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, Atkin, & 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

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

Method

- 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 0.83 – 0.90)
- Perceived Threat: Adolescents completed 4 items (CPI; Grych et al., 1992) assessing their beliefs that IPC may have negative consequences for them, their parents, or their family. Sample items included: “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

- As hypothesized, IPC was related to increased 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 fitness 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.

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 development 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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