Interparental Conflict and Adolescents' Social-Emotional Development

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Abstract

Adolescence is the period of formative changes marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. These changes include physical, complex psychological, emotional, and social skill development. Research suggests that interparental conflict can cause maladjustment in adolescents, including psychological distress, behavioral problems, decreased self-efficacy, and the inability to regulate emotions. Furthermore, maladjustment from interparental conflict can cause impairments in adolescents' abilities to positively develop social skills and emotion regulation abilities. Inadequacies in these areas of development during adolescence can cause psychological difficulties that inhibit their potential for close relationships outside of their families. Prevention and intervention strategies should be incorporated to help mediate the psychosocial effects of interparental conflict on adolescents and their close relationships within and outside of their families. Collective and separate programs for parents, as well as adolescents, can help alleviate the negative outcomes that interparental conflict can cause adolescents.

Keywords: interparental conflict, adolescents, social, emotional, development, maladjustment

Objectives

To increase awareness of interparental conflict and effects on adolescents' social-emotional development.

To provide prevention and intervention strategies to minimize detrimental interparental conflict.

Introduction

Conflict in marriages is to be expected, however, **Interparental Conflict**, also known as marital conflict, consists of disagreements and arguments that take place between parents that are characterized as hostile, aggressive, and lacking in resolution. Research suggests that interparental conflict has direct and indirect effects on children and adolescents, including links to psychological maladjustments, externalizing problems, internalizing problems, social anxiety, attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation and negative internal representations (Davies et al., 2016; DeBoard-Lucas et al., 2010; Fosco & Feinberg, 2015; Larssen et al., 2007; Lu et al., 2020; Schwarz et al., 2012; Shahinuzzaman & Akhtar, 2016; Weymouth et al., 2019).

Why this is important:

- The family system greatly influences adolescents' social-emotional development. Through their experiences, they perceive how relationships function, and these interpretations are carried over into their interpersonal relationships (Sanders, 2013).

- Social relationship are key to happiness (Holder & Comlema, 2009).

- Interparental conflict impairs youth social relationships (Larssen et al., 2007; Lu et al., 2020; Schwarz et al., 2012; Weymouth et al., 2019).

- Constant exposure to interparental conflict can cause adolescents to disengage from the family, which may cause adolescents to find support elsewhere (Lu et al., 2020; Weymouth et al., 2019).

- Inability to develop social- emotional skills puts adolescents at risk for maladjustments (Kouros et al., 2010; Larssen et al., 2007; Schwarz et al., 2012).

- Adequate social-emotional development during adolescence may ensure effective life-long interpersonal skills for developing quality relationships (Sanders, 2013).

- Awareness is beneficial for future counselors, especially school counselors.

Theoretical Approaches

The Emotional Security Theory:

- "The Emotional Security Theory (EST; Davies & Cummings, 1994) holds that children's responses to interparental conflict are affected by the implication for their own emotional security and children's confidence in parents abilities to manage difficulties for the purpose of preserving family stability" (Zemp et al., 2016, p. 101).

- Children's inability to minimize exposure of intense interparental conflict can cause emotional insecurity and insecure internal representations of the interparental relationship (Zemp et al., 2016).

- Research suggests that emotional insecurity leads to future emotional dysregulation in children. Which in turn, could have a negative impact on children's social competence and ability to make social relationships (Fosco & Grych, 2008; Larssen et al., 2007; Schwarz et al., 2012; Weymouth et al., 2019).

Cognitive-Contextual Framework

- "The cognitive-contextual framework conceptualizes threat as a key cognitive appraisal, along with self-blaming attributions of conflict, as underlying mechanisms that account for the influence of interparental conflict on youth maladjustment" (Fosco & Feinberg, 2015, p. 239).

Social Learning Theory

- Social Learning Theory posits that children will learn social interactions based on observations from their parents and imitate these behaviors (Zemp et al., 2016).

Spillover theory

- Spillover theory suggests that conflict between parents can carry over into the parent-child relationship. This can cause insecure representations in the child's social relationship internal working model (Schwarz et al., 2012; Simpson, 2020).

Triangulation theory

- Triangulation theory proposes adolescents become affected by interparental conflict through involvement in the conflict between parents (Fosco & Grych, 2008; Simpson, 2020).

The Effects of Interparental Conflicts on Adolescents' Social-Emotional Development

Adolescent maladjustment

The American Psychological Association (APA) dictionary of Psychology defines **maladjustment** as the "inability to maintain effective relationships, function successfully in various domains, or cope with difficulties and stresses."

Self Blame

- Shahinuzzaman & Akhtar (2016) examined adolescents perceptions of interparental conflict and psychological distress. Results from the present study suggested a positive relationship between high self blame and psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, low well-being). Furthermore, for adolescents who observe and become involved in interparental conflict, self-blame is a sense of coping efficacy and perceived control (Shahinuzzaman & Akhtar, 2016).

- DeBoard-Lucas et al. (2010) found that self-blame in adolescents predicted both internalizing and externalizing problems in families where parents were unsupportive and dismissive.

The Effects of Interparental Conflicts on Adolescents' Social-Emotional Development

Threat Appraisal/ Threat Perception

- Threat appraisal may predict psychological distress for adolescents experiencing interparental conflict (Fosco & Feinberg, 2015; Shahinuzzaman & Akhtar, 2016; Weymouth et al., 2019).

- According to Grych and Fincham (1990), children's emotional and behavioral responses to conflict is based on their threat perceptions of the conflict, their ability to cope effectively, and the cause of the conflict (Fosco & Feinberg, 2015; Shahinuzzaman & Akhtar, 2016).

- Shahinuzzaman & Akhtar (2016) found a positive relationship between threat to self and psychological distress in adolescents. Moreover, when adolescents are unable to cope with interparental conflict they are more likely express anxiety, depression, and low self esteem (Shahinuzzaman & Akhtar, 2016).

- Perceived threat has been linked to internalizing problems (DeBoard-Lucas et al., 2010; Fosco & Feinberg, 2015; Weymouth et al., 2019). Results from Fosco & Feinberg (2015) suggest adolescents exposed to frequent and intense interparental conflict had increased threat perceptions and in turn, higher levels of emotional distress two years later. These results support their hypothesis that threat mediates the link between interparental conflict and emotional distress.In the same study, results suggest an indirect effect between interparental conflict and self-efficacy via perceived threat (Fosco & Feinberg, 2015).

- Adolescents who witness frequent and intense interparental conflict and perceive the conflict as threatening may interpret that interpersonal relationships will function the same. Therefore, adolescents avoid friendships due to hypervigilance and perceived coerciveness or competitiveness (Weymouth et al., 2019).

Peer Relationships

- In a longitudinal study examining interparental conflict and peer relationships, researchers found that in a 12 month follow up, early adolescents who perceived high levels of threat of interparental conflict reported instability with their best friend. Emotional regulation was also a consecutive mediator in this study. Within a year, best friends were twice as likely to become former best friends for adolescent who perceived witnessing more frequent and intense interparental conflict (Weymouth et al., 2019).

- Researchers found that increased interparental conflict was positively correlated with increased externalizing difficulties in preadolescence. Further, increased externalizing difficulties also predicted increased social problems (Kouros et al., 2010).

Social Anxiety

- Weymouth et al. (2019) found that adolescents in the 6th grade with higher threat appraisals also had heightened social anxiety symptoms. In addition, a decrease in friendship support and increase in loneliness was reported by 7th graders with heightened social anxiety symptoms.

Parenting

- Parenting styles (e.g coercive & dismissive) can affect adolescents' perceptions of threat and levels of self-blame (DeBoard-Lucas et al., 2010). DeBoard-Lucas et al. (2010) suggested externalizing problems are greater for children experiencing negative parenting styles. In the same study, it was suggested that supportive parenting decreased self blame in adolescents .

- Interparental conflict can cause withdrawal within the family system, causing a lack in parental knowledge. Lu et al. (2010) found delinquency and deviant peer affiliations were less likely to occur when parents were knowledgeable about their adolescent's life.

- Davies et al. (2016) found that interparental conflict categorized as disengaging or hostile (strongest predictor for behavioral problems) were related to greater adolescent emotional insecurity (i.e. reactivity, avoidance, negative appraisals). Adolescents with greater levels of emotional insecurity were associated with increased externalizing problems.

Prevention and Intervention

Prevention

- Cooperative conflict- constructive problem solving behaviors, conflict resolution

Interventions for Parents

Couple-focused programs

- Couples Coping Enhancement Training (CCET) (Ledermann et al., 2007, as cited in Acquah et at., 2017; Zemp et al., 2016; Zemp et al., 2015)

- Triple P (Zemp et al., 2015)

- Couple Relationship Education (CRE) (Halford et al., 2016; Wilde & Doherty, 2013 as cited in Acquah et al., 2017)

Family-based Interventions

- Family Communication Programme (Miller-Graff et al., 2015)

- Attachment-based family therapy (ABFT) (Schleider & Weisz, 2017)

- Stress-Busters (Schleider & Weisz, 2017)

- Happy Couples and Happy Kids HCHK program (Zemp et al., 2016)

- '4 Rs 2Ss' Family Strengthening Programme (Small et al., 2015, as cited in Acquah et al., 2017)

Interventions for Youth

- I CAN DO Program (Bradford & Barber, 2005)

- Resourceful Adolescent Program (RAP) (Bradford & Barber, 2005)

- Penn Prevention Program (PPP) (Bradford & Barber, 2005)

- Mindfulness
  - Learn to Breathe (L2B) (Lucas-Thompson et al 2019; Lucas-Thompson et at., 2020)

Conclusion

- Interparental conflict can have major implications on adolescents' social-emotional development.

- Cognitive appraisals from interparental conflict can cause psychological distress and maladjustments in adolescents.

- Though programs have been created to promote healthy parenting, more research is needed for interventions that focus specifically on targeting adolescents experiencing interparental conflict.

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