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A house divided: Parental disparity and conflict over media rules predict children's outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Research on restrictive mediation seldom considers whether parents work together to regulate their child's media use. As an initial investigation, one parent per family (an MTurk sample of 1201 US parents of 2- to 17-year-olds) completed an online survey reporting on consistency and conflict between themselves and their partner with regard to their child's media restrictions. When one parent was more restrictive than the other, participants reported more inter-parent conflict about media rules and more child exposure to media violence. These two variables in turn predicted the child's physical and relational aggression, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors. When both parents were highly restrictive, there was less conflict and exposure to media violence, which predicted lower levels of all four negative outcomes. Rule disparities and media-related conflict did not vary by child's age.

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Parents set rules about their children's media use – what, when, and how much their child can watch, browse, or play on-screen – because they worry about negative effects (Nikken & Jansz, 2006; Warren, 2003). However, these rules are hard to enforce (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010; Vittrup, 2009) and, in a recent meta-analysis, were minimally predictive of children's aggression, substance use, or sexual activity (Collier et al., 2016). Why are there such issues?

Although there is a robust literature on parents' restrictions of their child's media use, research has seldom considered how media rules are managed in the context of co-parenting, and what the implications might be for children's outcomes. The current project is an initial exploration of these issues that lie at the intersection of parental mediation, marital communication, and media effects. We surveyed one parent per family, asking them the extent to which they and their partner had the same media rules for their child. We assessed the extent to which disparities in parents' rules predicted (a) parental conflict about those rules and (b) the parent's reports of the child's exposure to violent media content. We then examined whether conflict and violent media use predicted parental perceptions of negative outcomes for the child.

1. Parents' attempts to regulate children's media use

Research on parents' engagement with their child's media use (e.g., Nathanson, 1999; Valkenburg, Krmar, & Peters, 1999) has distinguished between active mediation (e.g., commenting and asking questions about content), co-viewing (e.g., watching with the child), and restrictive mediation (e.g., rules about time and content). National surveys in the US and UK suggest that the majority of families engage in some form of restrictive mediation, though there is ambiguity about what is actually involved. In the US, 84% of 8- to 18-year-olds said their parents had imposed at least some media rules, but only half said they had rules about TV content or computer activities, and roughly a third said they had rules about TV, computer, or video game time or content (Rideout et al., 2010). In the UK, over 80% of a national sample of parents of 5- to 15-year-olds said they restricted their child's TV and computer use, but again the numbers reporting specific rules (e.g., about time of day or exposure to sexual or violent content) were lower (OfCom, 2015; see also; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

Despite the prevalence of attempts to limit children's media use, a recent meta-analysis (Collier et al., 2016) indicated that parents' restrictive mediation was only weakly negatively associated ($r = -.06$) with the amount of time children spent using electronic media. Among the 8- to 18-year-olds in the Kaiser Family Foundation national survey (Rideout et al., 2010), those who said their

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parents didn't specify media rules spent roughly 12:43 hours a day with media, but even those who said their parents had laid down media rules spent most of their waking hours with media (9:51 h per day). In their study of British families, [Livingstone and Helper \(2008\)](#) found that parents' media rules, co-use with the child, and monitoring of their child's online behavior (e.g., online filters, checking emails) did not predict the child's exposure to online violence, pornography, or privacy risks.

Given high levels of media exposure even among children with rules, it is not surprising that the [Collier et al. \(2016\)](#) meta-analysis found non-significant effects of restrictive mediation on children's verbal, physical, or relational aggression ($r = -.03$) and children's substance use ($r = -.06$). Only sexual attitudes and behaviors were significantly negatively predicted by parents' media rules ($r = -.10$). These overall weak effects were not moderated by the age of the child, or by the medium being restricted, nor did it make a difference if the parent versus the child was the one reporting on the level of mediation or on the child's outcomes. Indeed, a more recent study ([Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Collier, 2016](#)) found that parents' restrictive monitoring of their teen's media use predicted subsequent reductions in teens' self-reported self-regulation, which in turn predicted increases (rather than decreases) in externalizing behaviors. In sum, many parents engage in restrictive mediation, yet it is often ineffective. A goal of the current study is to explore why this might be the case.

One line of research suggests that rules and ratings designed to limit children's exposure to violent or sexual content sometimes induce reactance and a "forbidden fruit effect," enhancing attraction and surreptitious exposure to the restricted content (e.g., [Bijvank, Konijn, Bushman, & Roelofsma, 2009](#); [Nathanson, 2001](#); see [Bushman & Cantor, 2003](#) for a meta-analysis). Other research has focused on discrepancies between parents and children in reports about what the family's media rules are and the extent of child compliance with those rules ([Vittrup, 2009](#)).

Most recently, Valkenburg and colleagues have focused on the communicative style and consistency with which parents try to influence their children's media use ([Nikkelen, Vossen, Piotrowski, & Valkenburg, 2016](#); [Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & de Leeuw, 2013](#)). In a one-year longitudinal study ([Fikkers, Piotrowski, & Valkenburg, 2017](#)), 10- to 14-year-olds' reports of their parents' use of autonomy-supportive restrictive mediation (e.g., explaining reasons for rules, seeking child's viewpoint) predicted less concurrent exposure to violent media content, which in turn predicted lower rates of concurrent physical aggression. The longitudinal relationships were not significant. In contrast, controlling forms of restrictive mediation (e.g., punishment, guilt-induction) did not significantly predict exposure to media violence, either concurrently or longitudinally, nor did the extent of active mediation. Most relevant to the current project, inconsistent restriction (sometimes forbidding, sometimes allowing media use) predicted more concurrent exposure to media violence, which predicted more physical aggression, though again, the longitudinal relationships were not significant.

The current project extends these examinations of inconsistent regulation, taking a somewhat different tack by focusing on the dynamic between parents with regard to their child's media use. A parent who fondly remembers playing violent video games as a child may be tempted to disregard or undermine a partner who expresses concern about their child playing violent games. Such mixed messages might conceivably reduce the effectiveness of either parent's attempts at restriction, and cause parental conflict. Unrestricted exposure and parental conflict, in turn, may have negative effects for the child.

We know of only two prior studies assessing the extent to which parents agreed about media restrictions for their child. [Hardy et al.](#)

(2006) asked Australian parents of 12- to 13-year-olds a single item about the extent to which their partner supported/shared their rules about amount of time their child could spend watching TV: roughly 90% said their partner had the same rules and/or supported their rules. Virtually identical results emerged from a nationally representative sample of US parents of 2- to 17-year-olds: 89% of those in two-parent households said both partners had the same rules about how their child could use TV and other media ([Gentile & Walsh, 2002](#)). Neither study examined whether the extent of inter-parent consistency varied by age of the child or by media platform. Moreover, neither study examined how the ten percent of couples who had different rules responded to those differences, or the implications of disagreements for children's media use and socio-emotional outcomes.

To inform our predictions about how parental differences with regard to media rules might affect children's media use and outcomes, we turn to the literature on co-parenting.

2. Co-parenting, parenting differences, and conflict

According to family systems theorists such as [Margolin, Gordis, and John \(2001\)](#), the co-parenting relationship is an important subsystem of the family structure, distinct from the marital relationship, or from each parent's relationship with the child. Although co-parenting is often studied in the context of divorced couples' strategies for raising their children, the term itself refers to parents' joint negotiation of their roles and responsibilities with regard to the welfare of the child ([Margolin et al., 2001](#)). [Feinberg \(2003\)](#) described four dimensions of co-parenting including joint management of family interactions, division of child-rearing labor, agreement on childrearing issues, and support/undermining of each other's parenting behaviors.

Lack of supportive co-parenting and differences between parents in their parenting style (e.g., levels of permissiveness) predict marital conflict ([Tavossolie, Dudding, Madigan, Thorvardarson, & Winsler, 2016](#)). Indeed, child rearing is one of the most common sources of marital tension ([Pendry & Adam, 2013](#)). Two theoretical accounts suggest that parents' agreement and mutual support with regard to child-rearing style and strategies have important implications for children's well-being. Two commonly considered indicators of the child's well-being are internalizing symptoms (including depression, withdrawal, anxiety, loneliness) and externalizing symptoms (including hostile, aggressive, delinquent behaviors).

The Parenting Process Model predicts that parents' differences and conflict reduce their ability to parent effectively (e.g., less behavioral control, less warmth, less autonomy-supportive parenting), which in turn adversely affects the child's adjustment ([Schoppe-Sullivan, Schermerhorn, & Cummings, 2007](#)). Consistent with the notion of reduced behavioral control, evidence suggests that inconsistent parental rules/discipline tend to be relatively ineffective in regulating children's behaviors, such as aggression in early childhood ([Gardner, 1989](#)), or binge drinking in adolescence, ([Laghi, Lonigro, Baiocco, & Baumgartner, 2012](#)). [Schoppe-Sullivan et al. \(2007\)](#) studied families of 8- to 16-year-olds and found that marital conflict in year one predicted less supervision of the child in year two, which predicted increases in the child's internalizing symptoms by year three.

Little research thus far has examined the interplay between family conflict and children's media diets. In the one relevant study, 10- to 14-year-olds who reported high levels of family verbal and physical conflict (e.g., criticizing each other, arguing, hitting, cursing) showed stronger associations between exposure to violent media and increases over 4 months in physical and verbal aggression ([Fikkers, Piotrowski, Weeda, Vossen, & Valkenburg, 2013](#)).

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