Journal of Family Psychology
2014, Vol. 28, No. 2, 160–167

0893-3200/14/$12.00 DOI: 10.1037/a0035990

Characteristics of Mother–Child Conflict and Child Sex Predicting Resolution

Jackie A. Nelson, Brittany P. Boyer, Samantha A. Sang, and Elizabeth K. Wilson
University of Texas at Dallas

Data from 190 mothers and their 5- to 7-year-old children were used to evaluate how characteristics of mother–child conflict discussions contribute to the likelihood of reaching a compromise, a win–loss resolution, or a standoff. Dyads discussed 2 topics they reported having disagreements about that were emotionally arousing. Coders rated global measurements of mothers' emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, and negativity; children's negativity; and the frequency of mothers' and children's constructive and oppositional comments. Child sex was examined as a moderator of the relation between discussion characteristics and resolution reached. Results indicated that more constructive comments by mothers and children increased the likelihood of reaching a resolution versus a standoff, but only children's constructive comments differentiated between a compromise and a win–loss resolution favoring mothers. Dyads with more emotionally responsive mothers who made fewer oppositional comments were also more likely to reach a compromise versus a win–loss resolution. A significant interaction with child sex revealed that, for boys, the use of more child oppositional comments was associated with a higher likelihood of reaching a standoff versus a compromise. Girls' oppositional comments did not predict resolution type. These results are discussed in terms of the children's developmental level and parents' socialization goals.

Keywords: conflict resolution, constructive conflict, mother–child discussion, middle childhood

The ability to manage disagreements and resolve conflicts is an important component of children's social competence (Maccoby, 1992). This skill is primarily learned through communication and socialization in the family system (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Minuchin, 1985). Children observe conflicts between family members and participate in frequent disputes with parents. Everyday conflicts between parents and children may be resolved in a number of ways. Dyads may negotiate and come to a compromise, resulting in the realization of both parents' and children's goals. However, in contrast to marital or sibling relationships, parent–child relationships are asymmetrical. Thus, researchers have suggested that parent–child conflicts are often resolved when parents prevail and assert their power over children (Recchia, Ross, & Vickar, 2010), or when dyads are unable to solve their problems and end disputes in a standoff (Vuchinich, 1987).

Research has shown that when family members do not compromise to solve disputes, they fail to fully resolve their differences, which is likely to leave lingering contentions and negativity (Vuchinich, 1999). Unresolved interparental family conflict has been associated with greater externalizing problems (Underwood, Beron, Gentsch, Galperin, & Risser, 2008) and emotion regulation difficulties in children (Siffert & Schwarz, 2011), and it has been suggested that unresolved parent–child conflict may lead to an eventual corrosion of parent–child relationship quality (García-Ruiz, Rodrigo, Hernández-Cabrera, Máiquez, & Dekovíc, 2013). Although the positive implications of productive conflict resolution are clear, experts have called for more research explaining how typical conflicts are negotiated and resolved (Feldman, Masalha, & Derdikman-Eiron, 2010). In the present study, we examined characteristics of mother–child conflict discussions that result in various resolution types.

Conflict Characteristics and Resolutions Reached

Researchers have identified various characteristics of parent–child conflict that increase the likelihood that the dyad will reach an agreeable resolution to the dispute. Previous work has tended to focus either on specific constructive comments made by parents and children (e.g., Recchia et al., 2010) or on the overall emotional climate of the exchange (e.g., Stein & Albro, 1997). One specific strategy that has received attention in the literature is future-oriented planning. These comments include discussions of behaviors that will be enacted in the future to prevent or solve a problem. In one experimental study, mothers who increased their use of future-oriented problem-solving during family conflicts experienced improvements in relationship quality, parenting, and child adjustment (Cummings, Faircloth, Mitchell, Cummings, & Schermerhorn, 2008). Future-oriented planning during parent–child conflict discussions also has been shown to result in more conflict resolutions and fewer standoffs (Recchia et al., 2010).

This article was published Online First March 3, 2014.

Jackie A. Nelson, Brittany P. Boyer, Samantha A. Sang, and Elizabeth K. Wilson, School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, University of Texas at Dallas.

Supported by the Timberlawn Psychiatric Research Foundation. We thank the Family Research Lab student research assistants and the families who generously gave their time to participate.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jackie A. Nelson, 800 West Campbell Road, GR41, Richardson, TX 75080. E-mail: Jackie.Nelson@utdallas.edu

Thus, dyads that use this strategy are better able to come to a productive conclusion to their disputes because discussions about the future focus primarily on achieving goals rather than recounting blame for past events (Stein & Albro, 2001). Oppositional comments, on the other hand, are used to advance one's own position through persuasion, disagreement, and blame. The use of these coercive comments has been shown to hinder parents' and children's ability to realize their individual goals and to reach a resolution (Recchia et al., 2010).

In addition to the specific comments parents and children make that either facilitate negotiation or foster blame, past research has demonstrated that the type of conflict resolution parents and children are able to reach also largely depends on the emotional climate of the relationship. Parents' emotional support creates a context of acceptance that encourages productive conflict resolution and child participation (Steinberg, 1990). When positive affect and warmth are present during conflict discussions, individuals are more helpful (Batson, 1990), less contentious (Carnevale & Isen, 1986), and more likely to negotiate (Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow, & Girnius-Brown, 1987). Hostility during problem-solving is associated with less cooperation and more blame and avoidance among family members (Rueter & Conger, 1995). Hostile behaviors elicit subsequent negativity from others and decrease the likelihood that disputes will be resolved successfully (Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981; Rueter & Conger, 1995). García-Ruiz et al. (2013) found that a secure attachment relationship is predictive of conflicts resolved through negotiation due to the positive communicative climate present in these dyads. In contrast, parents and children characterized with an anxious attachment relationship were highly critical during disputes, predicting more withdrawal and dominance resolutions.

Although most research has focused on parents' socializing behaviors during conflicts, it is important to recognize children's contributions (Perlman & Ross, 1997). Children's negativity can also impede resolution. The emotional arousal associated with negative affect may inhibit children's ability to engage in a logical discussion of both sides of an argument (Stein & Albro, 2001). Indeed, children who express more negative and defiant behavior have been shown to use less reasoning and negotiation during arguments, which, in turn, elicit more punitive and coercive responses from parents (Dunn & Brown, 1994; Kuczynski et al., 1987). Arguments in which both parents and children report reacting with anger are more likely to result in a standoff, and, although heated discussions are highly salient to parents and children, memory for the content of both sides of the argument is inhibited by high levels of negative emotion (Stein & Albro, 1997). Thus, these types of arguments are unlikely to result in social benefits for children, such as understanding the perspectives of others, which are possible when parents and children are able to calmly and logically discuss a problem. In the current study, we simultaneously examined mothers' and children's didactic and global observed characteristics of conflict discussion in relation to conflict resolution.

Child Sex Differences

Child sex differences have been reported in the likelihood of conflict resolution. In a study of family dinnertime conflicts, Vuchinich (1987) found that mothers and girls were most likely to engage in talk that brought the conflict to a close. The author suggested that females served a peacekeeping role in families. This role may reflect an emphasis on relationship-centered goals, including the desire to reach fair solutions to problems, a concern for other's contentment, and a focus on maintaining close family bonds (Hastings & Grusec, 1998). Females may be more motivated by these relationship-centered goals, including the resolution of ongoing conflicts, in light of past research that has demonstrated females tend to focus on interpersonal issues during problem-solving more so than males (Strough, Berg, & Sansone, 1996).

Characteristics of mother–child conflict discussions may also differ when the child is female versus male. Conflicts between parents and children are emotional experiences (Dix, 1991), and there are different expectations for boys and girls in how they discuss, express, and regulate their negative feelings. For example, Fivush, Berlin, Sales, Mennuti-Washburn, and Cassidy (2003) observed how mothers discussed past negative events with their children and found that mothers of girls were more elaborative and evaluative than mothers of boys when reflecting on emotionally negative events experienced by the child. In another narrative study, mothers and fathers of girls made more references to emotions when discussing a past event in which the child felt sad than mothers and fathers of boys (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000).

Due to greater exposure to the discussion of negative feelings through parental socialization, negativity may also be less of a hindrance for girls than boys when it comes to reaching a resolution during social conflicts. The ability to remain calm during social interaction is an important way children learn to control aggressive responses (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996). Negative emotion has been shown to result in less disruptiveness during tasks for girls compared with boys (Cole, Zahn-Waxler, & Smith, 1994), suggesting that girls may be better prepared to express their distress while also continuing to focus and engage in the interaction.

The Current Study

In this project, we observed characteristics of mother–child conflict discussions and examined associations with the resolution reached by the dyad. Constructive and oppositional comments made by mothers and children during discussions were coded, as well as global ratings of mothers' emotional responsiveness and intrusiveness and both mothers' and children's negativity. Resolution types included compromise, win–loss, and standoff. Child sex was investigated as a moderator of the association between conflict characteristics and resolution. Early school-age children were examined in light of their rapidly developing cognitive capacity for conflict discussion and negotiation (Kerns, 2008), as well as their increasing independence from parents as they bring problem-solving skills learned at home into the peer arena (Berndt, 2004). Mothers were examined in the interaction with their children because they are typically considered children's primary socializers and tend to be more responsible for the management and discipline of children's behavior than fathers (Finley, Mira, & Schwartz, 2008).

Five specific hypotheses were proposed. We hypothesized that the child's contributions during discussion would differentiate compromise resolutions, where both people's goals were realized,

from standoffs and win–loss resolutions, where mothers' goals were likely to be the only ones realized. Oppositional comments and negativity were expected to be more predictive of standoffs than other resolution types, whereas constructive comments and emotional support were expected to be more predictive of compromise or win–loss versus standoffs. Finally, we predicted that negative emotion would present more of a hindrance in reaching a resolution for boys than for girls, and that mother–daughter dyads would be more likely to reach a compromise or win–loss resolution versus a standoff compared with mother–son dyads.

Method

Participants

One hundred ninety 5- to 7-year-old children (M = 77.64 months, SD = 9.48) and their mothers participated in the study. The majority of families were recruited through letters sent home by kindergarten and first-grade teachers in a metropolitan public school district in the southwestern United States. Additional recruitment strategies included letters sent home to parents of children participating in school-sponsored summer camps and flyers posted in local public libraries. Approximately half (47%) of the children were female, 56% were European American, 15% were African American, 8% were Hispanic, 3% were Asian American, and 18% identified as mixed or other ethnicities. The median education level of mothers was a 4-year college degree. Based on family income-to-needs ratios that are calculated using poverty thresholds for a given family size during the year in which data were collected, 36% of families were considered low income (ratios < 2), 52% were considered middle income (ratios 2–5), and 12% were considered high income (ratios > 5).

Procedure

Mothers and children visited the laboratory between 3:30 and 5:30 p.m. for approximately 1 hr. Mothers and children provided consent and assent, respectively, after being given written and verbal information about the study procedure. While mothers completed questionnaires, children engaged in various tasks with a trained research assistant in the adjacent room. One of the questionnaires mothers completed was the Issues Checklist (Robin & Foster, 1989), which listed 36 common parent–child conflict topics, such as making too much noise in the home, lying, and fighting with siblings. For each topic, mothers were asked to indicate whether they had discussed this with their child during the last month, and, if so, to indicate on a 4-point scale how they felt when they discussed the topic (1 = *calm* and 4 = *angry*).

Children also completed the Issues Checklist in the adjacent room with the help of a trained research assistant. The research assistant asked whether they had discussed each topic with their mothers during the last few weeks. If they had, they were shown four pictures of facial expressions that represented how these discussions made them feel (1 = *calm* and 4 = *angry*) and were asked to point to one. To facilitate children's understanding of the emotional intensity ratings represented by each face, the research assistant provided hypothetical scenarios to children (e.g., "I feel calm when I am relaxed and reading a story" and "I feel *really* angry when I get blamed for something that wasn't my fault"). Mother and child reports were compared, and two topics were chosen that both participants selected as topics they had recently discussed that were emotionally arousing. The mother–child dyad was then given 8 min to discuss the two topics and encouraged to come to a resolution at the end. Based on similar procedures (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), researchers provided dyads with an index card containing prompts to use in case they needed additional direction during the discussion. Prompts consisted of the following questions: What is the problem? How does the problem begin? Who becomes involved in the problem? What might be done to avoid the problem in the future? These discussions were filmed and later coded by two trained graduate research assistants. They were unable to code six of the recordings due to equipment malfunction, mothers' use of a foreign language during discussion, or mothers' refusal to be filmed.

Measures

Global ratings. The global coding scheme, based on previous parent instruction coding (Neitzel & Stright, 2003), examined global qualities of maternal parenting as well as the child's affect during the conflict discussions. Coders rated mothers' emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, and negativity and the child's negative mood on a 5-point scale. Maternal emotional responsiveness was rated from 1 (*little sensitivity shown*) to 5 (*highly sensitive*). Mothers who scored the lowest on emotional responsiveness demonstrated a lack of help and encouragement during the discussion and little to no indication that they were enjoying this time with their child, whereas mothers who scored the highest on this scale respected and valued their child's opinions, encouraged their child to contribute to the discussion, and demonstrated clear enjoyment of the time with their child. Maternal intrusiveness was rated from 1 (*not at all intrusive*) to 5 (*consistently intrusive*). Mothers who scored the lowest on intrusiveness respected their child's autonomy during the discussion and supported their child's independent problem-solving efforts, whereas mothers who scored the highest on this scale interrupted the child often, controlled the conversation, and undermined their child's attempts to speak freely. Maternal negativity was rated from 1 (*no negativity shown*) to 5 (*more often negative than not*). Mothers who scored the lowest on this scale demonstrated no negative behaviors during the discussion, whereas mothers who scored the highest on this scale were irritated, impatient, insulting, or disrespectful toward their child throughout most of the discussion. Child negative mood was rated from 1 (*no negativity shown*) to 5 (*more often negative than not*). Children who scored the lowest on this scale were neutral or happy and did not demonstrate any negative behaviors during the discussion, whereas children who scored the highest on this scale were irritated, shameful, or crying throughout most of the discussion. Approximately 25% (n = 45) of the videos were rated by both coders for reliability, and intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) were satisfactory for emotional responsiveness (0.77), intrusiveness (0.81), negativity (0.88), and child's negative mood (0.86). In prior research, ratings based on this coding scheme have predicted children's self-regulation, reasoning abilities, and persistence (Mokrova, O'Brien, Calkins, Leerkes, & Marcovitch, 2012; Perry et al., 2013; Stright, Herr, & Neitzel, 2009).

Frequency ratings. The frequency coding scheme, based on Recchia et al. (2010), was a system of tracking the number of

constructive and oppositional comments used by mothers and children during the conflict discussions. Each distinct idea was counted as a separate comment, regardless of the number of words or the length of the utterance. Past research (Cummings et al., 2008; Ram & Ross, 2001; Recchia et al., 2010) has identified constructive planning comments as proposing, discussing, modifying, and asking questions about plans to resolve similar conflicts in the future. Examples of constructive comments are: "So maybe if I talk to you a little more respectfully, you wouldn't get mad and talk back," "And when I'm done playing with my toys, I'll put them back," and, "Do you have any ideas of what we could do in the future so we don't argue about the TV?" Individuals used oppositional comments to promote their own perspective by undermining the other person's perspective. Comments included blaming, making accusations, disagreeing with the other person, or challenging or dismissing the other person's perspective (Recchia et al., 2010; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Examples of oppositional comments are: "You never listen to me" and "You think you should get money to clean up your room? Do *I* get allowance to pick up my room? No." Approximately 25% ($n = 44$) of the videos were rated by both coders for reliability. There was no ceiling on the number of comments coded during the discussions; therefore, Pearson correlations were computed to establish reliability between coders on the total number of constructive ($r_{mothers} = 0.86$, $r_{children} = 0.91$) and oppositional ($r_{mothers} = 0.77$, $r_{children} = 0.74$) conflict strategies.

Resolution. Each conflict discussion for the dyads was forced-choice coded for a type of resolution (compromise, win–loss, or standoff). A compromise resolution type occurred if both the mother and child received at least some of what they wanted by the end of the discussion and the child contributed to the solution in some manner. A win–loss resolution type occurred if only one person's goal was recognized; in all but one case (99%), the winner of a win–loss resolution was the mother. A win–loss was also coded if the child did not contribute to the development of the plan. A standoff resolution type occurred if the dyad did not resolve the disagreement. Interrater agreement regarding resolution type was high for both topics discussed ($ICC_{Topic1} = .90$, $ICC_{Topic2} = .86$). Mother–child dyads reached a compromise in 43% of cases, a win–loss in 43% of cases, and a standoff in 14% of cases.

Each conflict discussion was coded for the amount of time dyads were considered to be on task during the discussion of each topic; periods longer than 5 s during which both the mother and child were silent, discussing an unrelated topic, or focused on objects in the room were not included in discussion time. The dyad was considered to be on task if at least one member of the dyad was talking about the topic and/or attempting to remain on task.

Often, mother–child pairs spent more time discussing one of the topics than the other. Some dyads focused on the conflict they found to be most salient in their families, and others simply ran out of time to give both topics attention. For this reason, the present analyses included only the conflict topic that dyads spent the most time discussing. Frequency of constructive and oppositional comments included only comments that occurred while dyads were discussing the selected topic. Global ratings, on the other hand, captured behavior during the entire interaction. However, there is evidence to suggest that these codes are comparable; there were no significant differences between frequency codes corresponding to Topic 1 versus those for Topic 2, and global codes on the selected topic only among a random sample of participants were found to be highly related to ratings over the whole interaction. The amount of time mothers and children spent discussing the selected topic ($M = 224.17$ s, $SD = 80.50$), as well as the temporal order in which they discussed the topic (52% first, 48% second), was controlled for in analyses.

Results

To test the study hypotheses, a hierarchical multinomial logistic regression was conducted in Mplus, Version 6.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2011). A multinomial logistic regression was required because the resolution variable was nominal with three categories: compromise, win–loss, and standoff. Standoff was used as the reference group initially, and another regression was run with win–loss as the reference group in order to compare compromise and win–loss resolutions. Odds ratios greater than 1 are interpreted as a positive association and a greater likelihood of being in the group in question versus the reference group; ratios less than 1 indicate a negative association and a greater likelihood of being in the reference group versus the group in question.

Descriptive results for study variables can be seen in Table 1. Two outliers were identified in the maternal oppositional comments variable, two were identified in child oppositional comments, and one was identified in maternal constructive comments. These values were removed from the dataset prior to the analyses. In addition to the mother–child discussion task controls of time duration and topic order, demographic covariates were examined for relations to both a characteristic of the discussion and the resolution reached. Only child ethnicity met this criterion and,

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables

	M	*SD*	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Maternal emotional Responsiveness	3.49	1.02	1–5	—						
2. Maternal intrusiveness	3.21	1.37	1–5	−.40**	—					
3. Maternal negativity	3.06	1.33	1–5	−.47**	.66**	—				
4. Child negativity	2.60	1.28	1–5	−.22**	.26**	.41**	—			
5. Maternal constructive comments	13.81	10.41	0–45	.29**	−.05	−.20*	−.10	—		
6. Child constructive comments	4.96	5.10	0–28	.18*	−.17*	−.19*	−.21**	.53**	—	
7. Maternal oppositional comments	11.48	11.19	0–51	−.33**	.48**	.68**	.38**	−.17*	−.11	—
8. Child oppositional comments	2.21	3.02	0–15	−.07	.12	.24**	.44**	.05	−.02	.36**

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

thus, was included as a demographic control. Full information maximum likelihood, a modeling method that estimates parameters based on available and implied values, was used to account for missing data.

Main Effects of Conflict Characteristics on Resolutions Reached

The log-odds and odds ratios from the regression can be seen in Table 2. In comparing compromise and standoff resolutions, two significant main effects emerged. When mothers and children used more constructive comments, dyads were more likely to reach a compromise as opposed to a standoff. For each additional maternal constructive comment, pairs were 1.12 times more likely (p = .019) to reach a compromise; for each additional child constructive comment, pairs were 1.45 times more likely (p = .001) to reach a compromise versus a standoff.

In comparing win−loss versus standoff resolutions, one significant main effect was found. When mothers used more constructive comments, pairs were more likely to end the discussion with a win−loss than a standoff. For each additional maternal constructive comment, dyads were 1.15 times more likely (p = .003) to reach a win−loss resolution than a standoff.

When compromise resolutions were compared with win−loss resolutions, there were three significant main effects. When mothers were more emotionally responsive to their children during conflict discussions, used fewer oppositional comments toward children, and when children provided more constructive contributions, families were more likely to reach a compromise than a win−loss resolution. For each additional point that mothers were given on the 5-point Emotional Responsiveness Scale, pairs were 1.80 times more likely (p = .027) to come to a compromise than a win−loss agreement. For each oppositional comment made by mothers, pairs were 0.94 times more likely (p = .049) to reach a compromise. And, finally, for each additional child constructive comment, pairs were 1.28 times more likely ($p < .001$) to end the conflict discussion in a compromise than a win−loss. Child sex did not significantly predict conflict resolution in any of the comparisons.

Interaction Effects Between Conflict Characteristics and Child Sex

Interactions between the standardized conflict characteristics and child sex were computed and added to the models. One significant interaction effect emerged. Child oppositional comments significantly interacted with child sex in predicting the likelihood that families would reach a compromise versus a standoff (see Table 2). No significant interactions emerged in predicting the likelihood that dyads would come to a win−loss versus a standoff or a compromise versus a win−loss at the end of the conflict discussions.

The significant interaction effect was graphed, and the simple slopes for boys and girls were tested to evaluate whether the effect of child oppositional comments on resolution differed significantly from zero (Aiken & West, 1991). As seen in Figure 1, there was a significant negative effect for boys of child oppositional comments on the probability of coming to a compromise versus a standoff. The effect for girls was positive and nonsignificant. For each additional child oppositional comment, boys were 0.34 times

Table 2
Demographics, Global Parenting Variables, and Constructive and Oppositional Comment Frequencies Predicting Resolution Type

	Log-odds B (SE B)			Odds ratio		
	1 vs. 3	2 vs. 3	1 vs. 2	1 vs. 3	2 vs. 3	1 vs. 2
Block 1						
Child sex	−0.68 (0.64)	−0.54 (0.59)	−0.15 (0.44)	0.51	0.58	0.86
Child ethnicity	0.16 (0.17)	0.31* (0.16)	−0.15 (0.11)	1.17	1.36*	0.86
Duration of discussion	−0.01 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.99	0.99	1.00
Temporal order of discussion	−0.29 (0.64)	−0.18 (0.64)	−0.11 (0.43)	0.75	0.84	0.90
MER	0.27 (0.42)	−0.33 (0.36)	0.59* (0.27)	1.31	.72	1.80*
MI	0.15 (0.31)	0.45 (0.29)	−0.30 (0.22)	1.16	1.57	0.74
MN	0.41 (0.42)	0.38 (0.41)	0.03 (0.24)	1.51	1.46	1.03
CN	−0.36 (0.25)	−0.16 (0.24)	−0.20 (0.20)	0.70	0.85	0.82
MC comments	0.11* (0.05)	0.14** (0.05)	−0.03 (0.03)	1.12*	1.15**	0.97
CC comments	0.37** (0.11)	0.12 (0.12)	0.25** (0.06)	1.45**	1.13	1.28**
MO comments	−0.05 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	−0.06* (0.03)	0.95	1.01	0.94*
CO comments	−0.14 (0.12)	−0.22 (0.11)	0.07 (0.09)	0.87	0.80	1.07
Block 2						
Child sex × MER	−0.75 (1.33)	−0.32 (1.19)	−0.44 (0.59)	0.47	0.73	0.64
Child sex × MI	−0.64 (1.24)	−0.25 (1.18)	−0.39 (0.63)	0.53	0.78	0.68
Child sex × MN	0.50 (1.53)	0.10 (1.45)	0.39 (0.70)	1.65	1.11	1.48
Child sex × CN	−2.08 (1.13)	−1.72 (1.02)	−0.36 (0.62)	0.12	0.18	0.70
Child sex × MC	−0.13 (0.25)	−0.18 (0.25)	0.05 (0.05)	0.88	0.84	1.05
Child sex × CC	−0.28 (0.36)	−0.51 (0.35)	0.23 (0.14)	0.76	0.60	1.26
Child sex × MO	0.90 (1.20)	−0.35 (1.10)	1.24 (0.69)	2.46	0.70	3.46
Child sex × CO	−2.09* (1.03)	−1.70 (0.96)	−0.39 (0.55)	0.12*	0.18	0.68

Note. 1 = compromise; 2 = win−loss; 3 = standoff; MER = maternal emotional responsiveness; MI = maternal intrusiveness; MN = maternal negativity; CN = child negativity; MC = maternal constructive; CC = child constructive; MO = maternal oppositional; CO = child oppositional.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

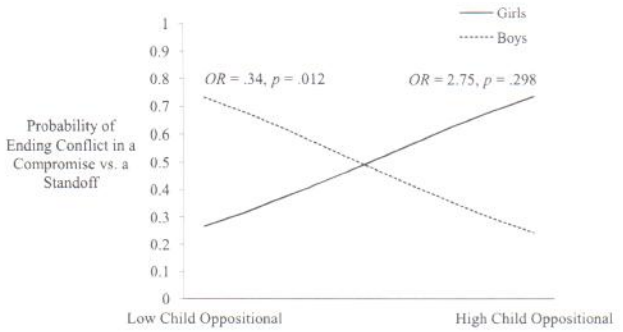

Figure 1. Interaction between child oppositional comments and child sex in predicting the likelihood of ending the mother–child discussion in a compromise versus a standoff. Higher scores on the dependent variable equate to a higher probability of reaching a compromise. *OR* = odds ratio.

more likely (p = .012) to reach a compromise with their mothers than a standoff. A likelihood less than 1.0 suggests that more oppositional comments by boys resulted in more standoffs than compromises.

Discussion

The current study explored how observed characteristics of mother–child conflict discussions related to the resolution reached by the dyad and whether relations differed for mother–daughter and mother–son pairs. This study addressed recent calls for research to examine how typical conflicts between family members are negotiated and resolved (Feldman et al., 2010). We incorporated multiple aspects of conflict discussions simultaneously that captured both the specific comments made and the overall emotional tone of the interaction. This allowed us to identify which specific strategies are influential in a dyad's ability to reach a compromise or win–loss resolution, or to fail to reach a resolution at all by ending the discussion in a standoff.

Both mothers' and children's constructive comments that planned for future solutions increased the likelihood that the dyad would come to a resolution rather than end the conflict in a standoff. But it was children's constructive planning comments alone that differentiated between a resolution in which mothers' goals were realized versus a resolution in which children also contributed and had their goals realized. Although the conflict is resolved in both cases, there are developmental implications for child contributions that result in a mutually agreeable resolution. For example, negotiation between parents and children has been linked to children's higher self-esteem, independence, and ability to problem solve (Dunn, 2004; Dunn & Munn, 1987; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). When children are able to share their perspectives and contribute to a productive solution, they learn valuable skills that can be taken into the peer domain.

Mothers' emotional responsiveness and oppositional comments also differentiated a mutually agreeable resolution from a resolution where only the mothers' goals were realized. Mothers who were emotionally responsive respected and enjoyed their children during the interaction. They encouraged children to contribute and demonstrated that they valued the child's perspective. Similarly, mothers who made fewer oppositional comments toward their child were less negative and coercive. Conflict discussions can be cognitively and emotionally difficult for early school-age children (Kerns, 2008). When they feel accepted and comfortable, they are likely to feel more confident in their ability to discuss and negotiate. As seen with the main effect findings, a compromise was differentiated from other resolution types with children's constructive contributions. This suggests that more emotional responsiveness and fewer oppositional comments by mothers created a supportive context that encouraged children to contribute to conflict discussions in a productive way, resulting in the dyad's tendency to reach a mutually agreeable solution.

Contrary to our hypotheses, child sex was not a significant main effect in predicting resolution type. Girls were no more likely to reach a compromise with their mothers than were boys. Although 24 different child sex interaction effects were tested across all comparisons, only one significantly differentiated whether families came to a compromise versus a standoff. Because of this, the interaction findings should be interpreted with some caution. In partial support of our hypotheses, more negative comments by children, typically seen in the form of blaming, accusing, and disagreeing, hindered the ability of mother–son pairs to reach a compromise, but did not affect the likelihood of mother–daughter pairs to reach compromise. Parents are more likely to talk to their daughters about negative emotions than their sons (Fivush et al., 2003), suggesting that girls may get more practice regulating emotions during negative discussions. This may explain why negative comments hindered boys more than girls in reaching a compromise with mothers, considering compromise was more likely when children were able to contribute to future planning. With increased emotion regulation, children may be better able to make both oppositional and constructive comments during conflicts.

Although past research has suggested that parent–child conflicts rarely result in compromises due to power differentials inherent in this asymmetrical relationship (Perlman, Siddiqui, Ram, & Ross, 2000), compromises were quite common in our study. Two procedural choices likely influenced mothers' child-centered behaviors: research assistants requested that dyads come to a resolution at the end of the discussion, and the questions provided to families to prompt communication referred to future encounters. However, it is noteworthy that win–loss resolutions were just as common as compromises, and mothers asserted their power in these situations 99% of the time. This is consistent with research on conflict theory that posits parents have power over children and will assert their dominance by requiring children to comply with their wishes (Emery, 1992; Perlman et al., 2000). Additionally, great variability in future-oriented planning behaviors was seen by both mothers and children regardless of the prompts provided, with one fifth of mothers and one half of children making very few or no comments regarding future experiences.

Interestingly, standoffs were relatively rarer in this study than in past investigations of natural family disagreements at home (Vuchinich, 1987). When families are faced with a specific task to discuss their problems for an extended period of time and resolve differences, they appear to be more likely to find a solution than in a natural home setting. At home, time and attention are limited, and parents may have less patience to facilitate a negotiation with their children. This is not to say that the constructive conflict strategies identified here are only applicable in a laboratory setting.

Past research has confirmed that many of the salient conflict characteristics found in this study are successfully used in more natural settings to enhance family problem-solving and children's social skills (e.g., Dunn & Munn, 1987; Rueter & Conger, 1995).

This study makes a unique contribution to the literature by examining an array of observed conflict characteristics. Nonetheless, there are limitations to the current study. For one, the study was correlational in nature. Although we identified characteristics of discussions that led to subsequent resolutions, we could not determine whether these associations are causal. Cummings et al. (2008) used an experimental procedure to encourage more constructive strategies during marital conflict and were able to observe later changes in family behavior. Future research that manipulates the use of characteristics identified in this study may help elucidate the value of these behaviors and the clinical applicability of the results. Second, the current study only examined mother–child conflict discussions. Future research that incorporates additional caregivers would be able to examine whether mother–child and father–child conflicts are resolved in similar ways and how conflicts are altered when multiple family members become involved. Third, parents may hold certain beliefs regarding parental authority and child conformity that may predict tendencies to use constructive conflict characteristics, incorporate the child's perspective into the discussion, and develop a compromise that fulfills the goals of each dyad member. Parent beliefs were not measured in the present study, but pose an interesting direction for future research. A final limitation is a lack of power in detecting interaction effects, particularly when comparing boys and girls on odds of reaching a standoff, which only 14% ($n = 26$) of dyads experienced. Power analyses suggest that odds ratios five times larger than those found in the current study are recommended to detect significant gender differences within the standoff group at .80 power (Demidenko, 2007). Studies with larger samples or that examine conflicts in other settings may be able to find stronger support for the results presented here.

Our investigation combines important past findings spanning the last three decades on didactic conflict strategies and overall emotionality in order to better determine which aspects of mother–child conflict interactions are most predictive of various resolution types in a contemporary sample. Although this list is not exhaustive by any means, we have coded many behaviors emphasized in past research as relevant to both resolution and children's development. We found that when examining these aspects simultaneously, there were a few salient characteristics of mothers' and children's behavior that differentiated each kind of resolution from the rest. Studies such as this, which identify a feasible number of specific productive strategies, can be used to inform both future research and clinical work with at-risk families seeking to incorporate more adaptive interaction patterns into everyday family life.

References

Aiken, L. S., & West, S. G. (1991). *Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Batson, C. D. (1990). Affect and altruism. In B. S. Moore & A. M. Isen (Eds.), *Affect and social behavior* (pp. 89–125). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Berndt, T. J. (2004). Children's friendships: Shifts over a half-century in perspectives on their development and their effects. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 50,* 206–223. doi:10.1353/mpq.2004.0014

Carnevale, P. J., & Isen, A. M. (1986). The influence of positive affect and visual access on the discovery of integrative solutions in bilateral negotiation. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 37,* 1–13. doi:10.1016/0749-5978(86)90041-5

Cole, P. M., Zahn-Waxler, C., & Smith, K. D. (1994). Expressive control during a disappointment: Variations related to preschoolers' behavior problems. *Developmental Psychology, 30,* 835–846. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.30.6.835

Cummings, E. M., Faircloth, W. B., Mitchell, P. M., Cummings, J. S., & Schermerhorn, A. C. (2008). Evaluating a brief prevention program for improving marital conflict in community families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22,* 193–202. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.22.2.193

Darling, N., & Steinberg, L. (1993). Parenting style as context: An integrative model. *Psychological Bulletin, 113,* 487–496. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.113.3.487

Demidenko, E. (2007). Sample size determination for logistic regression revisited. *Statistics in Medicine, 26,* 3385–3397. doi:10.1002/sim.2771

Dix, T. (1991). The affective organization of parenting: Adaptive and maladaptive processes. *Psychological Bulletin, 110,* 3–25. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.110.1.3

Dixon, S. V., Graber, J. A., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2008). The roles of respect for parental authority and parenting practices in parent–child conflict among African American, Latino, and European American families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22,* 1–10. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.22.1.1

Dunn, J. (2004). *Understanding children's worlds*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Dunn, J., & Brown, J. (1994). Affect expression in the family, children's understanding of emotions, and their interactions with others. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 40,* 120–137.

Dunn, J., & Munn, P. (1987). Development of justification in disputes with mother and sibling. *Developmental Psychology, 23,* 791–798. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.23.6.791

Eisenberg, A. R., & Garvey, C. (1981). Children's use of verbal strategies in resolving conflicts. *Discourse Processes, 4,* 149–170. doi:10.1080/01638538109544512

Emery, R. E. (1992). Family conflicts and their developmental implications. In C. U. Shantz & W. W. Hartup (Eds.), *Conflict in child and adolescent development* (pp. 270–298). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Feldman, R., Masalha, S., & Derdikman-Eiron, R. (2010). Conflict resolution in the parent–child, marital, and peer contexts and children's aggression in the peer group: A process-oriented cultural perspective. *Developmental Psychology, 46,* 310–325. doi:10.1037/a0018286

Finley, G. E., Mira, S. D., & Schwartz, S. J. (2008). Perceived paternal and maternal involvement: Factor structure, mean differences, and parental roles. *Fathering, 6,* 62–82. doi:10.3149/fth.0601.62

Fivush, R., Berlin, L. J., Sales, J. M., Mennuti-Washburn, J., & Cassidy, J. (2003). Functions of parent–child reminiscing about emotionally negative events. *Memory, 11,* 179–192. doi:10.1080/741938209

Fivush, R., Brotman, M. A., Buckner, J. P., & Goodman, S. H. (2000). Gender differences in parent–child emotion narratives. *Sex Roles, 42,* 233–253. doi:10.1023/A:1007091207068

García-Ruiz, M., Rodrigo, M., Hernández-Cabrera, J., Máiquez, M., & Dekovíc, M. (2013). Resolution of parent–child conflicts in the adolescence. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 28,* 173–188. doi:10.1007/s10212-012-0108-7

Gottman, J. M., Katz, L. F., & Hooven, C. (1996). Parental meta-emotion philosophy and the emotional life of families: Theoretical models and preliminary data. *Journal of Family Psychology, 10,* 243–268. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.10.3.243

Grotevant, H. D., & Cooper, C. R. (1985). Patterns of interaction in family relationships and the development of identity exploration in adolescence. *Child Development, 56,* 415–428. doi:10.2307/1129730

Hastings, P. D., & Grusec, J. E. (1998). Parenting goals as organizers of responses to parent–child disagreement. *Developmental Psychology, 34,* 465–479. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.34.3.465

Kerns, K. A. (2008). Attachment in middle childhood. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 366–382). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Kuczynski, L., Kochanska, G., Radke-Yarrow, M., & Girnius-Brown, O. (1987). A developmental interpretation of young children's noncompliance. *Developmental Psychology, 23,* 799–806. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.23.6.799

Maccoby, E. E. (1992). The role of parents in the socialization of children: An historical overview. *Developmental Psychology, 28,* 1006–1017. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.28.6.1006

Minuchin, P. (1985). Families and individual development: Provocations from the field of family therapy. *Child Development, 56,* 289–302. doi:10.2307/1129720

Mokrova, I. L., O'Brien, M., Calkins, S. D., Leerkes, E. M., & Marcovitch, S. (2012). Links between family social status and preschoolers' persistence: The role of maternal values and quality of parenting. *Infant and Child Development, 21,* 617–633. doi:10.1002/icd.1761

Muthén, L., & Muthén, B. (1998–2012). *Mplus user's guide*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.

Neitzel, C., & Stright, A. D. (2003). Mothers' scaffolding of children's problem solving: Establishing a foundation of academic self-regulatory competence. *Journal of Family Psychology, 17,* 147–159. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.17.1.147

Perlman, M., & Ross, H. S. (1997). Who's the boss? Parents' failed attempts to influence the outcomes of conflicts between their children. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 14,* 463–480. doi:10.1177/0265407597144003

Perlman, M., Siddiqui, A., Ram, A., & Ross, H. (2000). An analysis of sources of power in children's conflict interactions. In R. Mills & S. Duck (Eds.), *The developmental psychology of personal relationships* (pp. 155–174). Chichester, England: Wiley.

Perry, N. B., Nelson, J. A., Swingler, M. M., Leerkes, E. M., Calkins, S. D., Marcovitch, S., & O'Brien, M. (2013). The relation between maternal emotional support and child physiological regulation across the preschool years. *Developmental Psychobiology, 55,* 382–394. doi:10.1002/dev.21042

Ram, A., & Ross, H. S. (2001). Problem-solving, contention, and struggle: How siblings resolve a conflict of interests. *Child Development, 72,* 1710–1722. doi:10.1111/1467-8624.00374

Recchia, H. E., Ross, H. S., & Vickar, M. (2010). Power and conflict resolution in sibling, parent–child, and spousal negotiations. *Journal of Family Psychology, 24,* 605–615. doi:10.1037/a0020871

Robin, A. L., & Foster, S. L. (1989). *Negotiating parent–adolescent conflict: A behavioral–family systems approach*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Rueter, M. A., & Conger, R. D. (1995). Interaction style, problem-solving behavior, and family problem-solving effectiveness. *Child Development, 66,* 98–115. doi:10.2307/1131193

Siffert, A., & Schwarz, B. (2011). Parental conflict resolution styles and children's adjustment: Children's appraisals and emotion regulation as mediators. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 172,* 21–39. doi:10.1080/00221325.2010.503723

Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., & Whitton, S. W. (2002). Communication, conflict and commitment: Insights on the foundations of relationship success from a national survey. *Family Process, 41,* 659–675. doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.2002.00659.x

Stein, N. L., & Albro, E. R. (1997). Building complexity and coherence: Children's use of goal-structured knowledge in telling stories. In M. W. Bamberg (Ed.), *Narrative development: Six approaches* (pp. 5–44). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Publishers.

Stein, N. L., & Albro, E. R. (2001). The origins and nature of arguments: Studies in conflict understanding, emotion, and negotiation. *Discourse Processes, 32,* 113–133. doi:10.1207/S15326950DP3202&3_02

Steinberg, L. (1990). Interdependency in the family: Autonomy, conflict, and harmony in the parent–adolescent relationships. In S. S. Feldman & G. R. Elliot (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 225–276). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Stright, A. D., Herr, M. Y., & Neitzel, C. (2009). Maternal scaffolding of children's problem solving and children's adjustment in kindergarten: Hmong families in the United States. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 101,* 207–218. doi:10.1037/a0013154

Strough, J., Berg, C. A., & Sansone, C. (1996). Goals for solving every-day problems across the life span: Age and gender differences in the salience of interpersonal concerns. *Developmental Psychology, 32,* 1106–1115. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.32.6.1106

Underwood, M. K., Beron, K. J., Gentsch, J. K., Galperin, M. B., & Risser, S. D. (2008). Family correlates of children's social and physical aggression with peers: Negative interparental conflict strategies and parenting styles. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 32,* 549–562. doi:10.1177/0165025408097134

Vuchinich, S. (1987). Starting and stopping spontaneous family conflicts. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 49,* 591–601. doi:10.2307/352204

Vuchinich, S. (1999). *Problem solving in families: Research and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Received July 30, 2013
Revision received December 16, 2013
Accepted January 3, 2014 ■