



Short Communication

Examining the longitudinal relations among adolescents' conflict management with parents and conflict frequency

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ABSTRACT

Parent-adolescent conflicts are not necessarily detrimental for adolescent development. The way adolescents handle conflicts with parents is of crucial importance. The present five-wave longitudinal study ($N = 1313$) focuses on how adolescents' conflict management behaviors and conflict frequency with parents are interrelated over time. Four conflict management behaviors were investigated: positive problem solving, withdrawal, engagement, and compliance. Using cross-lagged panel analysis, results for conflict behaviors toward mothers indicated that conflict frequency predicted more engagement, withdrawal and compliance, and less positive problem solving one year later. Positive problem solving predicted fewer conflicts and maladaptive conflict management behaviors over time, pointing to the potential protective role of positive problem solving against a conflictual climate and maladaptive management behaviors. Results were largely replicated in the father model. Ancillary multi-group analyses revealed no moderation by gender or age. Suggestions and implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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Conflicts are an inevitable feature of human interactions. Especially in adolescence, conflicts with parents about everyday issues are common mainly due to the realignment of the parent-adolescent relationship and adolescents' striving for autonomy (Smetana, 2008). A meta-analysis by Laursen, Coy, and Collins (1998) revealed that conflicts with parents occur most frequently throughout early adolescence and decrease gradually thereafter. Further, the intensity of conflicts with parents tends to increase from early to mid-adolescence (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; McGue, Elkins, Walden, & Iacono, 2005). Conflicts as such are not necessarily detrimental because they play an important role in adolescents' separation and individuation process (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). In addition, conflicts provide adolescents the opportunity to consider opposing or alternative views which is an important and healthy hallmark of social functioning (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). To capture conflict mechanisms, it is essential to move beyond the presence and

intensity of conflicts and concentrate on conflict management (or the behaviors adolescents enact during a conflict). Furthermore, how adolescents deal with conflicts is expected to influence their social functioning as young adults in various life domains (e.g., work, studies, and romantic relationships). Both hostile and constructive conflict interactions with parents are transferred to relationships with friends and romantic partners (Trifan & Stattin, 2015; Van Doorn, Branje, VanderValk, De Goede, & Meeus, 2011).

We focused on four conflict management behaviors that substantially impact adolescents' psychosocial functioning (Branje, Laursen, & Collins, 2012; Laursen, Finkelstein, & Townsend-Betts, 2001; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993). Positive problem solving involves trying to understand the other's point of view and negotiating the conflict effectively to find a compromise. Conflict engagement involves destructive behaviors like attacking the other verbally, being defensive, or losing self-control. Withdrawal involves avoiding the problem, avoiding talking, and becoming distant. Finally, compliance involves giving in to the other party without expressing one's viewpoint.

From a developmental perspective, adolescents are expected to use more mature ways of conflict management because cognitive maturation combined with a more egalitarian parent-adolescent

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relationship enables them to take on different perspectives (Sandy & Cochran, 2000). Longitudinal research has indeed demonstrated that problem solving increased from early to mid-adolescence, and conflict engagement and withdrawal decreased around mid-adolescence (Van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2011). However, a detailed understanding of how conflict frequency and different conflict management behaviors influence each other over time has not emerged fully. Establishing an understanding which conflict management behaviors might mitigate or aggravate conflict is important. Such knowledge could inform prevention and intervention efforts for improving parent-adolescent relationships. Even less is known about how different conflict management behaviors are related to each other over time. Conflict management behaviors are not used in isolation (Branje, Van Doorn, Van der Valk, & Meeus, 2009), and gaining insight in which conflict management behaviors reinforce or debilitate each other will advance our understanding of adolescent-parent conflict processes.

1. The present study

To address these gaps, the present study had two research objectives. Objective 1 was to examine how conflict management behaviors and frequency were interrelated over time. Inspired by Patterson's (1982) coercion theory, we expected to find evidence for a vicious circle wherein destructive conflict management (i.e., conflict engagement and withdrawal) and conflict frequency reinforce each other over time. The frequency of recent conflicts has indeed been found to predict negative conflict interactions for both mothers and adolescents one month later (Eisenberg et al., 2008). Also, negative conflict management behaviors have been found to co-occur with more conflicts (Branje et al., 2009). Alternatively, positive problem solving might play a more protective role by reducing conflict frequency over time (Rueter & Conger, 1995). Adolescents who use more positive problem solving might be more able to reduce conflicts with parents and develop toward a more egalitarian relationship than adolescents who use less problem solving (Collins, Laursen, Mortensen, Luebker, & Ferreira, 1997). The use of problem solving between adolescents and parents might be indicative of a positive family climate. Previous studies have indeed found a positive association between adequate parenting and constructive conflict management (Eisenberg et al., 2008; Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2003).

Relatedly, Objective 2 was to examine the longitudinal associations among the four conflict management behaviors. Van Doorn et al. (2011a) revealed that an increase in positive problem solving was followed by a decrease in negative parent-adolescent interactions. This may reflect that adolescents who use more problem solving are also more able to reduce engagement and withdrawal in conflicts with parents than adolescents which use less positive problem solving. Therefore, we expected positive problem solving to predict a reduced use of destructive conflict management behaviors (i.e., withdrawal and conflict engagement) over time. All these associations were examined for adolescents' conflict behaviors with both parents separately. Most studies on parent-adolescent conflicts exclusively focus on adolescents' relationship with mothers. Therefore, we do not forward differential hypotheses based on parents' gender.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample was from the CONAMORE study (Meeus et al., 2004), consisting of 1313 adolescents (51.5% girls): 923 early-to-middle ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.42$ years, $SD = 0.59$) and 390 middle-to-late adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.68$ years, $SD = 0.80$). In both cohorts, the majority of adolescents came from intact families (85.1% and 84.3%, respectively). The

majority of participants of the young cohort were Dutch (83.4%), and 16.6% of the adolescents belonged to ethnic minorities (e.g., Surinamese, Antillean, Moroccan, Turkish). In the older cohort, the figures were 87.4% and 12.6%, respectively. The sample was assessed five times over four years. Sample attrition across waves was minimal (1.2%): In Waves 1–5, the numbers of participants were 1313, 1313, 1293, 1292 and 1275, respectively. To deal with missing data, we used FIML in Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010).

Participants were recruited from twelve high schools in the province of Utrecht in The Netherlands. Before the study, both adolescents and parents received written information letters; parents provided passive consent for their child's participation and adolescents provided active consent. During the annual assessments, adolescents filled out paper-and-pencil questionnaires at school or at home.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Conflict frequency

The weekly number of conflicts was assessed with the Interpersonal Conflict Questionnaire (Laursen, 1993). Adolescents rated on a 5-point scale how often, ranging from *never* to *often*, they had an argument with mother and father the past week for 35 conflict topics, resulting in an average weekly conflict score. Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.93 to 0.95 for conflicts with mother and father for T1–5.

2.2.2. Conflict management behaviors

The four conflict management behaviors were assessed with the Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (Kurdek, 1994), adapted for the parent-child context (Branje et al., 2009). On a 5-point scale, ranging from *never* to *always*, adolescents rated how often they used particular conflict management strategies. Cronbach's alphas for conflict management behaviors with mother and father ranged between 0.75 and 0.95 for T1–5.

3. Results

Correlations among all variables at T1–5 are displayed in Table 1. Longitudinal associations among the conflict management behaviors and frequency were investigated with cross-lagged panel models. We tested all models for mother and father separately. In all models, all within-time associations at Times 1–5 and autoregressive paths were estimated. To improve model fit, all two-year autoregressive paths were added. All lagged effects among the conflict variables were estimated. Finally, gender and age were controlled for by estimating paths to all study variables at all time points. Path analyses proceeded in two steps. First, the cross-lagged paths were freely estimated. Second, cross-lagged paths were constrained as equal across all four time intervals. Invariance tests indicated that the more parsimonious invariant model fitted the data equally as the free model. Consequently, we retained the model with longitudinal constraints. Ancillary multi-group analyses were performed to examine whether the cross-lagged coefficients would differ between boys and girls and younger and older adolescents. Invariance tests indicated that no significant differences emerged for both gender and cohort in both mother and father models. Table 2 contains fit indices of all models. Fig. 1 displays all significant standardized cross-lagged paths among the conflict variables between adjacent waves.

Concerning the mother model, conflict frequency predicted more conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance, and less positive problem solving. Positive problem solving predicted fewer conflicts and destructive management behaviors over time. Conflict engagement predicted more withdrawal and less compliance over time. Withdrawal negatively predicted positive problem solving. Compliance predicted more conflicts and less conflict engagement over

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