidant. For avoidant partners, new affect regulation strategies may need to be developed before withdrawal can be safely reduced. If the man is insecurely attached, work on increasing couples' positive engagement may not improve the family's adjustment. These couples may need a more in-depth education about balancing emotional demands across relationships and building on existing strengths. Finally, psychologically aggressive behavior should be decreased and replaced with more constructive conflict tactics in all cases.

Conflict is an inevitable part of family life, and not all conflict is detrimental. By identifying the factors that make interparental conflict destructive for child security, we can help to break intergenerational cycles of emotional and behavioral dysregulation, improving the quality of children's future romantic and parenting relationships.

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Figure 1.
Parents' psychological aggression decreases child security with father.

Figure 2. Fathers' attachment anxiety moderates the effect of parents' positive engagement on child security with father.

Figure 3.

Fathers' comfort depending on others moderates the effect of parents' withdrawal on child security with father.

Figure 4. Mothers' comfort depending on others moderates the effect of parents' withdrawal on child security with mother.

Table 1

Preschool Assessment of Attachment Classifications and Security Scores for Study Children

Categorical Classification	Attachment to Mother		Attachment to Father	
	Percent of Children	<i>M</i> Security score	Percent of Children	<i>M</i> Security score
Secure/B	49%	6.2	46%	6.4
Defended/A	21%	3.8	34%	3.3
Coercive/C	21%	2.7	14%	2.9
Combined/AC/Other	9%	2.0	6%	2.3

Table 2
Descriptives for Parents' Conflict Behaviors, Romantic Attachment, and Child Security

	Conflict Behavior		Romantic Attachment			Child Security
	Psychological Aggression	Positive Engagement	Withdraw	Anxiety	Close	
Dyadic <i>M (SD)</i>	.04 (.05)	.14 (.07)	.01 (.03)			
Mother <i>M (SD)</i>				12.1 (3.5)	21.4 (3.4)	4.8 (2.0)
Father <i>M (SD)</i>				11.4 (3.2)	22.4 (3.6)	4.7 (2.1)

Note. Conflict behaviors are duration proportions (time spent exhibiting behavior/total interaction time) for three FPPC conflict codes; romantic attachment scores are AAS subscales; child security is the continuous score from the PAA Strange Situation coding.

Table 3

Correlations among Parents' Conflict Behaviors, Romantic Attachment, and Child Security (mothers' attachment above the diagonal, fathers' attachment below the diagonal, mother-father correlations on the diagonal)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Dyadic Psych. Aggression	--			-.08	-.18	.03	-.04
2. Dyadic Positive Engagement	-.31**	--		-.06	.19	-.08	-.14
3. Dyadic Withdrawal	.23*	-.23*	--	-.14	-.09	.05	-.01
4. Parent Depend	-.06	.11	-.02	.26*	.49**	-.48**	.15
5. Parent Close	.08	-.07	.02	.55**	.19	-.39**	.00
6. Parent Anxiety	-.19	.22†	-.10	-.41**	-.39**	.14	-.18
7. Child Security	-.23*	-.06	.06	.08	.12	.08	.26*

Note.

†

$p < .10$.

*

$p < .05$.

**

$p < .01$.

Table 4
Parents' Psychological Aggression Predicting Child Attachment Security

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Security with Mother		
Intercept	4.84 ^{**}	0.28
Dyadic Psychological Aggression	-2.38	4.09
Security with Father		
Intercept	4.66 ^{**}	0.23
Father Age	0.26 [*]	0.11
Dyadic Psychological Aggression	-6.34 [*]	3.14

Note.

When father age is not included, the coefficient for dyadic psychological aggression predicting Security with father is -9.94 (*SE* 3.85), $p = .012$.

*
 $p < .05$

**
 $p < .01$.

Table 5
 Parents' Positive Engagement $\times$ Romantic Attachment Predicting Child Attachment Security

Variable	Parent Depend		Parent Anxiety	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Security with Mother				
Intercept	4.86 **	0.26	4.84 **	0.26
Dyadic Positive Engagement	-4.12	4.12	-4.71	3.77
Mother's Attachment	0.10	0.05	-0.16	0.09
Mother's Attach $\times$ Positive Engagement	0.36	1.04	-0.24	1.73
Security with Father				
Intercept	4.59 **	0.24	4.75 **	0.25
Father Age	0.30 **	0.09	0.33 **	0.10
Dyadic Positive Engagement	-2.08	2.76	-1.92	3.30
Father's Attachment	0.06	0.06	0.01	0.07
Father's Attach $\times$ Positive Engagement	2.01 *	0.76	-2.25 *	0.86

Note.

*
 $p < .05$

**
 $p < .01$.

Table 6
 Parents' Withdrawal $\times$ Romantic Attachment Predicting Child Attachment Security

Variable	Parent Depend		Parent Close	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Security with Mother				
Intercept	4.73**	0.26	4.76**	0.26
Dyadic Withdrawal	-11.40	8.86	-11.59*	5.17
Mother's Attachment	0.09	0.05	0.08	0.06
Mother's Attach $\times$ Withdrawal	-4.28**	1.22	-5.96**	0.98
Security with Father				
Intercept	4.65**	0.24	4.62**	0.24
Father Age	0.28**	0.10	0.30**	0.10
Dyadic Withdrawal	3.62	4.98	2.93	5.05
Father's Attachment	-0.003	0.06	0.09	0.06
Father's Attach $\times$ Withdrawal	-7.22**	2.65	0.03	1.36

Note.

*
 $p < .05$

**
 $p < .01$.