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# Parent–Child Connectedness Mediates the Association Between Marital Conflict and Children’s Internalizing/Externalizing Outcomes

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**Abstract** A number of studies of marital conflict have examined both parent- and child-reports of marital conflict and child outcomes, but additional research is needed to provide evidence for potential mechanisms of action explaining the association between marital conflict and child internalizing and externalizing outcomes. In the present study ( $N = 330$  2-parent/child triads), we show that the connectedness of the parent–child relationship (as reported by parents, but not children) significantly mediated the effect of marital conflict on children’s internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Our findings suggest that children’s perceptions are important when trying to understand the impact of marital conflict, but our results suggest that parent reports provide important, incremental insight and should not be overlooked.

**Keywords** Marital conflict · Parent–child connectedness · Internalizing disorders · Externalizing disorders · Mediation

## Introduction

Marital conflict has been associated with a number of adverse outcomes for children. Taking a multidimensional view of these constructs is important because children’s perceptions of conflict and their appraisal of its meaning

are theorized to be central to predicting child adjustment (Grych and Fincham 1990). While children’s mental health outcomes are determined by multiple factors, marital conflict of parents is one of the most robust predictors of these outcomes (Emery 1982; Davies and Cummings 1994; Wang and Crane 2001). Marital conflict has been associated with a number of negative outcomes for children, including delinquency, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Fishman and Meyers 2000; Grych and Fincham 1990). Although conflict is a normal part of marriage—indeed, if it is handled well and resolved constructively, exposure to mild conflict may help a child to develop effective strategies for coping and constructive problem solving (Grych and Fincham 1990)—if it is poorly managed, marital conflict leads to an increase in children’s risk for emotional and behavioral problems (Emery 1982; Kitzmann 2000).

This is especially true if the child becomes involved in the conflict, whether through directly witnessing it or through a parent having conversations with the child about the conflict. This process of pulling a third party (e.g., a child) into what was originally a dyadic conflict is called triangulation. Studies (Wang and Crane 2001; Fosco and Grych 2010) suggest that triangulation predicts child depressive symptoms and negative effects on the parent–child relationship, also known as the spillover hypothesis (Shek 1998), which will be discussed further. Child reports of marital conflict are theorized to be a particularly important factor in understanding the relationship between marital conflict and child outcomes (Grych and Fincham 1993). The cognitive-contextual framework proposed by Grych and Fincham (1990) proposes that it is not the conflict itself, but the child’s appraisal of the conflict that predicts outcomes. A child’s perception of the conflict is a significant predictor of various cognitive and behavioral responses, including self-blame, feelings of threat, and the

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inability to cope with stressful events (Mann and Gilliom 2004). Indeed, several studies (Emery 1982; Fosco and Grych 2010; Gerard Buehler et al. 2005; Grych and Fincham 1990; Mann and Gilliom 2004) have assessed marital conflict by measuring the child's cognitive appraisal of the conflict.

Researchers studying marital conflict and child outcomes have used a variety of approaches. Researchers studying marital conflict and child outcomes have used a variety of approaches, including only parent-reports (Fishman and Meyers 2000; Gerard et al. 2006; Sturge-Apple et al. 2006), child-reports, (Grych et al. 2004) and combinations of child- and parent-reports (Ablow et al. 2009; Burman et al. 1987; Grych et al. 2003; McDonald and Grych 2006; Stocker 2003; Wang and Crane 2001). Some have considered mediators such as parenting behaviors or parental involvement (Fishman and Meyers 2000; Forsch and Mangelsdorf 2001; Kitzmann 2000; Schoppe-Sullivan et al. 2007). Many studies have explored the parent-child relationship, aiming to measure global relationship quality (Davies and Cummings 1994; Donahue et al. 2010; Erel and Burman 1995; Grych et al. 2004), but have not tested specific aspects of this relationship, such as connectedness. One study that tested parent-child relationship quality and child interpersonal awareness as potential mediators between marital discord and child outcomes found that parent-child relationship quality significantly mediated the path from marital conflict to child interpersonal awareness and that parent-child relationship quality and child interpersonal awareness both mediated the path from marital conflict to child outcomes such as social withdrawal and aggression (Harrist and Ainslie 1998). These findings provide a foundation for further study of how the parent-child relationship may mediate between marital conflict and child outcomes. Although the quality of the parent-child relationship as a whole was shown to mediate child outcomes, parent-child connectedness (one aspect of that relationship) has not been specifically tested as a mediator.

In attempting to understand this particular relational process—the influence of marital conflict on child outcomes—using multiple informants is important because research has shown that perceptions of conflict are important moderators of outcomes (Grych and Fincham 1990). Likewise, using multiple informants in determining the parent-child connectedness is equally important, considering that both sides of the relationship need to be assessed in order to understand the parent-child connectedness accurately.

While research has explored the relationship between parent-child relationship quality and several other variables, it has not tested parent-child connectedness specifically as a mediator between marital conflict and

child outcomes. Parent-child connectedness is often conflated with parent-child relationships in general, but it refers to a specific component of these relationships, namely the emotional connectedness between parents and children, or the extent to which children feel loved, cared for, and close to their parents (Boutelle et al. 2009; Padilla-Walker et al. 2011). Parent-child connectedness is worth examining as a mediator between marital conflict and child outcomes, because research has shown parent-child relationship quality, including connectedness, to be both affected by marital conflict and predictive of child outcomes. Research has shown a direct relationship between marital quality and parent-child connectedness. Booth and Amato (1994) found that when marital quality is high, children typically have a close relationship with both parents; conversely, the presence of marital conflict is linked with poor parent-child relations that may last into adulthood (Orbuch et al. 2000; Osborne and Fincham 1996; Yu et al. 2010). This relationship holds true for both biological and blended families, and it may be even stronger for stepparent-stepchild relationships (Fine and Kurdek 1995). This suggests an important link between marital quality and parent-child connectedness, in addition to marital quality's established link to child outcomes.

Shek (1998) discussed two pathways by which the marital relationship might affect parent-child relations: the spillover hypothesis and the compensatory hypothesis. These hypotheses propose opposite pathways by which marital quality affects parent-child relationship quality either directly (spillover) or inversely (compensatory). In a meta-analysis examining support for these competing hypotheses, Erel and Burman (1995) showed little empirical evidence for the compensatory hypothesis, but they found compelling evidence for the spillover hypothesis. In this case, the quality of the marital relationship carried over to the parent-child relationship illustrating a spillover effect. A more recent study used daily diaries to examine how the spillover and compensatory hypotheses might play out over time (Kouros et al. 2014). They found a positive relationship between each day's ratings of marital quality and parent-child relationship quality for both mothers and fathers, supporting the spillover hypothesis cross-sectionally. However, they also found a negative relationship between marital quality ratings and parent-child relationship ratings from 1 day to the next for mothers only, suggesting support for the compensatory hypothesis longitudinally. While the presence of a relationship between parental conflict and parent-child relationship quality is not disputed, the exact nature of this relationship is still unclear.

Parent-child connectedness plays an important role in child adjustment and well-being. A five-year longitudinal study found a strong association between parent-child connectedness and child outcomes; a closer parent-child

bond was associated with increased body satisfaction in females, increased sense of self-esteem in males, and reduced depressive symptoms for both males and females (Boutelle et al. 2009). Conversely, lower levels of parent–child connectedness have been associated with increased levels of negative outcomes for children, including increased suicide attempts, increased depressive symptoms, and lower self-esteem (Ackard et al. 2006).

Although marital conflict has been shown to be a strong predictor of child outcomes, it does not operate in isolation. The connectedness of the parent–child relationship is important. Amato (1986) first showed that marital conflict was related to poorer self-concept in children, then found that this conflict is most strongly related to poor self-concept in children when the parent–child connectedness is low. In their sample, the relationship between marital conflict and poor self-concept disappeared when accounting for the level of connectedness of the parent–child relationship in school aged children. This research laid the foundation of investigation into different aspects of the parent–child relationship in subsequent years. However, little research has looked at the connectedness of the parent–child relationship, as Amato did, while using both parents and the child as informants in determining the relationship between parental conflict and externalizing and internalizing behaviors in children, as we attempt to do in this study.

The purpose of this study is to combine these broad areas of research—marital conflict, parent–child connectedness, and children’s outcomes—to shed greater light on the mechanisms that might drive these associations. In the present study we will examine parent–child connectedness as a mediator of the effect of marital conflict on children’s outcomes (see Fig. 1), using both parent–reports and child–reports. Including both reports will allow us to see whether children’s appraisals offer incremental predictive power, as they are hypothesized to do (Grych and Fincham 1990), when we account for parents’ report of conflict. We predict that marital conflict influences child internalizing and externalizing outcomes via the mechanism of parent–child connectedness. Further, we predict that both parent– and child–reports will predict significant amounts of variance in child outcomes, even when accounting for the other informants’ reports.

## Method

### Participants

Data for the present study were drawn from the *masked for review project*, a study of multiple domains of family life involving families with a child between the ages of 12 and

17. The participants for this study were taken from wave four of the project, and the sample consists of 469 families (330 two-parent families and 139 single-parent families). The present study consists only of the 330 two-parent families who were recruited from the greater *masked for review* area. Families were recruited using a national telephone survey database (Polk Directories/InfoUSA), and were randomly selected from targeted census tracts that mirrored the socioeconomic and racial stratification of reports of local school districts. All families with a child between the ages of 10 and 14 living within target census tracts were deemed eligible to participate in the *masked for review*. Demographics for the sample are in Tables 1 and 2. Approximately 95 % of parents were currently married and had never divorced. In these data Parent 1 refers to the parent the couple perceived as the primary caregiver. In virtually all cases (97 %), Parent 1 was the mother and Parent 2 was the father.

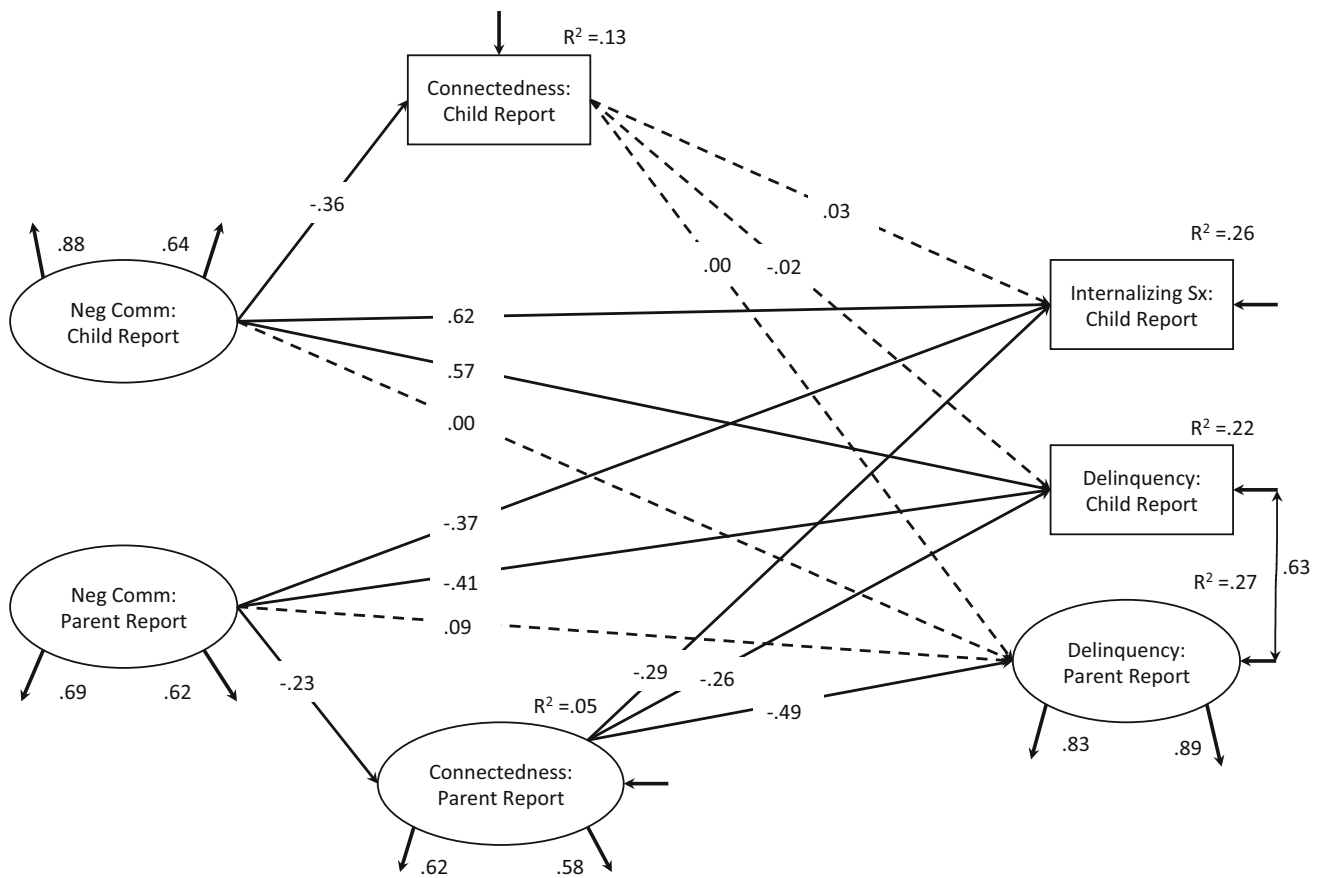
### Procedure

In an attempt to more closely mirror the demographics of the area, a limited number of families were recruited into the study through other means (e.g., referrals, fliers;  $N = 077, 15\%$ ). By broadening our approach, the project significantly increased the socio-economic and ethnic diversity of the sample. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to collecting any data. Once eligibility was established and consent to participate were obtained, interviewers made an appointment to come to the family’s home to conduct an assessment interview in the home. During the assessment interview, questionnaires were administered to the parents and child in a pen and paper format.

### Measures

#### *Parent–Child Social Connectedness*

The degree to which parents feel connected to the target child was assessed using nine items adapted from a general social connectedness measure (Lee et al. 2001). Items were reworded to focus on the parent–child relationship and parents were asked to respond in terms of their agreement or disagreement with statements such as “I feel distant from my child” and “I feel like an outsider with my child.” Parents responded on a Likert scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 6 (*agree*). Higher scores represent greater perceived levels of connection between the parent and their child. For this sample, reliability (Cronbach’s alpha coefficient) was found to be .90 for Parent 1 and .90 for Parent 2. Means and standard deviations as well as bivariate correlations are presented for this and all other scales in Table 3.



**Fig. 1** Proposed model in which connectedness between parents and children mediates the effect of parental conflict on children’s outcomes. Parameter estimates are presented in standardized units.

Solid lines indicate that a parameter estimate was statistically significant at  $p < .05$ , dashed lines indicate that a parameter estimate was not statistically significant

**Table 1** Demographics

	Children	Mothers	Fathers
Mean age (years)	14.24	46.2	48.3
Ethnicity: European American	77.90 %	80.70 %	86.60 %
Ethnicity: African American	5.40 %	5.90 %	5.40 %
Ethnicity: other or multiethnic	16.70 %	13.50 %	8.00 %
Education: bachelor’s or higher		68.60 %	70.90 %

**Table 2** Household income per year

	% of sample
<\$59,000	15.80
\$60,000–\$99,000	33.70
\$100,000–\$149,000	33.30
>\$150,000	17.20

A child version of the same scale was used to assess the degree to which the child feels connected to each parent. Sample items included: “Even though I am very close to my

parent, I feel I can be myself” and “I feel so comfortable with my parent that I can tell him/her anything.” Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with higher scores indicating a greater degree of parent–child social connectedness. Cronbach’s alpha for the combined scale (where reports of feelings toward both parents are included in a single scale) was .84 in the present sample.

*Marital Conflict*

Parents’ report on conflict was measured using 11 items from the RELATE assessment battery (Busby et al. 2001). Respondents answered questions including, “My partner uses tactless choice of words when he or she complains” and “When my partner gets upset, my partner acts like there are glaring faults in my personality.” Responses were based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of negative communication and conflict in the relationship. Cronbach’s alpha for the overall couple communication scale was .87 for Parent 1 and .85 for Parent 2.

**Table 3** Descriptive statistics and correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Mean	2.34	2.53	4.57	4.39	0.09	0.10	2.02	1.67	0.40	0.16	3.89
Standard deviation	0.70	0.69	0.80	0.83	0.17	0.16	0.83	0.77	0.36	0.22	0.60
1. Parental conflict (P1)	1.00										
2. Parental conflict (P2)	0.44	1.00									
3. Parent–child Rel (P1)	−0.09	−0.04	1.00								
4. Parent–child Rel (P2)	−0.06	−0.13	0.36	1.00							
5. Delinquency (P1) 0.11	0.11	0.06	−0.25	−0.24	1.00						
6. Delinquency (P2) 0.14	0.14	0.14	−0.22	−0.30	0.72	1.00					
7. Parental conflict frequency (child)	0.46	0.42	−0.05	−0.12	0.08	0.14	1.00				
8. Parental conflict triangulation (child)	0.28	0.24	−0.08	−0.12	0.10	0.12	0.57	1.00			
9. Internalizing Sx (child)	0.10	0.16	−0.15	−0.17	0.11	0.17	0.31	0.27	1.00		
10. Delinquency (child)	0.06	0.07	−0.15	−0.09	0.48	0.53	0.26	0.20	0.31	1.00	
11. Parent–child Rel (child)	−0.09	−0.15	0.33	0.20	−0.23	−0.17	−0.30	−0.32	−0.23	−0.24	1.00

Child's exposure to marital conflict and parental attempts to triangulate the child were measured using a 10-item modified version of the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Grych et al. 1992). Children answered how true items were with respect to each parent, with responses ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Sample items included "I see my parents arguing or disagreeing" and "I feel caught in the middle when my parents argue." Higher scores indicate higher levels of child-perceived marital conflict and higher levels of triangulation as perceived by the child. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this measure was previously found to be .70 for marital conflict frequency subscale and .71 for the triangulation subscale (Grych et al. 1992). Cronbach's alpha was .92 (parent conflict) and .76 (triangulation) for this sample.

#### Child Internalizing Symptoms and Delinquency

Internalizing and externalizing problem behavior was measured using delinquency-related items adapted by Barber et al. (2005) from Achenbach's Child Behavior Checklist (1991). Internalizing sample items included: "I am unhappy, sad or depressed" and "I feel worthless or inferior." Externalizing sample items included: "I lie or cheat" and "I steal things from places other than home." Responses ranged from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*very true or often true*) with higher scores representing higher levels of internalizing symptoms and/or delinquency. This measure has extensive evidence of both reliability and validity, as well as equivalent factor structure across ethnicities (Krishnakumar et al. 2003). In this sample, Cronbach's alpha for delinquency items was .77 and .84 for internalizing items.

Parents reported on delinquent behaviors using the same items that children completed (Barber et al. 2005), albeit

with phrasing adaptations to allow for parental responses about their children. Sample items include: "My child lies or cheats" and "My child steals things from places other than home." Responses ranged from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*often true*), with higher scores representing higher levels of delinquent behavior. Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .77 for Parent 1 and .66 for Parent 2.

#### Data Analysis

For measures of parent-reports of negative communication, parent-child connectedness, and child delinquency, we use the common fate model (CFM). The CFM is a dyadic data analytic approach that is useful when a construct influences both dyad members' perspectives (Ledermann and Kenny 2012). For example, how connected a child feels to her or her parents could be perceived differently by each parent, though their perspectives are likely to be more similar than different. Just as indicators of a latent variable reflect how a latent construct influences individual item responses, so a CFM reflects how a construct influences both parents' perceptions. By obtaining parents' reports of their relationship with the child we are able to model the effect of dyadic parent-child connectedness from the shared perspective of both parents rather than analyzing them as if they were separate, non-independent influences. Further, this allows for examination of the influence of more "true score" variance on the construct while parsing out error variance, thus allowing for a more powerful and valid tests of the influence of these constructs on outcomes. The data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling in AMOS 18.0; the results can be seen in Fig. 1. The model provided a good fit to the



data  $\chi^2(30) = 68.80, p < .01, TLI = .93, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .05$ . For our tests of mediation, we used the PRODCLIN approach to bootstrapping, estimating the limits of the confidence intervals using the *RMediation* package (Tofighi and MacKinnon 2011). When using this approach, an effect is established as statistically significant if zero does not fall within the limits of the confidence interval (i.e., if  $\alpha = .05$ , a 95 % confidence interval is used).

## Results

As predicted, child-reported marital conflict was associated with less child-reported connectedness ( $\beta = -.36, p < .001$ ), more child-reported internalizing symptoms ( $\beta = .62, p < .001$ ) and child-reported delinquency ( $\beta = .57, < .001$ ); it was not associated with parent-reported delinquency. Similarly, parent-reported negative communication was associated with less parent-reported connectedness ( $\beta = -.23, p < .01$ ) but also *less* child-reported internalizing symptoms ( $\beta = -.37, p < .01$ ) and delinquency ( $\beta = -.41, p = .001$ ). These counterintuitive effects likely represent suppression effects (where the sign of the effect changes—in this case from positive to negative—when accounting for the influence of the mediator or other covariates) arising because children's perceptions of conflict are such robust predictors of these variables. Evidence for this view comes from the fact that the zero-order correlations between these variables are positive (see Table 3) and that when we tested an alternate model in which the influence of the child-reported variables are constrained to equal 0, the same structural paths are positive and statistically significant: internalizing symptoms ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ) and child-reported delinquency ( $\beta = .31, p < .001$ ). The nature of the indirect effect of parent-reported conflict is more fully examined in the mediation section that follows.

Contrary to our predictions, child-reported connectedness was not associated with child-reported internalizing symptoms nor child- and parent-reported delinquency. However, parent-reported connectedness was significantly associated with child-reported internalizing symptoms ( $\beta = -.29, p < .001$ ), delinquency ( $\beta = -.26, p = .001$ ) and parent-reported delinquency ( $\beta = -.49, p < .001$ ).

Child-reported connectedness did not mediate the association between child-reported marital conflict and any of the child outcomes. In contrast, parent-reported connectedness did significantly mediate the association between parent-reported marital conflict and child internalizing symptoms. To illuminate the pattern and strength of the mediational effect, using a procedure recommended by Shrout and Bolger (2002), we isolated the

parent report mediational model by constraining the effect of child reports of communication and connectedness on the outcome variables to 0, which allowed us to clarify the relative strength of the mediational paths (see Fig. 2) (Ablow et al. 2009). Parent-reported connectedness significantly mediated each of the three outcomes: child-reported internalizing symptoms (indirect effect = .04, 95 % confidence interval .01—.09), child-reported delinquency (indirect effect = .03, 95 % confidence interval = .01—.06), and parent-reported delinquency (indirect effect = .04, 95 % confidence interval = .01—.07). Effect ratios indicate that parent-reported connection accounted for 12 % of the effect of marital conflict on child-reported internalizing symptoms, 17 % of the effect on child-reported delinquency, and 44 % of the effect on parent-reported delinquency.

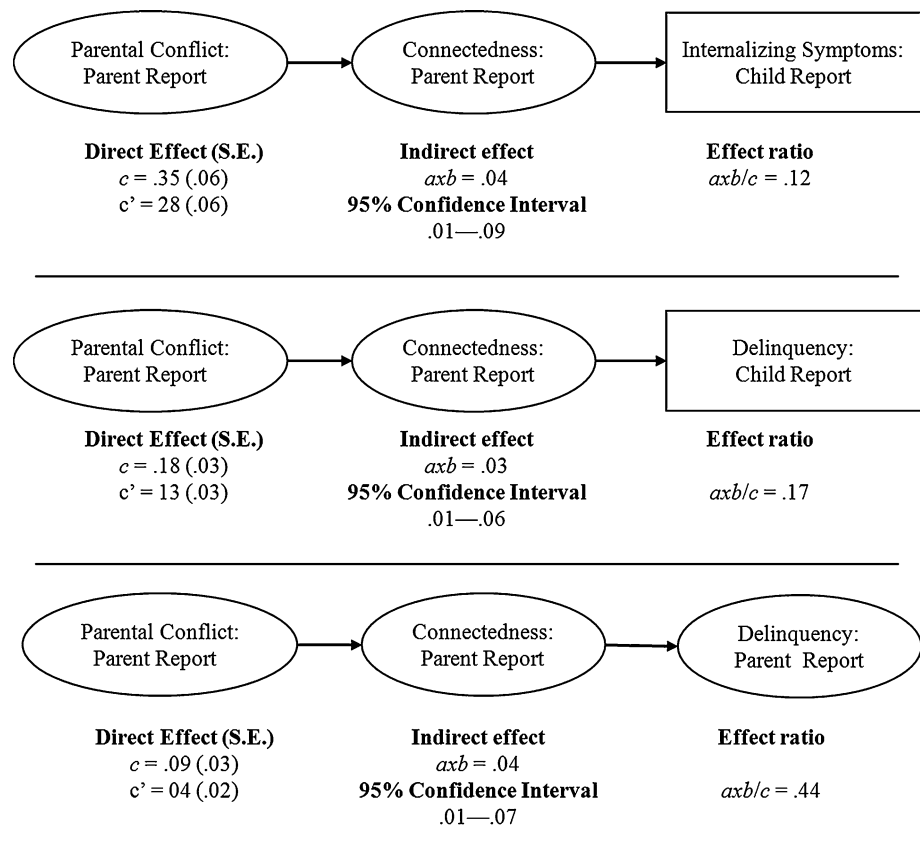
These mediational analyses show that marital conflict is associated with an increase in child internalizing symptoms and delinquency (as reported by both children and parents) via less parent-child connectedness. This effect was observed even when accounting for the potent direct effects of parent and child reports of conflict on each of these outcomes. Further, these findings suggest that parental perceptions of connectedness are a more robust correlate of both parent- and child-reported outcomes; the between-informant effect (parents perceptions of connectedness predicting child reported outcomes) was statistically significant and larger than the within-informant effect (children's perceptions of connectedness on their own outcomes), which was not significant. The predictors in our proposed model accounted for approximately one-quarter of the total variance (between 22 and 27 %) in children's internalizing/externalizing outcomes.

Our study was cross sectional and thus we cannot comment on issues of temporal precedence or make claims of causality. However, we ran an alternate model where we reversed the causal flow of our model (e.g., child adjustment predicted parent-child connectedness which, in turn, predicted marital conflict) and this model provided a significantly poorer fit to the data than our proposed model:  $\Delta_{\text{reverse-proposed}} \text{AIC} = 35.47$ , suggesting that the temporal ordering we proposed provides a better fit to the data than a model where the direction of effects is reversed.

## Discussion

Although many studies have examined marital conflict, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and children's outcomes as separate topics, researchers have yet to synthesize these areas of research by examining whether parent-child connectedness mediates the association between marital conflict and poor outcomes for children. Consistent

**Fig. 2** Mediation pathways and their associated parameter estimates



with existing literature (Erel and Burman 1995), our results replicated the “spillover hypothesis” effect by showing that marital conflict is negatively associated with parent–child connectedness (as reported by both parents and children). However, child–reports of parent–child connectedness were not significantly associated with either child– or parent–reports of child internalizing symptoms or delinquency. In contrast, parent–reports of parent–child connectedness were strongly associated with each of these outcomes, and parent–child connectedness (as reported by parents) significantly mediated the effect of marital conflict on children’s outcomes. Child–reports of parent–child connectedness did not mediate this association; however, there were still strong direct effects between children’s reports of conflict and internalizing and externalizing outcomes, suggesting that the relationship between marital conflict, as appraised by children, may operate via some other mechanism than parent–child connectedness.

The cognitive-contextual framework suggests that child perceptions of conflict are key predictors of the impact of conflict on children’s outcomes (Grych and Fincham 1990). Although children’s report of conflict frequency and triangulation did predict both internalizing symptoms and delinquent behavior, these outcomes were not mediated by children’s perceptions of the connectedness of the parent–

child relationship. In contrast, parent–reports of conflict influenced children’s outcomes via parent’s perceptions of the connectedness of the parent–child relationship. To clarify the nature of this effect, we examined an alternate model where the effect of parent–reported connectedness was constrained to be zero, thus allowing child–reported connectedness to be estimated without accounting for the influence of parent–reported connectedness. In this model, child–reported connectedness was associated with less internalizing and delinquency problems, but the parameter estimates were comparatively weaker than the effects of parent–reported estimates on outcomes in the initial model. When we estimated an alternate model in which the child–report of connectedness was constrained to be zero, the parent–reported connectedness parameter estimates remained virtually unchanged. This suggests that although both parent– and child–reported connectedness seem to be accounting for some of the same variance in outcomes, the parent–report trumps child–report in terms of explaining these outcomes. Why would the quality of parent–child connectedness as reported by parents be a more sensitive predictor of outcomes and mediate the effect of conflict on outcomes? Likewise, why does the quality of parent–child connectedness as reported by children not associate with outcomes nor mediate this effect? We suggest three reasons that seem most likely.



First, perhaps parents are simply better informants of parent–child connectedness than children. Perhaps because of parents' relatively advanced cognitive sophistication—parents have had more experience with close relationships and life in general—relative to their children, they are more sensitive to subtleties of a close relationship than their teenage children are. Likewise, parents may give a more accurate report of the parent–child connectedness, given that the children project the observed conflict in the marital relationship onto the parent–child connectedness (Mann and Gilliom 2004), as they are unable to cognitively separate the two relationships. It is also possible, however, that our use of a common-fate latent variable defined by both parents' reports of the parent–child relationship explained the greater sensitivity of parent-report; perhaps insight from two parents is superior to the insight from only one child. Future research might examine whether differing perception of the parent–child relationship are informative for understanding outcomes and whether combined parent-reports are different from reports that include only one parent. Research in related areas has found that discrepancies in reports between parents and children can be predictive of outcomes in their own right (De Los Reyes and Kazdin 2005).

Second, the difference across informants could be reflective of our sample; it is possible that being connected to a parent is not as important to children at this age (the average age of the child in our sample was 14) as it is at younger ages. Some research suggests that as children transition from childhood to adolescence, teenagers become more attuned to their peers and less attuned to their parents (Brown 2004). As such, perhaps the lack of a significant connection between child-reports of feeling connected to their parents and their mental health outcomes is a function of the developmental stage of the child. Future research could examine whether children's appraisals of the quality of their relationship with their parents are more sensitive predictors of outcomes when younger children are assessed.

Third, it is possible that other mechanisms are at work in explaining this association that we did not account for in this study. Even when accounting for the significant mediator (parent-reported connection with child) and the direct effect of parent-reports of conflict on outcomes, there were still robust direct effects for child-reports of marital conflict on child outcomes. These significant direct effects are unlikely to be instrumental, direct effects (i.e., it is not likely that marital conflict is directly associated, for example, in children stealing with no intervening mechanisms of action), thus this effect most likely operates via other mechanisms that were not examined in this study. Fosco and Grych (2008) examined other potential variables, beside the parent–child relationship, that might mediate the

relationship between marital conflict and children's outcomes (though they did not report any formal tests of mediation nor report effect sizes for indirect effects). They found that a model in which all of their mediators (general distress, triangulation, appraisals of threat, and appraisals of blame) were freely estimated provided a better fit to the data than alternate models where one of these acted as an intervening variable or a common pathway. Future research might examine models like ours (with multiple informants) that include multiple mediators to further illuminate what drives this important association. While existing research has established distinct correlations between marital conflict and children's outcomes, the present study explores parent–child connectedness as a mediating mechanism, gathering reports from both parents and children. The findings of this study help to explain the role of parent–child connectedness as a mediating factor. Further, continued examination of other possible mediating factors is necessary in determining effective and preventative methods regarding marital conflict and negative child outcomes.

This study advances research by establishing a mechanism of action in explaining the relationship between marital conflict and children's outcomes. Understanding mechanisms is an important part of psychological research, because mechanisms allow us to understand the process by which an association operates. Many areas of research in psychology have yet to move past simply establishing and (in fewer cases) replicating associations between variables. Although this is an important first step in understanding the phenomena we are interested in, it is not sufficient. Rather, we need to advance our understanding by exploring the mechanisms of action by which these associations operate. Will improving the quality of the parent–child relationship mitigate the negative effects of marital conflict on children's outcomes? This question, like so many others in our field, is essentially asking about a mechanism of action. Our study has provided direct evidence that improving the parent–child relationship, specifically connectedness, should reduce the harmful effect of marital conflict on children's outcomes. Being able to answer these types of questions—about mechanisms of action—provides us with the insight needed to develop effective preventive interventions, therapeutic interventions, and good public policy.

Our findings also have implications for intervention and clinical practice. While there are many interventions designed to help children whose parents are divorcing, our study lends credence to the components of those interventions that aim to improve the parent–child relationship. In fact, one of these interventions that has the best empirical support has an explicit focus on improving the mother-child relationship, and this intervention has been shown to effectively reduce diagnoses of mental illness and externalizing symptoms (Wolchik et al. 2002). Together,

these findings strengthen the theoretical proposition that parent–child connectedness is instrumental in explaining children’s internalizing symptoms and delinquent behaviors. We recommend that future research on these types of intervention focus on identifying “active ingredients” in component studies; it is likely that changes to the quality of the parent–child relationship will mediate observed improvements in outcomes among those who receive intervention. More broadly, we recommend that primary preventive efforts designed to reduce the incidence of internalizing and externalizing disorders consider focusing on strengthening the parent–child relationship.

The present study had several limitations. First, our study was cross sectional and thus we cannot comment on issues of temporal precedence or make claims of causality. However, we ran our model against a model with the causal flow reversed, which suggested that the temporal ordering we proposed provides a better fit to the data. Relatedly, the cross sectional nature of our data does not allow us to examine whether this effect changes over the course of childhood and, for example, whether it influences the romantic relationships of their children as emerging adults. Future research might examine these research questions. Additionally, our measures for child–parent connectedness were slightly different for parents and child. This was done to account for the differing perspectives on connectedness; however, it is possible other and more similar measures would do a better job of measuring this aspect of the parent–child relationship. Finally, we accounted for only one plausible mechanism of action in explaining the association between marital conflict and children’s outcomes. Future research may examine other possible mediators, such as parenting and/or discipline styles.

Our study also has a number of notable strengths. Our study used multiple informants; specifically, mother, father, and child. Previous research has built a foundation for understanding theories related to marital conflict but has not yet tested these theories in full theoretical models with reports from each of the actors involved in these processes. Furthermore, the present study’s large, representative sample increases the likelihood that these results are generalizable to the larger population.

In sum, a large body of research shows that child appraisals matter when examining the influence of marital conflict on children’s outcomes, but our study shows parent reports matter too. As such, parent reports should not be overlooked when examining these important constructs. It may be that parents’ reports are more sensitive to the quality of the parent–child relationship and this increased sensitivity provides critical insight into the dynamics at play when children are exposed to marital conflict.

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