

Mothers' Responsive Parenting Practices and Psychological Experience of Parenting as Mediators of the Relation Between Marital Conflict and Mother – Preadolescent Relational Negativity

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SYNOPSIS

Objective. This study assessed direct and indirect relations between marital conflict and mother – preadolescent relational negativity. *Design.* Self-report questionnaire data were gathered from 156 married mothers and their firstborn 5th graders who were between the ages of 10 and 12 years. Participants completed measures of marital conflict, responsive parenting practices, the psychological experience of parenting (e.g., parenting stress), and mother – preadolescent relational negativity (e.g., conflict). *Results.* Structural equation modeling indicated that marital conflict was positively associated with maternal reports of negativity in the mother – preadolescent relationship. In contrast, marital conflict was not associated with preadolescent reports of negativity in the mother – preadolescent relationship. Subsequent analyses revealed that the relation between marital conflict and maternal report of mother – preadolescent relational negativity was indirect and mediated by responsive parenting practices and mothers' psychological experience of parenting. *Conclusions.* This study integrated essential components from the marital conflict, stress and coping, and parenting literatures. Understanding the roles of different aspects of parenting in the relation between marital conflict and the mother – child relationship suggests new directions for research.

INTRODUCTION

The association between marital conflict and negativity in parent – child relationships has been well documented in the literature (for reviews see Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Grych, 2002). This relationship has held across sam-

ples of different ages including infancy (e.g., Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 2000; Owen & Cox, 1997), childhood (e.g., Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993; Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1997), and adolescence (e.g., Davis, Hops, Alpert, & Sheeber, 1998; Harold, Fincham, Osborne, & Conger, 1997; Noller, Feeney, Sheehan, & Peterson, 2000; Osborne & Fincham, 1996). Although linkages between interparental conflict and negativity in the parent-child relationship have been established, the processes that may underlie this relation are less well understood. Recently, however, a number of scholars have suggested that the association between marital conflict and poor parent-child relationships may be indirect and may be mediated by problems in parenting practices. According to this mediated effects view, marital conflict and the negative emotions that accompany it may decrease parental emotional availability and disrupt sensitive and appropriate parenting. In turn, problematic parenting is likely to set the stage for negative affectivity, coercion, and conflict escalation in parent-child interactions (Cox et al., 2001; Crnic & Acevedo, 1995; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Graham, 2002; Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994; Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984; Grych, 2002; Katz & Gottman, 1996; Patterson, 1982).

Although disrupted parenting has been a prominent feature of theoretical models that specify the effects of marital conflict on families, few empirical studies have examined parenting as a mediator of the link between marital conflict and parent-child relational negativity, especially when samples of children in middle childhood or older are considered. In one exception, Brody, Arias, and Fincham (1996) found that marital negativity was positively associated with ineffective parent-preadolescent arguing (e.g., repetitive fighting and mutual dissatisfaction with conflict outcomes). Furthermore, the relation between marital negativity and ineffective parent-preadolescent arguing was partially mediated by involved communicative parenting, a construct that assessed (1) parental awareness of the preadolescents' activities, (2) democratic parenting behaviors, and (3) a lack of parental love withdrawal during parent-preadolescent disagreements. Additional studies focused on infancy have indicated that disrupted parenting partially mediated the relation between marital conflict and attachment insecurity (Frosch et al., 2000; Owen & Cox, 1997). Taken together, these findings suggest that marital conflict may undermine the parent-child relationship by first affecting parents' ability or willingness to be responsive to their children's needs.

Because the foregoing studies have found only partial mediation, however, it is possible that other parenting-related variables also mediate the connection between marital conflict and negative relations between parents and children. In this study, we examined whether the relation between marital conflict and mother-preadolescent relational negativity was me-

diated by both responsive parenting practices and mothers' psychological experience of the parenting role. Drawing on a stress and coping perspective as applied to marriage (for review, see Grych, 2002), we believe that marital conflict may contribute not only to lowered parental responsiveness but also to a negative psychological experience of parenting. More specifically, a parent in a conflictual marriage may exhibit heightened reactivity to normative stressors arising from parenting and may experience erosion in his or her sense of efficacy and confidence to bring about positive family outcomes, including outcomes within the parenting role. In turn, both diminished responsiveness and a less positive psychological experience of parenting are likely to be associated with greater negativity in the parent – child relationship.

We illustrate our process-oriented model and our specific directional hypotheses in Figure 1. As depicted, we hypothesized that marital conflict

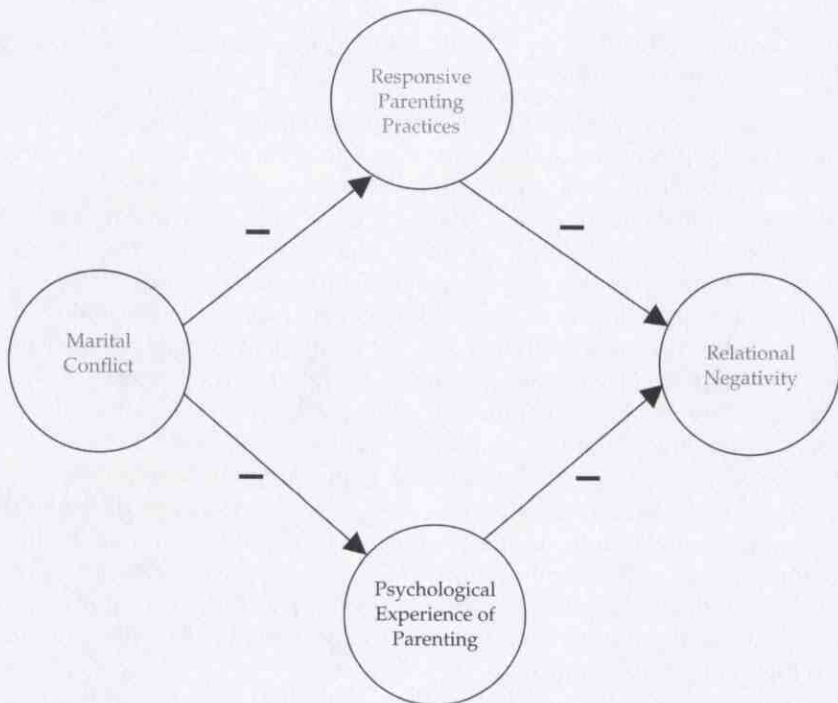


FIGURE 1

Conceptual Model of the Hypothesized Mediation Processes Between Marital Conflict, Responsive Parenting Practices, Mothers' Psychological Experience of Parenting, and Mother – Preadolescent Relational Negativity.

would be negatively associated with responsive parenting practices and mothers' psychological experience of parenting, a construct that included mothers' parenting efficacy, competence, and absence of stressful feelings about parenting. In turn, we expected that responsive parenting practices and a positive psychological experience of parenting would be negatively associated with mother – preadolescent relational negativity. Furthermore, we hypothesized that the association between marital conflict and mother – preadolescent relational negativity would be indirect and would be mediated by responsive parenting practices and the psychological experience of parenting.

To provide support for the specific linkages in our model and our overarching mediated effects view, we reviewed separate literatures that have examined relations among marital conflict, responsive parenting practices, the psychological experience of parenting, and the mother – preadolescent relationship.

Marital Conflict, Responsive Parenting Practices, and the Mother – Preadolescent Relationship

Because responsive parenting has been variously defined in the literature, it is important to describe our conceptualization of this construct. Generally, responsiveness is parenting that is attuned to the child's changing needs and capabilities and is relatively focused on promoting the child's agenda (Baumrind, 1991; Belsky, 1984; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In this study, responsiveness reflects maternal attunement to a preadolescent child. Preadolescence is characterized by gains in children's reasoning, increased desire for more mutual authority relationships with parents, and less direct parental supervision combined with continuing needs for parental involvement and nurturance (Collins, Madsen, & Susman-Stillman, 2002). Responsive parenting during preadolescence should therefore reflect a reasonably democratic stance that includes rational explanations for parental directives, invites "give and take" over issues, fosters psychological autonomy, and demonstrates awareness of the child's activities, including those distal to the family home. Thus, our responsive parenting construct was indicated by measures of democracy; psychological autonomy – promotion; and maternal awareness of the preadolescent's whereabouts, activities, and social contacts.

We hypothesized that marital conflict would be associated with diminished responsiveness, so defined. As previously discussed, the theoretical rationale for this hypothesis is that parents who experience chronic marital conflict are likely to have limited emotional availability for these dimen-

sions of responsive parenting (Cox et al., 2001; Crnic & Acevedo, 1995; Fincham et al., 1994; Grych, 2002). In addition, empirical evidence has linked marital conflict to decrements in parenting practices similar to those included in our responsiveness construct. Conger and colleagues (1992, 1993), for example, reported that marital conflict was associated with lower levels of nurturant-involved parenting, a construct that included age-appropriate expectations, inductive reasoning, active engagement, and parental awareness of child activities. Marital conflict also has been associated with lower levels of democratic parenting (Kitzman, 2000) and decreased psychological autonomy – promotion (Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002). Based on this body of research, we expected to find a negative relation between marital conflict and responsive parenting in our sample.

In turn, we expected that responsive parenting would be associated with lower levels of mother – preadolescent relational negativity. In accord with previous research (Brody et al., 1996; Conger et al., 1992, 1993), our relational negativity construct tapped a lack of emotional cohesion and the presence of conflictive engagement and negative affect within the dyad. Because our responsive parenting construct represents parenting that has a good fit with preadolescent needs and capabilities, we believed that it would be negatively associated with indicators of emotional distance and conflict in the mother – preadolescent relationship. To support this idea, Collins and colleagues (2002) noted that during middle childhood, children increasingly say that their conflicts with parents arise because parents provide inadequate support or do not spend enough time with them. Such findings suggest that preadolescents are able to recognize dimensions of responsiveness as desirable and may experience the absence of these dimensions as distressing and conflict promoting.

Furthermore, empirical studies have found bivariate relations among dimensions of responsiveness and the quality of parent – child relationships. Involved and communicative parenting has been associated with higher levels of parent – child cohesiveness and harmony (Collins, 1990). Parents' awareness of children's whereabouts and activities has been associated with more secure parent – child attachment (Kerns, Aspelmeier, Gentzler, & Grabill, 2001) and more positive parent – child relationships (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Metzler, Biglan, Ary, & Fuzhong, 1998). Finally, parental use of psychological control (vs. psychological autonomy – promotion) has been linked to higher levels of conflict in the parent – adolescent relationship (Yau & Smetana, 1996). Taken together, these findings suggest that appropriately responsive parenting practices are likely to be associated with lower levels of negativity in the mother – preadolescent relationship.

Marital Conflict, the Psychological Experience of Parenting, and the Mother – Preadolescent Relationship

Our second mediator was mothers' evaluations of their psychological experience of parenting, which included perceptions of efficacy, competence, and low stress in the parenting role. We hypothesized that marital conflict would be negatively associated with a favorable psychological experience of parenting. As described earlier, marital conflict is likely to be associated with dysphoria and stress reactivity (Cox et al., 2001; Crnic & Acevedo, 1995; Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984; Grych, 2002). We believe these basic emotional responses to marital conflict are unlikely to engender a positive sense of self within the parenting role. Indeed, prior research has indicated that marital conflict is negatively associated with perceptions of parenting efficacy (Teti & Gelfand, 1991) and parenting competence (Bogenschneider, Small, & Tsay, 1997; Floyd, Gilliom, & Costigan, 1998; Teti, Gelfand, & Pompa, 1990). Furthermore, marital adjustment has been associated with lower levels of parenting stress (Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Gelfand, Teti, & Fox, 1992; Grych & Clark, 1999; Webster-Stratton, 1990). Thus, we hypothesized that in this study, marital conflict would be negatively associated with a favorable psychological experience of parenting.

In turn, we hypothesized that mothers who perceived more pleasant or positive psychological experiences of parenting would be more likely to have relationships with their preadolescents that are low in contentiousness and that are emotionally close. Mothers who believe they are effective parents and who feel confident and minimally stressed when parenting may be more likely to approach parent – child interactions in an emotionally positive frame of mind than are mothers who feel incompetent and stressed (Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997; Patterson, 1982). Furthermore, a positive emotional climate surrounding parenting is likely to be associated with lower levels of interactional negativity within the mother – child dyad (Patterson, 1982). Thus, we expected to obtain a negative relation between mothers' perceptions of their psychological experience of parenting and mother – preadolescent relational negativity.

There have been few empirical studies of the connection between the psychological experience of parenting and parent – child positivity or negativity during middle childhood and adolescence. One study conducted by Bogenschneider et al. (1997), however, indicated that maternal parenting competence was positively correlated with adolescent openness to maternal socialization, a construct that assessed elements of mother – adolescent relational quality. In younger samples, parenting stress and low parenting efficacy were associated with insecure attachment among both infants (Jarvis & Creasey, 1991) and preschoolers (Hadadian & Merbler,

1996; Manassis, Bradley, Goldberg, & Hood, 1994; Teti et al., 1990). Mothers who reported low parenting efficacy also tended to perceive their toddlers as more difficult and demanding (Gross, Conrad, Fogg, & Wothke, 1994). Although this literature is not extensive and focuses mainly on young children, it indicates that a favorable psychological experience of parenting has been associated with less negativity and greater positivity in parent-child interactions.

This Study

In this study, we used structural equation modeling to examine the process model illustrated in Figure 1. Although previous studies have examined associations between marital conflict and dimensions of parent-child relational negativity, few studies have considered how effects may differ depending on parent versus child perceptions of the parent-child relationship. Therefore, we examined two versions of our model. The first version operationalized relational negativity with mother reports; the second version operationalized relational negativity with preadolescent reports.

METHODS

Participants

This study was part of a longitudinal project that examined parenting during the transition to adolescence. A subset of measures collected during the second year of the study was used for the current analyses. During the second year of the study, self-report data were gathered from 156 married, never divorced mothers and their firstborn preadolescents. The sample included 69 boys and 87 girls, and most participants were European American (93%). The age range of the mothers was 28 to 52 years, with an average age of 39 years, $SD = 4.30$. The target preadolescents were between the ages of 10 and 12 years at the second year of data collection, $M = 10.62$, $SD = .50$. The mothers reported having an average of 2.5 children in their family. Three percent of the mothers reported completing a graduate or professional degree, 16% had received a master's degree, 35% had obtained a bachelor's degree, 19% had completed an associate's degree, 26% had received a high school diploma, and 1% had not received a high school diploma. Seventy-seven percent of the mothers worked full or part time, whereas 23% were not employed in the workforce. The annual household incomes of the study participants ranged from \$10,800 to \$400,000, with a mean income of \$86,152, $SD = \$59,325$.

Procedures

During Year 1 of the study, fourth-graders and their mothers were recruited from several public school districts and private Catholic schools in a medium-sized, midwestern U.S. city. The 2,563 initial contact letters briefly described the study and instructed mothers to call the research office if interested. Five hundred thirty-seven mother – preadolescent dyads contacted the research office. Participants were eligible if the fourth-grader was the oldest child in the family and the mother was currently married to the target preadolescent's father and had never been divorced. Of the 537 who contacted the research office, 182 met the criteria; 355 did not meet the criteria because they had an older child or were divorced or remarried. One hundred sixty-five (91%) of the eligible dyads completed the study in Year 1; 13 dyads (7%) refused to participate after hearing more about the study, and 4 dyads (2%) dropped out of the study after repeatedly canceling the laboratory appointment. One hundred fifty-eight dyads (96%) returned to complete the second year assessment. Attrition of participants was the result of refusal to participate (three dyads) and relocation (four dyads). In addition, data were excluded from these analyses for two returning dyads in which the mother had experienced marital separation or divorce between Year 1 and 2 of the study, yielding a final sample of 156 dyads. The participants did not differ from the nonparticipants with regard to race, age, or family income as assessed at Year 1 ($ps > .10$).

A survey packet consisting of parenting questions was mailed to the mother and was to be completed 1 week before attending the laboratory visit. This was done to reduce the amount of material the mother had to complete during the visit. Mothers and their preadolescents independently and separately completed self-report questionnaires during the laboratory visit. To ensure that all preadolescents understood the questions, their surveys were read out loud by research assistants. Participants were paid \$30.00 for their participation in Year 1, and \$40.00 for their participation in Year 2.

Marital Conflict

Our measures of marital conflict assessed overt negative conflict behavior, consensus versus disagreement over important marital and family issues, and conflict surrounding co-parenting. Marital conflict was assessed with questions completed by the mother.

Overt marital conflict. Overt marital conflict was assessed with the O'Leary-Porter Scale (OPS), a widely used, 10-item scale that assesses frequency of parental conflict in the presence of a child (Porter & O'Leary, 1980).

Mothers were asked to indicate how often conflict occurred in front of the preadolescent using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) for nine of the items. One item asked mothers to report the percentage of arguments that take place in front of the child, with responses ranging from more than 75% to less than 10%. Higher scores indicated greater conflict. Internal consistency reliability was .88.

Marital consensus versus disagreement. The consensus subscale from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) was used to assess the extent of consensus versus disagreement over 13 important marital and family issues (e.g., handling family finances, ways of dealing with in-laws, career decisions). For each of the 13 issues, mothers indicated the extent of consensus or disagreement between themselves and their husbands using a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*always agree*) to 6 (*always disagree*). Higher scores indicated greater disagreement. Internal consistency reliability was .87.

Co-parent conflict. The four-item conflict subscale from the Co-Parental Interaction Scale (CPI; Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987) was used to assess the frequency of conflict between spouses over parenting. A sample item included, "When you and your husband discuss parenting issues, how often does an argument result?" Mothers were asked to respond using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Higher scores indicated greater conflict. Internal consistency reliability was .87.

Responsive Parenting Practices

Following conceptual classifications of responsiveness (Barber, 1996; Baumrind, 1991; Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) and considering our particular age group of preadolescents (Collins et al., 2002; Steinberg, 1990), responsive parenting practices were assessed with preadolescent reports of maternal psychological autonomy – promotion, knowledge, and democracy. We relied on preadolescent reports of parenting because we wanted to assess the parenting that preadolescents believed they received. We also wanted to incorporate a construct that could be measured easily from the preadolescent's perspective to help reduce reliance on maternal reports.

Psychological autonomy – promotion. To assess psychological autonomy – promotion, we used the eight-item Psychological Control Scale – Youth Self-Report (Barber, 1996), a scale based on the Psychological Autonomy (vs. Psychological Control) subscale of the Child Report of Parental Behav-

ior Inventory (CRPBI; Schaefer, 1965). Preadolescents were instructed to indicate how often their mothers acted like each statement using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). A sample item included, "My mom brings up my past mistakes when she criticizes me." In this study, items were reverse scored such that higher scores indicated greater psychological autonomy – promotion. Internal consistency reliability was .73.

Knowledge. The nine-item Knowledge scale measured preadolescent perceptions of maternal awareness of their activities and acquaintances (Bonds, Gondoli, Sturge-Apple, & Salem, 2002). A sample item included, "My mom knows who my friends are." For each item, participants responded with a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Higher scores indicated greater parental knowledge. Internal consistency reliability was .77.

Democracy. An 18-item Democracy scale was developed for this study. The scale measured the extent to which mothers used induction and rational explanations to gain compliance, demonstrated flexibility in response to preadolescent concerns, and solicited preadolescent involvement in decision making. We developed the scale after examining a similar parent self-report measure (Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995) and considering conceptual descriptions of democracy in parenting (Collins et al., 2002; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg, 1990). A sample item included, "When I ask why I have to do certain things, my mom explains her reasons." Preadolescents indicated how often their mother acted like each statement on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Higher scores indicated greater democracy. The internal consistency reliability for the scale was .86. The scale also demonstrated good convergent validity. Democracy had significant positive relations ($ps < .05$) with psychological autonomy – promotion (Barber, 1996) and knowledge (Bonds et al., 2002). Democracy was not related to demographic variables including mothers' age or family income ($ps > .10$).

Psychological Experience of Parenting

Mothers' psychological experience of parenting was assessed with maternal measures of Parenting Efficacy, Stress, and Competence.

Parenting efficacy. Parenting efficacy was assessed with a seven-item scale (Wells-Parker, Miller, & Topping, 1990). The scale measures mothers' perceptions of capability, influence, and skill in handling parenting chal-

enges when they compare themselves with other parents; for example, "I am at least as capable as most other parents would be in resolving problems my child may have at school." Mothers rated each item on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated greater parenting efficacy. Internal consistency reliability was .74.

Parenting stress. The Parental Stress Items scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) was used to measure perceptions of stress in the parenting role. The seven-item scale instructed mothers to show how much they experienced each of the feelings described. A sample item included, "When you think of your experiences as a parent to this child, how worried do you feel?" Mothers responded on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much so*). Before computing the scale, item scores were reversed such that higher scores indicated less parenting stress. Internal consistency reliability was .87.

Parenting competence. A measure of parenting competence was developed for this study based on similar measures used with either young children or adolescents (e.g., Bogenschneider et al., 1997). Our five-item measure was designed to assess maternal global, evaluative appraisals of competence as a parent. A sample item included, "I am confident in my ability as a parent to my child." Mothers responded on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Higher scores indicated greater parenting competence. Internal consistency reliability was .84. The measure also demonstrated good convergent validity. Parenting competence was significantly and positively associated ($ps < .05$) with parenting efficacy (Wells-Parker et al., 1990) and low parenting stress (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Parenting competence was not significantly related to demographic variables such as mothers' age or family income ($ps > .10$).

Mother - Preadolescent Relational Negativity

Mother - preadolescent relational negativity was assessed with three measures completed by the mother and preadolescent. In accord with previous studies (Brody et al., 1996; Conger et al., 1992, 1993; Harold & Conger, 1997; Harold et al., 1997; Osborne & Fincham, 1996), our relational negativity construct assessed negative conflict behavior, negative affectivity, and low emotional cohesion within the dyad.

Negative conflict behavior. Mother and preadolescent reports on the Dyadic Behavior subscale of the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ;

Robin & Foster, 1989) were used to assess negative conflict behavior. Mothers and preadolescents completed parallel versions of the subscale, responding on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*really false*) to 4 (*really true*). A sample item included "We argue until one of us is too tired to go on." Higher scores reflected greater negative conflict behavior. Internal consistency reliability for mother and preadolescent reports was .90 and .84, respectively.

Negative affectivity. Negative affectivity during recent mother – preadolescent conflict discussions was assessed with the Dyadic Discussion – Affect Intensity scale developed by Steinberg (1988; see also Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997). The scale assesses the average level of affect intensity during mother – preadolescent discussions that may have occurred in the previous 2 weeks. The scale lists topics frequently discussed by parents and preadolescents (e.g., chores, homework, free-time activities). For each of the 22 items, the mother and preadolescent were asked whether a discussion took place within the previous 2 weeks, and, if so, to rate the intensity of the discussion on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*very calm*) to 4 (*very angry or upset*). An average affect intensity score for both mothers and preadolescents was calculated by dividing the number of reported discussions by the sum of reported affect intensity (Steinberg, 1988). Higher scores reflected greater negative affectivity during mother – preadolescent discussions. Internal consistency reliability of the scale was .68 for mothers and .82 for preadolescents.

Emotional cohesion. A 10-item measure of emotional cohesion was developed for this study. The items asked mothers and preadolescents to indicate the extent to which they perceived positive interaction, closeness, and expressed affection within their relationship. A sample item included, "My child (mom) and I get along well together." Mothers and preadolescents responded on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). Before computing the scale, item scores were reversed such that higher scores indicated lower levels of cohesion. Internal consistency reliability was .89 and .85 for mother and preadolescent report, respectively. The Emotional Cohesion measures also demonstrated good convergent validity. For mothers and preadolescents, low Emotional Cohesion was significantly and positively associated ($ps < .05$) with the CBQ Dyadic Behavior subscale (Robin & Foster, 1989) and the Dyadic Discussion – Affect Intensity scale (Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997; Steinberg, 1988). In addition, mother and preadolescent reports of Emotional Cohesion were not correlated with demographic variables including mothers' age and family income ($ps > .10$).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum scores for the study variables were calculated and are presented in Table 1. Given normality assumptions for structural equation modeling, estimations of skewed distributions, were calculated for all study variables. Seven variables had skewed distributions including the DAS – Consensus subscale, the Psychological Autonomy – Promotion scale, the Parental Stress Scale, both mother and preadolescent report of CBQ – Dyadic Behavior, and mother report of the Dyadic Discussions – Affect Intensity scale. These variables were logarithmically transformed so that they no longer demonstrated significant skewness, and the transformed variables were used in subsequent analyses. In a final step before proceeding with our model testing procedures, correlations among the study variables were calculated and are presented in Table 2. Bivariate relations among the manifest indicators for separate model constructs were in the expected direction. In addi-

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for Study Measures

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
Marital conflict measures				
O'Leary Porter Scale — MR	20.74	6.21	10.00	40.00
DAS — consensus — MR	28.03	7.43	15.00	57.00
Co-parenting conflict — MR	9.06	2.70	4.00	20.00
Responsive parenting practices measures				
Psychological autonomy — PR	26.96	3.91	11.00	32.00
Knowledge — PR	32.73	3.50	12.00	36.00
Democracy — PR	51.22	8.58	29.00	71.00
Psychological experience of parenting measures				
Parenting efficacy — MR	23.16	3.09	14.00	28.00
Parenting stress — MR	23.11	3.83	8.00	28.00
Parenting competence — MR	19.83	2.95	12.00	25.00
Mother-preadolescent relational negativity measures				
Negative conflict behavior — MR	35.31	8.00	22.00	68.00
Negative conflict behavior — PR	33.91	6.74	22.00	54.00
Negative affectivity — MR	1.45	.30	1.00	2.27
Negative affectivity — PR	1.41	.43	0.00	2.89
Emotional cohesion — MR	25.33	3.66	10.00	32.00
Emotional cohesion — PR	26.94	3.71	14.00	32.00

Note. *N* = 156. MR = mother's report; PR = preadolescent's report; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale.

TABLE 2
Bivariate Correlations Among Study Measures

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. O'Leary Porter Scale	—														
2. DAS - consensus	.57**	—													
3. Co-parent conflict	.74**	.56**	—												
4. Psychological autonomy	-.24**	-.22**	-.08	—											
5. Knowledge	-.17*	-.17*	-.17*	.30**	—										
6. Democracy	-.06	-.17*	-.13	.34**	.27**	—									
7. Parenting efficacy	-.34**	-.23**	-.36**	.13	.18*	.20*	—								
8. Parenting stress	-.31**	-.27**	-.39**	.12	.24**	.19*	.51**	—							
9. Parenting competence	-.30**	-.25**	-.37**	.10	.09	.18*	.65**	.61**	—						
10. Neg conf behavior — MR	.39**	.35**	.36**	-.29**	-.22**	-.29**	-.53**	-.62**	-.53**	—					
11. Negc conf behavior — PR	.12	.04	.04	-.57**	-.39**	-.47**	-.22**	-.24**	-.18*	.32**	—				
12. Neg affectivity — MR	.29**	.25*	.25**	-.19*	-.16*	-.15	-.24**	-.42**	-.31**	.41**	.22*	—			
13. Neg affectivity — PR	.06	.06	.09	-.28**	-.34**	-.30**	-.16*	-.24**	-.04	.22**	.35**	.27**	—		
14. Emot coh — MR	.18*	.27**	.21*	-.29**	-.10	-.29**	-.35**	-.42**	-.47**	.63**	.32**	.28**	.16*	—	
15. Emot coh — PR	.01	.15	.01	-.39**	-.40**	-.51**	-.10	-.14	-.11	.25**	.55**	.09	.36**	.40**	—

Notes. N = 156. DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Neg conf behavior = Negative conflict behavior; Neg affectivity = Negative affectivity; Emot coh = Emotional cohesion. MR = mother report; PR = preadolescent report.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, two tailed.

tion, relations between manifest indicators within a construct were generally higher than relations with indicators across constructs were.

Plan of Model Testing Procedures

To examine our hypothesized models, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used. In SEM, an initial step involves examining a measurement model that defines the pattern of relations between manifest and latent variables. Therefore, for each of the structural models, a measurement model in which each observed variable was linked to a single latent variable, was first constructed and tested. The measurement model included all possible correlations among the latent variables. If the measurement model provided a reasonable fit, we proceeded with tests of successive structural models. In accordance with Baron and Kenny (1986), a model that examined the direct relation between marital conflict and relational negativity was tested first. If the direct relation was significant, we proceeded to test a full model that included the direct path between marital conflict and relational negativity and the indirect paths of the two potential mediators, responsive parenting practices and psychological experience of parenting. Finally, a mediation model was examined in which the direct path between marital conflict and relational negativity was set to 0. The process of testing for mediation involved nesting the mediation model within the full model so that statistical comparisons could be conducted using chi-square (χ^2) difference tests.

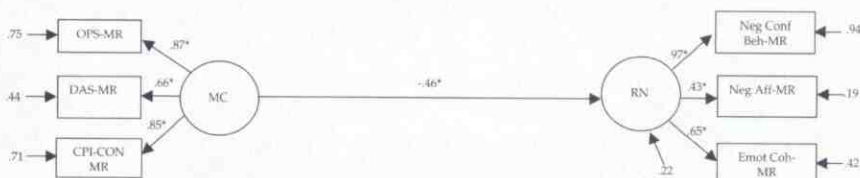
The Amos program (Arbuckle, 1995) was used to estimate the relations among the variables, to assess model fit (maximum likelihood method), and to compare models. The fit of all models was assessed with the chi-square statistic and several alternative fit indexes that assessed the discordance between the observed data and the model after adjusting for parsimony. The alternative fit indexes included the goodness of fit index (GFI; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993), with values greater than .90 indicating acceptable fit. In addition, we used the adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993), an index that takes degrees of freedom into account. AGFI values greater than .85 indicate acceptable fit. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1990) also was considered. The RMSEA is a population-based index and is relatively insensitive to sample size; values of .08 or less indicate a reasonable fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

Marital Conflict and Mother-Reported Relational Negativity

We began by testing a measurement model that included the latent variables marital conflict and mother-reported relational negativity and their manifest indicators. The measurement model fit well. The chi-square was

not significant, $\chi^2(8, N = 156) = 10.40, p = .24$, and the alternative fit indexes suggested that the model had an acceptable fit (GFI = .98, AGFI = .94, RMSEA = .04). In addition, the factor loadings for each manifest indicator of the latent constructs were all positive and significant at $p < .001$. Standardized loadings ranged from .43 to .97, indicating that each observed variable was strongly related to the latent variable it was hypothesized to measure. These results suggested that no modifications in the measurement model were needed; therefore, we proceeded with tests of the direct effect structural model in which marital conflict predicted mother-reported relational negativity (see Figure 2). The chi-square for the model was not significant, $\chi^2(8, N = 156) = 10.40, p = .24$, and the alternative fit indexes revealed an acceptable fit (GFI = .98, AGFI = .94, and RMSEA = .04). Importantly, the direct relation between marital conflict and mother-reported relational negativity was significant and in the expected positive direction ($\beta = .46, t = -5.07, p < .05$).

Before proceeding with tests of our mediation model, we repeated the test of the direct relation between marital conflict and relational negativity while controlling for several demographic variables (e.g., maternal age, education, family income, number of children in the family, and preadolescent gender). There was essentially no difference in the relation between marital conflict and relational negativity before and after controlling for demographic variables ($\beta = .46$ and $\beta = .51$, respectively), and the path coefficients between each of the demographic variables and relational negativity were not significant ($ps > .05$). The demographic variables were therefore not included in subsequent model testing procedures.



$N = 156$
 $\chi^2(8) = 10.40, p = .24$
 GFI = .98
 AGFI = .94
 RMSEA = .04

FIGURE 2

Structural Model Linking Marital Conflict With Mother-Reported Relational Negativity. MC = marital conflict; RN = relational negativity; MR = mother report. GFI = goodness-of-fit index; AGFI = adjusted goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; OPS = O'Leary-Porter Scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; CPI-CON = Co-Parental Interaction Scale-conflict; Neg Conf Beh = negative conflict behavior; Neg Aff = negative affectivity; Emot Coh = emotional cohesion. * $p < .05$.

Our subsequent analyses tested whether the relation between marital conflict and relational negativity was mediated by responsive parenting practices and the psychological experience of parenting. First, a measurement model was constructed that included the four latent variables and their respective manifest indicators. Although the chi-square was significant, $\chi^2(48, N = 156) = 72.78, p = .01$, the alternative fit indexes indicated that the model was a good fit. In addition, the factor loadings for each manifest indicator of the latent constructs were all positive and significant at $p < .001$. Standardized loadings ranged from .46 to .90, indicating that each observed variable was strongly related to the latent variable it was hypothesized to measure.

Our first structural model was a full model; that is, fully saturated at the latent variable level (see Figure 3). We specified direct paths between marital

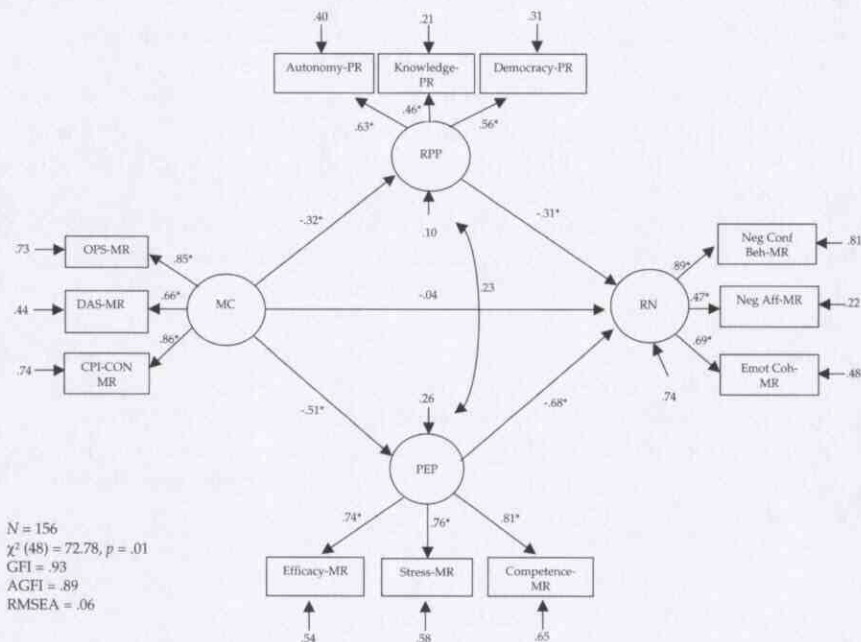


FIGURE 3

Structural Model Linking Marital Conflict With Responsive Parenting Practices, Psychological Experience of Parenting and Mother-Reported Relational Negativity. MC = marital conflict; RPP = responsive parenting practices; PEP = psychological experience of parenting; RN = relational negativity; PR = preadolescent report; MR = mother report; GFI = goodness-of-fit index; AGFI = adjusted goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CPI-CON = Co-Parental Interaction Scale-conflict; Neg Conf Beh = negative conflict behavior; Neg Aff = negative affectivity; Emot Coh = emotional cohesion. * $p < .05$.

conflict and responsive parenting practices, psychological experience of parenting, and relational negativity. We also specified direct paths between responsive parenting practices, psychological experience of parenting, and relational negativity. The disturbance terms for the two mediators were allowed to correlate. The full model had a significant chi-square, $\chi^2(48, N = 156) = 72.78, p = .01$. However, the alternative fit indexes suggested that the model had a good fit to the observed data. All structural path coefficients were in the expected direction. marital conflict had a negative relation with responsive parenting practices ($\beta = -.32, t = -2.60, p = .009$) and psychological experience of parenting ($\beta = -.51, t = -5.00, p = .001$). In addition, both responsive parenting practices ($\beta = -.31, t = -2.98, p = .003$) and psychological experience of parenting ($\beta = -.68, t = -6.29, p = .001$) had negative relations with mother-reported relational negativity. The structural path coefficients were statistically significant, with the exception of the direct path from marital conflict to mother-reported relational negativity ($\beta = .04, t = .40, p = .70$). This path coefficient can be compared with the path coefficient for the total effect of marital conflict on mother-reported relational negativity, which was estimated earlier to be $\beta = -.46$. The attenuated direct path suggested that most of the covariation between marital conflict and relational negativity was mediated by responsive parenting practices and the psychological experience of parenting.

To further test this finding, a nested mediation model was created that eliminated the direct path between marital conflict and mother-reported relational negativity (see Figure 4). The chi-square for the mediation model was significant, $\chi^2(49, N = 156) = 72.93, p = .02$. However, the alternative fit indexes suggested that the model had a good fit. Because the mediation model was nested within the full model, we were able to calculate the chi-square difference. Results showed that there was a statistically nonsignificant difference in chi-square between the two models for one degree of freedom, $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = .15, p > .05$. This finding suggests that, when compared with the full model, the reduced structural equation model in which the effects of marital conflict on mother-reported relationship quality are constrained to operate through the mediating mechanisms of responsive parenting practices and subjective perceptions of parenting, represents an equally accurate, yet more parsimonious explanation of the observed data.

To examine the possibilities that model fit was better when the mediators were placed sequentially in the model versus placed simultaneously, we constructed two alternative models. In Alternative Model 1, marital conflict led to responsive parenting, which led to psychological experience of parenting, which led to relational negativity. In Alternative Model 2, marital conflict led to psychological experience of parenting, which led to responsive parenting, which led to relational negativity. We generated the appropriate full and mediating models for both alternative

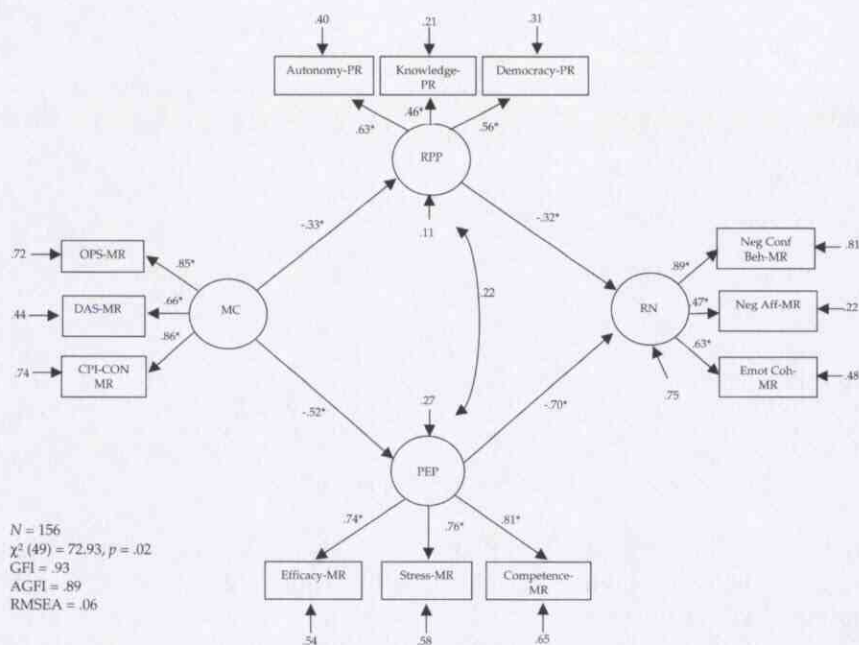


FIGURE 4

Mediation Model Linking Marital Conflict With Mother-Reported Relational Negativity Through Responsive Parenting Practices and Psychological Experience of Parenting. MC = marital conflict; RPP = responsive parenting practices; PEP = psychological experience of parenting; RN = relational negativity; PR = preadolescent report; MR = mother report; GFI = goodness-of-fit index; AGFI = adjusted goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CPI-CON = Co-Parental Interaction Scale-conflict; Neg Conf Beh = negative conflict behavior; Neg Aff = negative affectivity; Emot Coh = emotional cohesion. * $p < .05$.

models and conducted χ^2 difference tests to compare the alternatives with our simultaneous mediators model. The results of these analyses are reported in Table 3. Both alternative sequential models yielded significantly larger χ^2 values than the simultaneous mediators model. Thus, the simultaneous model provided a better explanation of the underlying data structure than did either of the alternative sequential models.

Marital Conflict and Preadolescent-Reported Relational Negativity

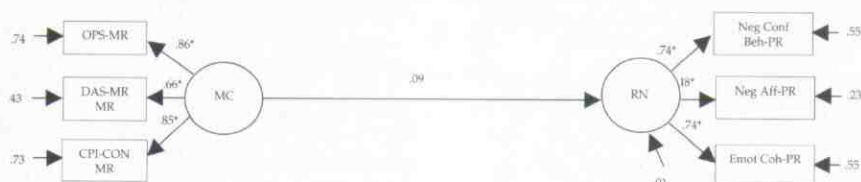
We began by testing a measurement model that included the latent variables marital conflict and preadolescent-reported relational negativity and their manifest indicators. The chi-square for the measurement model was

TABLE 3
Nested Model Results Comparing Simultaneous Mediators Versus
Sequential Mediators

Model	χ^2 (df)	χ^2 diff	Δdf
Full models			
Simultaneous mediators	72.78 (48)	—	—
Alternative sequential mediators			
1. RPP leading to PEP	98.45 (50)	25.67*	2
2. PEP leading to RPP	97.92 (50)	25.14*	2
Mediation models			
Simultaneous mediators	72.93 (49)	—	—
Alternative sequential mediators			
1. RPP leading to PEP	101.35 (51)	28.42*	2
2. PEP leading to RPP	98.66 (51)	25.73*	2

Note. $N = 156$. df = degrees of freedom; diff = difference. RPP = Responsive Parenting Practices, PEP = Psychological Experience of Parenting. * $p < .05$.

not significant, $\chi^2(8, N = 156) = 15.12$, $p = .06$, and alternative fit indexes suggested an acceptable fit. In addition, the factor loadings for each manifest indicator of the latent constructs were all positive and significant at $p < .001$, indicating that each observed variable was strongly related to the latent variable it was hypothesized to measure. These results suggested that no modifications in the measurement model were needed, and we proceeded with tests of the direct effect structural model in which marital conflict predicted preadolescent-reported relational negativity (see Figure 5).



$N = 156$
 $\chi^2(8) = 15.12$, $p = .06$
 GFI = .97
 AGFI = .92
 RMSEA = .08

FIGURE 5

Structural Model Linking Marital Conflict With Preadolescent-Reported Relational Negativity. MC = marital conflict; RN = relational negativity; PR = preadolescent report; MR = mother report; GFI = goodness-of-fit index; AGFI = adjusted goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CPI-CON = Co-Parental Interaction Scale-conflict; Neg Conf Beh = negative conflict behavior; Neg Aff = negative affectivity; Emot Coh = emotional cohesion. * $p < .05$.

The chi-square for this model was not significant, $\chi^2(8, N = 156) = 15.12, p = .06$, indicating a good fit. However, the coefficient representing the direct relation between marital conflict and preadolescent-reported relational negativity was not significant ($\beta = .09, t = .88, p = .38$). Because this relation was not significant, we were unable to proceed with further tests of the mediation model for preadolescents.

DISCUSSION

A growing body of literature has explored associations among interparental conflict and the dimensions of the parent-child relationship. As this literature has accumulated, the focus has shifted from an examination of the direct effects of marital conflict to an examination of the processes by which marital conflict affects parents, children, and their relationships. In accord with this new focus, we examined whether two aspects of parenting 'responsive parenting practices and the psychological experience of parenting' mediated the association between marital conflict and mother-preadolescent relational negativity.

We found that marital conflict and relational negativity were significantly associated for mothers' reports of negativity but not for preadolescents' reports of negativity. The possibility of rater effects in the sample may be one explanation for the lack of association between marital conflict and preadolescent report of relational negativity. That is, it may be more difficult to find associations between constructs when they are assessed by reports from different family members. In addition to methodological considerations, the lack of an effect may be due in part to what our relational negativity construct assessed: the presence of conflict and feelings of emotional distance in the mother-preadolescent dyad. Although it is difficult to interpret the lack of a relation, it is possible that when the preadolescents in our sample completed the conflict and emotional cohesion measures, they were focused primarily on autonomy-related conflicts they had experienced with their mothers. From a preadolescent's perspective, increased conflict and diminished closeness with his or her mother may come about because the mother, while typically progressively granting more autonomy, still routinely interrupts or impedes her preadolescent's goals and plans. These types of conflicts are likely to occur normatively during preadolescence and early adolescence, presumably whether marital conflict is present or not (Kidwell, Fischer, Dunham, & Baronowski, 1983; Montemayor, 1983; Steinberg, 1990, 2001). From the preadolescent's perspective, then, perceptions of increased conflict and diminished closeness may focus mainly on the self in relation to

the mother and may be less proximally related to conflicts in the other family subsystems.

When the mothers in our sample experienced marital conflict, they were also likely to perceive their relationships with their preadolescents as more contentious and less emotionally close. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that marital conflict was associated with parent and observer reports of increased negativity between parents and young children (Kerig et al., 1993; Lindahl et al., 1997; Margolin et al., 2001) as well as parents and adolescents (Harold et al., 1997; Osborne & Fincham, 1996). Our finding that this relation exists in a stably married and normative sample of mothers of preadolescents is noteworthy given the important developmental transitions that are likely occurring during this time. Preadolescence is a time when mothers and children in Western and industrialized societies are likely beginning to transform aspects of their relationships, especially aspects related to authority and emotional closeness (Steinberg, 1990). Preadolescents may be questioning family rules, may have increased resistance to "family policy," and may be trying to gain a measure of emotional and behavioral independence from their parents. In turn, mothers are likely trying to figure out how to respond to these changes in their children while maintaining an emotional connection with them as well as some degree of control over them (Kidwell et al., 1983). Marital conflict is likely to add additional stress for mothers during an already challenging transition, and, according to a mother's perspective, may provoke additional conflict and stress in the mother - preadolescent relationship.

Results of our model tests supported our hypothesis that marital conflict did not directly affect mothers' perceptions of negativity in their relationships with their preadolescents. Rather, this association was mediated by preadolescents' perceptions of responsive parenting and by mothers' psychological experience of parenting. Within this pattern of mediated relations, we found that marital conflict and responsive parenting practices were negatively associated. This finding is consistent with previous studies, which indicate that marital conflict has a negative relation with indexes of responsive parenting (e.g., Fauber et al., 1990; Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987; Stoneman, Brody, & Burke, 1989). Why does marital conflict have a negative effect on a mother's ability or willingness to provide responsive parenting? One possible explanation may be that the effects of marital conflict may "spill-over" into parenting (Erel & Burman, 1995). For example, marital conflict may be emotionally draining for a mother, rendering her unable to provide responsive parenting. Indeed, marital conflict has been linked previously to lower levels of sensitive, warm, and involved parenting (Brody et al., 1996; Conger et al., 1993; Owen & Cox,

1997). It also may be that entanglement in marital conflict may decrease a mother's ability to be involved with her child and focused on her child's needs because a disruptive marital relationship depletes her time and energy (Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988).

In addition, we found that marital conflict had a negative relation with mothers' psychological experience of parenting. It may be that, when high levels of marital conflict are present, a mother experiences less spousal affirmation of her parenting, ultimately contributing to a poor parenting self-evaluation. The negative affect associated with marital conflict may result in a negative emotional "halo" over one's parenting self-concept. In turn, negative affect surrounding the self in parenting may result more specifically in negative evaluations of parenting competence and efficacy, as well as greater stress reactivity to parenting challenges. Moreover, when marital conflict occurs against the backdrop of the transitional aspects of preadolescence, its negative effects on a mother's psychological experience of parenting may be exacerbated further. More generally, our results concerning the psychological experience of parenting suggest that the concept of "parenting" in the marital conflict literature needs to be expanded to include both behavioral and cognitive/affective aspects of parenting.

Results of the mediational tests also indicated that responsive parenting practices had a negative association with mothers' perceptions of negativity in the mother - preadolescent relationship. This finding supports previous studies, which have suggested that when a mother's parenting reflects dimensions of responsiveness there is less negativity and conflict in her relationship with her child (Collins, 1990; Kerns et al., 2001; Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Metzler et al., 1998; Yau & Smetana, 1996). However, much of the previous research has relied on younger or older samples of children. The findings from this study suggest that the association between mother's caregiving and the level of negativity in the mother - child relationship occurs during the important transitional period of preadolescence.

The model tests also revealed that mothers who reported more positive psychological experiences of parenting also reported less negativity in the mother - preadolescent dyad. Previous studies focused on either younger children or older adolescents have indicated that mothers who had negative psychological experiences of parenting tended to have negative and conflictual interactions with their children (e.g., Donovan & Leavitt, 1985; Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Results from this study reveal that the association between the psychological experience of parenting and mother - child relationship quality is also evident at the transition to adolescence.

Finally, our alternative model comparisons revealed that the models had a better fit to the data when the psychological experience of parenting

and responsive parenting practices simultaneously mediated the relation between marital conflict and relational negativity. Although it is certainly possible that one mediator may lead to another or that mediators are reciprocally related across time, within the context of our data, the simpler simultaneous model appeared to be more appropriate. Longitudinal data would be valuable in ascertaining whether these particular mediators could be sequentially or reciprocally ordered or whether a simultaneous view is indeed more appropriate.

Although the model constructs were related in ways that were consistent with the hypotheses of this study, some limitations of the data should be addressed. First and most important, because we used data collected at one time point, the causal pathways implied by our model should be considered exploratory in nature. For instance, it is possible that negative interactions between mothers and preadolescents may come to impair both responsive parenting and mothers' appraisals of themselves in their parenting roles. Second, our reliance on self-report measures as well as single reporters for latent constructs may have capitalized on source and method variance. The use of observational methods and the collection of additional family members' reports (including those from fathers) would help address such concerns. Third, although our sample was diverse with respect to socioeconomic status, it was largely homogeneous with respect to ethnicity. Although there is no empirical basis to believe that the findings in this study differ according to racial background, replications of the study with a more heterogeneous sample would allow for empirically supported generalization of findings to a broader population. Finally, we have not assessed how other indicators of marital problems, such as marital withdrawal, may affect dimensions of the mother - child relationship. Although past findings have generally been stronger for fathers than they are for mothers, such associations are certainly possible among mothers (Cox et al., 2001; Katz & Gottman, 1994; see also Grych, 2002).

The limitations notwithstanding, this study makes a number of contributions. Perhaps the major contribution of our findings is that we establish the possibility that different conceptualizations of parenting may serve as mediators in models of marital conflict and mother - preadolescent relationships. Previous studies on marital conflict have persisted in examining parenting practices only and have not delved more deeply into additional aspects of the parenting role. This study demonstrates support for the extension of the definition of parenting within marital conflict research. In addition, this study uses a family process perspective, and the significant findings support the call by empiricists and theorists alike that research on the family needs to incorporate a process-oriented approach in developing more comprehensive and explanatory models of the role of parenting in

the family system (Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000). Also, this study used measures of parenting and of mother – preadolescent relationship quality that used a more adolescent focus. It has been documented that the nature of parent – child relationships, including parenting and relationship quality, transform somewhat during the transition to adolescence (Holmbeck, Paikoff, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995). To help capture the different dynamics involved in parent – adolescent relationships and parenting during this epoch, we must develop and refine age-appropriate measures.

Marital conflict may affect both how a mother feels about her parenting and how responsive she is in her parenting practices; these feelings and behaviors may subsequently affect mother – child negativity. Our findings demonstrate that the marital conflict literature needs to move beyond narrow definitions of parenting as simply parenting practices and should include broader aspects of parenting, such as efficacy, competence, and stress. Indeed, it may be that by including cognitive/affective aspects of the psychological experience of parenting in research studies, psychologists have the opportunity to explain more variance in family process models.

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