
Children's Coping with Marital Conflict: The Role of Conflict Expression and Gender

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Abstract

This study compared boys' and girls' coping responses to videotaped representations of marital conflict that varied in conflict content, tactic, and the gender of the parent engaging in conflict behaviour. Participants were 398 children (208 boys, 190 girls) aged 12–13 years old living in the United Kingdom. Child-related conflict exchanges characterized by hostile behaviour (e.g., physical aggression) elicited greater mediation efforts by children. Children were more likely to mediate father-enacted conflict. Girls, relative to boys, endorsed more mediation to fathers' physical aggression and mothers' pursuit of an issue and were more avoiding of mothers' physical aggression and threats to intactness of the family. Findings underscore the importance of considering parent and child gender in determining children's coping efforts in the context of interparental conflict.

Keywords: marital conflict; child coping; parent gender; child gender

Exposure to interparental conflict is associated with increased symptoms of psychological distress among children (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1998; Nicoletti, El-Sheikh & Whitson, 2003) and adolescents (e.g., Davies & Lindsay, 2004; Harold & Conger, 1997; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2004). The documenting of relations between marital conflict and children's adjustment problems has been followed by research aimed at increasing understanding of the underlying mechanisms or processes that account for this association (Cummings & Davies, 2002). For example, the development and empirical testing of theoretical frameworks such as the emotional security hypothesis (Davies & Cummings, 1994, 1998) and the cognitive contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Grych, Harold & Miles, 2003) have been at the forefront of research examining why children manifest adjustment problems in response to hostility and discord between parents. One line of enquiry that has received particular attention is the effect different forms of marital conflict have on children during and immediately following conflict. This research has demonstrated that marital conflict is associated with distress (increased sadness, anger, and fear), physiological arousal, and heightened sensitivity to subsequent instances of conflict (e.g., Crockenberg & Forgays, 1996; Gottman & Katz, 1989).

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The distress that children experience in response to interparental conflict may lead to efforts to manage emotions aroused in the context of conflict. Coping may be defined as 'cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). The behaviours that children use to cope with parents' arguments have the capacity to affect children's adjustment and the course and outcome of conflict exchanges. Yet there is limited understanding of the conditions under which children are motivated to engage in coping behaviour in response to interparental conflict and whether the coping response is itself determined by the characteristics of the conflict to which children are exposed.

An understanding of how children cope with interparental conflict has the potential to highlight why some children are adversely affected by exposure to discord in the home (Jenkins, Smith & Graham, 1989). The emotional security hypothesis proposes that children's efforts to regulate their exposure to marital conflict are a key component of attempts to maintain emotional security in the context of marital conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994). The emotional security hypothesis conceptualizes children's coping with marital conflict both in terms of over-regulation (mediation, comforting, distraction) and avoidance (distancing, escape) of conflict and highlights two of the primary ways in which children attempt to preserve emotional security by engaging or disengaging from family stress (Cummings & Davies, 2002).

A consistent research finding is that children are motivated to intervene in marital conflict, including behaviours that seek to solve the problem or comfort parents (e.g., Jenkins *et al.*, 1989; Laumakis, Margolin & John, 1998). Studies assessing children's responses to different types of inter-adult anger have found that children of different ages consistently endorse involvement as a response to conflict (e.g., Cummings, Ballard & El-Sheikh, 1991). Far from being an adaptive coping response, strategies that involve children in conflict have been associated with increased internalizing symptoms and externalizing problems (e.g., Davies, Forman, Rasi & Stevens, 2002). Children also use withdrawal and avoidance as coping responses to marital conflict (e.g., O'Brien, Margolin & John, 1995). One study found that after mediation and acting as an authority in parents' arguments, avoidance was the third most frequently endorsed response to marital conflict (Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2000). Interestingly, avoidance strategies whereby the child seeks to create distance between themselves and interparental conflict does not appear to be uniformly protective for children. As Kerig (2001) suggests, avoidance may be helpful in the first instance by removing children from the immediate threat posed by conflict, but its habitual use may hinder the development of more constructive coping strategies. These findings raise questions about the characteristics of conflict that prompt children to cope in particular ways when exposed to a negative exchange between parents. In other words, the different ways in which parents can express disagreement and discord may partly determine children's coping behaviour. This study examines the particular features of interparental conflict that motivate children's coping behaviour and considers whether boys and girls differ in their respective coping responses to mothers' and fathers' conflict behaviour.

The Role of Conflict Expression

Different types of conflict expression between parents have been associated with negative responding by children. Marital conflict characterized by verbal anger elicits

negative emotion in children including heightened fear, anger, and sadness (Cummings *et al.*, 1991). Moreover, verbal anger and hostility that includes threats to leave is particularly upsetting for children, possibly because such exchanges threaten the stability of family relationships (Laumakis *et al.*, 1998). Less overt forms of conflict, such as unexpressed hostility between parents, have also been found to be distressing for children (Cummings, Vogel, Cummings & El-Sheikh, 1989). It is suggested that non-verbal anger and the use of 'silent treatment' by parents elicits distress in children because it conveys to the child a poor likelihood that the conflict will be resolved (e.g., Cummings *et al.*, 1991). Interparental conflict characterized by physical violence and aggression is related to disturbance in children's emotional and behavioural functioning, as well as being related to increased involvement in conflict (e.g., Jouriles & Norwood, 1995; O'Brien, Margolin, John & Krueger, 1991). Parent withdrawal from marital interaction has also been associated with child adjustment problems (Cox, Paley & Payne, 1997). Indeed, the use of withdrawal and 'stone-walling', which is often more characteristic of husbands' behaviour, is thought to represent significant marital distress to children (Katz & Gottman, 1997). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that children are sensitive to the many different ways in which problems between parents are expressed, showing heightened distress and adjustment problems to both overt and covert forms of conflict. Less clear is whether different conflict tactics lead children to engage in different forms of coping behaviour.

Children's coping with marital conflict can also vary as a function of the content of conflict. Research indicates that child-related marital conflict is more distressing for children than conflict concerning a topic unrelated to the child (e.g., Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold & Shelton, 2002; Grych & Fincham, 1993). Child-related conflict has been associated with feelings of shame and blame and a greater motivation by children to intervene in marital conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Intervention in child-related conflict reflects children's perception that they have greater control over the course and outcome of interparental conflict (Grych, 1998). It is also possible that children are more likely to intervene in conflict that they perceive responsibility for, irrespective of conflict intensity and the potential therein to experience physical or psychological harm. Each of these features of marital conflict (expression and content) may have implications for the way in which children cope with conflict occurring between parents. Although previous research suggests that children use both mediation and avoidance in their efforts to cope with marital conflict, research has yet to examine the conditions under which children are more or less likely to cope using either of these strategies.

The Role of Child Gender

Research findings are inconsistent about gender differences in how children cope with marital conflict. There is some evidence that boys are more likely to propose practical solutions to conflict (Davies, Myers & Cummings, 1996) and that adolescent boys are particularly likely to intervene in marital violence and aggression (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990). In contrast, other studies have found that girls report greater involvement in and avoidance of marital conflict (Davies *et al.*, 2002; El-Sheikh & Reiter, 1996; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold & Shelton, 2003). Efforts by girls to regulate their exposure to interparental conflict and specifically, to mediate parents' arguments, are a possible response to socialization experiences that emphasize

responsibility for the maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Davies & Windle, 1997). Research indicative of boys' motivation to mediate marital conflict may reflect socialization norms that value assertiveness and agency in males (e.g., Davies & Lindsay, 2001; Laumakis *et al.*, 1998). Recent findings have highlighted how the role of coping in the relationship between marital conflict and children's psychological adjustment varies as a function of gender. The use of active and support coping acted to protect girls against depressive symptoms and low self-esteem whereas avoidance coping was a vulnerability factor for boys' adjustment (Nicoletti *et al.*, 2003). In contrast, work by Kerig and colleagues suggests that avoidance coping may protect girls against adjustment problems (e.g., Kerig, Fedorowicz, Brown, Patenaude & Warren, 1998). Although recent studies suggest that the processes linking interparental conflict and child adjustment differ for boys and girls (e.g., Davies & Lindsay, 2004; Grych *et al.*, 2003), relatively little research has been conducted investigating gender differences in coping behaviour. This is surprising given that coping behaviour is a key component of major theoretical perspectives on how marital conflict affects children (e.g., the cognitive-contextual framework, Grych & Fincham, 1990; the emotional security hypothesis, Davies & Cummings, 1994). One way in which gender differences in children's coping responses can be further elucidated is to examine how boys and girls differ in their responses to mothers' and fathers' conflict behaviours.

The Role of Parent Gender

Research that considers whether children's responses to marital conflict differ as a function of parent gender varies considerably in its focus (Coiro & Emery, 1998). Some research has examined whether children disproportionately attend to and model their same-sex parents' conflict behaviour. Parent aggression expressed in the context of the marriage has been associated with behaviour problems in the same-sex child, whereas parents' avoiding behaviour has been associated with internalizing symptoms in the same-sex child (e.g., Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums & Lendich, 1999). However, the pattern of relationships within conflicted families is likely to be more complex than can be accommodated within a same-sex account of modelling parent behaviour. Given the greater power held by fathers in families, it has been argued that both boys and girls are more likely to imitate their fathers (Crockenberg & Forgays, 1996). For example, research examining cross-generational alliances has found that adolescents form alliances with the father against the mother in the context of marital conflict (Davis, Hops, Alpert & Sheeber, 1998). Recent research, however, has found that children engage in more emotion and behaviour regulation in response to fathers' use of physical aggression than to mothers' (e.g., Goeke-Morey *et al.*, 2003). Rather than seeking to imitate his behaviour, this suggests that children are motivated to employ coping strategies in response to fathers' marital aggression. Other research suggests that boys and girls respond more negatively to the opposite-sex parents' conflict behaviour with implications for their perceptions of the parent-child relationship (Osborne & Fincham, 1996) and later psychological adjustment (Katz & Gottman, 1993). There is limited evidence for the role of child gender as a moderator of the effects of mother and father conflict behaviour on the coping behaviour of children. However, research examining the effects of marital aggression on parents' behaviour towards their children found that husband-to-wife aggression was related to both

mothers' and fathers' aggression towards boys but not girls (e.g., Jouriles & LeCompte, 1991). Boys and girls therefore may react differently to interparental conflict as a function of their expectations about parents' behaviour towards them during and following negative marital exchanges.

How children respond to marital conflict, the underlying motivation for coping behaviour and how responses are measured, remains a subject for discussion (e.g., Kerig, 2001). Indeed, theoretical perspectives on how children cope with interparental conflict remain largely underdeveloped. Possible reasons for this include the ethical and practical difficulties of assessing how children cope with parents' arguments in a real life setting (Cummings, 1995). A methodological approach that can advance understanding of the moderating role of parent and child gender on children's coping responses is the analogue method. Analogue procedures, which involve the presentation of either live or tape-recorded instances of inter-adult or interparental conflict, enable the researcher to control the dimensions of conflict presented to children, including the form, intensity, and content of conflict (Cummings, Goeke-Morey & Dukewich, 2001; Kerig, 2001). Previous studies indicate that analogue methods provide empirically valid information relating to children's appraisals and responses to marital conflict. For example, the method was employed in a study that distinguished between forms of marital conflict that were particularly distressing for children and those that were more benign (Goeke-Morey *et al.*, 2003). The response patterns elicited by analogue presentations of conflict are argued to meaningfully reflect children's reactions to conflict in the home, without being a precise replica of their experience and response to their own parents' arguments (Cummings *et al.*, 2001). Recent research has demonstrated relations between analogue responses and prior experience of interparental conflict (Grych, 1998) as well as longitudinal relations between marital conflict, children's analogue responses, and their long-term adjustment (Harold *et al.*, 2004).

The Present Study

Guided by the emotional security hypothesis, the present study examines the conditions under which children cope with marital conflict using strategies of mediation and avoidance. Specifically, this study examines how children's endorsement of these coping strategies varies depending on the expression of marital conflict, its content, and the gender of the parent who engages in a conflict expression. Consistent with the emotional security hypothesis, which predicts that children will be more distressed by child-related conflict because of the potential for spillover of negativity into the parent-child relationship (Goeke-Morey *et al.*, 2002), and previous findings documenting intervention in child-related conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1993), it was hypothesized that child-related conflict would elicit higher levels of mediation than adult-related conflict. Two hypotheses were tested relating to gender differences in children's coping responses. First, it was hypothesized that girls would endorse higher levels of mediation and avoidance coping relative to boys. Second, it was hypothesized that fathers' use of conflict tactics that included a physical aggression component would elicit higher levels of both mediation and avoidance in children than mothers' use of such tactics. Analyses of the interaction between parent and child gender were treated as exploratory given the paucity of systematic research that considers whether boys and girls cope differently with mother- versus father-initiated conflict.

Method

Sample

The participants included 398 children (208 boys, 190 girls) between 12 and 13 years old (Boys: $M = 12.68$ years old; $SD = .47$; Girls: $M = 12.64$ years old; $SD = .48$) who were part of a larger, longitudinal study of children and families living in Wales, in the United Kingdom. In view of the research questions, only children living with two parents were considered in the present analyses. The majority of children lived with both biological parents (87.4 per cent); 10.6 per cent lived with their mother and stepfather, whereas 2 per cent lived with their father and stepmother. The sample was predominantly White-European (98.2 per cent), with smaller proportions of other ethnic groups (.8 per cent Indian/Sri Lankan, 1 per cent other non-British, e.g., Pakistan). 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 constitution, parent education, and ethnic representation (Social Trends, 2002).

Procedure

After receiving permission from area schools to conduct the study, parents were informed about the study by written summaries sent through the mail and presentations at parent-teacher meetings. Parents provided written consent for children to participate in a study focusing on the relationship between children's experiences of family life and their socio-emotional development. Data collection was carried out in school.

A videotape analogue method was used to assess children's responses to different instances of marital conflict. Children were shown videotapes of two actors engaged in a series of exchanges representing examples of everyday interactions between a man and a woman, and were asked to imagine how they would feel if their parents acted similarly. In each clip, either a female (representing the mother) or a male (representing the father) actor initiated a conflict tactic. The conflict in the video clips was meant to sound and appear like everyday disagreements with the actors being carefully selected to reflect the typical ages and dialect (South Wales) of the children's parents. Each videotape segment (30 seconds to 1 minute in length) began with a standard neutral exchange between the actors. Children viewed two scenarios. The first concerned the choice of television programme. Despite a prior agreement to turn the channel over at a designated time, one parent was sitting watching another programme when the 'initiating' parent asked for the programme to be changed. This served as the stem for the ten conflict tactics that followed. The second scenario was about whose turn it was to help with the child's homework that evening. One parent sat watching television when the 'initiating' parent reminded them that it was their turn to help. Again, ten conflict tactics followed this stem. The two scenarios depicting discussion about choice of television scenario and helping with homework reflect an adult- and child-related topic, respectively.

Children therefore viewed 20 video clips. Twelve scenes were classed as destructive and included two instances each of physical aggression towards the spouse, physical aggression towards an object (throwing a newspaper), threat to the intactness of the family (one parent leaves the room), verbal anger, non-verbal anger, and pursuit of the issue. The eight remaining scenes were classed as neutral or constructive and

included calm discussion, problem solving, support, and affection. In the present study, only instances of destructive conflict are considered in the analyses (Appendix A provides descriptions of the destructive exchanges). Negative scenes were followed by a neutral or positive scene in order to minimize the carry-over of negative affect across scenes. Prior to viewing each conflict tactic, children were reminded to imagine the situation in the video was occurring at home between their own parents, and that they were in the room. They were told each time that something different would happen. With the second scenario, children were also asked to imagine that they were the child who needed help with the homework. Each segment was followed by a short period of time during which children filled in their responses to the video segment. At the end of the session, the children viewed a thorough resolution between the two actors in order to ameliorate any possible ill-effects of witnessing the marital conflict. No children raised significant concerns after viewing the videotapes.

The gender of the initiating parent in the conflict was a between-subjects factor, and was counterbalanced across children (194 children saw the father as the initiator and 204 saw the mother as the initiator). All children viewed the same order of conflict tactics. The presentation of scenario order was also counterbalanced (184 children saw the adult-related conflict scenes first and 214 children saw the child-related conflict scenes first). Children were randomly assigned to view either the mother- or father-initiated conflict tactics and to view either the adult-related or the child-related scenario first.

Measures

At the end of each videotape segment, children answered a series of short questions. Children were asked, 'What would you have done if you had been in the same room as them?' Responses were coded along two theoretically relevant dimensions of regulation of exposure to marital conflict: mediation and avoidance of marital conflict. Responses were coded for severity ranging from 1, 'mild or no response' to 5, 'severely insecure response'. Appendix B provides examples of responses for each scale point. Given that children may use several different strategies to cope with parents' arguments, mediation and avoidance were not conceptualized or coded as mutually exclusive responses. Two research assistants coded children's responses for mediation and avoidance coping. Alpha coefficients across conflict scenes for a subset of questionnaires (15 per cent of responses) ranged from $\alpha = .90$ (range = .87–.98) to $\alpha = .91$ (range = .86–1.00) for mediation and avoidance, respectively.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Intercorrelations between each group of 12 analogue responses indicated that there were weak to moderate relations between variables (mediate range: $r = .12$, $p < .05$ to $.42$, $p < .01$, and avoid range: $r = .04$, $p > .10$ to $.44$, $p < .01$). The correlation between a composite estimate of the 12 mediate responses and a composite of the 12 avoid responses was negative and moderate in magnitude ($r = -.42$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that there was variability in reported mediation and avoidance coping across conflict tactics and that the two coping measures represent correlated, yet conceptually distinct, dimensions of behaviour.

Overview of Analyses

The study hypotheses were tested using a multivariate approach to repeated measures. Child gender and the gender of the parent who initiated each conflict exchange were included as between-subjects variables. Conflict tactic (six destructive exchanges) and content (child vs adult-related) were included as within-subjects variables. A 'doubly' multivariate repeated measures approach to data analysis was employed because children responded to 12 conflict tactic presentations, with responses to each presentation coded twice, once for mediation and once for avoidance (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2001). Significant main and interaction effects were explored using simple effects tests with a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. For the sake of parsimony, where main effects are qualified by interactions, only the latter are reported.

Statistical Analyses

Collectively, the results suggest that children used more severe mediation in response to child-related conflict tactics that were overtly hostile, including verbal anger and physical aggression in comparison to adult-related tactics. A significant interaction between parent gender and content indicated that this was the case for fathers' enactment of these tactics. Few differences were noted in avoidance behaviour as a function of conflict content. Some differences in boys' and girls' responding were found. Girls reported more mediation in response to fathers' use of physical aggression and mothers' pursuit in comparison with boys. Girls also reported more avoidance to mothers' physical aggression and threat to intactness in comparison to boys.

The main effect of conflict tactic and content was qualified by a significant interaction between these two within-subjects variables (see Table 1). Pairwise comparisons revealed a pattern of effects whereby for several conflict tactics, child-related conflict elicited more severe mediation and avoidance coping than adult-related conflict (see Table 2). Specifically, child-related verbal anger, physical aggression towards person and object, elicited more severe mediation coping than tactics expressed as adult-related conflict. In addition, child-related physical aggression towards a person elicited more severe avoidance coping than adult-related conflict.

A two-way interaction was found between conflict content (adult-related vs child-related) and parent gender (see Table 1). Children reported higher levels of mediation to fathers' conflict tactics in the context of a child-related exchange than to mothers' ($F[1,394] = 8.709, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$). Further analysis showed that fathers' child-related verbal anger and physical aggression towards a person elicited more severe mediation than adult-related presentations of these tactics ($F[1,394] = 4.135, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$; $F[1,394] = 23.272, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$ for verbal anger and physical aggression towards person, respectively).

A three-way interaction was found between conflict tactic, parent gender, and child gender (see Table 1). Simple effects tests indicated that girls in comparison to boys reported higher levels of mediation to fathers' physical aggression towards a person and physical aggression towards an object ($F[1,394] = 5.553, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$; $F[1,394] = 6.470, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$; see Table 3). Girls reported more mediation in response to mothers' pursuit than boys did ($F[1,394] = 6.819, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$). Differences were also found for avoidance of conflict. Girls reported higher levels of avoidance in comparison to boys for mothers' use of physical aggression

Table 1. Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance for Mediate and Avoid Coping

	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Partial η^2
<i>Between-subjects</i>			
Parent gender	2	3.018*	.02
Child gender	2	8.427**	.04
Child gender \times parent gender	2	.768	.00
Between-subjects error	393		
<i>Within-subjects</i>			
Content	2	8.223**	.04
Content \times parent gender	2	6.020**	.03
Content \times child gender	2	.479	.00
Content \times parent gender \times child gender	2	1.911	.01
Within-subjects error	393		
Tactic	10	32.295**	.46
Tactic \times parent gender	10	8.077**	.17
Tactic \times child gender	10	1.491	.04
Tactic \times parent gender \times child gender	10	2.587**	.06
Content \times tactic	10	4.137**	.10
Content \times tactic \times parent gender	10	1.229	.03
Content \times tactic \times child gender	10	.415	.01
Content \times tactic \times parent gender \times child gender	10	.814	.02
Within-subjects error	385		

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

Table 2. Children's Endorsement of Mediation and Avoidance Coping in Response to Marital Conflict Tactics

Conflict Tactic	Mediate				Avoid			
	Adult-related Content		Child-related Content		Adult-related Content		Child-related Content	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Verbal anger	2.47 _a	1.43	2.67 _b	1.36	1.34 _a	.73	1.36 _a	.84
Non-verbal anger	2.31 _a	1.45	2.35 _a	1.38	1.41 _a	.85	1.34 _a	.78
Physical aggression person	2.59 _a	1.57	2.85 _b	1.61	1.63 _a	1.01	1.86 _b	1.32
Physical aggression object	2.21 _a	1.49	2.48 _b	1.48	1.66 _a	1.09	1.69 _a	1.14
Pursuit	2.33 _a	1.53	2.48 _a	1.50	1.79 _a	1.09	1.54 _a	.98
Threat to intactness	3.03 _a	1.53	3.00 _a	1.48	1.65 _a	.99	1.51 _a	1.13

Note: Higher values reflect children's greater efforts to mediate or avoid conflict tactics. Means in the same row that do not share a subscript differ at $p < .05$ for mediate and avoid, respectively.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Boys' (N = 208) and Girls' (N = 190) Mediation and Avoidance Coping

Conflict Tactic	Mediate						Avoid							
	Mother		Father		Mother		Father		Mother		Father			
	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy		
M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
<i>Adult-related</i>														
Verbal anger	2.53	1.49	2.48	1.43	2.45	1.42	2.42	1.41	1.38	.76	1.31	.70	1.38	.73
Non-verbal anger	2.54	1.49	2.29	1.40	2.18	1.43	2.27	1.50	1.39	.78	1.30	.68	1.53	1.02
Physical aggression person	2.28	1.51	2.21	1.09	3.05	1.54	2.88	1.66	1.68	1.00	1.59	1.01	1.81	1.27
Physical aggression object	2.33	1.54	2.08	1.47	2.39	1.53	2.07	1.42	1.94	1.13	1.68	1.08	1.76	1.10
Pursuit	2.62	1.63	2.19	1.47	2.25	1.50	2.28	1.50	1.67	.94	1.52	.92	1.74	1.05
Threat to intactness	3.13	1.62	3.05	1.59	3.10	1.40	2.85	1.50	1.70	1.23	1.37	.88	1.35	.85
<i>Child-related</i>														
Verbal anger	2.47	1.43	2.59	1.27	3.03	1.36	2.58	1.34	1.37	.83	1.32	.80	1.43	.95
Non-verbal anger	2.24	1.39	2.22	1.28	2.42	1.43	2.53	1.42	1.45	.85	1.26	.66	1.29	.69
Physical aggression person	2.44	1.51	2.52	1.49	3.58	1.51	2.89	1.68	1.95	1.20	1.59	1.12	2.00	1.48
Physical aggression object	2.57	1.50	2.31	1.37	2.82	1.52	2.25	1.50	1.80	1.18	1.52	1.02	1.71	1.22
Pursuit	2.74	1.57	2.27	1.48	2.46	1.41	2.48	1.53	1.60	.96	1.49	.94	1.60	1.05
Threat to intactness	2.83	1.56	2.88	1.49	3.28	1.32	3.01	1.50	1.67	1.16	1.35	.94	1.63	1.35

towards an object and for mothers' threat to intactness ($F[1,394] = 4.163, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$; $F[1,394] = 6.907, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, respectively).

Discussion

The present study examined the use of mediation and avoidance coping strategies by children in response to different marital conflict tactics. Of particular interest was the potential for coping efforts to vary as a function of the content of conflict (adult- or child-related) and the effect of exposure to either the mother or father as the initiator of conflict. In a further effort to elucidate the gender-based dynamics hypothesized to exist in the family, the role of child gender and the interaction between child and parent gender were examined.

Consistent with an emotional security perspective (Davies & Cummings, 1994) and previous findings by Grych (1998) and Grych and Fincham (1993), some support was found for the hypothesis that children would report more severe forms of mediation in response to conflict that was child-related. Child-related conflict tactics characterized by physical aggression and verbal anger elicited more severe mediation relative to adult-related conflict tactics, particularly for father-enacted conflict. Children may perceive physical aggression by the father as a serious transgression, prompting more severe forms of intervention. Although mediation behaviour reflects an attempt by children to manage their distress, this form of coping is likely to be far from adaptive. Previous research indicates that children who involve themselves in parents' arguments are at heightened risk of enmeshment in parents' quarrels, becoming the target of parents' hostility and of manifesting adjustment problems (Kerig, 2001). There are also likely to be long-term effects of children's involvement in marital conflict. A recent longitudinal study identified relations between regulation of exposure to marital conflict and children's internalizing symptoms and externalizing problems one year later (Harold *et al.*, 2004).

It is noteworthy that for three other conflict tactics (non-verbal anger, pursuit, and threat to intactness), no differences were observed in mediation responses as a function of conflict content. Likewise, with the exception of physical aggression towards a person, children's avoidance behaviour did not vary across scenarios. Perceiving oneself to be implicated in the cause of parents' argument leads to increased efforts to mediate conflict but not generally, to avoid it. Other studies have not found differences in children's distress reactions as a function of the content of conflict (Davies *et al.*, 1996). Taken together, these findings indicate that with the exception of particularly hostile and aggressive exchanges between parents, children use similar levels of mediation and avoidance strategies to cope with conflict, irrespective of why marital conflict is occurring.

Significant interactions were found between child gender, parent gender, and conflict tactics. Some support was found for the hypothesis that girls were more likely than boys to mediate interparental conflict. Girls reported higher levels of mediation to fathers' use of physical aggression (towards person and object) and mothers' pursuit. Rather than supporting a same-sex hypothesis whereby children mimic their same-sex parents' conflict behaviour, these results are more consistent with a socialization hypothesis whereby girls are distressed by interpersonal conflict, and engage in behaviours that seek to restore interpersonal harmony (Davies & Lindsay, 2004). According to Crockenberg and Forgays (1996), children, particularly girls, may view fathers' use of power-assertive aggression as unfair and empathize with the mother, or react

as if they were the recipient of fathers' behaviour. This interpretation is broadly consistent with these findings. Boys, on the other hand, may be vigilant to the possibility of involvement in parents' arguments (specifically conflict characterized by aggression) and the subsequent spillover of hostility from the marital to the parent-child relationship, making it less likely that they will respond by mediating marital conflict (Davies & Lindsay, 2001; Jouriles & LeCompte, 1991). The similar levels of mediation reported by boys and girls for verbal hostility, non-verbal anger, and threat to intactness suggests, however, that boys also cope with marital conflict using mediation, consistent with a socialization account whereby boys use assertive behaviours to exert control and protect themselves in stressful situations.

Few gender differences were detected for avoidance coping. Girls, in comparison to boys, reported higher levels of avoidance in response to the mothers' physical aggression towards an object and threat to intactness. It is possible that mothers' use of these tactics is particularly threatening for girls and they are motivated to escape parents' arguments. Alternatively, when the mother leaves the room, girls may be attempting to leave in her company. This possibility may reflect girls imitating the mother's behaviour, or else leaving with their mother as an ally. Girls might also be seeking to reduce the likelihood that they will become the target of the father's hostility after the mother has left. This would be consistent with the view that children fear becoming the target of the opposite-sex parents' hostility. By virtue of identifying with their mothers, girls perceive negative interactions with their fathers as more threatening and upsetting (Osborne & Fincham, 1996). Although some research has documented the protective role of avoidance coping for girls (e.g., Kerig *et al.*, 1998), recent research has identified avoidance coping as a vulnerability factor in the relationship between marital conflict and child adjustment (Nicoletti *et al.*, 2003). These speculations about children's responses to their same- and opposite-sex parents' conflict behaviour highlight the need for systematic research that attempts to isolate children's underlying motives and responses to each parent's behaviour in the context of marital conflict.

Limitations and Further Research

The findings of the present study highlight instances of interparental conflict likely to elicit coping behaviours in children characterized by involvement in parents' problems or a wish to escape a negative exchange. In the absence of information about the cognitive processing that accompanies coping behaviour, however, children's written responses to conflict exchanges are somewhat limited in their ability to clarify the functions that different behaviours provide children in their efforts to cope with conflict. Some work has found that avoidance coping is an adaptive reaction to conflict (O'Brien *et al.*, 1995), whereas other work has suggested that avoidance is associated with increased adjustment problems in children (Davies *et al.*, 2002). This disparity likely relates to the different role that avoidance plays in children's adaptation to stress. On the one hand, children who remove themselves from the vicinity of parents' arguments might engage in productive distraction, such as playing a game. Alternatively, children who avoid conflict might ruminate about the possible causes and likely outcomes of conflict or listen at closed doors and, in doing so, not reduce levels of arousal or distress (Lengua & Sandler, 1996). An important direction for future research will be to examine the adaptive function of avoidance coping for children exposed to marital conflict. Attention should be paid to children's expectations about the likely

course and outcome of parents' arguments. For example, an expectation that they will be drawn into a conflict exchange may precede and accompany children's avoidance of parents' arguments.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the importance of considering the role of conflict expression as well as the interplay between parent and child gender when understanding how children cope with marital conflict. Evidence was provided to suggest that there are meaningful differences in the coping behaviours used by boys and girls in response to inter-adult exchanges that appear to vary as a function of mothers' or fathers' conflict behaviour. In the absence of a comprehensive theoretical perspective capable of explaining these complex gender effects, further research is required to test the underlying mechanisms that account for this pattern of results. The findings of the present study have potentially important implications for family intervention programmes by suggesting that in families characterized by couple conflict, children's involvement in parents' marital problems has the capacity to exacerbate interparental conflict and to make the child a target of parents' hostility. The development of intervention programmes that seek to encourage parents to manage conflict more constructively should be sensitive to the likely presence and involvement of children during parents' marital disagreements. Given that mediation and prolonged, ruminative avoidance are unlikely to be adaptive coping strategies for children in the long term, future research should aim to identify those coping strategies that serve an adaptive function for children exposed to conflict between parents.

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Appendix A. Descriptions of Marital Conflict Tactics Depicted in the Videotaped Analogue Presentations

Conflict Tactic	Description
Verbal anger	Annoyance and frustration is followed by an angry tone of voice and verbalizations about the problem.
Non-verbal anger	One parent expresses dissatisfaction and moderate anger through gestures (e.g., crossing arms, frowning).
Physical aggression spouse	Angry verbalizations and gestures culminate in one parent forcefully pushing the other.
Physical aggression object	Angry verbalizations and gestures culminate in one parent throwing a household object (the newspaper).
Pursuit	With an impatient, angry tone, one parent continues to push the topic of conflict, whereas the other withdraws to the point of refusing to engage in discussion.
Threat to intactness	In a raised voice, one parent states that the other's behaviour is typical, threatens to leave, then leaves.

Appendix B. Examples of Responses Coded for Mediation and Avoidance

Scale	Mediation	Avoidance
1	'Nothing'	'Carry on watching TV'
2	'See what will happen next', 'Watch'	'Be very still', 'Freeze'
3	'Help parents to work the problem out'	'Leave the room', 'Avoid parents'
4	'Comfort Mum', 'Tell Dad to stop it'	'Sneak out quietly', 'Leave quickly'
5	'Shout at Dad', 'Call the police'	'Run out of the house', 'Hide'