



Common and unique associations of adolescents' affective and cognitive empathy development with conflict behavior towards parents



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ABSTRACT

Adolescents' development of two empathy dimensions, affective empathic concern and cognitive perspective taking, may be associated with shifts towards more constructive behaviors in conflict with parents. This six-year longitudinal study (ages 13–18) used multivariate latent growth curve modeling to investigate correlations between the developmental trajectories of adolescents' ($N = 497$) empathic dispositions and trajectories of their conflict behaviors towards both parents. There were some similarities between the associations of both empathy dimensions with conflict behaviors. Both empathy dimensions were associated with reduced conflict escalation with mothers, and increased problem solving with both parents. However, these associations were consistently stronger for perspective taking than for empathic concern. Furthermore, higher levels of compliance with mothers in early adolescence were uniquely associated with over-time increasing empathic concern. Perspective taking was uniquely associated with decreased withdrawal from conflicts. Perspective taking thus appears to be more strongly associated with a pattern of constructive conflict behaviors.

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Parent–child conflict is a natural part of adolescence, as youths endeavor to forge their own identities in the context of continued closeness with their parents (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Such conflicts are not inherently harmful; what is more important is the way adolescents learn to manage these conflicts (Branje, Van Doorn, Van der Valk, & Meeus, 2009). The obligatory and permanent nature of the adolescent–parent relationship provides a context for adolescents to practice adaptive conflict resolution skills (Adams & Laursen, 2001). It is important to study factors which might promote constructive

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adolescent–parent conflict resolution, because conflict behaviors towards parents spill over into adolescents' conflict behaviors with peers, and are thought to shape models for future conflict resolution with romantic partners (e.g., see Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006; Van Doorn, Branje, Van der Valk, De Goede, & Meeus, 2011). Adolescents' naturally occurring empathy development might be associated with a shift towards more constructive conflict behavior towards parents, because empathy decreases aggression, and increases pro-social behavior (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Furthermore, empathy encompasses both affective and cognitive dimensions (e.g., Davis, 1983). Many interventions aim to promote the development of one or both of these dimensions in adolescents (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2011). However, little is known about the common and unique associations that these dimensions might hold with specific conflict resolution behaviors. The present six-year longitudinal study addressed these issues by investigating whether the development of adolescents' affective and cognitive empathy is associated with common and unique changes in their conflict behaviors towards parents over time.

Previous research has identified specific conflict resolution behaviors, such as conflict escalation (intensifying the conflict and losing control), problem solving (negotiating a compromise), compliance without defending one's own position, and withdrawal from the discussion (Kurdek, 1994). The conflict resolution behaviors adolescents use with parents are associated with concurrent and future adjustment. For example, conflict escalation and withdrawal have been associated with internalizing and externalizing problems (Branje et al., 2009; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993; Van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2008). Problem solving, in contrast, was associated with lower levels of problem behavior. Interestingly, a person-centered analysis found that some adolescents engaged in compliance in concert with constructive problem solving, whereas others engaged in compliance alongside more negative behaviors like escalation and withdrawal (Branje et al., 2009). Conflict only predicted greater internalizing problems for the latter group, which suggests that compliance can be associated with either positive or negative developmental outcomes, depending on the context in which it occurs. Overall, these studies suggest that conflict escalation and withdrawal are associated with adolescents' poorer adjustment, when compared to constructive problem solving. It is therefore important to identify dispositional factors associated with a transition towards constructive conflict resolution behaviors during adolescence.

Empathy and conflict resolution behavior

The development of two specific empathy dimensions, empathic concern and perspective taking (Davis, 1983), appears to coincide with parallel developmental changes in adolescents' conflict behavior toward parents. Empathic concern involves sympathetic affective responses to the emotions of others (Eisenberg, 2000). Cognitive perspective taking involves the tendency to consider different sides of a dilemma. On average, empathic concern and perspective taking increase throughout adolescence, although empathic concern appears to stabilize at an earlier age (Eisenberg, Cumberland, Guthrie, Murphy, & Shepard, 2005; Van der Graaff, De Wied, Hawk, Van Lier, & Meeus, 2014). This empathy development is mirrored by a shift in adolescents' conflict behavior towards parents, from predominantly negative exchanges that culminate in compliance by one party, to greater constructive problem solving and negotiation of compromises (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001; Van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2011). Such developmental parallels might be a manifestation of changes in shared neurological circuits. A network involving the prefrontal cortex and amygdala is central in empathic responding (Frith & Frith, 2006; Singer, 2006), as well as conflict-related behavior (Blair, 2004). In adolescence, maturation of the prefrontal cortex leads to increased efficiency of perspective taking (Choudhury, Blakemore, & Charman, 2006). Meanwhile, strengthening functional connections between the prefrontal cortex and amygdala foster the development of emotion regulation abilities (Gee et al., 2013), which is likely to result in more constructive conflict resolution behaviors. Empirical evidence for parallel development of empathy and conflict behavior *within individuals* is lacking, however, because developmental studies to date have not jointly investigated empathy and conflict behavior. To bolster the argument for developmental synchronicity, the present study aims to make the critical contribution of examining parallel development of empathic dispositions and specific conflict behaviors *within individuals* over time.

Empathic concern and perspective taking are likely to have common and unique associations with specific conflict behavior. Regarding common associations, both empathic concern and perspective taking have been linked with reduced aggression (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988; Richardson, Hammock, Smith, Gardner, & Signo, 1994), and increased pro-social behavior (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008). This suggests that, in conflicts with parents, both empathy dimensions might be associated with reduced escalation and increased constructive problem solving. However, these empathy dimensions are also likely to hold unique associations with specific conflict behaviors. Empathic concern rouses a motive to reduce others' distress (Stocks, Lishner, & Decker, 2009), and might consequently increase adolescents' willingness to reduce parents' negative emotions by complying to their demands, even if that means they will lose ground in an argument. Perspective taking, on the other hand, might allow adolescents to take some emotional distance from the heat of a conflict, consider both sides of the argument, and engage in more constructive and mutually beneficial conflict behaviors (e.g., Sandy & Cochran, 2000). However, the literature on adolescents has focused primarily on associations between affective empathy and conflict-related constructs, without taking into account potentially differential associations for cognitive empathy. For instance, adolescents' greater self-reported affective empathy was found to be associated with reduced conflict escalation and greater problem solving with peers (De Wied, Branje, & Meeus, 2007). A study using peer-reported measures found similar associations, and additionally found that adolescents' affective empathy was associated with increased withdrawal (Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 2000). Additional research is thus required to identify common and unique

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