Inter-parental conflict and children’s academic attainment: a longitudinal analysis

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Background: Previous research suggests a link between inter-parental conflict and children's psychological development. Most studies, however, have tended to focus on two broad indices of children's psychological adaptation (internalizing symptoms and externalizing problems) in considering the effects of inter-parental conflict on children's development. The present longitudinal study extends this body of research by considering the impact of inter-parental conflict on children's low academic attainment among a sample of 230 schoolchildren (age 11–13 years) living in the United Kingdom. Method: Controlling for teacher reports of children's initial levels of aggression (Time 1), the proposed theoretical model linked parent and child reports of inter-parental conflict at Time 1 (1999) to children's perceptions of negative parent–child relations, appraisals of self-blame for marital conflict and teacher reports of children's aggressive behavior at Time 2 (2000), which in turn were linked to children's performance on standardized academic tests (English, Math, Science) at Time 3 (2001). Structural equation modeling was used to test all hypothesized relations in the proposed theoretical model. Results: Support was found for the role of children's self-blaming attributions for parents' marital arguments, not negative parenting behavior, as a mechanism through which variation in their academic attainment is explained. Conclusions: Contrary to the focus emphasized in most current family and school-based intervention programs, findings suggest that the attributional processes engendered in children who live in households marked by high levels of inter-parental conflict and hostility have important implications for their long-term academic success. Keywords: Inter-parental conflict, parenting, children's attributions, behavior problems, academic attainment, family–school intervention programs, marital disharmony, social cognition, longitudinal studies.

The role of the family as a context for understanding variation in children's normal and abnormal psychological development has a long and established history. Children raised in households exposed to acute or chronic economic strain (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994), heightened levels of parental psychopathology (Downey & Coyne, 1990), inter-parental conflict and violence (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Rivett, Howarth, & Harold, 2006), negative parent–child relations (Erel & Burman, 1995), parental separation, divorce and remarriage (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998) have been shown to experience a variety of negative psychological outcomes, including increased anxiety, depression, aggression, hostility and anti-social behavior. Research in this area, however, has progressed from establishing simple bivariate associations between these indices of family experience and children's psychological adaptation to identifying the social, emotional and cognitive processes that underlie family stress–child development links (see Cummings & Davies, 2002). In considering the impact of parental separation and divorce on children, for example, it is now recognized that children's adaptation to marital transition may be determined more by the level of conflict that occurs between parents before, during and after the breakup of the marital relationship than the actual breakup itself (Harold & Murch, 2005). Indeed, in relation to each of the other family factors mentioned (e.g., economic stress, parent depression, negative parenting), conflict occurring between parents has been recognized as a factor common to all in accounting for adverse effects on children (Conger et al., 1994; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Harold & Conger, 1997), with recent experimental (see Cummings & Davies, 2002) and longitudinal studies (e.g., Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2004) highlighting the role of inter-parental conflict as a causative agent in accounting for the effects of family stress on children's psychological adaptation.

Inter-parental conflict and children's psychological development

From as far back as the 1930s it has been recognized that discord between parents has a potentially debilitating effect on children (Towle, 1931). More recent theoretical models suggest that the effects of inter-parental conflict on children are determined through (1) disruptions in the parent–child relationship and (2) the negative emotions, cognitions and representations of family relationships engendered in children who are exposed to hostile exchanges between their parents.

Evidence supporting the first of these hypotheses suggests that parents embroiled in a hostile and distressed marital relationship are typically more
hostile and aggressive toward their children, and less sensitive and emotionally responsive to their children’s needs (Harold, Fincham, Osborne, & Conger, 1997). The effects of inter-parental conflict on children therefore are deemed to occur indirectly through a ‘spillover’ of emotion from the couple relationship to the parent–child relationship. In support of this proposal, there is a robust association between emotion expressed in the marital relationship and emotion expressed in the parent–child relationship (Erel & Burman, 1995). However, if conflict between parents only ever affected children via disruptions in the parent–child relationship, children would be adversely affected by such disruption irrespective of whether or not they actually witnessed the conflict.

Research conducted over the past two decades has shown that overt inter-parental conflict to which children are exposed has a greater impact on child distress than covert conflict to which children are not exposed (see Cummings & Davies, 2002). This finding has led researchers to consider a second set of hypotheses that focus on the underlying cognitive and emotional processes engendered in children who live in households marked by hostile inter-parental relations. Three primary theoretical perspectives have emerged that focus on the role of the child’s own perspective when explaining the effects of inter-parental conflict on children’s psychological well-being. Grych and Fincham (1990), in their cognitive-contextual framework, propose that the attributions children assign to their parents’ marital arguments account for effects on well-being. Davies and Cummings (1994) emphasize the importance of attachment processes and highlight the role of children’s emotional security as a factor in accounting for variation in well-being. Harold and Conger (1997) offer a family-wide model and propose that the attributions children assign to conflict occurring in the marital relationship orient their expectations and representations of conflict in the parent–child relationship which in turn affects their long-term psychological adaptation.

While support for each of these perspectives has been highlighted in recent studies (Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000; Davies, Harold, Goeken-Morey, & Cummings, 2002; Harold et al., 2004), the present study will focus on the role of children’s self-blaming attributions for marital conflict as outlined by the cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990). According to this perspective, the impact of inter-parental conflict on children depends both on how parents express conflict in their relationship and how children interpret its meaning and implications for their well-being. Children who view conflict as threatening or feel unable to cope effectively are hypothesized to experience more anxiety and helplessness when conflict occurs, and those who blame themselves for parental disagreements or feel responsible for helping to end them are proposed to experience greater feelings of guilt and shame. More recent research has suggested that the specific appraisals children assign to their parents’ marital arguments may be respectively or even differentially linked to internalizing symptoms and externalizing problems. Studies with American, Australian, Canadian and British children have shown that children’s respective threat and self-blaming appraisals following marital conflict have varied effects on their psychological adaptation, depending on the particular index of psychological adaptation considered. For internalizing symptoms, threat and self-blame appraisals have been identified as both moderators of effects on children (Kerig, 1998; Grych et al., 2000). For externalizing problems, self-blame and threat appraisals have also been identified as moderators of effects on children (Kerig, 1998); but in terms of an indirect or mediating role, self-blame appraisals have been more consistently linked with this particular index of adaptation (Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums, & Lendich, 1999; Grych et al., 2000). In the only existing longitudinal study of the role of children’s threat and self-blame appraisals in relation to their symptoms of psychological distress, Grych, Harold, and Miles (2003) showed that children’s specific attributions of threat and self-blame differentially mediated the relationship between marital conflict and children’s internalizing symptoms and their externalizing problems; with threat appraisals associated with internalizing symptoms and self-blame appraisals associated with externalizing problems.

The emerging picture from research therefore suggests that the specific appraisals children assign to their parents’ marital arguments have important implications for their emotional and behavioral development. Indeed, such is the evidence that inter-parental conflict adversely affects children’s psychological development, that the time has come to move beyond assessment of these broad indices of psychological adaptation to assessing how conflict between parents may affect children in other important domains of their social and personal development. For example, it is recognized that academic success is an important predictor of adult adjustment (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994), but little is known about the factors that influence school achievement, particularly how family factors operate to affect children’s long-term academic attainment. Existing research does, however, suggest that parent–child problems and children’s self-blaming attributions for parents’ marital arguments are respectively linked to children’s behavior problems (Erel & Burman, 1995; Grych et al., 2003), with behavior problems in turn linked to a variety of negative outcomes for children, including low academic attainment (Hinshaw, 1992). Furthermore, children’s internal attributions for negative social experiences have been shown to affect task
performance (such as attainment on tests) and general well-being (Diener & Dweck, 1978). Building on this research base, we therefore considered the respective role of children’s self-blaming attributions relating to their parents’ marital arguments, their perceptions of hostile-rejecting parenting and their concurrent behavior problems in accounting for the association between inter-parental conflict, children’s early behavior problems and long-term academic attainment (standardized academic test scores).

The present study

Using the benefits of a three-wave longitudinal design, the present study assessed the impact of inter-parental conflict on children’s academic attainment among a sample of 230 schoolchildren (age 11–13 years), parents and their teachers living in the United Kingdom. Specifically, the proposed theoretical model linked parent and child reports of inter-parental conflict at Time 1 (1999) to children’s perceptions of negative parent-child relations, appraisals of self-blame for marital conflict and teacher reports of aggressive behavior at Time 2 (2000), which in turn were linked to children’s performance on standardized academic tests (English, Math, Science) completed nationally among children living in the United Kingdom (Time 3; 2001). Given established links between children’s early behavior problems and their long-term academic attainment (DiLalla, Marcus, & Wright-Philips, 2004), and the possible implications of trait-negative affectivity bias impacting children’s respective perceptions of inter-parental conflict and hostile-rejecting parenting (see Harold & Conger, 1997), teacher reports of children’s initial levels of aggression (Time 1) were controlled across all analyses (see Figure 1).

Method

Sample

The sample for the present study was derived from a three-year longitudinal study of 387 schoolchildren, parents and teachers living in the United Kingdom (83% response from total sample contacted). This study focused on children from all family types other than two-parent families were excluded from these analyses. Two hundred and thirty parents, children and teachers (girls = 122, boys = 108) provided complete information at all three time points and comprise the present study sample. Preliminary analyses indicated that families who completed the study at all three time points did not significantly differ from families who participated only in the first or second years of the study on primary measures.

Participating children lived in homes where both a male and a female guardian were resident and at least one of these adults was the child’s biological parent. Children living with both biological parents comprised 91.3% of the sample, 7.4% lived with their biological mother and stepfather, and 1.3% lived with their biological father and stepmother. Thirty-eight percent of mothers and 34.7% of fathers completed secondary or high-school education only, 32.6% of mothers and 28.9% of fathers completed technical or vocational-level training, and 29.8% of mothers and 36.4% of fathers completed university education. Ninety-eight percent of the children in the study were of White-European origin, 1.5% were of Indian, Sri-Lankan, or Pakistani

Figure 1 Theoretical model of the relationship between inter-parental conflict, children’s aggressive behavior, negative parenting behavior, appraisals of self-blame for parents’ marital arguments and low academic attainment

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origin, with the remaining .5% being of non-British origin (e.g., East African, Jamaican). Demographic statistics derived from the present study suggest that the overall sample is representative of British families living in England and Wales with respect to family composition, parent education and ethnic representation (Social Trends, 2002).

Procedure

Following initial contact with area secondary schools, parents received a letter inviting them and their children to participate in a research project focusing on the link between everyday family life and children’s development. Parents were then further informed about the study during a presentation at a scheduled parent–teacher evening, given a second letter and a consent form describing the goals and each stage of the project in more detail. No payment was made to families, but parents were informed that a summary booklet outlining key research findings would be distributed to all families upon completion of the study.

Parents received their questionnaires through the post, along with instructions for completing the measures and stamped addressed envelopes for each parent to return their questionnaires. Parent questionnaires contained a variety of measures relating to the quality of family interaction, parenting, marital satisfaction, parent and child psychological health, economic conditions and family demographics. Parents were asked to complete their questionnaires independently and a contact number for concerns or queries was provided. Children completed questionnaires during the course of the normal school day. Their questionnaire packets contained a variety of measures relating to the quality of family interaction, parent–child relations, marital conflict, children’s psychological health, economic conditions and family demographics. Teachers also completed questionnaires assessing child psychological functioning. As part of an overall debriefing, researchers and children discussed the benefits of successfully negotiating and resolving conflicts between individuals. Children were encouraged to speak about how they felt after completing their questionnaires. No concerns were raised by any children participating in the study.

Measures

Inter-parental conflict. Two indexes of inter-parental conflict were used to derive composite measures of mothers’ and fathers’ reports of inter-parental conflict: a subset of questions relating to inter-parental hostility taken from the Iowa Youth and Families Project Ratings Scales (see Harold & Conger, 1997; $r = .88$) and the O’Leary–Porter scale (Porter & O’Leary, 1980; $r = .86$). Child reports of inter-parental conflict were measured using the Conflict Properties subscale of the Children’s Perceptions of Inter-parental Conflict scale (CPIC), which assesses children’s appraisals of the frequency, intensity and resolution of conflict between parents (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992; $r = .79$).

Appraisals of self-blame. Children’s appraisals of self-blame in response to inter-parental conflict were measured using the Self-Blame subscale of the CPIC (Grych et al., 1992; $r = .89$). This subscale measures the extent to which children feel at fault for or responsible for their parents’ marital arguments.

Negative parenting behavior. The revised Child Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI; Margolies & Weintraub, 1977) was used to assess children’s reports of negative parent–child relations. This instrument is a 56-item measure in which children rate different dimensions of parental behavior. A composite index of the rejection and withdrawal subscale was used in the present study ($r = .91$).

Children’s aggressive behavior. Teachers completed the aggression subscale of the Teacher Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) at Time 1 ($r = .92$) and Time 2 ($r = .94$). Children’s respective year tutors provided information when children were in Year 7 (age 11 years) and Year 8 (age 12 years), thereby facilitating independent teacher reports of children’s aggressive behaviour at each time point.

Academic attainment. Standardized examination grades (Key Stage Three) in three core subject areas in the UK (English, Math, Science) were used to measure academic attainment. Key Stage Three exams are tests that British schoolchildren sit at the end of their third year of secondary school (age 13 or 14 years). Grades for these exams are given in the form of numeric scores between 1 and 7, 7 representing the highest level of attainment and 1 representing the lowest. Examination scores were recoded so that high scores reflected an ordinal index of low academic attainment.

Analysis and results

Correlational analysis

Means, standard deviations and correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1. Polyserial correlation coefficients were calculated so as to allow estimation of the magnitude of bivariate relations between continuously measured indicators of inter-parental conflict, appraisals of self-blame, negative parenting and behavior problems and the ordinal attributes of the academic performance scores (English, Math, Science).

Structural equation modeling analysis

Structural equation modeling based on maximum likelihood and polyserial variance-covariance estimation was used to test the empirical validity of the proposed theoretical model. Analyses were conducted in two stages so as to assess the relative role of children’s attributions relating to parents’ marital arguments and their perceptions of negative parenting in accounting for long-term links with academic attainment.
Inter-parental conflict and children's low academic attainment: perceptions of parenting or perceptions of conflict between parents?

The first set of analyses tested the respective role of negative parenting behavior (Figure 2, Panel A) and children’s self-blaming appraisals for parents’ marital arguments (Figure 2, Panel B) in linking inter-parental conflict and children’s academic attainment. Preliminary analyses revealed that a non-significant association existed between inter-parental conflict (Time 1) and children’s low academic attainment (Time 3; \( b = .15, p > .10 \)), replicating previous research relating to the longitudinal association between inter-parental conflict and children’s externalizing problems when parent reports of conflict and independent reports of child functioning (e.g., teachers) are employed (Harold and colleagues, 1997, 2002, 2004). Because there was no initial association between Time 1 inter-parental conflict and Time 3 low academic attainment, these data do not meet the criteria that Baron and Kenny (1986) described as necessary to define a mediational pathway. However, an independent variable can have an indirect effect on a dependent variable even if they are not correlated, if the independent variable influences a third (or intervening) variable, which in turn affects the dependent variable (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). If the independent and dependent variables are each related to the proposed intervening variable, the significance of the indirect association between the independent and dependent variables can be assessed statistically.

Controlling for initial behavior problems, results for Figure 2 (Panel A) revealed a significant direct association between inter-parental conflict at Time 1 and negative parenting behavior at Time 2 (\( b = .48, p < .01 \)) and between negative parenting at Time 2 and low academic attainment at Time 3 (\( b = .13, p < .05 \)). The stability in children’s aggressive behavior was strong and significant (\( b = .68, p < .01 \)), with significant associations also apparent between Time 1 aggression and Time 2 parenting (\( b = .18, p < .05 \)) and between Time 2 aggression and academic attainment at Time 3 (\( b = .30, p < .05 \)). Results for Figure 2 (Panel B) revealed significant direct associations between inter-parental conflict and children’s appraisals of self-blame for parents’ marital arguments (\( b = .36, p < .01 \)) and between self-blaming appraisals and low academic attainment (\( b = .21, p < .05 \)). The stability in children’s aggressive behavior was again strong and significant (\( b = .67, p < .01 \)), with significant associations also apparent between Time 1 aggression and Time 2 self-blame (\( b = .22, p < .05 \)) and between Time 2 aggression and Time 3 academic attainment (\( b = .28, p < .05 \)). Significant indirect pathways were apparent in each model linking Time 1 aggression to Time 3 academic attainment through Time 2 aggression (\( b = .20 \) and .18, \( p < .05 \)) and appraisals of self-blame (\( b = .05, p < .05 \)), but not through negative parenting behavior (\( b = .02 \)). For inter-parental conflict, a significant indirect pathway was also found through self-blaming appraisals for parents’ marital arguments to academic attainment (\( b = .08, p < .05 \)), with only a marginal effect noted through negative parenting (\( b = .06, p < .10 \)).

Inter-parental conflict and children’s low academic attainment: perceptions of parenting versus perceptions of conflict between parents

The full theoretical model was estimated such that children’s perceptions of hostile-rejecting parenting, appraisals of self-blame for parents marital arguments and teacher reports of children’s aggressive behavior (Time 2) were considered together in accounting for the association between inter-parental conflict (Time 1) and academic attainment (Time 3), controlling for initial behaviour problems at Time 1. Significant direct associations were found between inter-parental conflict at Time 1 and children’s respective perceptions of negative parenting (\( b = .48, \)

### Table 1: Means, standard deviations and polyserial correlations among all indicators of theoretical constructs

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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>52.61</td>
<td>26.14</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>34.69</td>
<td>12.43</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>13.55</td>
<td>6.86</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>9.68</td>
<td>4.04</td>
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Note. \( N = 230 \). TRF = Teacher Report Form. \( *p < .05; **p < .01 \).
and their self-blaming appraisals for marital conflict (β = .36, p < .01) at Time 2. Neither path from negative parenting or appraisals of self-blame to concurrent behavior problems at Time 2 appeared statistically significant (β = .01 and .08). Significant paths were apparent between children’s initial levels of aggression (Time 1), negative parenting behavior (β = .18, p < .05) and appraisals of self-blame (β = .22, p < .05) at Time 2. The stability in children’s levels of aggression was again strong and significant (β = .67, p < .01). Interestingly, significant paths were apparent from children’s self-blaming
appraisals ($\beta = .20, p < .05$) and aggressive behaviors ($\beta = .28, p < .05$) to academic attainment, but not from perceptions of negative parenting ($\beta = .02$). This finding suggests that the initially significant pathway between negative parenting and academic attainment (see Figure 2, Panel A) is mediated when self-blaming appraisals are considered in the same analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986); a finding that has significant implications for school and family-based intervention programs that emphasize parenting training only. The indirect effect from inter-parental conflict through appraisals of self-blame to academic attainment was also statistically significant ($\beta = .7, p < .05$), further affirming the mediational role of this measure in accounting for the impact of inter-parental conflict on children's long-term academic success (Mackinnon et al., 2002). Fit indices for all models tested suggested that each model provided a good fit to the data.

**Discussion**

The present study extends previous research highlighting the role of the inter-parental relationship on children's psychological development by providing additional evidence that children living in households marked by high levels of inter-parental conflict and hostility are also at risk for low academic attainment. Most notably, the present study underscores the important role of children's own appraisals of parents' marital arguments, specifically their self-blaming appraisals, as a mechanism through which inter-parental conflict adversely affects children's long-term academic attainment.

While the link between family factors and school outcomes for children has received attention in past research (see Cowan & Cowan, 2002), most research has either focused on parenting style (Fang, Xiong, & Guo, 2003) or child behavior problems emanating from adverse parent–child experiences (Melby & Conger, 1996). In addition, facets of children's school experience that have received most consistent attention have tended to concentrate on school transition (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994), parent–teacher relations (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) and general school behavior (Hinshaw, 1992). Few studies have considered the role of the inter-parental relationship as a source of influence on children's academic attainment and fewer still have considered the joint interplay between family problems (inter-parental and parent–child conflict), child behavior problems and academic well being. No previous study has considered the interplay between these factors within a longitudinal research design, using a nationally diverse sample of children (i.e., British schoolchildren) and employing performance grades on standardized academic tests as the primary criterion index of academic success.

As mentioned previously, research focusing on the effects of inter-parental conflict on children has suggested that children are adversely affected through two primary mechanisms: (1) disruptions in the parent–child relationship (Erel & Burman, 1995) and (2) the negative emotions, cognitions and representations of family relationships engendered in children who are exposed to hostile exchanges between their parents (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Erel & Burman, 1995; Grych & Fincham, 1990;}

![Figure 3](https://example.com/figure3.png)

**Figure 3** Maximum likelihood estimation of the full theoretical model, *, p < .05, **p < .01, NS not significant

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Harold & Conger, 1997). The present study first assessed each of these hypotheses separately by considering whether children's perceptions of hostile and rejecting parenting or their self-blaming appraisals for parents' marital arguments, controlling for children's initial behavior problems, accounted for variation in children's long-term academic success. Results suggested that in the absence of a direct longitudinal association between marital conflict and academic attainment, significant indirect effects existed between children's appraisals of self-blame for parents' marital arguments and their perceptions of hostile and rejecting parenting (albeit marginal for the latter; see Figure 2, Panel A and B). Tests of a model that jointly considered the role of children's respective perceptions of hostile and rejecting parenting and their self-blaming appraisals for parents' marital arguments, however, suggested that children's self-blaming appraisals, not their perceptions of hostile-rejecting parenting, accounted for any long-term association with academic attainment (see Figure 3). This result, as it stands, is practically significant in that it suggests that children living in households marked by high levels of inter-parental conflict are at heightened risk for lower levels of academic attainment via the appraisals they assign to their parent's marital arguments more so than the impact such arguments have on their perceived relationship with their parents; a finding that has significant implications for intervention programs aimed at alleviating adverse family effects on children's psychological development, specifically their academic attainment.

A factor also considered in the present study and that has been consistently shown to be related to children's academic attainment is their level of aggression. Children whose behavior is marked by high levels of aggression and hostility are at risk for reduced academic performance, including disrupted school transition and general academic underachievement (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Hinshaw, 1992). In the context of the present theoretical model, children's aggressive behaviors are also relevant in that both negative parenting and children's appraisals of self-blame for parents' marital arguments have been linked to heightened behavior problems (Erel & Burman, 1995; Grych et al., 2003), with children's negative appraisals (attributions) also related to decreased task performance and well-being (Diener & Dweck, 1978). The full theoretical model therefore considered the interplay between children's perceptions of hostile and rejecting parenting, teacher reports of children's aggressive behaviour and children's self-blaming attributions for parents' marital arguments in linking inter-parental conflict and children's long-term academic attainment. Tests of the full model revealed that children's self-blaming attributions for parents' marital arguments offered the only mechanism through which both inter-parental conflict and children's initial levels of aggression affected their long-term performance on standardized academic tests. This finding is consistent with past research highlighting the role of general attributional processes in relation to children's performance and well-being (Diener & Dweck, 1978) and helpless and mastery achievement patterns in the family (Hokoda & Fincham, 1995), but is the first to suggest that children who assign self-blaming attributions relating specifically to their parents' marital arguments are at increased risk for low academic attainment.

While the present study advances understanding of the inter-parental conflict–child adjustment link by considering an index of adjustment that goes beyond the standard assessment of internalizing symptoms and externalizing problems, several limitations must be noted. First, it was not possible to control for children's initial academic performance as the specific index of academic attainment considered in the present study was only assessed when children were aged 13 years (Time 3 in the present study). Caution must therefore be taken in deriving causal conclusions relating to derived results. In order to partly overcome this limitation, teacher reports of children's aggressive behaviors were assessed at both Time 1 and Time 2. Controlling for initial symptom levels allows both the estimation of early behavior on long-term attainment and the partialing out of any variance that may emanate from trait negative affectivity bias impacting on children's respective perceptions of inter-parental conflict and hostile-rejecting parenting. Second, previous research has highlighted differences in children's adaptation to inter-parental conflict when analyses are considered separately by child gender. The sample size in the present study is marginal in allowing subgroup comparisons and therefore limited in what may be concluded regarding different mechanisms that may operate respectively for boys and girls within the context of the present theoretical model. This limitation is not only a limitation in the present study but most existing studies of the effects of inter-parental conflict on children; a dearth that must be remedied in future research (for exceptions see Kerig, 1998; Grych et al., 2003). Notwithstanding these limitations, the present study advances understanding of the inter-parental conflict–child adjustment link by further emphasizing the importance of underlying attributional processes in accounting for adverse effects on children's development and by extending consideration of impacts to the realm of academic attainment.

Implications for practice and policy

The present findings have important implications for current family and school-based intervention programs aimed at ameliorating adverse family effects on children's academic success and well-being. Most
existing intervention programs emphasize the importance of positive parenting with respect to facilitating improved academic success for children. More recent family and school-focused intervention programs recognize the importance of the inter-parental relationship both as an influence on the parent–child relationship and on children directly (see Cowan & Cowan, 2002). Findings from the present study highlight the importance of the inter-parental relationship for children’s development and suggest further that treating family effects on children at the level of parenting only, substantively misses out on an important mechanism through which children’s academic success may be affected; the attributional processes engendered in children who live in households marked by high levels of inter-parental conflict and hostility. While treating family relationship effects on children is important, treating children’s perceptions of family relationships may be even more important when it comes to long-term academic success and well-being.

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