



Examining the Social Consequences of Interparental Conflict: Pathways through Threat Appraisals and Social Anxiety

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Introduction

- Interparental dynamics have direct effects on development and success of adolescents across contexts (e.g. Buehler et al., 1994, Davies & Cummings, 1994; Harold, Aitken, & Nelson, 2007; Fosco & Grych, 2010)
- Interparental conflict (IPC) places youth at risk for being less effective in peer relationships
- They may learn maladaptive social interactional skills by observing contentious, poorly resolved interparental conflicts (Buehler et al., 2009)
- Proposed a developmental model through adolescents cognitive appraisals of conflict, that may place them at risk poor peer outcomes (Figure 1)
- Threat appraisals of IPC may be related to increases in adolescents' social anxiety about peer relationships

The Present Study

- Examines the potential pathway linking interparental conflict to adolescent social development and the formation of subsequent peer relationships
- Aims to learn about how adolescents' perception of threat of parental conflict influence their levels of social anxiety and peer relationships

Hypotheses:

- Adolescents who perceive interparental conflict as threatening would have increased social anxiety about peer relationships
- Social anxiety would be a key mechanism linking interparental conflict and perceived threat to social isolation and engaging with deviant peers

Participants and Procedure

- Randomly-selected subset of 6th graders and their families participating in PROSPER project (PROmoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience)
- Two-parent families were used for this analysis, including 768 families
- 80% retention rate across waves
- 94.9% of female caregivers were identified as "mother", and 75.3 % of male caregivers were identifies as "father"
- 61% of families resided in Iowa, and 39% in Pennsylvania
- The median household income was \$52,000 at T1 (in 2003)

Demographic Information at Time 1

768 Families	
Age:	
Adolescents	11.3 (SD = 0.49)
Mothers	38.7 (SD = 6.05)
Fathers	41.2 (SD = 7.14)
Adolescent Ethnicity:	
White	89%
Hispanic	6%
African American	1%
Asian	1%
Other	3%

- As hypothesized, IPC was related to increases in perceived threat over time, and perceived threat was associated with increases in adolescents' social anxiety at T3; the indirect effect was statistically significant.
- Social anxiety was associated with increases in adolescents' social isolation and decreases in friendship support by the end of grade 8.
- There were significant indirect effects for social isolation (p=.02) and friendship support (p=.03) over three paths from IPC to perceived threat, social anxiety, and peer relationships.

Corresponding Grades	
Time 1	Fall of 6 th Grade
Time 2	Spring of 6 th Grade
Time 3	Spring of 7 th Grade
Time 4	Spring of 8 th Grade

Table 1. Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Interparental Conflict T1	—										
2. Threat T1	.31**	—									
3. Threat T2	.27**	.55**	—								
4. Soc. Anx. T1	.08*	.38**	.34**	—							
5. Soc. Anx. T3	.15**	.34**	.39**	.58**	—						
6. Soc. Isolation T1	.07	.28**	.19**	.39**	.32**	—					
7. Soc. Isolation T4	.02	.21**	.17**	.24**	.32**	.25**	—				
8. Frnd. Support T1	-.10**	-.22**	-.21**	-.32**	-.37**	-.14**	—				
9. Frnd. Support T4	-.10*	-.13**	-.12**	-.16**	-.25**	-.22**	-.36**	.33**	—		
10. Antisocial Peers T1	.05	.15**	.11**	.07	.07	.09*	-.18**	-.18**	—		
11. Antisocial Peers T4	.03	.06	.13**	.00	.04	.08*	-.17**	-.28**	.34**	—	
M	2.05	2.25	2.17	2.25	2.15	1.58	1.57	4.18	4.25	1.39	1.63
SD	0.70	1.08	1.08	0.77	0.77	0.87	0.81	0.64	0.61	0.67	0.84

Note. Covariates included in this model as auxiliary variables: parent education, family income, and living with two biological parents.

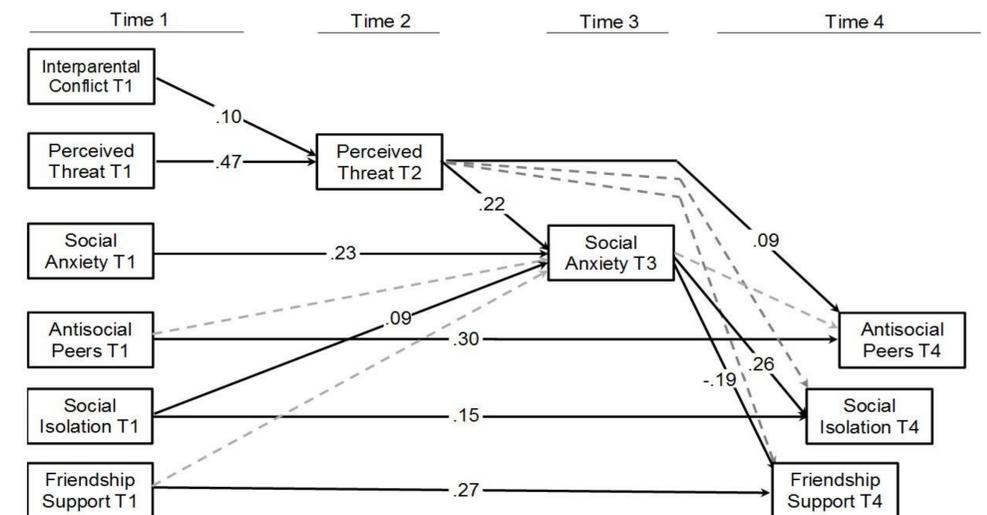
Method

Measures

- **Interparental Conflict:** Each parent responded to a set of 7 items about their own behavior and their partners' behavior assessing the frequency of conflict behaviors over the past month. Sample items included: "hit, push, grab, or shove you." (α range .83 - .90)
- **Perceived Threat:** Adolescents completed 4 items (CPIC; Grych et al., 1992) assessing their beliefs that IPC may have negative consequences for them, their parents, or their family. Sample items included: "When my parents argue, I'm afraid that something bad will happen." (α range .86 - .87)
- **Social Anxiety:** Adolescents completed 18 items assessing their feeling of anxiety in social situations. Sample items included: "I'm afraid that others won't like me." (α range .93 - .94)
- **Social Isolation:** Adolescents responded to 3 items assessing their general feelings of social isolation at school. Sample items included: "I feel left out of things at school." (α range .93 - .94)
- **Friendship Support:** Adolescents responded to 8 items assessing their general feelings about their social support groups at school. Sample items included: "My friends care about me." (α range .76 - .81)
- **Antisocial Peers:** Adolescents responded to 3 items assessing the antisocial behaviors of their "closest friends." Sample items included: "These friends sometimes break the law." (α range .79 - .82)

Results

Figure 1. Examining a Sequential Mediation Model of Threat and Social Anxiety Pathways from Interparental Conflict to Peer Relationships



Note. Path coefficients reflect standardized betas; solid lines reflect statistically significant paths (p<.05). Dotted lines are not statistically significant. Parent education was included as a covariate, but is not displayed for ease of presentation.

Model fit: $\chi^2(20) = 41.652$ p < .01; CFI = .98; TLI = .95; RMSEA = .038 (90%: .021-.054)

Discussion

- There were significant indirect effects over three paths from interparental conflict to perceived threats, to social anxiety, to peer relationships, and statistically significant effects were found for social isolation and friendship support.
- Social anxiety was not correlated with increases in antisocial peer relations; however adolescents' perceived threats were directly associated with antisocial peer friendships.
- The adolescent developmental period is understudied in terms of IPC and perceived threats, and these findings suggest that adolescents are significantly influenced by interactions between their parents across contexts.
- Overall, these findings suggest that future interventions should target IPC as a mechanism to change adolescent social functioning.

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