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The role of skin conductance level reactivity in the impact of children's exposure to interparental conflict on their attention performance



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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that undermining of attention performance might be one decisive underlying mechanism in the link between marital conflict and children's academic maladjustment, but little is known about specific risk patterns in this regard. This study examines, in an experimental approach, the role of children's history of interparental discord and skin conductance level reactivity (SCLR) as moderators in the link between analogue marital conflict exposure and children's attention. The attention performance of 57 children, aged 11 to 13 years, was assessed prior to and immediately after a 1-min video exposure to either (a) a couple conflict or (b) a neutral condition. SCLR was measured continuously throughout the stimulus presentation. Results indicated that children's family background of interparental conflict and their physiological reactivity moderated the influence of the experimental stimulus on children's short-term attention performance. Lower SCLR served as a protective factor in children from high-conflict homes exposed to the couple conflict. The current study advances the body of knowledge in this field by identifying risk patterns for the development of attention problems in children in relation to marital conflict exposure.

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Introduction

Exposure to destructive interparental conflict increases children's risk for psychological problems such as externalizing and internalizing symptoms, impairments in social relationships, and poor academic achievement (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Rhoades, 2008). Due to its role as predictor of a wide array of future adjustment problems (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), the latter has become the focus of increasing interest. Previous findings suggest attention performance as one of the major underlying mechanisms that may account for the detrimental impact of interparental conflict on child school maladjustment (Davies, Woitach, Winter, & Cummings, 2008). However, to our knowledge no study has been undertaken identifying why certain children may be at higher risk for disruption in attention performance in this context. We addressed this paucity of research by examining the effects of marital discord on children's attentional performance, testing physiological reactivity and children's history of interparental conflict exposure as moderators, in an experimental approach.

Previous work on the emotional security theory (EST; Davies & Cummings, 1994) provides conceivable explanatory mechanisms in the link between marital strife and children's academic problems. EST posits that maintaining a sense of security and safety in the family setting is a priority goal for children and that insecurity is elevated when facing interparental conflict. It holds the sensitization hypothesis stating that children do not get used to conflict between their parents but that, with repeated exposure, the more conflict sensitive they get and the more intense their emotional and behavioral responses become (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981; Davies, Sturge-Apple, Winter, Cummings, & Farrell, 2006). Accordingly, the theory postulates that children from high-conflict homes, compared with children experiencing lower levels of marital conflict, are more likely to develop negative internal representations of the consequences of parental conflict for the welfare of themselves and the family, one of three domains in which emotional security can be manifested (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Although such insecure representations may be adaptive by enhancing children's ability to identify danger cues in high-conflict homes, maladaptive implications for their long-term adjustment are reported. Presuming to serve as schemata for guiding decisions and information processing, they have emerged to be a primary intervening mechanism in the association between interparental conflict and children's academic maladjustment over 2 years (Sturge-Apple, Davies, Winter, Cummings, & Schermerhorn, 2008). Beyond this, several studies have explored the underlying processes in the relation between children's emotional insecurity and their functioning in the school setting, including (a) the role of sleep disruptions (El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Cummings, & Keller, 2007; El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Keller, Cummings, & Acebo, 2007), (b) negative peer information processing (e.g., Bascoe, Davies, Sturge-Apple, & Cummings, 2009), and (c) attention performance (e.g., Davies et al., 2008).

Addressing the latter, Davies and colleagues (2008) found that attention difficulties measured by task assessment and parents' reports accounted for 34% of the link between insecure representations of the interparental relationship and teacher reports on children's school problems. Insecure representations predicted subsequent child attention problems 1 year later, which in turn were associated with children's academic adjustment both concurrently and longitudinally over a 1-year period (Davies et al., 2008). Therefore, parental discord appears to have a substantial impact on children's functioning outside the home as well, in particular in school, with attention difficulties as a potential result. Concerns about emotional security following destructive interparental conflict require psychosocial resources that may impair children's neuropsychological functioning, for example, attention performance (Davies, Winter, & Cicchetti, 2006). In a similar vein, Davies, Manning, and Cicchetti (2013) recently reported that regulation of emotional insecurity in toddlers seems to cause impairments in other domains of functioning by prioritizing resources toward potential threat. This hypothesis is consistent with resource allocation models postulating that human cognitive processing of multiple stimuli is limited by central resources (Kahneman, 1973). To the extent that an individual is burdened with too many distracting stimuli that tap these resources, performance on other tasks will suffer (Schneider & Fisk, 1982). Given that affective states redirect attentional focus from the task to the affective experience particularly strongly (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005), exposure to

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