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MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION TACTICS AND
PRESCHOOLERS' SOCIAL COMPETENCE: AN
ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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**MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION TACTICS AND PRESCHOOLERS' SOCIAL
COMPETENCE: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

By

Krista Surowiec

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ABSTRACT

MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION TACTICS AND PRESCHOOLERS' SOCIAL COMPETENCE: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

By

Krista Surowiec

This descriptive study investigated the relationship of marital conflict resolution tactics to preschoolers' social competence. The variables in this study were mothers' self-reported use of negotiation, psychological aggression, and violence as marital conflict resolution tactics and preschoolers' social competence scores. Thirty-five three-, four- and five- year old children and their parents' marital subsystem were units of analysis drawn from a larger study of preschoolers' social competence. Analysis of secondary data collected in the larger study and new data collected by the author were used for this investigation. Relationships between the variables in this study were determined using correlational techniques. There were no significant correlations between the conflict resolution tactics and preschoolers' social competence scores. There was, however, a significant correlation between preschoolers' negative social competence behavior scores and mothers' self-reported use of psychological aggression, particularly minor psychological aggression. In addition, mothers' reports of fathers' psychological aggression was significantly related to boys' negative social competence behavior scores but was not significantly related to girls' negative social competence behavior scores.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Social competence is important for being healthy, happy, and prosperous, from childhood to early adulthood (Boyum & Ross, 1995) and for succeeding in life challenges (Garbarino & Gaboury, 1992). Socially competent individuals manage their social surroundings and engage in meaningful social action within interactional contexts (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998). They do this by being responsible, independent, self-controlled, friendly, self-reliant, explorative, self-assertive, realistic, and content (Baumrind, 1969, 1995). The study of social competence, however, is not a simple investigation of the individual. Rather, the study of social competence is conceptualized, analyzed, and promoted within environmental contexts.

Children's home environments have powerful influences on children's development. The marital relationship is an important component in the home environment that has major influences on family life. Researchers (Glick & Kessler, 1974; Steger & Kotler, 1979) have referred to the marital subsystem as the core of family solidarity and the key component in determining the quality of family life. Components of the marital relationship, including the types of conflict resolution tactics used by marital couples contribute to the disorganization or stability within the home environment. The way in which conflicts are managed is important for the psychological health and well being of all members of the family, particularly children (Beach & Nelson, 1990; Bradbury, 1998; Cummings, 1998; Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Whisman, 2001).

Marital conflict has many significant implications for children's social development. Several investigations have reported that children's social competence is related to marital conflict (Emery & O'Leary, 1984; Long, Forehand, Fauber, & Brody, 1987). Marital couples typically experience most conflict during the child-rearing years of their marriage (Glenn, 1990), especially during infancy and early childhood (Belsky & Rovine, 1990). To some extent, minor marital conflict is a normative part of the marital relationship and family environment. An occurrence of about two instances of conflict a week (Lloyd, 1987) is typical. Anger is also a natural part of life, and children can handle anger at normal levels even if it is a bit stressful at the time (Cummings & Davies, 1994). However, more intense levels of marital conflict negatively impact children's social development (Cummings & Davies, 1994, Fincham & Osborne, 1993). When exposed to non-normative levels of marital conflict, children display higher levels of distress, aggression (Cummings, Iannotti & Zahn-Waxler, 1985), insecurity, anger (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1981), and increased behavior problems (Long, Forehand, Fauber & Brody, 1987; Wiersen, Forehand & McCombs, 1988). Interestingly, the frequency of marital conflict plays a smaller role in impacting children's social outcomes as compared to how parents handle marital conflict. That is, the types of conflict resolution tactics used by the couple are related to children's social development. The destructive conflict resolution tactics that marital couples use negatively influence the development of children's social competence. On the other hand, the constructive conflict resolution tactics that marital couples use may positively influence the development of children's social competence and is worth exploring.

Children understand more than just whether their parents have a conflict, but *how* their parents have a conflict. Cummings and Davies (1994) suggest that it is *how* parents have conflicts and whether they are able to resolve their differences that may be the solution to understanding the impact of marital conflict on children. In order to test hypothesis that exposure to constructive conflict resolution tactics may be beneficial for children, Grych (2001) suggested, “it is necessary to examine theoretically relevant outcomes such as their social competence or conflict resolution skill, rather than to simply document lower level of pathology” (p. 176).

Statement of the Problem

This study investigated the relationship of mothers’ self-reports of their marital conflict resolution tactics to preschoolers’ social competence scores. Specifically, this study investigated the relationship of mothers’ self-reported use of their marital conflict resolution tactics using the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) to preschooler's social competence scores as measured by parent ratings of the Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS) (Cowen, Hightower, Pedro-Carroll, Work, Wyman, Haffey, 1996).

Significance of the Study

As stated above, there is a great expressed need to further study marital conflict resolution tactics when analyzing the influence of marital conflict on children and to examine relevant children outcomes such as social competence. This study is significant to the family ecological approach that views the family as an energy transformation system (Andrews, Bubolz, & Paolucci, 1980). The dynamic flow of energy within the home environment influences the socialization function of the family. Specifically, the

tactics that marital couples use during conflict is energy that is transformed which then serves a function in their children's development of social competence. This study analyzes those relationship variables. The study of marital conflict resolution tactics as a significant influence on family systems may help direct interventions and contribute to improving the quality of marriages, parent-child relationships, and children's social development including social competence. Specifically, this investigation supports the use of constructive conflict resolution tactics (i.e. negotiation) instead of destructive resolution tactics (i.e. psychological aggression, violence) because of its implications on children's positive developmental outcomes. Most previous research has focused on the destructive conflict resolution tactics as it influences children's developmental outcomes (Straus, 1990). However, more will be learned about violence if studied in the context of other tactics for resolving conflicts. The significance of this investigation may be beneficial to professionals designing marriage family therapy, family life education, and parent education using an ecological perspective.

Family Ecological Model

"The family ecosystem can be viewed as an environment that supports the development of individual subsystems or family members" (Andrews et al., 1980, p.33). The family ecological model was chosen as an appropriate framework for conceptualizing and analyzing the influences of marital conflict resolution tactics used by marital couples as they interact with the child to influence social competence. Other researchers have also considered the interdependent systems of the home environment as a best-fit model for studying the influences of marital conflict on other family systems. When studying marital conflict, Cummings and Davies (1994) assumed that the

“emotional climate in the home is contagious, moving across relatively permeably boundaries between the various subsystems” (p.107). The ecological model, a set of four interdependent organizational systems, includes the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem was chosen as the focus for this analysis as it consists of a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations (i.e. marital conflict resolutions tactics) that the developing person (i.e. the child) actively experiences within a physical, social, and symbolic context (i.e. the home environment), which may limit or promote development (i.e. social competence) (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

The home environment is where children first begin to develop social competence. Children's development differs according to the quality of the home environment. The quality of the home environment functions to influence the competence (development of knowledge and skills) versus dysfunction (difficulties of maintaining control) of its members (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Andrews et al., (1980) presented an ecological approach for examining the function of the family as building individual competencies. They explained, “the family can be considered a primary educator and the home a basic center for developing competencies- or incompetencies” (p. 41).

Transactions within the home environment influence the developing child and may either promote or thwart development (Thomas, 2000). Conflict resolution tactics that married couples use in the home environment are measures of quality that may contribute to the development of children’s social competence. This investigation asks whether there are relationships between different styles of conflict resolution tactics and children’s social competence.

The way that social competence is conceptualized in this investigation is a general reflection of our cultural and societal values of social competence. These values, for example, are that of autonomy, responsibility, attainment of goals, self-worth, self-control, sensitivity to one's own needs as well as the needs of others, empathy, ability to cope with stress, ability to manage emotions, and cooperation. These cultural values influence our expectations of children. The macrosystemic culture also influences the way that children interrelate with others as they develop social competencies within different contexts.

Conceptual and Operational Definitions

Social competence. Socially competent children are characterized as having a balanced mood, having friends, participating in discussions, being able to cope with failure, being able to express ideas willingly, being able to tolerate frustration, possessing positive conflict resolutions skills, and trying to help other children (Cowen et al., 1996).

Social competence is operationally defined as parent ratings of children's social competence behaviors as scored on the Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS) (Cowen et al., 1996).

Marital conflict resolution tactics. In this investigation, marital conflict resolution tactics are conceptually defined as the overt actions used by marital couples in response to conflict (Coser, 1956 & Straus 1990).

Marital conflict resolution tactics are operationally defined as mothers' self-reported use of their and their spouses' marital conflict resolution tactic behaviors as measured on the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2) (Straus et al., 1996). The CTS2 includes the scales of Negotiation (including emotional negotiation and cognitive negotiation

subscales), Psychological Aggression (including minor psychological aggression and severe psychological aggression subscales), and Violence (including only minor physical aggression subscale). Descriptions of the three scales are listed below:

Negotiation We define negotiation as actions taken to settle a disagreement through discussion. The items in the cognitive subscale are examples of such discussions. Research on marital conflict and communication has shown that the emotional tone of discussion (e.g., whether positive or negative) is strongly linked to marital stability (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). The emotion subscale is meant to measure the extent to which positive affect is communicated by asking about expression of feelings and care and respect for the partner (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman 1996, p. 289).

Psychological Aggression The use of verbal and nonverbal acts which symbolically hurt the other, or the use of threats to hurt the other (Straus, 1990, p.30).

Violence The use of physical force against another person as a means of resolving the conflict, which is called the “Physical Aggression” or “Violence” scale (Straus, 1990, p.30).

The Psychological Aggression and Violence scales include classified items of minor and severe that has been supported by factor analysis and from the acknowledgement that occasional minor violence may be distinguished from repeated severe assaults (Gelles, 1991; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; M.P. Johnson, 1995; Straus, 1990). The CTS is one of the most popular and frequently used instruments for measuring verbal and physical family violence (Schumm & Bagorozzi, 1989).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The frequency, intensity, styles of resolution and meanings of marital conflict are at the heart of understanding the important influences of marital conflict on children's social development. The literature review outlines the influences of marital conflict on children's social development. More specifically, the literature review discusses the relationship between types of conflict resolution tactics and children's social development outcomes, and the reasons why conflict tactics may impact social development.

Influences of Marital Conflict on Children's Social Competence

Marital conflict is negatively associated with marital quality (Bradbury, Rogge, & Lawrence, 2001; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2001; Johnson, 2001). The "spillover hypotheses" (Engfer, 1988) suggests that negative marital quality is associated with negative parent-child relationship quality. Home environments that have more marital conflict carryover to yield more negative parent-child relationships than home environments that have less conflict (Erel & Burman, 1995). The more negative parent-child relationships are associated with poorer social awareness and social withdrawal in children (Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine, & Volling, 1991; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Fincham, Grych, Osborne, 1994; Harrist & Ainslie, 1998; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991). Socially competent children are not withdrawn; rather they participate in discussions, express their ideas willingly and make friends easily.

Marital conflict, rather than general marital distress (Johnson & O'Leary, 1987; Jouriles, Murphy, & O'Leary, 1989) is a key predictor of child adjustment and

psychological problems (Jouriles, Bourg, & Farris, 1991). Marital conflict is related to children's adjustment problems of adaptiveness and appropriateness of children's behaviors (Grych & Fincham, 1990), externalizing disorders (i.e. aggression and noncompliance; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Jenkins & Smith, 1991), and internalizing disorders (depression and withdrawal; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987). Children's adjustment problems and externalizing and internalizing disorders, as a result of marital conflict, are counterproductive to the development of social competence. In fact, Olson and Rosenblum (1998) found that preschoolers with high internalizing problem behavior rates manifested lower social competence than others. Cummings et al., (2001) stated "children from high-conflict homes are also more likely to display lower social competence with peers . . ." (p.120). Marks, Glaser, Glass, & Horne (2001) found that children, who witnessed marital violence, had a lower social competence, more behavior problems and exhibited more internalizing and externalizing behaviors than the control group.

When children are exposed to repetitive and severe conflict, difficulties in emotional regulation increase, resulting in anger and physical aggression when the child becomes emotionally stimulated (Cummings & Davies, 1994; DeBellis, 1997). It is important for children to regulate their emotions. Socially competent children are characterized, for example, as having a mood that is balanced and stable, being able to ignore teasing, being friendly toward peers, being able to function well with distractions, and being able to tolerate frustration (Cowen et al., 1996). The inability to regulate emotions impedes the development of social competence.

Some studies focus on the influences of marital conflict on children when the conflict is resolved and when it is not resolved (Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991; Cummings, Simpson, Pennington, & Wilson, 1993). Research indicates a decrease of children's negative responses to marital conflict when it is resolved (Cummings, 1987; Cummings et al., 1985; Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, & El-Sheikh, 1989; Cummings et al., 1991; Cummings et al., 1993). Resolution of conflict reduces children's negative reactions to marital conflict. Cummings, Iannotti & Zahn-Waxler (1985) found that aggression and distress experienced by 2-year-old children were reduced to baseline levels after they were exposed to conflict resolution. In other studies, children's increased distress as a reaction to adult conflict significantly decreased when the conflict was subsequently resolved (Cummings & Smith, 1993; El-Sheikh, Cummings, & Goetsch, 1989).

Davies and Cummings (1994) considered the positive implications of conflict resolution from the child's perspective. For example, as the emotional unpleasantness associated with marital conflict decreases, the possibility of conflict turning into family violence also decreases. When conflict is resolved, the child does not need to become involved, the parents are emotionally available and the conflict most likely does not imply divorce or family break up. Conflict resolution, therefore, encourages parental warmth, which in turn encourages the emotional security and well-being of the child. When conflict is resolved, children perceive family conflict to pose no significant threat. Emotional security is important for the socially competent child because it affects the child's regulation of emotions, guides children to cope with significant events and affects

the child's cognitive appraisals and internal representations of relationships (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Influences of Marital Conflict Resolution Tactics on Children's Social Competence

The resolution tactics that parents use during conflict differ in styles (Straus, 1996). Parents in conflict may discuss the problem calmly and show each other that they care even though they disagree by constructively “negotiating” on their disagreeing interests. Parents in conflict may destructively threaten, insult, or spite each other by using “psychological aggression” tactics. In other cases, parents in conflict may destructively use “violence” to hurt their partner. The constructive and destructive styles of conflict resolution are explored here as they relate to children’s development of social competence.

Destructive marital conflict resolution tactics. Overt hostility, (i.e. verbal and physical aggression) between married couples is a stronger predictor of child behavior problems than marital conflict itself (Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, Vincent, & Mahoney, 1996; McNeal & Amato, 1998), or marital apathy and covert tension (Jenkins & Smith, 1991). Johnson and O’Leary (1987) found that the behaviors parents displayed during conflict have a greater influence on children than parental distress. Therefore, marital conflict resolution behaviors are a predictor of child outcomes.

The impact of negative marital conflict resolution tactics, specifically using violence, on child outcomes (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Marks et al., 2001; Rosenberg, 1987; Rosenberg & Rossman, 1990; Wolfe, Zak, Wilson, & Jaffe, 1986) and adolescent outcomes (Niemi, 1988) is greatly studied.

Marital psychological and physical aggression during conflicts is correlated with children's adjustment problems even when controlling for frequency (Jouriles et al., 1996). Other researchers have contradicting beliefs on what exact aspects of psychological and physical aggression are related to children's dysfunction. For example, Cummings and Davies (1994) hypothesize that "how much people overtly disagree is not critical; it is the negative emotionality and meaning associated with conflict that has the destructive impact" (p. 135).

Prolonged marital conflict as well as the use of negative conflict resolution tactics (i.e. psychological aggression or violence) sets a certain negative ambiance in the home environment with several risks to children. Some of these risks include children's feelings of distress, children's modeling of aggression, parental hostility, and lack of warmth with potential for violence in the home. A 12-year longitudinal study on marital violence was related in youth to low life satisfaction, poor self-esteem, less closeness to their mother, more psychological distress, and 189% increased chance of more violence in their own relationships (McNeal & Amato, 1998). Parents may influence their child's level of social competence by reducing the child's exposure to violence (Rutter, 1981).

The sensitization hypothesis offers an explanation for how past histories of exposure to marital conflict affect children's reactions. Children become more reactive to marital conflict as a function of greater histories of marital conflict (Cummings et al., 2001). Children who were more reactive displayed more distress and anger, which are counterproductive to social competence. Specifically, histories of exposure to negative conflict behaviors (i.e. using psychological aggression as a conflict resolution tactic, lack of resolution) sensitize children to conflict. However, histories of exposure to positive

behaviors (i.e. using negotiation as a conflict resolution tactic) do not result in sensitization (Davies, Myers, Cummings, & Heindel, 1999; ElSheikh & Cummings, 1995; El-Sheikh, Cummings, & Reiter, 1996).

Constructive marital conflict resolution tactics. Cummings et al., (1991) found that the degree to which children are distressed and aroused by adults' fights was a direct function of the degree to which conflicts were resolved. Children responded in a nonnegative way to conflicts that were resolved with negotiation, in a moderately negative way to conflicts that were partially resolved and responded in a highly negative way to unresolved conflicts (those with continued open fighting). In addition, when parents use more negotiation rather than psychological aggression or violence, children's fear, distress, and other symptoms lessen (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Even if children do not observe their parents' conflict resolution tactics, they use contextual cues to infer the emotional climate in the home environment (Cummings, Simpson, & Wilson, 1993). The reduction of children's negative responses when parents resolved conflict was independent of observing and not observing the resolution.

The conflict tactics that parents' use do not simply influence the marital relationship, but influence the parent-child relationship and children's developmental outcomes. When children observe adults using constructive ways of handling conflict (i.e. through negotiation) they may learn valuable lessons concerning how to handle their own conflict (Beach, 1995). Children learn many of their social behavioral patterns in their family of origin (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). This suggests that early family experiences, including how conflicts are resolved in families, play a major role in the development of children's social competence. In addition, maternal behavior was found

to predict children's social problem solving skills, which predicted their social competence and future social behavior (Putallaz, 1987). Conflict resolution and problem solving skills are characteristic of socially competent children (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Cummings et al., 2001).

The significance of using constructive conflict resolution tactics is evident in that it teaches children valuable lessons on how to handle conflicts that are inevitable throughout life. Cummings and Davies (1994) challenge researchers to investigate the dimensions of constructive and destructive conflict. For example, they ask, "what are the messages and processes through which children learn to cope with and express conflict from observing their parents' conflicts" (p.135). The next sections attempt to answer this question by discussing the common processes found in literature that explain the influences of marital conflict on children, with an emphasis on *modeling*. As noted earlier, the research literature tends to focus more on the processes that lead to childhood disorders, maladjustment, and incompetencies as opposed to the development of social competencies. However, the strengths of constructive conflict resolution tactics on children's social competence was also found and is shared.

Processes of Marital Conflict on Children

Emery (1982) suggested four processes by which marital conflict influences children and yields childhood disorders. First, marital conflict is a stressor in the home environment and poses risks to children by threatening children's sense of security. Stress in the marital relationship spills over to the parent-child relationship and influences the child's experience of stress while interfering with the healthy development of social competence. Research demonstrates that children experience stress when exposed to

angry interactions between adults including when adults use psychological aggression and violence and marital conflict resolution tactics. Children as young as one and two years old show distress when observing parental conflict (Crockenberg, 1985; Cummings et al., 1981; Dunn & Munn, 1985). These responses to anger at age one and two are consistent even five years later in their response to stressors (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1984). Children coping with much marital conflict may become hypersensitive and overwhelmed by conflict.

Second, during marital conflict, parents use more inconsistent and harsher disciplining strategies leading to more child behavior problems. Marital conflict can result in a deterioration of parenting discipline practices and can abate the emotional availability, responsiveness or sensitivity of parents (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988), thereby disrupting parent-child relations and leaving children emotionally insecure, counteracting the healthy development of social competence. On the other hand, parents who have satisfying and supportive marital relationships will be more responsive and sensitive to their child's needs, and such interactions contribute to socially competent behaviors.

Third, marital conflict interrupts the parent-child attachment bonds. Attachment is a significant predictor of children's early socioemotional development contributing to social competence (Bretherton, 1985). Several studies show the relationship between marital conflict and insecure parent-child attachment (Howes & Markman, 1989; Isabella & Belsky, 1985; Cox & Owen, 1993). Many other studies show strong relationships between marital conflict and the poor emotional relationship between parents and children (Camara & Resnick, 1989; Forehand et al., 1991; Kline et al., 1991; Peterson &

Zill, 1986). Children with emotional security are able to regulate their emotions and have less anxiety and less stress than emotionally insecure children.

Fourth, children may model their parents in conflict along with their ineffective conflict resolution styles like psychological aggression or violence. The role of adult models provides important information as to how use of particular conflict tactics may be related to children's social development.

Modeling. Children observe and imitate their parents, a concept known as modeling (Bandura, 1977). Parents are powerful models to their children because of their significance to children. Children observe their parents even during marital conflict and model their parents including their marital resolution tactics (Amato, Spencer, & Booth, 1995; Camara & Resnick, 1988; Fainsilber-Katz & Gottman, 1993; Long et al., 1987).

Children are constantly learning about interpersonal relationships by observing their parents (Belsky, 1981). Children learn a great deal about interpersonal relationships and problem solving by modeling their parents in interaction with each other. Through modeling, behavior problems increase when children are exposed to their parents' marital conflict (Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Children's modeling of parental behaviors, failure to learn positive social interaction skills, and physiological effects are all direct negative effects of high marital conflict (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

Witnessing parental violence can affect children's attitudes and abilities toward dealing with conflict resolution and violence (Jaffe et al., 1990). In fact, children exposed to family violence have poorer social competence than those not exposed (Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Jaffe et al., 1986; Rosenberg, 1987; Wolfe et al., 1986). Children exposed to family violence were also less interpersonally sensitive and more inclined to use either

passive or aggressive tactics, rather than constructive tactics of negotiation to resolve interpersonal problems (Rosenberg, 1987; Rosenberg & Rossman, 1990).

Children learn “scripts,” or general strategies for aggressive behavior from observing their parents (Bandura, 1986). Because parental modeling of negotiation is generally missing in high-conflict marriages, these children do not learn the social skills and control of aggression necessary for successful peer relationships. Children exposed to violence or repetitive severe parental conflicts do not affectively regulate their own emotions (DeBellis, 1997; Lieberman & Van Horn, 1998) and may form maladaptive models of problem solving or conflict resolution (Grych & Fincham, 1990) leading to lower social competence. To be socially competent, children must have positive problem solving skills, and should interact with friendliness toward others rather than with hostility.

Positive problem solving and resolution skills, for example, using negotiation as a conflict resolution tactic, beneficially help create adaptive models for children leading to social competence (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Children's observations of parents' positive, effective conflict resolution may teach valuable skills for resolving their own differences with peers or siblings (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Resolving conflicts positively, teaches children that conflict is not necessarily destructive, rather conflict is necessary in order to problem solve and come to agreements within the family, thus promoting family functioning. Grych & Fincham (1990) suggested that parents, who resolve conflicts successfully, serve as positive models of problem solving for their children, thus leading to children's increased social competence and coping skills.

Crockenberg, Jackson and Langrock (1996) suggested that parents promote competence by several means. When children observe their parents resolve conflicts effectively, they learn positive ways of attaining goals. Also, when parents work with children in resolving conflicts, children learn that their own goal attainment is linked with others' goal attainment. The ability to achieve personal goals while maintaining positive relationships with social partners is an important component of social competence (Cirino & Beck, 1991; Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986; Musun-Miller, 1993; Rubin & Krasnor, 1986). Finally, parents promote the internalized motivation to engage in behavior even when adults are not present.

The process of modeling occurs not simply by children imitating their parents, but by accumulating information about behavior. When observing aggression and hostility during conflict, children may learn that behaving in this way is acceptable during disputes. Children who associate aggression during conflict may act aggressively not necessarily toward their parents, but during interaction with peers or younger children. In a study of children's aggression, children exposed to adults' angry verbal interchanges, displayed more physical and age-appropriate aggression toward a playmate (Cummings et al., 1985). Exposing children to aggression may give children permission to be aggressive. Children may not inhibit their aggressive impulses. Therefore, children with a greater tendency to be aggressive are more likely to become hostile, after observing acts of aggression and may engage in long-lasting and more frequent aggression.

Summary

Marital conflict in the home environment "spills over" from the marital subsystem to the parent-child subsystem and from the parent-child subsystem to the child's social

development. It is not conflict per se that negatively impacts children's social development; rather it is how parents deal with conflict and their tactics of resolution that have a greater influence on children. Both marital conflict and marital conflict resolution tactics are related to children's social development and social competence. Marital conflict may result in a stressful home environment for all members and all ages if not subsequently resolved. Positive resolution of conflict, on the other hand, has been shown to reduce stress. Marital conflict can result in a deterioration of parenting discipline practices and can abate the emotional availability, responsiveness or sensitivity of parents, thereby disrupting parent-child relations and leaving children emotionally insecure, counteracting the healthy development of social competence. Constructive conflict resolution, however, offers children positive problem solving models and examples of how to positively achieve goals. This investigation proposes that children whose parents use a greater frequency of constructive conflict resolution tactic behaviors (negotiation) are more socially competent than children whose parents use a greater frequency of destructive conflict resolution tactic behaviors (psychological aggression and/or violence).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Research Design

This is a descriptive study involving the analysis of relationships between children's social competence and marital conflict resolution tactics. Thirty-five three-, four- and five- year old children and their parents' marital subsystem were units of analysis drawn from a larger study of preschoolers' social competence (Brophy-Herb, Lee, & Stollak, 2000). Participants in the larger study were recruited from a local university-based laboratory preschool and from two Head Start classrooms in a suburban Midwestern community. Analysis of secondary data collected in the larger study and new data collected by the author were used for this investigation. The collected data included a single 19-item survey completed by participants from the larger study.

Research Subjects

The final sample consisted of 35 mothers and their children, ages three to five years (19 boys, 16 girls; $M = 3.9$ years old, $SD = .60$). Mothers were primarily Caucasian, highly educated, and all married. Demographic information on the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Subject Demographics

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Sibling Relationships		
Has a sibling(s)	31	89
Does not have a sibling(s)	4	11
Mother's Age		
18-24	2	6
25-30	3	8
31-35	14	40
36-40	9	26
over 40	7	20
Mother's Ethnicity		
Caucasian/Non-Hispanic	30	86
Hispanic/Latino	1	3
Asian American	3	8
Other	1	3
Family's Hometown		
Lansing	5	14
East Lansing	12	34
Okemos/Haslett	11	32
Williamston, Mason, Grand Ledge, Dewitt, Holt	2	6
Other	5	14
Family Income		
\$10,000-\$29,000	2	6
\$30,000-\$59,000	11	31
\$60,000-\$99,000	9	26
\$100,000 and above	13	37

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Mother's Occupation		
Corporate manager, executive, high skilled technician, government, college professor	7	20
Middle manager, other Professional/technical work, independent business	9	26
Public School, junior college Teacher, skilled labor/trade, real estate	3	8
Homemaker	16	46
Father's Occupation		
Corporate manager, executive, high skilled technician, government, college professor	20	57
Middle manager, other Professional/technical work, independent business	13	37
Public School, junior college Teacher, skilled labor/trade, real estate	2	6
Mother's Education		
Some college or technical school	1	2
College or technical school graduate	17	49
Professional graduate degree	17	49
Father's Education		
High school graduate	1	3
Some college or technical school	4	11
College or technical school graduate	8	23
Professional graduate degree	22	63
(n = 35)		

Sampling Procedures and Data Collection

The University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) approved the thesis proposal. Following approval by UCRIHS, letters of invitation to participate in this study, as well as consent forms, were mailed to the mothers who participated in the above stated study ($N=73$). A response rate of 48% was received. Mothers who signed and returned consent forms were enrolled in this project, and a subsequent questionnaire on conflict resolution tactics was mailed to them.

Mothers were asked to report on the conflict tactic behaviors that they use toward their husband and that their husbands' use toward them by completing the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) (Straus, 1996). Each item on the CTS2 asks for the frequency of the mothers' behavior (i.e. I shouted or yelled at my partner) and then asks about the same behavior of the partner (i.e. My partner shouted or yelled at me) in the past year. Mothers in the sample completed all the Parent-Child Rating Scales. Therefore, mothers were chosen as the sole reporters on the CTS2. Straus et al. (1996) stated that although use of both partners for couple data is preferred, use of data from one partner is still valid. A number of studies have shown correlations between data provided by husbands and data provided by wives when reporting on conflict (Arias & Beach, 1987; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Szinovacz, 1983). In addition, when the CTS2 is used for basic research where the issue is the relationship between variables, and when used to analyze the total amount of conflict resolution behaviors, regardless of who the actor is, it is less crucial to obtain data from both partners.

Mothers were asked to complete the scale and return it to the researcher in a pre-stamped envelope. Data from the Teacher-Child Rating Scale that were used in the larger

study were not used in this investigation because the data were not available at the time of analyses and not included in the proposal. Confidentiality of the participants was protected.

Research Instrumentation

Preschoolers' social competence. Preschoolers' social competence scores were assessed using parent ratings of each child with the Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS) (Cowen et al., 1996). This measurement consists of 38 items; 18 referring to problematic behaviors (i.e., "disturbs others, stubborn") and 20 referring to behaviors indicating social competence (i.e., "defends own views"). Parents score each item on a five point Likert scale. Each behavior is rated as being "not at all true," "a little true," "somewhat true," "quite true," and "very true" of the child. Internal reliability coefficients range from .85 to .95 (Cowen et al., 1996) for the P-CRS. Reliability analyses in this study indicated an alpha coefficient of .91 for the P-CRS.

Marital conflict tactics. Mothers' self-reported use of their marital conflict tactics were assessed using the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2) (Straus et al., 1996), one of the most popular and frequently used instruments for measuring verbal and physical family violence (Schumm & Bagorozzi, 1989). The scale consists of three main scales, Negotiation, Psychological Aggression and Violence, all of which have been validated by factor analysis (Schumm & Bagorozzi, 1989). Within the Negotiation scale, "emotional negotiation" (3 items) and "cognitive negotiation" (3 items) are assessed. Within the Psychological Aggression scale, "minor psychological aggression" (4 items) and "severe psychological aggression" (4 items) are assessed. Within the Violence scale, "minor physical assault" (5 items) is assessed. The "severe physical assault items" were not

included. Respondents are asked to respond to a list of 19 behaviors that could be used as conflict resolution tactics by indicating the frequency with which they used each tactic in the past year. The following seven frequency categories are provided: 0, 1, 2, 3-5, 6-10, 11-20, and more than 20 instances of the behavior. The behavioral items include actions low in severity (i.e. "I showed my partner I cared even though I disagreed") and actions with more severity and aggressiveness (i.e. "I pushed or shoved my partner"). The CTS has moderate to high reliabilities with alpha coefficients ranging from .77 to .88 for the psychological aggression and physical aggression scales, and from .50 to .76 for the negotiation scale. There is little evidence of social desirability response on the CTS (Saunders, 1986). In addition, there is evidence of concurrent and construct validity (Straus et al., 1996). See Table 2 for the reliability analyses of the CTS2 scales in the current study.

Table 2

Reliability Analyses for the CTS2 Scales

Scale	α
Negotiation	.87
emotional negotiation	.90
cognitive negotiation	.70
Psychological Aggression	.72
minor psychological aggression	.77
severe psychological aggression	-.05
Violence	.40
minor physical assault	.40
Constructive conflict resolution tactics	.87
Destructive conflict resolution tactics	.70

Note. The Constructive Conflict Resolution Tactics are those of the Negotiation scale. The Destructive Conflict Resolution Tactics are those of the Psychological Aggression and Violence scales combined.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. Is there a relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reported use of negotiation as a marital conflict resolution tactic?
HO₁ There is no relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reported use of negotiation as a marital conflict resolution tactic.
HA₁ There is a positive relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reported use of negotiation as a marital conflict resolution tactic. Specifically, preschoolers who have higher social competence scores as measured by the Parent-Child Rating Scale (Cowen et al., 1996) have parents with a higher frequency of negotiation resolution tactic behaviors as measured by the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus et al., 1996).
2. Is there a relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reported use of psychological aggression and mothers' self-reported use of violence as a marital conflict resolution tactic?
HO₂ There is no relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reported use of psychological aggression and mothers' self-reported use of violence as a marital conflict resolution tactic.
HA₂ There is an inverse relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reported use of psychological aggression and mothers' self-reported use of violence as marital conflict resolution tactics. Specifically, preschoolers who have lower social competence behaviors as measured by the Parent-Child Rating Scale (Cowen et al., 1996) have parents that use a greater

frequency of psychological aggression and/or violence marital conflict resolution tactic behaviors as measured by Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus et al., 1996).

Decision Rule: A decision rule with a chance probability of $p < .05$ was used.

Limitations

1. Mothers were solely used to report on their child's social competence behaviors, which could result in bias behavioral ratings and may not be the most valid measure. The additional use of teacher reports could extend the study by providing a more precise understanding of children's social competence within multiple contexts.
2. Mothers were solely used to report on the conflict resolution tactics that both they and their partners use. Although this method has proven validity, the use of father reports on their own conflict resolution tactics could have provided a more congruent view of conflict resolution.
3. Restricting analysis to correlations only explores relationships between variables.
4. Family systems are dynamic and in a constant state of change and adaptation, collecting data over time would have been more sensitive to this assumption of family ecology.
5. The influence of marital conflict resolution tactics on children's social competence was explored. However the influences of children on the marital subsystem were absent. Therefore, the mutual interdependent transactions with the subsystems and the environment were not analyzed.

Data Analyses

Relationships between the variables in this study were determined using correlational techniques. The variables used include preschoolers' social competence scores from the Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS), and mothers' self-reported use of marital conflict resolution tactics from the Conflict Tactic Scale (CTS2), which was used to assess the frequency of Negotiation, Psychological Aggression and Violence conflict tactic styles.

Social competence scores were calculated for each child by first reverse coding the 18 scored problematic behaviors, and creating a mean social competence score based on the 38 items. Averaged social competence scores had a possible range of 0 to 4 with a score toward 0 representing a lower social competence and a score toward 4 representing a higher social competence score.

Three totals were calculated on the CTS2 for the three scales of Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, and Violence. Straus et al. (1996) recommends a scoring strategy, which was used for this study. First, the 7-point scale was replaced by a weighted scale, 0, 1, 2, 4, 8, 15, and 25 which were the midpoints of the ranges that mothers used to indicated the frequency of their conflict resolution tactic behaviors. According to Straus (1990), when the items are recoded to the midpoints of the approximate frequency designated by each response category, the resulting scale is a measure of the number of tactic behaviors that took place within the year. Totals were then calculated for each scale by summing the midpoints of the wife-to-husband items and the husband-to-wife items associated with the three scales: Negotiation (CTS2 summed items 1-4, 11-12, 21-22, 29-30, 37-38); Psychological Aggression (CTS2

summed items 5-6, 15-20, 25-26, 31-36); and Violence (CTS2 summed items 7-10, 13-14, 23-24, 27-28). Therefore, the CTS2 scale scores reflect the combined, total frequency with which each tactic was used in the marital relationship during conflict.

For research question 1, a Pearson correlation (one-tailed) was computed to find the extent and direction to which preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports on their use of negotiation as a marital conflict resolution tactic were related. For research question 2, two different Pearson correlations (one-tailed) were used. A Pearson correlation (one-tailed) was computed to find the extent and direction to which preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports on their use of psychological aggression as a marital conflict resolution tactic were related. One-tailed tests were used since the literature provided enough evidence to support a directional hypothesis. Only 4 participants (11%) indicated few instances of violence. For that reason, the psychological aggression and violence totals were combined to represent a general destructive style of conflict resolution tactics for some analyses. Nixon and Watson (2001) also combined the scales of Psychological Aggression and Violence to form a global measure of interparental aggression because of their strong relationship ($r = .56, p < .001$). A Pearson correlation (one-tailed) was computed between social competence and the destructive style of conflict resolution tactics (CTS2 summed items 5-10, 13-20, 23-28, 31-36). To decide whether or not to reject the null hypothesis for research questions 1 and 2, the correlations that were computed were tested for statistical significance using an alpha of .05. Other appropriate analyses were additionally computed for exploratory relationships.

Exploratory analyses. Several other relationships were explored by creating subscales from the P-CRS and CTS2. First on the CTS2, the Negotiation scale (sum of 6 item scores) was divided into two other subscales including emotional negotiation (sum of 3 item scores) and cognitive negotiation (sum of 3 item scores). The Psychological Aggression scale (sum of 8 item scores) was divided into two other subscales including minor psychological aggression (sum of 4 item scores) and severe psychological aggression (sum of 4 item scores). The Violence scale only included the minor physical assault subscale; therefore this scale was not further broken down. Pearson correlations (one-tailed) were calculated between the emotional negotiation, cognitive negotiation, minor and severe psychological subscales, and the social competence scores to find the extent and direction to which they relate. A Spearman correlation was calculated to explore relationships between the Violence scale and social competence scores because of the skewed nature of the violence data (see Results section for further explanation).

Second, the two main scales of the P-CRS, the *positive social competence behaviors* (the 20 positive social competence behaviors) and *negative social competence behaviors* (the 18 problematic behaviors) were used. Pearson correlations (one-tailed) were calculated between the positive social competence behavior variable and the major CTS2 variables of Negotiation and Psychological Aggression and between the negative social competence behavior variable and the major CTS2 variables to find the extent and direction to which they relate. Again, a Spearman correlation was used in analyses involving the Violence scale.

Third, Pearson correlations (one-tailed) between each of the subscales on the CTS2 (emotional negotiation, cognitive negotiation, minor psychological aggression, and

severe psychological aggression) and the two variables on the P-CRS (positive social competence behaviors and negative social competence behaviors) were performed to find the extent and direction to which they relate. The Spearman correlation was computed for the violence scale. Finally, Pearson correlations (one-tailed) between the five subscales on the CTS2 were performed to find the extent of their relationships.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In preparation for the planned analyses, a *t*-test was calculated to test for any differences in social competence scores by gender, and was not significant, $t(-1.6)$, $p = .06$. Social competence scores tended to increase with child age, although this relationship was not significant ($r = .28$, $p = .06$). Also, boys' and girls' ages were not significantly different, $t(-.76)$, $p = .13$.

The means and standard deviations for the P-CRS scales are reported in Table 2. Social competence scores tended to be high. Chronicity means, prevalence rates and standard deviations for the CTS2 scales are reported in Table 3. The chronicity means indicate how often the set conflict tactic acts measured by each scale occurred, among those marital couples who engaged in one or more instances of these acts. The prevalence rate is the percentage of the sample that reported one or more instances of the acts in each scale. An examination of the chronicity means and prevalence rates on the CTS2 scores indicated that the most frequently used conflict resolution tactic was Negotiation, followed by Psychological Aggression and Violence, respectively. For the subscales, emotional negotiation was most frequently used, followed by cognitive negotiation, minor psychological aggression, and only few instances of minor physical assault, and severe psychological aggression.

Data in violence and marital conflict research are often skewed since reports of violence are typically low (Hamby, Poindexter, & Gray-Little, 1996). With this in mind, skewness and kurtosis scores were examined. The frequency reported on the Violence scale was significantly, positively skewed. That is, scores tended to cluster toward 0 (no

violence). The skewness of these measures probably reflects the skewed distributions of violence in the population. However, because of the skewness of the violence data, Spearman correlations were used for this scale.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for P-CRS Scale and Subscales

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social Competence	3.01	.38
Positive Social Competence Behaviors	2.61	.58
Negative Social Competence Behaviors	.68	.39

Table 4

Means, Prevalence, and Standard Deviations for CTS2 Scales and Subscales

	<i>M</i>	<i>Prevalence (P)</i>	<i>SD</i>
Negotiation	103.06	100	63.93
emotional negotiation	56.17	100	40.18
cognitive negotiation	46.89	100	29.66
Psychological Aggression	25.91	89	25.78
minor psychological aggression	25.60	89	25.70
severe psychological aggression	.31	9	1.39
Violence	.05	11	2.55
minor physical assault	.05	11	2.55
Constructive Conflict Resolution Tactics	103.06	100	63.93
Destructive Conflict Resolution Tactics	26.46	89	25.73

Note. The Constructive Conflict Resolution Tactics are those of the Negotiation scale. The Destructive Conflict Resolution Tactics are those of the Psychological Aggression and Violence scales combined.

Results of Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. Is there a relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports of negotiation as a marital conflict resolution tactic?
HO₁ There is no relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports of negotiation as a marital conflict resolution tactic ($r = 0$)
HA₁ There is a positive relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports of negotiation as a marital conflict resolution tactic.
Specifically, preschoolers who have higher social competence scores as measured by the Parent-Child Rating Scale (Cowen et al., 1996) have parents with a higher frequency of negotiation resolution tactic behaviors as measured by Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus et al., 1996).

There was failure to reject the null hypothesis, as the Pearson correlation indicated no significant relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports of a negotiation marital conflict resolution tactic ($r = .03, p = .44$).

2. Is there a relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports of psychological aggression and mothers' self-reports of violence as a marital conflict resolution tactic?
HO₂ There is a no relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports of psychological aggression and mothers' self-reports of violence as a marital conflict resolution tactic ($r = 0$)

HA₂ There is an inverse relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports of psychological aggression and mothers' self-reports of violence as marital conflict resolution tactics. Specifically, preschoolers who have lower social competence behaviors as measured by the Parent-Child Rating Scale (Cowen et al., 1996) have parents with a higher frequency of psychological aggression and/or violence marital conflict resolution tactic behaviors as measured by Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus et al. 1996)

There was failure to reject the null hypothesis, as Pearson correlations did not indicate a significant relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports of psychological aggression as a marital conflict resolution tactic ($r = -.17, p = .16$) or between preschoolers' social competence scores and the destructive marital conflict resolution tactic scores (psychological aggression and violence combined) ($r = -.16, p = .18$). There was a failure to reject the null hypothesis, as a Spearman correlation did not indicate a significant relationship between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self-reports of violence ($r_s = .20, p = .12$). A Spearman correlation was used for the violence scale because these scores were not normally distributed; rather, scores were positively skewed.

Results of Exploratory Analyses

This investigation used the marital conflict resolution behaviors of mothers and fathers combined to reflect the frequency of the tactics among the couple. However, for exploratory purposes the scales were separated to reflect use of mother negotiation, father negotiation, mother psychological aggression, father psychological aggression, mother

violence and father violence. Pearson correlations were computed to find the extent to which the wife-to-husband and husband-to-wife marital conflict resolution tactics relate. Mother's tactics were highly correlated with fathers' tactics for Negotiation ($r = .82, p = .000$), and Psychological Aggression ($r = .56, p = .000$), but were not significantly related within the Violence tactic ($r = .04, p = .84$). The means were significantly different between mothers and fathers for the violence scales ($t = 1.06, p = .04$). Three mothers reported use of violence ($M = .49, SD = 2.5$) toward their husbands and there was one mothers' report of her husband's violence toward her ($M = .03, SD = .17$).

Pearson correlations were computed to find relationships between preschoolers' social competence scores and the subscales of conflict tactics, with the exception of the minor physical assault (Violence) subscale for which a Spearman correlation was used. There were no significant relationships ($p < .05$) or trends toward significance ($p < .10$) found between preschoolers' social competence scores and mothers' self reported use of emotional negotiation (Negotiation), cognitive negotiation (Negotiation), minor psychological aggression (Psychological Aggression), severe psychological aggression (Psychological Aggression), and minor physical assault (Violence).

Pearson correlations were computed to identify relationships between preschoolers' positive social competence behavior scores (P-CRS items 19-38) and mothers' self-reported use of Negotiation and Psychological Aggression. There were no significant relationships ($p < .05$) or trends toward significance ($p < .10$) found between preschoolers' positive social competence behavior scores and mothers' self-reported use of Negotiation and Psychological Aggression. In addition, there was no significant relationship ($p < .05$) or trend toward significance ($p < .10$) between the positive social

competence behavior scores and emotional negotiation, cognitive negotiation, severe psychological aggression, and minor physical assault.

Pearson correlations were computed to find relationships between preschoolers' negative social competence behavior scores (P-CRS items 1-18) and mothers' self-reported use of Negotiation and Psychological Aggression (main scales of the CTS). There was no significant relationship ($p < .05$) or trend toward significance ($p < .10$) between negative social competence behaviors and Negotiation. There was a significant relationship between negative social competence behavior scores and mothers' self-reported use of Psychological Aggression ($r = .31, p = .04$). Moreover, it was father's use of psychological aggression ($r = .32, p = .03$), more than mothers' psychological aggression ($r = .23, p = .09$) that was significantly related to children's negative social competence behaviors. Boys' negative social competence behaviors ($M = 14.8, SD = 8.07$) were significantly greater than girls' negative social competence behaviors ($M = 8.94, SD = 4.11$), $t(2.6), p = .01$. Boys' negative social competence behaviors were significantly related to fathers' psychological aggression ($r = .41, p = .04$), but girls' negative social competence behaviors were not significantly related to fathers' psychological aggression ($r = .13, p = .32$). Boys' ($M = 50.79, SD = 12.19$), and girls' ($M = 53.19, SD = 11.28$) positive social competence behaviors were not significantly different from each other, $t(-.60), p = .55$.

There was no significant relationship ($p < .05$) or trend toward significance ($p < .10$) between the negative social competence behavior scores and emotional negotiation, cognitive negotiation, severe psychological aggression, and minor physical assault.

There was a significant relationship between preschoolers' negative social competence

behavior scores and mothers' self-reported use of marital minor psychological aggression ($r = .32, p = .03$, CTS subscale).

Pearson correlations were computed to find the extent to which the different marital conflict resolution tactic scales and subscales were related to one another. These correlations are reported in Table 5 and 6 respectively.

Table 5

Correlations among the Conflict Resolution Tactic Scales

Scale	1	2	3
Mothers (n = 35)			
1. Negotiation	—	.26	-.01
2. Psychological Aggression		—	-.07
3. Violence			—

Table 6

Correlations among the Conflict Resolution Tactic Subscales

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5
Mothers (n = 35)					
1. emotional negotiation	—	.67**	.14	.13	.13
2. cognitive negotiation		—	.38*	-.11	-.20
3. minor psychological aggression			—	.03	-.12
4. severe psychological aggression				—	.95**
5. minor physical assault					—

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

Summary of Results

Overall, preschoolers' social competence scores on the P-CRS were relatively high and had internal reliability. The sample of preschoolers was fairly balanced in terms of ages of boys and girls. Negotiation was the conflict resolution style that was used most frequently among marital couples followed by Psychological Aggression and only a few instances of Violence.

There were no significant correlations between mothers' self-reported conflict resolution tactics and preschoolers' social competence scores. There was a significant relationship between preschoolers' negative social competence behaviors and mothers' self-reported use of Psychological Aggression. In particular, mothers' self-reports of fathers' psychological aggression was correlated with children's negative social competence behaviors. Fathers' psychological aggression was also significantly related to boys' negative social competence behaviors, but not to girls' negative social competence behaviors. There was also a significant relationship between preschoolers' negative social competence behavior scores and mothers' self-reported use of *minor psychological aggression* (subscale).

Mothers' and fathers' use of Negotiation and Psychological Aggression were highly correlated as reported by the mothers. However, mothers reported that they used more Violence toward their partners than they reported fathers' violence toward them. There were only four instances of violence. Styles of subscale conflict tactics were significantly correlated with one another. Significant relationships were found between emotional and cognitive negotiation; cognitive negotiation and minor psychological aggression; and severe psychological aggression and minor physical assault.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

An ecological perspective was used to investigate the marital conflict resolution tactics that the developing child actively experiences within the home environment as it relates to the child's social competence. The reported social competence of children did not differ by gender but did increase with age. In general, older children have had more opportunities to engage in social experiences, develop skills, and, as a result, be viewed as having higher social competence.

There was not much variability in preschoolers' social competence scores. This sample was comprised of highly social competent children and their primarily Caucasian, highly educated married mothers who reported most frequently using negotiation as a marital conflict resolution tactic. There were only four instances of violence. The low violence responses were skewed data which either is a result of people's resistance to report such behaviors or the unequal distribution of violence in the population. There are findings of a negative correlation between socioeconomic status (Straus et al., 1989), age, income, education (Mirowsky, & Ross, 1989; Stets, 1991), and unemployment to intimate partner violence in past research (Ellison & Anderson, 2001; Stets, 1991). Although marital violence occurs across the socioeconomic spectrum, low income and poverty are among the strongest and most consistent correlates of male-to-female violence (Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002; Fox, Benson, DeMaris, & Van Wyk, 2002; Greenfield, et al., 1998; Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). The fact that the individuals in this study were of a higher socioeconomic status, well

educated, and all the husbands were employed may explain in part why there was a lower prevalence of reported violence.

This investigation tested two main hypotheses that were not supported statistically. The results suggested that preschoolers' social competence scores in this small sample were not necessarily related to their mothers' self-reported use of Negotiation, Psychological Aggression and Violence as conflict resolution tactics. There are several possible explanations for the lack of significant findings.

Straus (1990), the author of the CTS, stated that the Negotiation and Psychological Aggression scales on the CTS, have not been used enough to sufficiently be able to reach conclusions about validity. This investigation focused on the two CTS scales that are least utilized by researchers of marital conflict. The CTS is the most widely used tool for studying marital conflict and overall has strong validity. However, most investigations focus solely on the Violence scale. Much feedback, improvements and enhancement has been made with the Violence scale, thus strengthening its validity and not the others. This investigation used all three scales respecting the dynamic and individualistic conflict resolution styles that married couples use including the strengths of constructive resolution. The absence of any significant relationships between mothers' self-reported use of Negotiation and preschoolers' social competence scores may have been the result of how it was measured and not that these two variables are not associated for the sample that participated. Another explanation may be that the effects of couples' positive conflict tactic styles are more subtle and more difficult to identify and detect. Future research is encouraged to use a strengths-based approach of constructive marital conflict resolution tactics and children's positive social development.

Exploratory analysis tested other relationships for significance and found that children who were rated with a greater degree of negative social competence behaviors had parents who used more psychological aggressive behaviors, specifically behaviors that included minor psychological aggression. The minor psychological aggression subscale is composed of the behaviors: insulting or swearing; shouting or yelling; stomping out of the room, house or yard during a disagreement; and doing something to spite the other person. In general, these results mirror those of other studies, providing evidence of the relationship between negative conflict resolution tactics and children's behavior problems. The review of literature explored many studies concluding that the use of destructive marital conflict tactics is associated with children's negative social behaviors and has the greatest impact on children's more externalizing (i.e. aggression) and internalizing (i.e. anxiety) symptoms. The combined behaviors of minor psychological aggression as measured by the CTS2 were related to the combined negative social competence behavior which include children's more externalizing (i.e. P-CRS item 1 "disruptive at home," P-CRS item 7 "disturbs others," P-CRS item 13 "aggressive with peers) and more internalizing (i.e. P-CRS item 2 "withdrawn," P-CRS item 5 "shy," P-CRS item "unhappy, sad") behaviors.

Fathers' psychological aggression was significantly related to boys' negative social competence behaviors. Each parents' use of the conflict resolution tactics may influence children in a different way. Modeling may also occur in gender-specific ways. Because children model their parents' same sex behavior, daughters and mothers along with sons and fathers have shown to respond to conflict in similar ways. Generally, mothers react to conflict with more anxiety and withdrawal, and fathers react to conflict

with more aggression. Parallel to this is the tendency for girls to respond to conflict with more internalizing behaviors and boys to respond with more externalizing behaviors (Cummings & Davies, 1994). This does not suggest, however, that girls are less upset by parents' fighting than boys.

The review of literature included possible processes by which psychological aggression between parents influences children's social development. Children in homes with much unresolved conflict (not resolved through negotiation, rather continuous fighting) might have fewer opportunities to observe and learn the benefits of constructive conflict tactics and develop effective coping styles of their own. Children may also rely on less effective and less mature coping skills when exposed to a high level of stress (Spielberger, 1979). For example, children who have used aggression or withdrawal at a young age may also rely on these responses older as a child. Children from divorced families have shown to rely on a single coping style with little consideration for the context or effectiveness (Derensky & Tarabulsky, 1991). Frequent marital conflict with destructive conflict resolution behaviors, like psychological aggression, influence children of all ages as they respond with great distress and cope less effectively themselves in stressful situations. Using effective coping skills is a characteristic of socially competent children.

When parents are psychologically aggressive toward one another the environment becomes stressful, parents are less emotionally available, and children observe and learn ways of handling conflict with aggression. Exposure to interparental anger might increase children's aggression through modeling. Children may learn that handling conflict with psychological aggression is acceptable and in turn, may act aggressively in

their own conflicts. Children actively experience the psychological aggression that their parents use in the home environment. Therefore, children may display negative behaviors much like that of their parents. A study by Strassberg, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit (1992) found relationships between marital aggression and child aggression, and between child aggression and characteristics of children's social competence. Moreover, children who came from homes in which there were high levels of aggression were considered to be socially less desirable than other children. Further research is needed to explore children's problem solving and conflict resolution skills as they relate to parents' conflict resolution tactics to better answer research questions addressing children's modeling of parental behaviors.

Significant correlations were found between the conflict resolution tactic subscales. It makes sense that the emotional negotiation and cognitive negotiation subscales were significantly related, as they collectively measure the Negotiation scale. In addition, there was a significant relationship found between cognitive negotiation and minor psychological aggression. Although these subscales do not collectively measure the same scale, they both use approaches that do not entail any physical actions, instead mostly rely on discussion. The cognitive negotiation items reflect constructive actions taken to settle a disagreement through discussion. Minor psychological aggression reflects destructive actions taken to settle conflict also through discussion, rather than using physical violence. The significant relationship between severe psychological aggression and violence was also found and may be expected, as they are both considered destructive uses of marital conflict resolution tactics.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There were several limitations to this investigation. The use of the CTS2 instrument as a self-report on marital conflict tactics could have resulted in bias reporting. In addition, mothers reported on the conflict resolution tactic behaviors of themselves and their partners. Mothers were chosen as the primary responders in this investigation because, in the larger study, mothers were also the primary responders of their child's social competence behavior. Future investigations may use data from both partners in the relationship to offset the general self-report biases that is common in much social science research, particularly when focusing on sensitive behaviors of marital conflict and violence. Szinovacz (1983) found that when either or both spouses reported on the CTS2 Violence scale, the rate was about 50% higher than rates based on the report on only one spouse. Having both partners complete the CTS2 may have increased the reporting of the "violence" items (there were only 4 mothers' that reported violence). In this investigation, mothers' violence behaviors were significantly greater than fathers, which is not typical. No real conclusions can be drawn, however, because of the low prevalence of violent behaviors. Although some women may act violently toward their husbands, "the overall pattern of intimate violence is dominated by men as the abusers and women as the abused" (Dobash R.E., Dobash, R. P., Cavanaugh, & Lewis, 2000, p.3). It may also be interesting to gather information on parent aggression or violence toward their children and children's reports of their parents' marital conflict behaviors.

Another limitation with using the CTS2 instrument is that there could be differences in the mothers who completed the survey and mothers who declined. The sample size of 35 children and their mothers was a small sample with which to work,

especially when exploring the subscales of the instruments. The lack of variability within the social competence scores and within the styles of conflict resolution tactics limited the ability to calculate any significant relationships. This may have been due to the underreporting on more of the destructive conflict resolution tactics and the demographic similarities of the sample being primarily Caucasian, highly educated married mothers as the sole reporters for both measurements. Respecting diversity by more thoroughly exploring the similarities and differences among demographic variables and the individual and cultural differences of conflict resolution is also important to investigate.

The developing child in this investigation has been placed within the context of the home environment. However, it is important to note the significance in which the larger society and culture influences these contexts. The family is established within the larger cultural and societal complex of norms and expectations (Nucci, Killen & Smetana, 1996). Conflict resolution styles vary by culture. Gabrielidis, Stephan, Ybarra, Dos, Pearson, & Villareal (1997) explained how people from individualistic versus collectivistic and masculine versus feminine cultures use different conflict resolution styles. Individualistic cultures, like the United States, hold values that encourage the individual's needs and separate the individual from the group. Whereas, collectivistic cultures, like Mexico, hold values that encourage the concern for other people and relationships. Masculine cultures, like Mexico, emphasize confrontational strategies of conflict resolution. In contrast, feminine cultures, like Canada and the Netherlands, emphasize harmony-enhancing strategies of conflict resolution. Therefore, the larger culture influences the conflict resolution styles that individuals use. Because of the individualistic values of the American culture, marital conflict is frequent as couples

promote their own individual needs and separate themselves from others. Positive conflict resolution requires that individuals have some concern for others and that differences of interest have subsided.

Much previous research focused on the negative influences of marital conflict on children (Cummings et al., 1985; Cummings et al., 1981; Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Johnson & O'Leary, 1987; Johnston, Gonzalez et al., 1987; Jouriles et al., 1991; Jouriles et al., 1989; Long et al., 1987; Wiersma et al., 1988). There is limited research on the positive influences that constructive conflict resolution tactics (i.e. negotiation) have on children's positive outcomes including social competence. More systematic research needs to focus on whether children learn positive lessons from experiencing constructive resolution of conflicts, for example their own conflict resolution and problem solving skills that are characteristic of socially competent children (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Cummings et al., 2001).

Conclusion

There is much to be gained from the knowledge that the use of psychological aggression by married couples in conflict not only influences the marital relationship but is also related to young children's negative social behaviors. Moreover, it may not be the mere presence of psychological aggression that may influence marital partners and their children, but the underlying message most associated with aggression that also needs further investigation. Psychological aggression between parents is very powerful as it influences children's perceptions of the emotional environment of the home, has an impact on their capacity for regulating their emotions and on their development of social

competence. Some components in the home environment serve as buffers to marital conflict. Parental warmth and control positively relate to children's social competence (Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980; Putallaz & Heflin, 1990; Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, & Chapman, 1983; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Even with marital conflict, if there is parental warmth, family members' development still reaches optimal levels. Marital conflict in the context of familial warmth and communication is associated with optimal adolescent development, whereas conflict in a setting of general familial negativity is linked with psychological problems (Niemi, 1988).

Parents teach their children valuable lessons of healthy communication, adaptive ways of handling conflict, and succeeding in life's challenges through modeling constructive conflict resolution tactics. The use of negotiation during conflict should be encouraged and promoted. Suggesting changes in the resolution of conflicts from destructive to more constructive behaviors, may aide in providing feedback to families so that family members may have the resources to make the appropriate changes that serve their interests. Spouses who deal with conflict through negotiation and compromise are more satisfied with their marriages than other couples (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Whiffen & Gotlib, 1989). This research encourages programs to educate parents about conflict management not only for a healthier and happier marriage, but also for the children's healthy social development. Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale (2000) suggested that providing direct and indirect services (i.e. marital counseling, parent education) designed at increasing positive engagement and decreasing marital conflict may contribute to more positive parent-child relationships as well as for the socioemotional development of children.

This research should also encourage a continued focus on studying the influences of constructive marital conflict resolution tactics on children's social development using an ecological perspective. Resolving conflict in constructive ways is a skill of socially competent individuals. Therefore, the social competence of marital couples is related to the social competence of their children and the skills that they carry with them across time and contexts. The ecological perspective is an excellent guide for examining the human experience and promotion of quality of life. Ecology theory views the social environment as a grand human experiment, therefore, requesting our efforts and support for improvement (Garbarino & Gaboury, 1992).

APPENDIX

CONSENT FORM

TO WHOM: The married mother living at this residence

WHAT:

You are being invited to participate in my thesis study. I am a graduate student in the Department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University. Within the past year you have participated in a research project about children's social development. I am interested in learning more about families and children's development. I am inviting you to complete this additional information by filling out one questionnaire that will help me better understand some aspects of how marital couples interact. This new information that you provide will be combined with previous information gathered about your child. If you choose not to participate, there is absolutely no penalty.

In this packet you will find two consent forms, a questionnaire and two stamped return envelopes. Please sign both consent forms and fill out the attached questionnaire. Please send one of the signed consent forms in one stamped return envelope and the completed questionnaire in the other stamped return envelope. Your consent form will remain separate from your questionnaire to maintain confidentiality. The other consent form is for you to keep for yourself as a statement of your participation in this study.

The questionnaire that you will be filling out asks questions about how you and your husband deal with marital conflict. There are more specific directions on the questionnaire that will guide you. It will take approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The only minimal risk to you is that you may feel uncomfortable disclosing some information regarding marital conflict. Remember, participation in this study is voluntary and held confidential. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may choose not to participate without any penalty. Your identity as a participant in this study will be kept confidential. The material collected and the results of this study will be handled in strict confidence, and your name will remain anonymous in any report of its findings. Any information collected from you will be kept in a locked file and only the researcher will have access to the file. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Benefits in this study include an increased awareness of your own family relationships. You will also be provided with the study's results which may enhance your understanding of family relationships and children. You will be provided with a thorough debriefing following the data collection.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may call me, Krista Surowiec (734-522-8971) or my graduate advisor, Dr. Brophy-Herb (353-1664). Dr. David E. Wright (355-2180) may also be contacted for questions about your participation rights as human subjects of research.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study (sign and date below):

PARENT/GUARDIAN (signature) _____ **(date)** _____

PARENT/GUARDIAN (Printed Name): _____

ARE YOU YOUR CHILD'S MOTHER? ____yes ____no

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