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Spillover between interparental conflict and parent-child conflict within and across days

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Abstract

The present study used a daily reporting design to examine the bidirectional spillover in conflict and conflict strategies between the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship. Participants were 60 parents with a preadolescent child at-risk for aggressive behavior. Parents reported on their experience of interparental and parent-child conflict and their use of constructive and destructive conflict strategies through daily telephone interviews over seven days. Each day was divided into three equal time periods roughly corresponding to early morning, daytime, and evening. Time-lagged analyses investigated the spillover in conflict within and across days. Results revealed that the presence of interparental conflict significantly predicted the presence of parent-child conflict one time period later and one full day later. Likewise, the presence of parent-child conflict significantly predicted the presence of interparental conflict one full day later. In terms of conflict strategy use, results revealed that parents who engaged in constructive patterns of interparental conflict were more likely to engage in constructive patterns of parent-child conflict one time period later and one full day later. Reciprocal effects for constructive parent-child conflict predicting subsequent interparental conflict were significant across all three time lags assessed. There were no significant, bidirectional effects for the spillover in destructive conflict. Findings have important clinical implications.

Keywords

Interparental conflict; parent-child conflict; spillover hypothesis; conflict strategies; daily reporting design

Research has consistently highlighted the link between the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship. Although multiple explanations have been proposed to account for this link, the “spillover hypothesis” has garnered the most research support (e.g., Erel &

Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). In this theory, “spillover” refers to the transmission of mood, affect, and behavior from one setting to another (Repetti, 1987). The spillover hypothesis proposes that negativity aroused in one family sub-system is likely to bleed over into other family sub-systems (Engfer, 1988). Understanding the bidirectional spillover in conflict between the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship is essential given the documented impact of these processes on children’s emotional and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Buehler, Benson, & Gerard, 2006; Cui & Conger, 2008; Erath, Bierman, & the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2006).

Most prior research investigating the link between the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship has used cross-sectional or longitudinal designs with each time point separated by one or more years (e.g., Lansford, Staples, Bates, Pettit, & Dodge, 2013; Stover et al., 2016). These designs have frequently relied on participants to recall the frequency of interparental and parenting behaviors over the prior year. In addition to introducing problems associated with retrospective recall, cross-sectional designs fail to tell us about the temporal ordering of behaviors. Although traditional longitudinal designs with time points separated by one or more years can provide some insight into time-ordered links, these designs tend to mask the dynamic, moment-to-moment nature of real-life family interactions. Capturing these dynamic processes and understanding the temporal ordering of behaviors is essential, given that the spillover hypothesis implies a specific causal relationship between aspects of interparental functioning and aspects of parent-child functioning. Although laboratory studies that incorporate interaction tasks have made progress in addressing this limitation (Kitzmann, 2000), laboratory studies have lacked the ecological validity of daily reporting designs that can capture naturally occurring conflict in the home environment.

A small number of studies have used daily reporting designs to investigate unidirectional (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2009) and bidirectional effects between the marital or interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship (Almeida, Wethington, & Chandler, 1999; Kouros, Papp, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2014; Margolin, Christensen, & John, 1996; Sears, Repetti, Reynolds, Robles, & Krull, 2016). With one exception (Margolin et al., 1996), these studies have collected data at one time point each day to reflect aggregate experiences on that day. These studies have then used the aggregate data to predict same-day associations (cross-sectionally) or next-day associations. In terms of same-day associations, Sears et al. (2016) found that individuals who experienced marital conflict events on a particular day were more likely to display frictional parenting behavior towards their child (e.g., nagging, yelling) that same day. Findings were bidirectional. In other words, individuals who experienced parent-child conflict on a particular day were also more likely to display frictional marital behaviors that same day (Sears et al., 2016). Kouros et al. (2014) found a similar positive association between individuals’ daily report of their marital quality and their report of their parent-child relationship quality that same day. Moreover, Chung et al. (2009) found that daily parent-adolescent conflict mediated the relation between interparental conflict and adolescent emotional distress experienced on that same day. These studies all used daily reporting designs to demonstrate same-day, positive associations between the marital or interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship.

When next-day associations have been examined using daily reporting designs, findings have been more mixed. Almeida et al. (1999) found that parents who reported tension with a spouse were more likely to report tension with their adolescent child (mean age = 14) the next day, supporting the spillover hypothesis. Reciprocal effects from the parent-child relationship to the marital relationship were present but only for fathers (Almeida et al., 1999). When Kouros et al. (2014) investigated next-day associations in a sample of preadolescent children (mean age = 13), they found that mothers who reported lower levels of marital quality on one day actually reported higher levels of mother-child relationship quality the next day, and they found no evidence for reciprocal effects. The former finding contradicted the spillover hypothesis and instead provided support for the compensatory hypothesis. The compensatory hypothesis proposes that parents may compensate for problems in the marriage by building up their relationship with their child. One aim of the present study was to clarify these mixed findings.

A second aim of the present study was to extend the daily diary literature by exploring the bidirectional associations between the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship at multiple time points within days and across multiple days – not just contemporaneously or from one full day to the next as has been done in the past. Measuring variables at multiple time points within each day (1) highlights sequential effects in a way that contemporaneous measurement of variables cannot and (2) uncovers decay effects that are lost in studies that aggregate variables across one full day. As researchers have aptly pointed out, one full day may be too long a time frame to capture these dynamic family processes (Kouros et al., 2014). Only one prior daily diary study has explored the association between the marital or interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship at multiple time points within days and across multiple days (Margolin et al., 1996). This study divided the day into three time periods and found that the experience of marital tension increased the likelihood of parent-child tension across three time lags. This spillover effect was only observed in distressed families characterized by marital and child behavior problems (Margolin et al., 1996). This study served as a methodological guide and as a springboard for the current study's third aim.

The third aim of the present study was to extend the work of Margolin et al. (1996) by (1) using concrete, behaviorally anchored definitions of conflict and (2) by examining the spillover in multiple dimensions of conflict. Most prior research in this area has defined conflict in general ways. Studies, for example, have explored the spillover in “tensions,” “arguments,” “disagreements,” and/or “disciplinary problem[s]” broadly-defined, without inquiring about how those tensions, arguments, disagreements, and disciplinary problems were experienced or expressed (Almeida et al., 1999; Chung et al., 2009; Margolin et al., 1996). Other daily diary studies have looked at daily variations in the “emotional quality” of the marital and parent-child relationships (Kouros et al., 2014). It has been rare for daily diary researchers to operationalize the interparental and parenting variables in a concrete, behavioral way.

The present study took a finer-grained look at the nature of spillover by decomposing conflict behavior into constructive and destructive strategies. Understanding conflict in terms of these two dimensions has received much empirical support (e.g., Cummings, Goeke-

Morey, & Papp, 2003; Rinaldi & Howe, 2003). Destructive conflict strategies have included negative verbal interactions, physical aggression, non-verbal expressions of anger or distress, and avoidance/withdrawal. Constructive conflict strategies have included calm reasoning and warmth. These six strategies reflect the forms of conflict that have been assessed in past measures of daily marital conflict (Cummings et al., 2003) and map onto the conflict behaviors reflected in leading family conflict measures, such as the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979). Although distinguishing between constructive and destructive conflict has been an important distinction made in the research literature, daily diary researchers have tended to investigate only the spillover in destructive conflict or conflict broadly-defined. It is important to distinguish between constructive and destructive conflict and understand their unique patterns of spillover, because research has indicated that some types of conflict have stronger, negative effects on children than others (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004; Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Prior studies have shown links among interparental conflict, parenting, and multiple negative child outcomes, including aggression (e.g., Erath et al., 2006). This research suggests that the families of children at-risk for aggression will have more interparental conflict and parent-child conflict compared to the families of typical children. We therefore decided to test our hypotheses in a sample of children at-risk for aggression where conflict is more common, making it easier to detect relations among interparental and parent-child conflict. An at-risk sample was also of particular interest because it makes it easier for our findings to inform the tailoring of preventive interventions.

In the present study, we explored two primary hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that families would show a bidirectional spillover in conflict between the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship across three distinct time lags. To investigate these spillover processes, each day was divided into three equal time periods roughly corresponding to early morning, daytime, and evening. We selected these three time periods to roughly correspond to naturally occurring segments of the day, consistent with prior work in this area (Margolin et al., 1996). Second, we hypothesized that individuals would show a bidirectional spillover in constructive and destructive conflict behavior between the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship across three distinct time lags. Prior research using questionnaire data has provided some support for this hypothesis. Past research using the Conflict Tactics Scales, for example, found that parents reported using similar strategies in both the marital and parent-child relationship (Rinaldi & Howe, 2003). Parents' use of constructive marital conflict strategies was positively correlated with their use of reasoning in the parent-child relationship. Likewise, parents' use of verbal aggression and avoidance strategies in the marital relationship was positively correlated with their use of these same strategies in the parent-child relationship (Rinaldi & Howe, 2003). Although this prior research suggests that individuals may demonstrate similar patterns of conflict behavior in the interparental and parent-child relationships when measured concurrently, the present study is the first to our knowledge that examined this question using longitudinal data with a daily reporting design. Secondary analyses explored the effects of constructive conflict on destructive conflict (and vice versa) between the interparental and parent-child relationship.

Method

Participants

Participants in the present study were 60 parents who had lived with their spouse or cohabitating partner for at least six months and had a child between the ages of 10 and 14. Participants in the present study were the parent in the household who spent the most time with the target child, consistent with the inclusion criteria for similar studies (e.g., Margolin et al., 1996). Participants were recruited from a sample of 254 families who had participated in one of two prior research studies testing the efficacy of a preventive intervention for children at-risk for aggression. Of these 254 potential participants, 57 people were ineligible for the present study because they had no partner living in the home, they were not the primary caretaker for the child, and/or they lived out-of-state. 19 people declined participation. 99 people were not reachable. 18 people were scheduled for an appointment but either cancelled or no-showed. One person completed the baseline visit but was ultimately excluded from this study because she was lost to follow-up.

Descriptive statistics about this sample are summarized in Table 1. The sample was primarily comprised of biological mothers (75%). The sample was 73.3% African American/Black and 26.7% Caucasian/White – Non Hispanic. The median age was 35 (range: 29 to 71). 45 participants were married and 15 were cohabiting. The target children in the present study were predominantly male (70%) and non-white (72.9% African-American/Black, 5.1% bi-racial). They were on average 12.4 years of age (SD: 0.80). Children were 5th (16.7%), 6th (55%), and 7th (28.3%) graders. These children were the target children for whom participants in the present study reported on parent-child conflict. These children were all considered at-risk for aggressive behavior on the basis of teacher-reports on a screening measure, placing them in the top 25% of students screened for aggression.

Procedure

The procedure was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, and consent was obtained from the adult participants in the study. The procedure had two phases. In phase one, participants completed a baseline visit lasting approximately 50 minutes during which participants reviewed the consent form, completed a contact sheet and demographic questionnaire, and received instruction on the daily telephone interview. Participants received a packet of daily telephone interviews that began with a question-and-answer page highlighting general instructions, defining what types of interparental and parent-child interactions to report, and specifying the time frames for the three reporting periods (i.e., early morning, daytime, and evening) for each day in the weeklong data collection period. Participants then completed the interview for the first time. This yielded the first day of interview data. The first question in the baseline interview queried participants about the prior evening (5:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m.). The second question in the baseline interview queried participants about the early morning period that day (1:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.). The third question in the baseline interview queried participants about the daytime hours that day (9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.). If the time of the baseline interview and subsequent telephone

interviews occurred in the middle of a time frame, the interviewer queried about that time frame the next day.

In phase two, participants reported on their daily interparental and parent-child conflicts through five-minute telephone interviews that occurred at approximately the same time once each day for the six consecutive days following their baseline visit and interview. This resulted in seven days (i.e., 21 time points) of data. We encouraged participants to provide a specific window of time in the evenings when they were willing to complete the telephone interview each day. Ultimately, however, we offered significant flexibility in interview times in order to ensure maximum participation. If participants were not available when we called, they were re-contacted one additional time later that day. If they were still not available, we left them a phone message asking them to record their responses on their personal copy of the telephone interview. Participants were asked to provide these responses when we called the next day. If data were not collected within one day of the targeted day, the data were considered missing. A missing data analysis revealed that all 60 participants had at least 9 time points of data (i.e., 3 days), with 90% of the sample having 18 or more time points of data (i.e., 6 of 7 days). Missing interview data occurred with 13 of 60 participants. Across all 60 participants and time points, there was only 5.1% missing data on both interparental and parent-child conflict. Approximately 88% of the complete interview data were collected on the targeted day, and approximately 12% of the complete interview data were collected one day late.

Measures

Daily telephone interview—We developed the daily telephone interview to capture the presence/absence of interparental and parent-child conflict and the presence/absence of six general conflict strategies during three distinct time periods of the day. These three time periods spanned 1:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and 5:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to these three time periods as early morning, daytime, and evening in the present study.

The interview began with a description of the types of interparental and parent-child conflicts that participants should report. This description was derived essentially verbatim from the Marital Daily Record (MDR) developed by Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, and Dukewich (2002) and was designed to capture a wide range of interparental and parent-child conflicts. Consistent with the description of conflict developed by Cummings et al. (2002), participants were instructed to report any interparental and parent-child interactions in which (1) give and take was required to reach an agreement/solution (even if an agreement was not reached), or (2) they had different points of view, or (3) someone felt emotional tension, frustration, or anger, or (4) any mix of the above. Consistent with Cummings et al. (2002), participants were told that these interactions could be positive or negative, involve simple misunderstandings or small differences of opinion, seem major or minor, and occur at home, while driving, out, or on the telephone together. Although the full description was stated several times throughout the baseline visit, the description was shortened slightly for the actual telephone interviews.

The first question in the interview was whether participants had contact with their partner or child (i.e., saw him/her, talked on the phone, or slept in the same house) during the three distinct time periods of the prior 24-hour time period. For time periods in which participants reported contact, they were asked whether they experienced conflict. The presence or absence of interparental and/or parent-child conflict during those time periods was recorded. If conflict occurred, participants were asked whether they used any of six specific conflict strategies: (1) negative verbal interactions (e.g., nagging, insulting), (2) physical aggression (e.g., towards a person or object), (3) warmth (e.g., using humor, showing physical or verbal affection), (4) calm reasoning (e.g., discussing, problem-solving), (5) withdrawal/avoidance (e.g., leaving the room, giving silent treatment), and (6) expressions of anger and distress without words (e.g., rolling eyes, using cold stares). Examples of each of these strategies were named. Participants reported all of the conflict strategies they used during the blocks of time for which they had contact with their partner and/or child. The presence or absence of specific conflict strategies was recorded. All questions in the daily telephone interview could be answered with *yes* or *no*.

Data Reduction

Dummy codes were created to reflect the presence or absence of constructive and destructive conflict in the interparental and parent-child relationship. For each time period in which individuals had contact with their partner or child, dummy codes were generated to reflect (1) the presence or absence of destructive conflict during that time period and (2) the presence or absence of constructive conflict during that time period. Destructive conflict was coded as present during a time point if participants engaged in negative verbal interactions, physical aggression, withdrawal/avoidance, and/or expressions of anger or distress without words during a given time point. Destructive conflict was coded as absent if participants (1) experienced no conflict at all or (2) used no destructive conflict strategies during a given time point. Likewise, constructive conflict was coded as present during a time point if participants used warmth and/or calm reasoning during a given time point. Constructive conflict was coded as absent if participants (1) experienced no conflict at all or (2) used no constructive conflict strategies during a given time point.

Codes for constructive and destructive conflict were not mutually exclusive. In other words, participants could have engaged in both types of conflict during a given time point. Separate dummy codes were created for conflict that occurred in the context of the interparental relationship and for conflict that occurred in the context of the parent-child relationship. These conflict dummy codes were used in all Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) analyses involving conflict strategy use.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Data were examined to determine the frequency of interparental and parent-child conflict, the frequency of constructive and destructive conflict strategies, and variations in the frequency of conflict by day and time.

Frequency of interparental and parent-child conflict—On average, participants reported that they experienced interparental conflict during 17.02% of the time periods during which there had been interparental contact ($SD = 17.43\%$; Range = 0% to 69%). On average, participants reported that they experienced parent-child conflict during 23.6% of the time periods during which there had been parent-child contact ($SD = 16.53\%$; Range = 0% to 74%).

Frequency of constructive and destructive conflict strategies—When there was interparental conflict, the average participant used constructive strategies 81.19% of the time ($SD = 30.06\%$; Range = 0% to 100%) and destructive strategies 57.21% of the time ($SD = 38.14\%$; Range = 0% to 100%). The average participant used *both* constructive and destructive interparental conflict strategies 38.4% of the time ($SD = 39.59\%$; Range = 0% to 100%). When there was parent-child conflict, the average participant used constructive strategies 92.11% of the time ($SD = 20.61\%$; Range = 0% to 100%) and destructive strategies 41.8% of the time ($SD = 37.99\%$; Range = 0% to 100%). The average participant used *both* constructive and destructive parent-child conflict strategies 33.9% of the time ($SD = 32.77\%$; Range = 0% to 100%). A paired-samples t-test revealed that participants used constructive strategies more frequently than destructive strategies during interparental ($p = .005$) and parent-child ($p < .001$) conflict.

Variations in the frequency of conflict by day.¹—Multivariate tests revealed a significant relation between the day interparental conflict was reported and the frequency of interparental conflict reported, Wilks' Lambda = 0.70, $F[6, 42] = 3.03$, $p = .015$. Post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons revealed that the frequency of reported interparental conflict was significantly greater on day one than all other days ($p < .05$), except day five ($p = .101$). There were no other significant differences among any other days during the reporting period. Multivariate tests also revealed a significant relation between the day parent-child conflict was reported and the frequency of parent-child conflict, Wilks' Lambda = 0.57, $F[6, 43] = 5.33$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons revealed that the frequency of reported parent-child conflict was significantly greater on day one and day two than on day five ($p < .001$). There were no other significant differences among any other days during the reporting period.

Variations in the frequency of conflict by time.²—Data were also examined to test whether the frequency of interparental and parent-child conflict differed by time (i.e., 1:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., 5:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m.). There was no significant relation between the time point at which interparental conflict was reported and the frequency of reported interparental conflict, Wilks' Lambda = 0.94, $F[2, 58] = 1.76$, $p = .18$. There was also no significant relation between the time point at which parent-child conflict

¹Multivariate tests revealed no significant variations in the frequency of interparental and parent-child contact by day.

²Multivariate tests revealed a significant relation between the time point and the frequency of interparental contact, Wilks' Lambda = 0.88, $F[2, 58] = 3.85$, $p = .027$, and the frequency of parent-child contact, Wilks' Lambda = 0.83, $F[2, 58] = 6.12$, $p = .004$. Post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons revealed that the frequency of reported interparental and parent-child contact was significantly greater during the early morning time frame than during the evening time frame ($p = .042$ and $p = .014$, respectively). Note that primary analyses were run only on time periods during which there had been contact.

was reported and the frequency of reported parent-child conflict, Wilks' Lambda = 0.91, $F(2, 57) = 2.79, p = .07$.

Hypotheses Tests

Hypothesis 1. GEE analyses were used to test the hypothesis that parents would show a bidirectional spillover in conflict between the interparental and the parent-child relationship across three time lags—In order to test this hypothesis, the presence or absence of interparental conflict at earlier time periods was the independent variable and the presence or absence of parent-child conflict at later time periods was the dependent variable. The reciprocal effect was also tested. Analyses were run only on time periods during which there had been contact and therefore the opportunity for conflict during that time period. Lag one reflected the prediction of early morning to daytime, daytime to evening, and evening to the next early morning. Lag two reflected the prediction of early morning to evening, daytime to the next early morning, and evening to the next daytime. Lag three reflected the prediction of early morning to the next early morning, daytime to the next daytime, and evening to the next evening. In other words, lag three represented the prediction of outcomes one full day later.

Results revealed that the presence of interparental conflict significantly predicted the presence of parent-child conflict one time period later and one full day later, but not two time periods later. Odds ratios [Exp(B)] indicated that the odds that a family would experience parent-child conflict during a time period were 2.26 times larger when there had been interparental conflict during the prior time period. In addition, the odds that a family would experience parent-child conflict during a time period were 1.998 times larger when there had been interparental conflict one full day earlier. The presence of interparental conflict two time periods prior did not appear to significantly influence the odds of having parent-child conflict during the current time period. All findings controlled for prior parent-child conflict and other covariates noted in Table 2.

Reciprocal effects were also explored. Results revealed that the presence of parent-child conflict significantly predicted the presence of interparental conflict one full day later. Odds ratios [(Exp(B)] indicated that the odds that a family would experience interparental conflict during a time period were 1.82 times larger when there had been parent-child conflict one full day earlier. The presence of parent-child conflict one time period prior and two time periods prior did not appear to significantly influence the odds of having interparental conflict during the current time period. Findings controlled for prior interparental conflict and other covariates as noted in Table 2.

Hypothesis 2. GEE analyses were also used to test the hypothesis that parents would show a bidirectional spillover in constructive and destructive conflict between the interparental and the parent-child relationship across three time lags—In order to test this hypothesis, the presence or absence of destructive interparental conflict at earlier time periods was the independent variable and the presence or absence of destructive parent-child conflict at later time periods was the dependent variable. This model was also tested with constructive interparental conflict as the

independent variable and constructive parent-child conflict as the dependent variable. Reciprocal effects were also tested. All models were tested across the three time lags outlined previously.

Results revealed that the presence of constructive interparental conflict significantly predicted the presence of constructive parent-child conflict one time period later and one full day later, but not two time periods later (Table 3). Odds ratios [Exp(B)] indicated that the odds that a family would experience constructive parent-child conflict during a time period were 2.63 times larger when there had been constructive interparental conflict during the prior time period. In addition, the odds that a family would experience constructive parent-child conflict during a time period were 2.15 times larger when there had been constructive interparental conflict one full day earlier. The presence of constructive interparental conflict two time periods prior did not appear to significantly influence the odds of having parent-child conflict during the current time period. Moreover, the presence of destructive interparental conflict did not appear to significantly influence the odds of having destructive parent-child conflict at any of the three time lags assessed.

Reciprocal effects were also explored. Results revealed that the presence of constructive parent-child conflict significantly predicted the presence of constructive interparental conflict one time period later, two time periods later, and one full day later (Table 3). Odds ratios [(Exp(B))] indicated that the odds that a family would experience constructive interparental conflict during a time period were 1.65 times larger when there had been constructive parent-child conflict one time period earlier, 1.68 times larger when there had been constructive parent-child conflict two time periods earlier, and 2.41 times larger when there had been constructive parent-child conflict one full day earlier. The presence of destructive parent-child conflict did not appear to significantly influence the odds of having destructive interparental conflict at any of the three time lags assessed.

Secondary Analyses

GEE analyses were used to explore the effects of constructive conflict on destructive conflict (and vice versa) between the interparental and parent-child relationship. We examined constructive interparental conflict predicting destructive parent-child conflict, destructive interparental conflict predicting constructive parent-child conflict, constructive parent-child conflict predicting destructive interparental conflict, and destructive parent-child conflict predicting constructive interparental conflict. We examined these predictions across all three time lags. Findings were not significant.

Discussion

The present study explored the bidirectional spillover in conflict between the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship using a daily reporting design that assessed for conflict at multiple time points within and across days. The present study extends past research by highlighting important sequential and decay effects lost in most prior daily diary research and by using concrete, behaviorally anchored definitions of conflict. The present study is also the first to examine the spillover in multiple dimensions of conflict using a daily reporting design.

The most important finding in the present study is that parents show a spillover in conflict from the interparental relationship to the parent-child relationship across one time period and across one full day, but not across two time periods. One implication of this finding is that parents are especially vulnerable to conflict with their children during the period of time immediately following interparental conflict. Perhaps after parents engage in interparental conflict, they are primed to notice subsequent points of conflict with their children, have less patience for minor disagreements with children, have less tolerance for child non-compliance and minor misbehavior, and feel more emotionally and mentally taxed. Although these data do not reveal the reason for the link between interparental conflict and subsequent parent-child conflict, they do suggest that this link is particularly strong at consecutive time periods but dissipates over two time periods. This finding highlights a decay effect whereby the initial carryover of conflict dissipates over time. As Margolin et al. (1996) point out, perhaps this decay effect suggests that over time, parents resign themselves to conflict or simply lose interest in the conflict. Although conflict appears to decay over time, present findings indicate that conflict is re-activated at the same time period one full day later.

Findings indicate that interparental conflict during a given time period significantly predicts parent-child conflict one full day later, and vice versa. There are several possible explanations for this re-activation effect. First, it is possible that some environmental cue or stressor characterizes a certain time of day and routinely stimulates conflict for families (Margolin et al., 1996). This finding certainly converges with anecdotal reports from parents, who bemoan dreaded morning routines characterized by consistent battles with children over getting out of bed and hectic evening hours characterized by marital negotiations about who takes the trash out and how the credit card bill gets paid. Second, time-bound effects may be attributable to individual differences in families' schedules. Perhaps certain family members are only together at certain times of the day. Third, perhaps parents routinely spend more time with each other and with their children at certain times of the day and therefore have more opportunity for conflict during those time frames than others. Notably, the frequency of interparental and parent-child conflict did not vary by time of day in the present study, so it appears that parents vary in the times of day that are routinely problematic for them.

It is noteworthy that the frequency of interparental conflict was significantly greater on day one than all other days and that the frequency of parent-child conflict was significantly greater on day one and day two than on day five. It is likely that these findings reflect methodological influences. Conflict data were collected in-person on day one and over the phone on all other days in the reporting period. The in-person data collection on day one allowed for maximum opportunities to clarify definitions of conflict, answer participants' questions, and probe for all relevant conflict interactions. This may explain the higher rates of interparental and parent-child conflict on day one and the carryover effects for parent-child conflict on day two. Although it is possible that findings reflect unintended intervention and monitoring effects, Laurenceau and Bolger (2005) cite preliminary research indicating that pre- to post- ratings of relationship functioning did not significantly change for three independent samples participating in a daily reporting study. Future research might investigate these issues further.

There are conflicting findings regarding the spillover in constructive versus destructive conflict. Findings indicate that parents who engage in constructive patterns of conflict with a partner during a given time period will be more likely to engage in constructive patterns of conflict with a child one time period later and one full day later. This effect is bidirectional. Parents who engage in constructive patterns of conflict with a child during a time given time period will be more likely to engage in constructive patterns of conflict with a partner one time period later, two time periods later, and one full day later. In contrast, there was no support for unidirectional or bidirectional spillover in destructive conflict between the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship across any of the three time periods assessed. There are several possible reasons for these conflicting findings. First, it is possible that parents who use constructive strategies for handling conflict are positively reinforced for the use of these behaviors – either through the resolution of conflict or positive feedback from their partners and children. This theory fits with behavioral theory and prior research in the couples realm suggesting that altering the conflict strategies that one uses in a dating relationship elicits strong, reciprocal counter-effects in the partner (Lochman & Allen, 1979). Second, conflicting findings may relate to the types of strategies comprising each of these higher-order categories. More specifically, past meta-analytic work suggests that spillover effects are strongest for overt conflict rather than covert conflict (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). In the present study, constructive conflict was comprised of many overt constructive behaviors that occurred frequently in this sample (e.g., calm reasoning, problem solving, showing physical affection). In contrast, destructive conflict was comprised of relatively infrequent overt destructive behaviors (e.g., physical aggression) and relatively more frequent covert destructive behaviors (e.g., rolling eyes, using cold stares, withdrawal, avoidance). Consequently, perhaps the differential findings are a function of the overt versus covert quality of conflict strategy use. Third, conflicting findings may reflect the different frequencies with which participants in our study used constructive versus destructive strategies. Participants used constructive strategies significantly more frequently than destructive strategies in both the interparental and the parent-child relationship. Past research suggests that high frequency behaviors may reflect habits that are more likely to be repeated in the future (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). This may explain the stronger carryover effects for constructive strategy use.

It is noteworthy that constructive conflict did not predict destructive conflict (and vice versa) across the interparental and parent-child relationship. We believe that this finding lends discriminant validity to our separation of constructive and destructive strategies. This also appears to undermine the compensatory hypothesis, which is the primary competing hypothesis to the spillover hypothesis and posits that individuals may compensate for problems in one family relationship by building up another family relationship. The compensatory hypothesis would have predicted that destructive conflict in one family relationship would have been associated with constructive conflict in another family relationship. Ultimately, present findings on strategy use provide additional support for the spillover hypothesis.

The finding that interparental conflict and parent-child conflict are causally and reciprocally linked in a sample of children at-risk for aggression has important clinical implications. This finding suggests that clinicians who engage parents in traditional parent training and

behavior management programs focused on child behavior and the parent-child relationship but who are not attuned to assessing and treating interparental conflict will be seriously limited in their ability to create meaningful change in families. Indeed, past research has demonstrated that maritally discordant parents who received child management training alone showed poorer treatment outcomes at 6-month follow-up than maritally discordant parents who received parenting training plus a brief marital intervention (Dadds et al., 1987). In recent decades, traditional parent training and behavioral management programs have expanded to include marital or interparental components (e.g., Dadds et al., 1987; Sanders, 1999; Webster-Stratton, 1994). In light of present findings, clinicians who focus on challenges in the parent-child relationship should also assess for the presence of interparental conflict and seriously consider one of these augmentative programs in the likely event that there are problems in both family sub-systems. Likewise, present findings documenting the reciprocal impact of parent-child conflict on the interparental relationship suggest that parent-child conflict may be a critically important point of emphasis when working with couples in distress. Clinicians who deliver traditional marital therapy may need to expand their focus to include work on the parent-child relationship. Indeed, parent training has emerged as an effective augment to behavioral couples therapy in some pilot research with high-risk families (Lam, Fals-Stewart, & Kelley, 2009).

Present findings are helpful for clarifying targets for intervention. One target may be to increase parents' use of constructive strategies in handling family conflict. Existing marital interventions have found that psycho-education has more consistent and prolonged effects on constructive conflict strategy use than on destructive conflict strategy use (Cummings et al., 2008; Faircloth, Schermerhorn, Mitchell, Cummings, & Cummings, 2011). Results of the present study suggest that parents who use constructive strategies during interparental conflict will be more likely to use constructive strategies during subsequent parent-child conflict, and vice versa. Moreover, recent research suggests that acceptance-based marital interventions can bring about increased feelings of acceptance in couples and also have carryover effects on their positive parenting practices (Morrill, Hawrilenko, & Córdova, 2016). Taken together, this research suggests that intervention components focused on enhancing parents' use of constructive strategies in family conflict may be especially beneficial. Interventions should specifically focus on nurturing parents' use of humor, affection, calm reasoning, discussion, and problem-solving during instances of interparental and parent-child conflict. Parents would likely benefit from some education in basic problem-solving techniques and in-vivo coaching in the use of those techniques. In-vivo coaching would also allow therapists to help parents coordinate the use of warmth (humor, support, affection) with active problem-solving to achieve positive outcomes. Although present findings do not translate as easily into recommendations about destructive conflict, it is important to acknowledge the clear clinical importance of assessing for the presence of physically aggressive forms of destructive conflict and working to minimize their use.

Present findings are also helpful for clarifying targets for intervention related to the timing of family conflict. The finding that interparental conflict significantly predicts parent-child conflict one time period later suggests that interventionists should educate parents about the ways in which stress and conflict in the interparental relationship can heighten their sensitivity to and/or experience of conflict with their children in the subsequent time period.

Perhaps if parents are more aware of their vulnerability to parent-child conflict immediately following interparental conflict, they will be more likely to take steps to de-escalate situations before conflict with their children occurs. The finding that interparental conflict significantly predicts parent-child conflict one full day later (and vice versa) suggests that interventionists should sensitize parents to the ways in which family conflict may follow daily, ritualized patterns, to help them identify environmental stressors or cues that might trigger conflict (e.g., certain daily routines), and to strategize with them about how to mitigate these factors.

Limitations of the present study provide a springboard for future research. First, present findings may reflect some degree of single source bias. Future daily reporting studies should incorporate partner- and child-reports of conflict or augment self-reports with laboratory-based measures, in order to minimize the potential impact of single source bias and social desirability issues on study findings. Second, the stability and generalizability of our findings are likely somewhat limited by the small size of our sample and its specific demographic make-up (e.g., predominately non-white, children at-risk for aggression, uneven mix of cohabiting and married partners). Replicating this work with a larger, broader sample would help to address these issues and allow for some interesting comparisons between sub-groups (e.g., spillover in cohabiting versus married couples). Moreover, research is clear that spillover processes are associated with multiple negative outcomes in children – not just aggression. As such, an important future direction might be for researchers to investigate these spillover processes in samples of children at-risk for other negative outcomes (e.g., internalizing problems) using daily reporting designs. Third, we measured “contact” within each of our three time frames as a dichotomous variable, and we are therefore unable to draw conclusions about ways in which the *degree* of contact (i.e., in terms of minutes, hours) might influence conflict frequency and conflict spillover. There are probably some interesting differences, for example, between a person who spends one hour directly interacting with a partner and child each morning versus a person who spends three. Moreover, we coded “contact” characterized by sleeping in the same house as a partner and/or child the same as “contact” characterized by more substantive forms (e.g., seeing him/her, talking on the phone). We are therefore unable to draw conclusions about the degree to which *type* of contact influenced conflict frequency and conflict spillover. Fourth, our decision to dichotomize the conflict strategies into two broad categories (i.e., constructive and destructive) may have masked some important findings. There are likely some differences, for example, between a person who uses multiple destructive conflict strategies during an interaction and a person who uses only one. Moreover, some destructive conflict strategies (e.g., physical aggression) likely have greater negative impact than others (e.g., leaving the room). Ultimately, we dichotomized this variable due to the low rates of some of the more specific conflict strategies. Future research with a larger sample and a longer data collection period may begin to examine some of these differences. Future daily reporting studies might also examine potential moderators of the spillover between interparental conflict and parent-child conflict, with an eye towards identifying additional targets for intervention. For example, some researchers have investigated the degree to which depressive symptoms may moderate this association (Kouros et al., 2014), and the field is ripe for additional work in this area. Research that uses daily reporting methods with

multiple time points within and across days may be best suited for studying these dynamic family processes.

Summary

The present study's daily reporting design, with measurement of variables at multiple time periods within and across days, offers significant contributions to the existing literature. The present daily reporting design captures the natural, spontaneous, day-by-day nature of family conflict that is often lost when using standard questionnaire or laboratory-based methods. Moreover, collecting data based on individuals' daily experiences in their home and community settings allows us to more confidently generalize study findings to real-world settings. The present daily reporting design also addresses problems of retrospective recall introduced by prior longitudinal studies, highlights important sequential effects, and reveals decay effects lost in most prior daily reporting studies. The present study uses concrete, behaviorally anchored definitions of conflict and is the first to examine the bidirectional spillover in constructive and destructive conflict between the interparental and parent-child relationship using a daily reporting design. Findings have important clinical implications.

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Table 1

Characteristics of the Sample (N = 60)

Variable	Count (%)
Gender	
Female	54 (90%)
Male	6 (10%)
Race	
African American/Black	44 (73.3%)
Caucasian/White – Non-Hispanic	16 (26.7%)
Marital and Living Status	
Married and living with spouse	45 (75%)
Single and living with partner	15 (25%)
Education	
Some high school (10 th or 11 th grade)	7 (11.7%)
High school graduate/GED	12 (20%)
Some college (at least 1 year or technical training)	23 (38.3%)
2-year college or associate degree	10 (16.7%)
4-year college or bachelor's degree	5 (8.3%)
Graduate training or degree	3 (5%)
Income per year (in dollars) ^a	30,001–40,000
Participant's relationship to target child	
Biological mother	45 (75%)
Biological father	4 (6.7%)
Grandmother	7 (11.7%)
Other ^b	4 (6.7%)
Partner's relationship to target child	
Biological mother	4 (6.7%)
Biological father	19 (31.7%)
Biological parent's significant other	8 (13.3%)
Stepmother	1 (1.7%)
Stepfather	18 (30%)
Grandfather	2 (3.3%)
Other ^c	8 (13.3%)

Note:

^a Median family income is listed. Income ranges were as follows: \$0–\$10,000, \$10,001–\$20,000, \$20,001–\$30,000, \$30,001–\$40,000, \$40,001–\$50,000, \$50,001–\$60,000, \$60,001–\$70,000, \$70,001–\$80,000, \$80,001–\$90,000, \$90,001–\$100,000, More than \$100,001.

^b Includes 1 significant other of the biological parent, 1 aunt, 1 foster/adoptive parent, and 1 great-grandmother.

^c Includes 1 uncle, 1 foster/adoptive parent, 4 step-grandfathers, 1 great-grandmother, and 1 friend.

Table 2**Bidirectional Effects between Interparental Conflict and Parent-Child Conflict**

Variable	Parameter Estimates			
	B	SE	Wald Chi-Square[1]	p
The Effect of Interparental Conflict on Parent-Child Conflict One Time Period Later				
Intercept	-2.33	1.49	2.44	.12
Independent Variable				
Presence of Interparental Conflict	0.82	0.25	10.66	.001
Covariates				
Presence of Prior Parent-Child Conflict				
One time point prior	0.03	0.18	0.03	.87
Two time points prior	0.03	0.25	0.01	.91
Three time points prior	1.19	0.20	37.33	<.001
The Effect of Interparental Conflict on Parent-Child Conflict One Full Day Later				
Intercept	-2.00	1.56	1.65	.20
Independent Variable				
Presence of Interparental Conflict	0.69	0.19	12.92	<.001
Covariates				
Presence of Prior Parent-Child Conflict				
One time point prior	-0.02	0.20	0.01	.94
Two time points prior	-0.01	0.25	0.003	.96
Three time points prior	1.04	0.20	26.33	<.001
The Effect of Parent-Child Conflict on Interparental Conflict One Full Day Later				
Intercept	-2.59	2.07	1.57	.21
Independent Variable				
Presence of Parent-Child Conflict	0.60	0.25	5.58	.02
Covariates				
Marital Status ^a	-1.15	0.38	9.33	.002
Length of Cohabiting Relationship	-0.05	0.02	4.66	.03
Presence of Prior Interparental Conflict				
One time point prior	0.87	0.22	15.13	<.001
Two time points prior	0.44	0.33	1.72	.19
Three time points prior	0.49	0.28	3.10	.08

Note: Covariates that were not significant and not directly relevant to primary analyses were omitted from this table. Covariates for each model included respondent gender, respondent race, respondent age, marital status, length of cohabiting relationship, income, child gender, child age, and the presence of prior conflict on the dependent variable. A copy of the full table may be obtained from the first author. In the last model, procedure is modeling

^a single and living with a partner.

Table 3**Bidirectional Effects between Constructive Interparental Conflict and Constructive Parent-Child Conflict**

Variable	Parameter Estimates			
	B	SE	Wald Chi-Square[1]	p
The Effect of Constructive Interparental Conflict on Constructive Parent-Child Conflict One Time Period Later				
Intercept	−2.05	1.56	1.74	.19
Independent Variable				
Presence of Constructive Interparental Conflict	0.97	0.30	10.46	.001
Covariates				
Length of Cohabiting Relationship	−0.03	0.01	4.23	.04
Income	0.09	0.04	5.53	.02
Presence of Prior Parent-Child Constructive Conflict				
One time point prior	−0.16	0.20	0.60	.44
Two time points prior	0.27	0.24	1.27	.26
Three time points prior	0.93	0.19	23.52	<.001
The Effect of Constructive Interparental Conflict on Constructive Parent-Child Conflict One Full Day Later				
Intercept	−1.44	1.65	0.76	.39
Independent Variable				
Presence of Constructive Interparental Conflict	0.76	0.25	9.19	.002
Covariates				
Length of Cohabiting Relationship	−0.03	0.01	4.53	.03
Income	0.10	0.04	5.53	.02
Presence of Prior Parent-Child Constructive Conflict				
One time point prior	−0.27	0.23	1.35	.25
Two time points prior	0.16	0.26	0.35	.55
Three time points prior	0.79	0.21	14.65	<.001
The Effect of Constructive Parent-Child Conflict on Constructive Interparental Conflict One Time Period Later				
Intercept	−1.04	2.29	0.21	.65
Independent Variable				
Presence of Constructive Parent-Child Conflict	0.50	0.24	4.33	.04
Covariates				
Marital Status ^a	−1.12	0.46	5.98	.02
Length of Cohabiting Relationship	−0.04	0.02	4.15	.04
Presence of Prior Interparental Constructive Conflict				
One time point prior	0.86	0.25	11.33	.001
Two time points prior	0.22	0.36	0.37	.55
Three time points prior	0.44	0.22	4.00	.05

Variable	Parameter Estimates			
	B	SE	Wald Chi-Square[1]	p
The Effect of Constructive Parent-Child Conflict on Constructive Interparental Conflict Two Time Periods Later				
Intercept	−0.79	2.22	0.13	.72
Independent Variable				
Presence of Constructive Parent-Child Conflict	0.52	0.19	7.18	.007
Covariates				
Marital Status ^a	−1.08	0.43	6.44	.01
Presence of Prior Interparental Constructive Conflict				
One time point prior	1.05	0.23	19.95	<.001
Two time points prior	0.14	0.39	0.13	.72
Three time points prior	0.53	0.27	4.01	.05
The Effect of Constructive Parent-Child Conflict on Constructive Interparental Conflict One Full Day Later				
Intercept	−1.47	2.25	0.43	.51
Independent Variable				
Presence of Constructive Parent-Child Conflict	0.88	0.26	11.41	.001
Covariates				
Marital Status ^a	−1.35	0.46	8.49	.004
Presence of Prior Interparental Constructive Conflict				
One time point prior	0.94	0.27	12.26	<.001
Two time points prior	0.23	0.38	0.37	.54
Three time points prior	0.50	0.24	4.49	.03

Note: Covariates that were not significant and not directly relevant to primary analyses were omitted from this table. Covariates for each model included respondent gender, respondent race, respondent age, marital status, length of cohabiting relationship, income, child gender, child age, and the presence of prior conflict on the dependent variable. A copy of the full table may be obtained from the first author. In the last model, the procedure is modeling

^a single and living with a partner.