



## Emotional variability during mother–adolescent conflict interactions: Longitudinal links to adolescent disclosure and maternal control



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### A B S T R A C T

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The aim of this study was to examine relations of emotional variability during mother–adolescent conflict interactions in early adolescence with adolescent disclosure and maternal control in early and late adolescence. Data were used from 92 mother–adolescent dyads (*M* age T1 = 13.05; 65.20% boys) that were videotaped at T1 while discussing a conflict. Emotional variability was derived from these conflict interactions. Mothers also completed questionnaires at the start of the study (T1) and five years later (T6) on adolescent disclosure and maternal control. Path analysis showed that more emotional variability during conflict interactions in early adolescence was associated with higher levels of *adolescent disclosure* in early adolescence and with relative decreases in *maternal control* from early to late adolescence. More emotional variability of mother–adolescent dyads serves an important function in adaptively dealing with relational challenges that arise during adolescence.

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Adolescence is a developmental phase that is marked by profound changes in mother–adolescent relationships. Mother–adolescent dyads need to find a new balance between adolescents' autonomy and privacy on the one hand and maternal control and access to information on the other hand. Across adolescence, mother–adolescent relationships tend to change from more hierarchical relationships in early adolescence to more egalitarian relationships by late adolescence (Laursen & Collins, 2009; Smetana, 2011). Conflict interactions in early adolescence are thought to play an important role in reorganizing mother–adolescent relationships towards more horizontality (Adams & Laursen, 2007; Branje, Laursen, & Collins, 2012). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of longitudinal evidence to empirically support this claim. To understand how mother–adolescent dyads attain a more egalitarian relationship, the current study examines the role of emotional processes during mother–adolescent conflict interactions in early adolescence.

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## Developmental changes during adolescence

Adolescence is characterized by a striving for greater autonomy. As adolescents try to assert more control and independence, they begin to re-evaluate the hierarchy of family roles (Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2006). Adolescents increasingly consider pieces of information about their daily life and activities as private and personal and consider it less legitimate for mothers to exert control over things. Although mothers gradually release their control over the course of adolescence, they continue to experience that some of these issues still fall under their jurisdiction (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013; Petronio, 2002). These relational changes can go together with temporary increases in emotional turmoil and conflict intensity (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Conflict interactions offer important experiences for mothers and adolescents to express, modulate, and regulate different types of emotions together in response to a difficult emotional conversation topic. Thereby conflict interactions represent an important context where adolescents' emotion regulation development takes place (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). Mother–adolescent dyads eventually need to find a way of communicating during these conflicts that allows for disagreement, negative emotions, and autonomy to occur and at the same time enhances relatedness and problem solving (Bosma et al., 1996; Laursen & Collins, 2009). Thus, although conflict interactions can be unpleasant, they are considered to be a means of recognizing and resolving discordant expectations regarding autonomy and control. As such, mother–adolescent conflict interactions are thought to enable mothers and adolescents to develop a more egalitarian relationship (Adams & Laursen, 2007). The purpose of the current study was to take initial steps in examining the role of emotional variability during mother–adolescent conflict interactions for dealing with relational challenges regarding disclosure and control.

## The function of emotional variability in conflict interactions

An aspect of mother–adolescent conflict interactions that has gained increased attention is emotional variability, which reflects the ability of mother–adolescent dyads to flexibly switch between dyadic emotional states from moment-to-moment during conflict interactions (Hollenstein, 2012). Mother–adolescent dyads with higher levels of emotional variability tend to express a wide range of positive and negative emotions and are able to flexibly adapt these emotions according to interpersonal demands. In contrast, mother–adolescent dyads with lower levels of emotional variability have a tendency to get stuck in certain emotions (either positive or negative) during conflicts. From a dynamic systems approach (Fogel, 1993; Thelen & Smith, 1994), more emotional variability during conflict interactions in early adolescence is thought to allow dyads to reorganize interaction patterns. That is, mother–adolescent dyads that show relatively high levels of emotional variability during conflict interactions are expected to adequately express their thoughts and emotions, to put across their point of view clearly, and to adjust discrepant perceptions accordingly. These dyads are expected to adequately deal with differences in opinions. In contrast, mother–adolescent dyads with low levels of emotional variability that show a tendency to get stuck in emotions during conflict interactions, even if they get stuck in neutral or positive emotions, might not be able to solve their conflicts, because these dyads may not provide a supportive and secure context to discuss different point of views and discordant emotions (Branje, 2008; Van der Giessen, Branje, Frijns, & Meeus, 2013).

Empirical evidence has shown that more emotional variability in early adolescence was associated with indicators of adaptive relationship reorganization. Higher levels of emotional variability were associated with moderate levels of perceived conflict frequency (Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Kunnen, & van Geert, 2009), with a realignment of levels of perceived dominance, criticism, and open communications in mother–adolescent relationships (Branje, 2008), and with a decrease in perceived conflict frequency and an increase in perceived autonomy support over time (Van der Giessen et al., 2013). Taken together, both theory and research suggest that more emotional variability during mother–adolescent conflict interactions is helpful in dealing with various relational challenges that arise during adolescence, and serves an important function in adaptively realigning relationships towards a more equal and horizontal nature.

## Emotional variability: links with adolescent disclosure and maternal control

Emotional variability in mother–adolescent conflict interactions could also play a role in dealing with relational challenges that arise with respect to adolescent disclosure and maternal control. Being able to express your thoughts, feelings, and emotions during conflict interactions, indicative of high emotional variability, is considered to be related to more open communication patterns, which might facilitate adolescent disclosure and could reduce maternal control (e.g., Adams & Laursen, 2007; Butler, 2011). First, *adolescent disclosure* reflects in the current study the extent to which mothers perceive that adolescents voluntarily and spontaneously reveal information about friends, activities, and whereabouts. Spontaneous disclosures of adolescents are thought to enhance mutual trust and understanding, and might also create a more egalitarian mother–adolescent relationship (Branje et al., 2012). One of the main reasons why adolescents refrain from disclosure is their concern about mothers' potentially negative responses about the content of their disclosure (Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2010). This implies that adolescents feel safer to disclose to their mothers in a context where their emotions, both positive and negative, are likely to be accepted. More emotional variability during conflict interactions might be indicative of such a safe and supportive context characterized by more open communication, because more emotionally variable mothers and adolescents are thought to be able to freely express different types of emotions. More emotional variability in early adolescence might therefore be related to more adolescent disclosure both concurrently and over time.

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