

The Impact of Parental Relationship Dissolution on Children's Problem Behaviors

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Abstract. The current study intends to investigate the processes behind the link between parental relationship breakdown and children's issue behaviors (both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors). Family interactions are centered upon marriage, and parental marital conflict has an impact on how children develop. A number of studies have demonstrated that marital disagreement between parents may significantly affect kids' emotional and social growth, resulting in undesirable behaviors like internalizing or externalizing tendencies. Additionally, complex mechanisms like mediation and moderation that affect how parental marital conflict affects children's development also play a role in this problem. The consequences of parental marital conflict on children's development are mostly facilitated by children's cognitive-emotional processes and family dynamics. Children's perception, attribution, and coping mechanisms, in addition to parental support, parent-child communication, and the general family environment, all work together to have an influence on this. Additionally, this effect varies based on the kid and surroundings, including gender, age, personality, life experiences, social support, etc. Future studies must simultaneously examine how parental marital conflict affects children's cognitive development, including intelligence, academic success, creativity, etc., further explore how mediating and moderating mechanisms affect children, including parenting styles, teacher support, peer acceptance, etc., and integrate multiple mechanisms to provide strong support for the formulation of intervention programs, such as family therapy, parent-child training, and other programs.

Keywords: Parental marital conflicts, children's problem behaviors, mediating mechanisms, moderating mechanisms.

1. Introduction

The primary site for children's socialization is the family, which maintains a strong connection with children's developmental progress. Every couple of parents will experience marital strife to varied degrees throughout family life. Parental relationship breakdown refers to the situation where there is persistent disharmony, conflict or separation between parents. It can be divided into two types: parental marital conflict and parental divorce. Numerous empirical investigations have indicated that children's cognitive development, as well as emotional and social growth, can be adversely affected by parental marital conflict [1]. With increased frequency and heightened intensity of parental marital conflict, along with conflict content directly involving children or remaining unresolved, the influence on children's development becomes more potent [2]. Children's problem behaviors refer to maladaptive or undesirable behavior patterns exhibited by children in emotional, behavioral or social aspects. Internalizing problematic behaviors and externalizing problematic behaviors are the two categories into which it can be split. Internalizing problem behaviors refer to negative emotional responses of children to themselves or the environment, such as depression, anxiety, and introversion. Externalizing problem behaviors refer to aggressive or antisocial behavioral responses of children to others or the environment, such as aggression, rebellion, and bullying. Despite the rising trend of divorced parents in China over time, findings from the inaugural survey of the China Family Panel Studies in 2010 reveal that, on the whole, the marital unions of Chinese parents remain highly stable, as divorces were avoided by over 93% of parents [3]. Contrary to divorce, there is a nearly two-fold increase in the likelihood that parental arguments will have a detrimental influence on children's development [3]. The effect of parental disagreements on children's development must thus be clearly described. According to social learning theory, children learn their own behavior and emotions by

observing and imitating their parents' behavior and emotions. When there is conflict between parents, children may learn poor conflict resolution methods or feel insecure and distrustful. Family systems theory holds that the family can be a system of interconnectedness and influence, where each change in one person has an impact on the other members as well as the system as a whole. When there is conflict between parents, the family system may lose balance and stability, resulting in a lack of support and protection for children. Furthermore, aside from its direct impact on children's development, parental marital conflict also exerts an indirect influence on children's growth by shaping their cognitive-emotional processes and family dynamics [1]. Various kid and environmental factors may influence how parental marital conflict affects children's development. In conclusion, this essay will present a thorough analysis of the processes underpinning parental marital conflict's impact on children's development.

2. Marital Conflict and Internalizing/Externalizing Problem Behaviors

Children's problem behaviors and social relationships are important indicators of their emotional and social development. Parental marital conflict not only affects children's emotional and social development, but also their cognitive development. According to research, parental marital conflict may have a negative impact on children's cognitive abilities, including IQ, academic success, and creativity. Children who see parental marital conflict are prone to exhibit internalizing problems include depression and anxiety as well as externalizing issue behaviors like violence and criminality, according to both national and international studies [1]. Parental marital conflict is more probable to result in children internalizing issue behaviors as opposed to externalizing problem behaviors. In a longitudinal research, Gerard et al. (2006) discovered that parental marital conflict not just has an immediate effect, increasing issue behaviors in kids at the moment, but also has a long-term effect, increasing problem behaviors in kids five years later. Cummings et al. (2012) also supported this long-term impact, with parental marital conflict experienced in kindergarten significantly increasing the problem behaviors exhibited in seventh grade. Similarly, parental marital conflict experienced before the kid became 64 months old significantly indicated an increase in problem behaviors at the time the child turned 16 years old [4]. In addition, Vu et al. (2016) found in a meta-analysis of 74 longitudinal studies that the longer the measurement time interval between parental marital conflict and children's problem behaviors, the stronger the relationship between the two. This result may be due to the sleeper effect, where after experiencing parental marital conflict, children may not exhibit obvious problem behaviors in the short term, but over time they will exhibit obvious problem behaviors; or it may be due to the cumulative effect, where the long-term accumulation of parental marital conflict leads to more problem behaviors in children. It should be noted that the research cited above only document the direct negative impacts of parental marital conflicts on children's issues and do not document the impact of modifying parental marital disputes on the development of alterations in children's problem behavior. In summary, parental marital conflict not only has an immediate negative impact on children's problems but also has a long-term negative impact, and increasing parental marital conflict has an increasingly significant negative impact.

3. Mechanisms

3.1. Mediating mechanis

3.1.1. Children's Cognitive-Emotional Processes

Children's cognitive evaluation of parental marital conflict plays a critical part in their overall development, according to the notion of children's cognitive-emotional development [5]. According to this hypothesis, children's comprehension of the disputes mediates the effects of parental marital disputes on their development. Furthermore, children's comprehension of conflicts is influenced by various factors, including contextual, cognitive, and developmental elements. Both domestic and international studies have shown that parental marital conflict contributes to children's internalizing

behavioral problems by fostering negative cognitive evaluations such as perceiving threats and self-blame.

Foreign studies have indicated that the degree of children's perception of parental conflict and their attributions regarding such conflicts are significant factors influencing their adjustment issues. As the level of parental conflict increases, children's cognitive assessments tend to become more negative, characterized by heightened perceptions of threat and self-blame [5]. Although Chinese scholar Chi Liping's research in 2005 suggested that parental marital conflict might not necessarily lead to increased perceptions of threat and self-blame in children, resulting in more externalizing behavioral problems, the role of cognitive mediating variables between marital conflict and children's external behavioral issues remains inconclusive.

However, utilizing meta-analytic techniques, studies such as those by Buehler et al. (2007) have explored the relationship between parental dispute and individual well-being, drawing from 93 research studies. The authors found a positive correlation between parental conflict and adolescents' assessment of threat, and this assessment of threat was negatively related to self-efficacy. They further proposed that parental conflict could enhance adolescents' perception of threat, subsequently undermining their self-efficacy beliefs. In a similar vein, Fosco and Feinberg's work in 2015, employing meta-analysis techniques across 26 cross-sectional and 6 longitudinal studies, investigated the link between marital quality and depressive symptoms, revealing a negative association. Collectively, these studies support the notion of such mediating effects. The possibility that children's cognitive evaluation of parental marital disputes acts as an intermediary element in the impact of parental marital dispute on children's development is thus quite likely.

The Emotion Security Theory, which builds on the cognitive-emotional theory, highlights the crucial role that children's emotional security plays in how parental marital disagreements affect their development. According to the Emotion Security Hypothesis, parental marital conflict triggers emotional insecurity in children, leading to negative emotions (fear, anxiety, depression), behavioral dysregulation (aggression, avoidance), and adverse internal manifestations. Children's cognitive and socio-emotional development is impacted by these responses, thereby increasing the likelihood of experiencing both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems.

Cummings employed structural equation modeling to test their hypothesis and discovered that emotional insecurity acts as a mediating factor between parental conflict and adolescent adjustment. It suggests that emotional uncertainty modulates how parental conflict affects adolescents' internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. Furthermore, the study suggests that experiencing parental marital conflict during kindergarten contributes to emotional insecurity in second grade, subsequently leading to behavioral issues in seventh grade [5]. Additionally, studies indicate that emotionally insecure children often exhibit poorer sleep quality. Children's responses to parental conflict depend on their assessment of personal and familial security. Children who see parental disagreement as a danger to themselves or the family, or who feel accountable for the conflict, are more prone to suffer emotional uneasiness. The nighttime symptoms of emotional insecurity include increased dread, worry, and uneasiness.

3.1.2. Family processes

Family processes refer to the quality and patterns of interactions, communication, emotions, and support among family members. Parent-child interaction is one such pattern within family processes. According to family systems theory, negative emotions and behaviors within marital relationships can spill over into parent-child interactions, influencing parenting behaviors, co-parenting dynamics, and parent-child triadic relationships, subsequently impacting child development. It may also lead to decreased interaction, increased conflict, and reduced warmth and support within parent-child relationships. In addition, family processes play a significant role in children's behavioral issues. Empirical studies have found that parental marital conflict reduces sensitive parenting by either the father or mother (such as positive attention and warmth), consequently affecting children's emotional, and behavioral development. Brent Finger discovered that parental alcoholism and psychological

problems increase the risk of marital intrusion, which in turn leads to harsh parenting by fathers, adversely affecting children's emotional, and behavioral development [6].

Parental sensitive parenting acts as a mediating variable, enhancing or diminishing children's self-regulation, attention, memory, planning, decision-making executive functions, as well as their empathetic, cooperative, communicative, and conflict resolution social skills. In Jean M. Gerard's study, data from the U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Youth - Child Supplement was used to assess 551 married families with children aged 5 to 11 over two measurements, five years apart. We looked studied the concurrent and long-term links, as well as mediating factors, between parental marital dispute, the relationship between parents and quality of relationships, and adolescent maladjustment. The study found a positive correlation between parental marital disputes and adolescent externalizing behavioral problems (such as aggression, defiance, bullying) across both measurements, indicating that more marital conflict corresponds to more externalizing behavioral problems. In the initial assessment, the connections between parental marital conflict and adolescent externalizing behavioral issues were completely mediated by harsh punishment and parent-child dispute, while in the subsequent evaluation, parent-child conflict partially served as a mediator. This demonstrates that parental marital conflict affects parenting approaches and parent-child relationship quality, subsequently influencing adolescent behavior [7]. Additionally, the lasting influence of parental marital conflict on adolescent maladjustment is dynamic and can evolve with the passage of time. From the aforementioned research, it can be concluded that parental marital dispute reduces parental sensitive parenting, influencing children's executive functions and social abilities. It can also heighten negative parenting behaviors, leading to increased externalizing behavioral problems among children.

3.2. Moderating mechanisms

3.2.1. Child Factors

Children's own and environmental factors can also affect their understanding and emotional processes of parental marital conflict. Children's own factors such as age, gender, personality, intelligence, self-esteem, and other characteristics can affect their perception and understanding of conflict, as well as the coping strategies they adopt. For example, younger children may be more easily stimulated and hurt by conflict, while older children may be better able to understand and regulate conflict. The gender intensification hypothesis posits that, as they mature, boys tend to become more independent, while girls increasingly prioritize the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, aligning with traditional gender role expectations. According to studies, certain parent-child disputes vary by gender and have a substantial influence on children's behavioral issues. The authors found through a multivariate study of boys that verbal aggressiveness had a strong positive link with externalizing difficulties whereas collaboration showed a substantial negative correlation with both externalizing and internalizing problems. Conversely, it was discovered through multivariate research on females that collaboration showed a substantial negative link with both externalizing and internalizing issues. On the other hand, avoidance-submission displayed a significant positive correlation with internalizing problems [8]. Other research has revealed that when it comes to emotions, boys may be more prone to feel angry and aggressive feelings than girls, who may be more probable to exhibit signs of anxiety and despair. Boys may be more prone to externalizing issues like violence, antisocial conduct, truancy, etc., whereas girls may be more prone to internalizing issues like autism, inferiority, self-harming behaviors etc. In terms of cognition, girls may be more likely to develop negative attribution styles, thinking that they are incompetent, worthless, unloved, while boys may be more likely to develop hostile attribution styles, thinking that others are untrustworthy, unfriendly, hostile. Parental disagreement can damage children's feeling of closeness and trust with both their parents and their classmates by affecting how they interact with them. Girls may be more likely to form cross-generational alliances or parentified triangular relationships with their parents, taking on too much responsibility and pressure, while boys may be more likely to form scapegoat or distant triangular relationships with their parents, feeling excluded

and ignored [9]. In conclusion, when parents experience marital conflict, males may be more likely to display externalizing issue behaviors (such as violence and disobedience) but girls may be more likely to display internalizing issues with behavior (such as sadness and withdrawal). youngsters with introverted and sensitive personalities may find it more difficult to deal constructively with conflict, whereas youngsters with upbeat and self-assured personalities may do so.

3.2.2. Environmental Factors

According to the ecological system theory, the effects of parental disagreements on a child's development might differ depending on the child's surroundings and sociocultural background. First off, the socioeconomic situation of the family may moderate the impact of dispute among parents on children's development. Studies have shown that compared to families with higher socio-economic status, parental marital conflict is more likely to lead to problem behaviors in children from families with lower socio-economic status. Research shows that when the family's financial status deteriorates, the influence of parental relationship quality on children's externalizing difficulties increases. As an illustration, consider children at the age of 5. Among those experiencing the most challenging economic circumstances, those with the poorest parental relationship quality scored 7.21 on externalizing problems, whereas those with the highest parental relationship quality scored 4.16, reflecting a discrepancy of 3 points. Among children in the most favorable economic conditions, those with the weakest parental relationship quality registered an externalizing problem score of 6.16, while those with the strongest parental relationship quality scored 4.01, indicating a difference of 2.15 points. This suggests that children from families with good economic situations are better able to resist the negative effects of poor parental relationship quality than children from families with poor economic situations [10].

Second, the importance of social support has a substantial impact on how parental marital conflict affects children's development. According to research, social support might potentially lessen the negative effects of parental disputes on children's development. This is a significant protective element. Social support includes family support, school support and peer support, which can provide emotional comfort, a sense of identity and belonging, as well as practical help and resources. Research results show that these factors have significant positive correlations or additive effects in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, indicating that they can enhance children's adaptability. In addition, these factors also show consistent effects across different types of violence (such as abuse, domestic violence, community violence). The study also found that social support can sometimes have a buffering effect, i.e., in situations where parental marital conflict is high, social support can reduce the occurrence of externalizing problems in children. For example, in a longitudinal study, family support had a significant buffering effect on externalizing problems in 5-year-old children, i.e., when parental marital conflict was high, children with high family support had lower externalizing problem scores than children with low family support. Similarly, in a cross-sectional study, school support had a significant buffering effect on externalizing problems in 12-year-old children, i.e., when parental marital conflict was high, children with high school support had lower externalizing problem scores than children with low school support [11].

Ultimately, cultural norms may have a substantial impact on how parental marital conflict affects children's development. Teenagers who seek societal harmony are more susceptible to the effects of parental marital strife and have weaker emotional stability, according to research. Chinese culture emphasizes "harmony is precious" and "family harmony brings prosperity", which emphasizes social harmony and family harmony. Within this cultural framework, parental marital conflict is prone to disarray family bonds, diminish children's emotional well-being and sense of security, thereby exerting a more pronounced adverse effect on the development of Chinese children.

4. Conclusion

This paragraph gives a thorough explanation of the mechanics involved in how parental marital conflict affects children's development. It is established that children's emotional and social

development is directly impacted by parental marital conflict. Simultaneously, parental marital conflict indirectly influences children's development by impacting their cognitive-emotional processes and family dynamics, resulting in the occurrence of internalizing or externalizing problem behaviors in children. The impact of parental disputes on a child's development is also shown to be modified by the child's own qualities as well as those of the environment, including age, gender, personality, family economic status, social assistance, and cultural values. Parental marital dispute is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that needs to be understood and intervened from multiple angles and levels. Future studies should investigate how parental marital conflict affects kids' cognitive growth, including their IQ, academic success, and creativity; further explore the mediating and moderating mechanisms that affect children's development, such as parenting styles, teacher support, peer acceptance; integrate multiple mechanisms to provide strong support for the development of intervention programs, such as family therapy, parent-child training, school counseling.

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