

Marital Hostility, Hostile Parenting, and Child Aggression: Associations From Toddlerhood to School Age

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Objective: The spillover hypothesis suggests that childhood aggression results from spillover of interparental conflict to poor parenting, which promotes aggressive child behavior. This study was designed to examine the spillover hypothesis in non-genetically related parent-child dyads from the toddler period through age 6 years.

Method: A sample of 361 sets of children, adoptive parents, and birth parents from the Early Growth and Development Study (EGDS) was assessed from child age 9 months to 6 years on measures of adoptive parent financial strain, antisocial traits, marital hostility, hostile parenting, and child aggression. Structural equation modeling was used to examine links from financial strain, parent antisocial traits, and marital hostility in infancy and toddlerhood to hostile parenting and child aggression at ages 4.5 and 6 years.

Results: Spillover of marital conflict from child age 18 to 27 months was associated with more parental hostility in

mothers and fathers at 27 months. In turn, adoptive fathers' parental hostility, but not mothers', was associated with aggression in children at age 4.5 years. However, there was no significant spillover from hostile parenting at 4.5 years to child aggression at 6 years. Birth mother antisocial traits were unassociated with child aggression.

Conclusion: This study is the first to examine spillover of marital hostility to parenting to child aggression from toddlerhood through age 6 years in an adoption design, highlighting the impact of these environmental factors from the toddler to preschool period. The findings support the potential benefit of early identification of marital hostility.

Key words: spillover, marital hostility, hostile parenting, child aggression, adoption

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Aggression is a serious problem in childhood and adolescence, with significant associations with a wide variety of negative outcomes.^{1,2} The spillover hypothesis has been studied over the last several decades and proposes that conflict and negative emotion in 1 family subsystem (husband-wife) can negatively impact another subsystem (parent-child).³ This would imply that childhood aggression may in part result from spillover of interparental conflict to poor parenting practices, which promotes aggressive behavior.³ This study tests the spillover hypothesis by examining associations among marital hostility, parental hostility, and child aggression from the toddler to school-age period. We use a longitudinal adoption design of children placed with nonrelative adoptive families at birth to identify those associations that could not be attributable to genes shared by rearing parents and their offspring.

Links From Marital Conflict to Parent to Child Aggression

Several meta-analytic studies have found moderate effects sizes for the spillover from marital conflict to negative parenting behaviors and from parenting to child aggression.^{4,5} Spillover effects from marital conflict to childhood behavior may be a result of the emotional distress caused by poor interparental relationship quality, which erodes parenting, or the direct influence of witnessing high levels of parents' negative emotions, including verbal and/or physical aggression.^{6,7} Many of the prior studies of the spillover

hypothesis are in school-aged and adolescent samples.⁷⁻¹⁰ Studies examining the full spillover model from marital to parenting to child aggression specifically in early childhood using genetically informed designs are scarce.

To our knowledge, 3 studies have examined pathways from marital conflict to parenting to childhood outcomes in early childhood using genetically informed designs. Using the current sample, the first assessed relationships among marital conflict, parental harsh discipline, and childhood anger/frustration in a sample of toddlers¹¹ and found an indirect relationship from marital conflict at child age 9 months to child anger/frustration at 18 months via parental harsh discipline. The second, also using the current sample, examined the spillover of marital to parenting hostility to child aggression for both mothers and fathers when children were 27 months old.¹² Results indicated a significant unique contribution of spillover from marital hostility to parenting hostility to child aggression for both adoptive mothers and adoptive fathers. Finally, a study of 6-year-old children and their families, using data from both the current sample and a sample of families that used in vitro fertilization, found indirect associations of interparental conflict to childhood externalizing problems at age 6 years via parent-to-child hostility for both mothers and fathers in genetically related and non-genetically related parent-child units.¹³ Consistently, twin studies indicate that nonshared environmental effects account for a greater proportion (64%) of the variance

in global family conflict than genetic influences.¹⁴ These studies all lend support for the spillover hypothesis, but they are primarily cross-sectional.

There is evidence to suggest that younger children may be more likely to exhibit distress as a result of marital conflict through aggressive behaviors,¹⁵ but aggressive behaviors typically subside as children enter school age,¹⁶ because children learn to regulate their emotions and to reduce aggressive behaviors in preschool before they enter formal schooling.¹⁷ No studies have examined whether marital hostility in infancy and toddlerhood will have an impact on child aggression as children progress through preschool and enter kindergarten, when aggression is expected to have decreased. Understanding the longitudinal impact of marital hostility and hostile parenting in early childhood on later aggression in childhood can further inform intervention and prevention efforts for child conduct and aggression problems.

Additional Factors That Contribute to Spillover

Socioeconomic distress has been consistently linked with marital discord and conflict.^{18,19} Financial strain is defined as the subjective experience of financial burden that is not necessarily linked to a lack of money. Individuals may earn sufficient income to meet basic needs but be overburdened by bills or expenses. Subjective financial strain has been associated directly with marital hostility and indirectly to poor parenting through marital hostility.^{12,20} Parental traits also have been linked to marital and parenting behaviors. Studies have indicated that parental antisocial traits in particular contribute to negative marital and parenting behaviors.^{21,22}

Shared genetic influences can also have an impact on associations between parenting and child aggression. The same genetic factors that influence parenting behaviors may affect child behavior. Heritability of aggression²³ and parenting behaviors²⁴ has been found to be in the moderate range. The current sample of unrelated parent-offspring dyads, along with inclusion of birth mother antisocial traits in statistical models, allows examination of family environmental factors without shared genes between parents and children, as well as inherited contributions to child aggressive behaviors.

This study seeks to add to the evidence for the spillover hypothesis as children transition from toddlerhood through the preschool years and formal school entry by means of the following: examining contextual factors of financial strain and parent antisocial traits and their associations with

marital hostility and hostile parenting; and testing the spillover hypothesis over time from marital hostility to hostile parenting at child age 27 months to later child aggression at age 4.5 years and age 6 years, while controlling for birth mother antisocial traits.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 361 sets of adopted children, adoptive parents, and birth parents from the Early Growth and Development Study (EGDS), a longitudinal multisite study.²⁵ The full sample of 2 cohorts consists of 561 family sets; however, only cohort I had complete data collection at child age 6 years as of the writing of this report. Hence, the sample used in this study included the 361 families from cohort I only.

Study participants were representative of those completing adoption plans at the participating agencies during the recruitment period.²⁶ Based on the goal of this study—to examine relations among marital hostility, child aggression, and parental hostility for both mothers and fathers—individuals with same-sex parents (2 adoptive fathers, $n = 12$; 2 adoptive mothers, $n = 8$) or single parents ($n = 5$) were excluded from the sample, resulting in a sample of 336 sets for analysis.

The EGDS cohort I sample consisted of 57% male adopted children with a mean age of 7 days ($SD = 13$ days) at the time of adoption. The adoptive parents had been married or living together in a committed relationship for an average of 17 years ($SD = 5.2$ years) at the time of adoption, and were typically college educated and middle class. Both birth mothers and birth fathers typically had a high school or trade school education level and household incomes less than \$25,000. Additional demographic data related to birth and adoptive parents are presented in Table 1 and in other reports.²⁵ Although data were available for a subset of birth fathers ($n = 121$), their data were not used in the current analyses due to the need for a larger sample size given the complex modeling. There were no significant differences in demographic characteristics between the full EGDS sample and the participants in cohort I examined in the current analyses.

Procedure

The present analyses used data from birth mothers at child age 3 to 6 months, 18 months, and 4.5 years, and from adoptive families at child age 18 months, 27 months, 4.5 years, and 6 years. All participants were paid for their time. Following informed consent procedures, interviewers asked participants computer-assisted interview questions, and each participant independently completed a set of questionnaires. Full details on the EGDS study recruitment procedures, sample, and assessment methods are reported elsewhere.²⁶

TABLE 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

	Mean Age (y)	White	African American	Multiethnic	Hispanic/Latino	American Indian	Other
Adoptive mother	38	92	4	1	2	<1	<1
Adoptive father	38	91	5	<1	<1	<1	<1
Birth mother	24	72	11	4	7	3	3
Birth father	25	75	9	5	<1	1	10

Note: $N = 361$. All data shown as percentages except for mean age.

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