

# Children's Patterns of Emotion Regulation during Interparental Conflicts: Implication for Children's Adjustment

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## Introduction

- Interparental conflict is a robust risk factor for child maladjustment (Buehler et al., 1997; Rhoades, 2008)
- The ways in which children evaluate parental conflicts guide children's coping and efforts for diffusing conflicts (Davies & Woitach, 2008; Fosco & Grych, 2010)
- We propose four profiles of children's emotion regulation during interparental conflict (see Figure 1.):
  - Concordant Low:** The experience and expression of *low* level of negative emotions
  - Suppression:** Restraint of expressed negative emotions compared to how they are experienced
  - Amplification:** Magnification of expressed negative emotions beyond how they are experienced
  - Dysregulated:** The experience and expression of *high* level of negative emotions
- The psychological implications of these regulatory styles during conflict episodes are not well understood

## The Present Study

- Examines whether and how different emotion regulatory styles toward interparental conflict predict different aspects of youth adjustment and affect
- Aims to learn about how children's appraisals of interparental conflict influence their employment of different emotion regulatory styles

### Hypotheses:

- Children who use *suppression* regulatory style would be at higher risk for internalizing problems
- Children who use *amplification* regulatory style would be at greater risk for externalizing problems
- Children who are *dysregulated* would be at higher risk for both internalizing and externalizing problems

## Participants and Procedure

- Among 266 families contacted, 56% agreed to participate
- 150 two-parent families with 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade children (8-12 years old)
- 48.7% girls; 51.3% boys
- Each parent and the child completed questionnaires separately and were video recorded in a family conflict task
- Parents were given 10 minutes to talk about disagreement over parenting issues while the child was sitting 10 feet away
- Emotions were observed during the task and self-rated after the task

## Demographic Information

N	150
Male	77
Female	73
Age	8-12, median 10
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	55%
African American	28.2%
Latino	6.0%
Asian	1.3%
Native American	0.7%
Biracial	6.7%
Other	2.2%

## Method

Variables	Measures	$\alpha$
*Self-Rated Negative Affect	CDR	.73
*Observed Negative Affect	SCIFF	$r = .59$
Internalizing Problems (mother-report; father-report)	CBCL	.85; .85
Internalizing Problems (self-report)	YSR	.85
Externalizing Problems (mother-report; father-report)	CBCL	.92; .90
Aggression (self-report)	YSR	.79
Positive Affect	PANAS-C	.86
Negative Affect	PANAS-C	.88
Conflict Properties	CPIC	.88
Threat	CPIC	.78
Self-Blame	CPIC	.79

\*Negative affect measured after the family conflict task

## Measures

- CDR** - Children's Distress Reaction to Interparental Conflict
- SCIFF** - System for Coding Interactions and Family Functioning (Lindahl & Malik, 2000)
- CBCL** - Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991)
- YSR** - Youth Self-Report (Achenbach, 1991)
- PANAS-C** - The Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children (Laurent et al., 1999)
- CPIC** - Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Questionnaire (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992)

## Results

Figure 1. The Four Profiles of Children's Emotion Regulation

		Observed Negative Emotions	
		Low	High
Self-Rated Negative Emotions	Low	Concordant Low (41%)	Amplification (9%)
	High	Suppression (34%)	Dysregulated (15%)

Valid=140, Missing=10

Table 1. Emotion Regulation Group Comparisons for Youth Adjustment

Model	"Concordant Low"			"Suppression"			"Amplification"			"Dysregulated"		
	M	SD	<i>d</i>	M	SD	<i>d</i>	M	SD	<i>d</i>	M	SD	<i>d</i>
CBCL Mom INT	4.93	3.96		7.32	5.97	0.47	7.38	5.25	0.53	8.50	5.04	0.79
CBCL Dad INT*	4.20 <sup>ab</sup>	3.69		7.47 <sup>a</sup>	5.49	0.70	6.92	5.99	0.55	7.74 <sup>b</sup>	5.13	0.79
YSR INT	4.46 <sup>a</sup>	3.34		7.22 <sup>ab</sup>	4.61	0.69	3.93 <sup>b</sup>	3.58	-0.15	5.74	3.99	0.35
CBCL Mom EXT	6.56 <sup>a</sup>	6.26		8.71	7.55	0.31	8.54	4.98	0.35	12.33 <sup>a</sup>	9.94	0.69
CBCL Dad EXT*	6.49	4.75		8.79	6.92	0.39	11.54	7.28	0.82	12.00	10.19	0.69
YSR AGGR <sup>ns</sup>	6.91	4.43		7.96	4.42	0.24	6.58	4.81	-0.07	7.57	4.37	0.15
PANAS POS*	4.00 <sup>a</sup>	0.56		3.66	0.81	-0.49	3.54	0.91	-0.61	3.35 <sup>a</sup>	0.85	-0.90
PANAS NEG*	1.51 <sup>a</sup>	0.47		2.01 <sup>a</sup>	0.83	0.74	1.67	0.59	0.30	1.94	0.74	0.69
PANAS BAL*	2.50 <sup>ab</sup>	0.67		1.65 <sup>a</sup>	1.40	-0.77	1.88	1.06	-0.70	1.41 <sup>b</sup>	1.17	-1.14

Note. Values with the same superscript were significantly different. The model testing for differences on YSR aggression was not statistically significant. \*Homogeneity of variance could not be assumed. In these models, Welch was used for ANOVA and Games-Howell was used for post-hoc comparisons.

Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regressions Analyses Predicting Children's Regulatory Styles

	<i>b</i> (SE)	Odds Ratio	95%CI
1. Predicting Suppression (vs. Concordant Low)			
Conflict Properties	0.02(0.04)	1.02	[0.93, 1.11]
Threat	0.11(0.06)*	1.12	[1.00, 1.25]
Self-Blame	0.16(0.08)*	1.18	[1.01, 1.37]
Observed Negativity	-0.37(0.25)	0.69	[0.42, 1.13]
2. Predicting Amplification (vs. Concordant Low)			
Conflict Properties	0.10(0.07)	1.10	[0.97, 1.25]
Threat	-0.10(0.09)	0.90	[0.75, 1.08]
Self-Blame	0.09(0.11)	1.09	[0.88, 1.36]
Observed Negativity	0.48(0.34)	1.61	[0.83, 3.16]
3. Predicting Dysregulated (vs. Concordant Low)			
Conflict Properties	-0.09(0.05)	0.91	[0.82, 1.02]
Threat	0.14(0.07)*	1.15	[1.00, 1.32]
Self-Blame	0.11(0.09)	1.11	[0.93, 1.33]
Observed Negativity	0.64(0.27)*	1.89	[1.11, 3.23]

Note. Observed Negativity is the observed negativity of the interparental conflict task, which was included as a covariate. \* $p < .05$

## Discussion

- SUPPRESSION:** Children who keep their negative emotions about interparental conflict to themselves are more likely to present higher level of internalizing problems and negative affect and lower level of affective balance
- AMPLIFICATION:** Children who amplify their negative emotions about interparental conflict are more likely to report lower level of internalizing problems than those who are suppressing them
- DYSREGULATED:** Children who have high levels of both experienced and observed negative emotions about interparental conflict are likely to present higher level of internalizing and externalizing problems. They are also likely to experience less positive affect and lower level of affective balance
- Children who perceive interparental conflict as both *threatening* and *self-blaming* are more likely to **suppress** their expression of negative emotions
- Children who perceive interparental conflict as mainly *threatening* are more likely to be **dysregulated** (experience and express high level of negative emotions)

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