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Marital Problems in Childhood Affect Teen Adjustment

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Interparental Conflict in Kindergarten and Adolescent Adjustment: Prospective Investigation of Emotional Security as an Explanatory Mechanism

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Marital discord is a significant social problem for children, sometimes leading to problems in health and well-being. A new longitudinal study finds that the impact of marital problems on children in their kindergarten years is long lasting and can lead to emotional problems that contribute to difficulties in adolescence.

The study, by researchers at the University of Notre Dame and the University of Rochester, appears in the journal *Child Development*.

“The results further highlight the possibility that there will be persistent negative effects of children’s early experiences when there is conflict between their parents, at least when their emotional insecurity increases as a result of the conflict,” according to E. Mark Cummings, professor and Notre Dame Endowed Chair in Psychology at the University of Notre Dame, the study’s lead author. “This study has important implications for clinicians and parents,” he added.

Cummings and his colleagues examined 235 primarily middle-class mothers, fathers, and children over seven years, focusing on the links between marital conflict when the children were in kindergarten, children’s emotional insecurity in the early school years, and subsequent problems when the children were teens. Children’s emotional security about family ties is related to their sense of protection, safety, and security, and has implications for how they do socially and emotionally. The researchers observed parents discussing a topic they had identified as hard to handle, rating specific conflict behaviors. They also asked parents to report on their conflicts.

The study found that conflict between parents when their children are young predicted children’s emotional insecurity later in childhood, which, in turn, predicted adjustment problems in adolescence, including depression and anxiety.

“Emotional insecurity appears to be an explanation for the effects of marital conflict on children’s later problems,” Cummings explained. “This mechanism lasts across relatively long periods of time and across the transition between childhood and adolescence.”

The National Institute of Mental Health funded the study.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Volume 83, Issue 5, Interparental Conflict in Kindergarten and Adolescent Adjustment: Prospective Investigation of Emotional Security as an Explanatory Mechanism by Cummings, EM, George, MRW, McCoy, KP (University of Notre Dame), and Davies, PT (University of Rochester). Copyright 2012 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.