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Family-Centered Research & Practices

From the Director's Office: The Big Picture

Why Do They Do That?

Focus on Families

I Don't Want to Talk About It!

Putting Parents in the Picture

NCEDL News

I don't want to talk about

WITHDRAWAL FROM A PARTNER during a marital disagreement, rather than the amount of disagreement, predicts more negative interactions months later with infants.

This is one of the findings reported in a longitudinal study of the transition to parenthood headed by Martha Cox, a researcher at the Frank Porter Graham Center. Cox says women who were more withdrawn in their interactions with their husbands were later more likely to be flat and disengaged in interactions with their infants, especially with sons, than were women who were not withdrawn during marital interactions.

This finding occurred even after researchers controlled for mothers' depressive symptoms, mothers' education, and the child's negative affect in the interaction with the mother. Withdrawal in the marital interaction also predicted fathers' flat, disengaged parenting, but fathers were especially disengaged from their infants when they were withdrawn and angry in interaction with their wives.

Cox has studied families through a variety of projects over the years at FPG, and some of her work is included in *Causes and Consequences*, a book just published by Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates. Cox and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn of Columbia University are editors of the book.

"We need to understand more about when conflict and tension in the marital relationship spill over into other family relationships," notes Cox. "It is clear that the avoidance of conflict that accompanies withdrawn marital behavior can be as detri-

mental to parent-child relationships as angry arguing." She said other studies show avoidance of conflict, particularly in the form of withdrawal from interaction, is a marker of poor marital relationships.

Constructive conflict

Indeed, conflict may be constructive in some marital relationships. Conflict can highlight the individual differences, needs, desires, and goals of each partner. Ideally, making those individual needs an understood part of the couple's dialogue and planning would let the marriage stay close and the partners connected.

Conflict between marital partners may be necessary to stimulate the adjustments needed to keep a marriage intimate and satisfying. Furthermore, constructive conflict may provide children with models of effective strategies for conflict resolution. Cox said that this quality of marriage has not been sufficiently explored.

There is also the growing recognition of the need for a more complex understanding of the association between conflict in marital relationships and children's adaptation. Conflict, whether marital or parent-child or sibling, is a fact of family life, and it may have constructive as well as destructive effects on the development of children.

Spillover of tensions

For distressed couples (those who scored as distressed on screening instruments and desired treatment for their difficulties) as compared to nondistressed couples, one study found there was greater continuity of marital tensions from one day to the next and greater "spillover" of tensions from the marital relationship to the parent-child relationship. "It may be," observed Cox, "that the ongoing tension in the marital relationship and the failure to resolve conflicts, rather than the frequency of conflict or negative affect is most detrimental to parenting."

Another thread running through this book is that development is seen as occurring in



Illustrations by M. Kersgard, source photos by Kersgard and Gazelle Technologies, Inc.

How wives handle marital disagreements may indicate how they interact with infants

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the context of relationships. Thus, the way healthy or disturbed relationships are defined for children in

families must take into account the way that the relationships serve a child with respect to critical developmental issues. For example, cohesive parent-child relationships are important in fostering the collaboration needed for good parental supervision of young adolescents. Supervision as an aspect of parenting in adolescence is a key to preventing delinquent behavior.

Parents who are emotion-coaching are more likely to be in marriages in which the couple believes in discussing emotional issues and that marital conflict is worth the struggle. The willingness to tolerate and accept some negative affect in family relationships may be an important common element associated with good outcomes for family members.

Relationships

An overarching theme of the book, and indeed most of Cox's research, is that individual development needs to be understood in the context of relationships in the family. In line with that, another portion of the book theorizes that changes in parent-adolescent relations derive not only from biological and cognitive changes in the adolescent which result in increases in conflict (overt hostility and negative affects) and decreases in cohesion (observable warmth and support) in parent-child relationships, but also from the social interactional histories of parents and adolescents.

One study shows even greater hostility among

adolescent girls toward their parents than among boys, reflecting perhaps the more rapid pubertal and social development of girls during that age. The findings also showed that parents and children who were higher on warmth and support at an earlier time increase their emotional closeness over time, while those who were low on warmth and supportiveness showed declines over time.

A 1995 study showed that closeness and conflict coexist in most families, and consequently, the balance between the two may be important for the adolescent daughter's development. Mother-daughter relationships do change at the time of puberty.

The patterns have long-term implications. For example, in one sample, a pregnancy during the daughters' college years was predicted by lower family cohesion, more family conflict, and a more controlling environment than for girls who did not become pregnant as early as the college years. Interestingly, it was conflict with fathers that predicted the early pregnancy, rather than conflict with mothers.

In another study reported in this book, mothers and daughters show difficulties in negotiating autonomy when daughters have a high degree of symptoms that are kept inside. Chronic internalizing symptoms in girls lead to high levels of

both conflict and submission. And conflict and submission together are a behavioral combination unlikely to lead to success in negotiating more autonomous relations with mothers.

One study of mothers and daughters supports the idea that it is developmentally important for mothers of adolescent girls to tolerate a moderate degree of conflict. Again, noted Cox, tolerance for a certain amount of negative emotion in family relationships may be important for healthy outcomes.

Cox said that "while a fair amount is known about how families fail under conditions of severe or pervasive adversity, little is known about the many families whose children show successful adaptation, positive functioning, and competence despite conditions of adversity. We know little about families that successfully negotiate risk conditions, although we know that many of these families exist." **ed**

