



## Effect of family affective environment on individuals' emotion regulation



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### ABSTRACT

The current study explored the relations between interparental conflict, parental attachment, and emotion regulation among 404 undergraduates (322 females, 88.9% Caucasians). Data were collected through online survey. Results from conditional process analyses demonstrated that intensity of interparental conflict positively predicted late adolescents' emotion regulation whereas low resolution of interparental conflict negatively predicted emotion regulation when parental attachment was considered. Frequency of interparental conflict was not associated with parental attachment or emotion regulation. In addition, parental attachment partially mediated the relations between intensity and low resolution of interparental conflict, and late adolescents' emotion regulation. The findings supported the emotional security theory and highlighted intensity and low resolution of interparental conflict as significant contributors of late adolescents' emotion regulation, and identified parental attachment as a mechanism between the relations. Implications of the study and future research directions were discussed.

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In the past decade, there has been a renewed interest in emotion regulation, which refers to individuals' consciously "initiating, avoiding, inhibiting, maintaining, or modulating the occurrence, form, intensity, or duration of internal feeling states, emotion-related physiological states, attentional processes, and motivational states of emotion" to accomplish personal goals (Eisenberg, Morris, & Spinrad, 2005, p. 424). Emotion regulation is fundamental to human development and essential to most relationships (Langlois, 2004). Moreover, it holds a significant role in enriching our understanding of typical and atypical development among adolescents and beyond (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004).

Research on emotion regulation has recently burgeoned with a focus on parental influences, given the role of family as one of the most important contexts of emotional socialization (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). In a seminal review, Morris et al. (2007) highlighted the influence of family on emotion regulation in three important ways: children's observations of parental interactions, parenting practices, and family emotional environment such as parent-child attachment, interparental relations, and family emotional expressiveness. In

addition, emotional security theory (EST) emphasizes the role of interparental relations in children's emotional security (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015), characterized by emotional stability and protection from emotional distress. Interparental conflict endangers children's adjustment by invoking their feelings of insecurity, demonstrated through high emotional reactivity, strategies to reduce their exposure to the conflict, and negative self-representations of the meaning of the conflict. It could be argued that such strategies could manifest as poor emotion regulation. Therefore, the primary purpose of the current study was to assess both direct and indirect relations between interparental conflict and emotion regulation.

Recent studies indeed have demonstrated a link between interparental conflict and emotion regulation (Fosco & Grych, 2012; Schwarz, Stutz, & Ledermann, 2012; Siffert & Schwarz, 2011); however, it is not clear through what mechanism interparental conflict influences adolescents' emotion regulation (Morris et al., 2007). EST is consistent with attachment theory in recognizing the significance of the parent-child relationship in children's positive emotional development, and implies that parent-child attachment may play a significant role in enhancing emotional security. Empirical studies have documented both the negative impact of interparental conflict on parent-child attachment (Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Schwarz et al., 2012; Steinberg, Davila, & Fincham, 2006) and the positive role of parental attachment in children and adolescents' emotion regulation (Brenning, Soenens, Braet, & Bosmans, 2012; Gallarin & Alonso-Arbiol, 2012; Kullik & Petermann, 2013). Therefore, the second purpose of this study was to test the

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possibility that attachment is the mechanism through which interparental conflict influences emotion regulation.

### 1. Interparental conflict and emotion regulation

Parental influences on adolescents' emotion regulation, particularly the negative emotional climate resulting from interparental conflict has been found to exert a significant impact on adolescents' emotion regulation (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Morris et al., 2007). Emotional socialization often involves observation of parents as role models. The interactions that are implicitly expressed among parents serve as important messages to adolescents as to what they should do to regulate their emotions in times of stress or frustration (Morris et al., 2007).

Research has found that children from families inflicted by high conflict and hostile interaction demonstrated more aggressive behaviors and had difficulties controlling negative affect such as anger (Clark, 2004). Interparental conflict reported by both parents and adolescents predicted early adolescents' emotion regulation one year later (Schwarz et al., 2012), and resolution styles of interparental conflict were associated with children's emotion regulation (Siffert & Schwarz, 2011). In a recent study with a multi-method and multi-informant design, interparental conflict was indirectly associated with children's emotion regulation through family emotion positivity and maternal warmth (Fosco & Grych, 2012). One strength of the study was that it included both family emotional environment and parental warmth as mediators. However, the construct of family emotional environment, especially family negativity, seemed to have too much overlap with interparental conflict conceptually and empirically ( $r = 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In the current study, we precluded family positivity and negativity and focused on emotional relations between parents and between parent and adolescents. We anticipated it would be a parsimonious model that captured most aspects of family emotional environment.

### 2. Interparental conflict and parental attachment

Relations between interparental conflict and many aspects of parenting have been well documented in the literature. A commonly accepted hypothesis, the spillover effect, theorized that the negative affect and behaviors generated in the hostile relationship between spouses would spill into the parent-child realm and influence how parents respond and interact with children (Erel & Burman, 1995). Research findings have supported the spillover effect and demonstrated the link between interparental conflict and almost every aspect of parenting (Cummings & Davies, 2010). For example, interparental conflict was associated with less use of effective parenting such as parental monitoring/discipline and acceptance (Krishnakumar, Buehler, & Barber, 2003), parental warmth and sensitivity (Fosco & Grych, 2012; Li, Putallaz, & Su, 2011; Manning, Davies, & Cicchetti, 2014; O'Donnell, Moreau, Cardemil, & Pollastri, 2010), and parental involvement (Dehon & Weems, 2010); and more onset of maladaptive parenting including psychological control (Gong, Paulson, & Wang, 2016; Krishnakumar et al., 2003; Li et al., 2011), and parental harshness and rejection (Shelton & Harold, 2008).

According to EST, adolescents strive to maintain a sense of emotional security in the face of destructive family relations (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Emotional security can be viewed as children's confidence in inter-parental relations, and extending the confidence to their own relationship with others. It represents faith about parents' availability as a couple to respond to children's needs and about relationships in general (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Adolescents growing up in families with constant, unresolved parental conflicts tend to become hypersensitive to conflicts between family members, and experience more emotional distress and feelings of hopelessness. That is, long term exposure to parental conflicts reduces adolescents' capacities to regulate their emotions; perhaps because interparental conflict disrupts parent-adolescent attachment (Cummings & Miller-Graff, 2015).

Research on the relations of interparental conflict and parental attachment has increased just recently. In existing empirical evidence, interparental conflict was associated with securer attachment among children and adolescents (Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005; Schwarz et al., 2012; Steinberg et al., 2006). Moreover, parenting practices and parent-child attachment influenced individuals' appraisal of interparental conflict; and negative parenting was related to more distress such as self-blame; whereas adaptive parenting and better parental attachment could buffer the detrimental effects of interparental conflict on children (DeBoard-Lucas, Fosco, Raynor, & Grych, 2010; Manning et al., 2014). Notably, with a daily diary method, Kouros, Papp, Goetze-Morey, and Cummings (2014) found that marital quality predicted parent-child relations one day later, even when moderated by maternal and paternal depressive symptoms.

### 3. Parental attachment and emotion regulation

As previously noted, modeling has long been viewed as an important way to learn specific behaviors (Bandura, 1977). As both interparental conflict and parent-child attachment involve displays of emotions and affective exchanges between family members, it is likely that adolescents obtain knowledge about how to regulate emotions through observing how parents interact with them, and with each other (Thompson, 1994).

The link between attachment and emotion regulation is also supported by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). Adolescents' emotional security is influenced by the quality of their interactions with parents, namely parent-adolescent attachment (Bowlby, 1982). A trusting, communicative and affectionate relationship between parent and adolescent can foster secure attachment. Adolescents feel emotionally secure when there are healthy affective exchanges between parents and adolescents, and parents are perceived as caring, understanding, respectful, and be used as a haven in times of stress. In contrast, emotionally insecure adolescents choose not to reveal their real thoughts or feelings to parents, for parents are perceived as either untrustworthy, or unsupportive, and cannot serve as "sources of protection and support" (Cummings & Davies, 2010, p.32).

Children regulate their emotions to achieve the central biologically based goal of maintaining close relations with attachment figures, in most cases parents (Bowlby, 1982; Cassidy, 1994). The core of emotional security in parental attachment context is adolescents' capabilities of emotion regulation (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Cassidy (1994), in a classic review, discussed how children adopt various emotion regulation strategies to meet parents' expectations (e.g., whether children should express minimum negative emotions, or display a wide array of emotions), in order to maintain relationships with parents. Recent studies supported such a proposition and showed that parents play significant roles in fostering children's emotion regulation. By the time children reach adolescence, children's perceptions of their relationships with parents were related to the development of emotional autonomy and self-regulation (Gallarín & Alonso-Arbiol, 2012); a secure attachment was found to be associated with better emotion regulation and lower levels of aggressiveness among adolescents (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005; Gomez & McLaren, 2007; Morris et al., 2007), and emotion regulation was found to mediate the relations between attachment and depression (Kullik & Petermann, 2013). Insecure attachment (e.g. avoidant and anxious attachment) was related to emotional expressive suppression and dysregulation (Brenning et al., 2012). Emotion regulation also was found to mediate mother-child attachment and peer relations during middle childhood (Contreras, Kerns, Weimer, Gentzler, & Tomich, 2000).

### 4. The current study

The present study was based on Morris et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework and EST, and focused on investigating the influence of family

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