



Improving Marital Conflict in Community Families

E. Mark Cummings
University of Notre Dame

Marital and Family Conflict

Marital Conflict linked with a wide range of problems for:

Children: Emotional, behavioral, and academic problems

Adults: Depression, alcohol problems, divorce

Potential risk factors for community families – even those without clinically significant problems

Emotional Security

- Emotional Security Theory is theoretical model for prevention programs
- ES is a bridge between the child and the world
- Supports child's overall well-being
- Foundation for program development (both parent and adolescent component)

Prevention Directions

Risk for future problems exist in all families from destructive marital and family conflict patterns

Intervening before marriages and families become distressed minimizes challenges of:

- Sensitization

- Behavioral and emotional over-reactivity

- Negative tracking

- Unresolved conflicts

- Decreased security in all family relationships

Brief prevention programs optimal for community families without or less severe clinically significant problems

Translational Prevention Programs

Promoting Healthy Families (PHF)

- Brief prevention program for marital conflict for couples with young children
Funded by Administration for Children and Families

Family Communication Project: Tune In and Listen Up! (FCP)

- Brief prevention program for marital and family conflict for couples with adolescents
 - Included adolescents in program training (conflict and communication)
- Funded by W. T. Grant Foundation

Changing Family Conflict Behaviors

Theory and evidence converges on constructive, destructive conflict behaviors for both children and adults

Not *whether parents* fight, but *how*...

Thus, the emphasis is on how to fight

↑ constructive communications and ↓ negative communications

Goals of the PHF Program

1. Educate parents about the effects of marital conflict on adults and children
2. Increase constructive, and decrease destructive marital conflict
3. Maintain concern with emotional security of family relationships during marital conflict
4. Improve marital communication patterns

Hypotheses

1. Greater improvements in marital conflict for the experimental groups experiencing parent psychoeducational program than the self-study group
2. Changes in marital conflict will be related over time to improvements in parenting and child behavior problems

Evaluating the Prevention Program

- With regard to program evaluation:
 - randomized prevention trial
 - the program was manualized
 - included fidelity checks
 - long-term as well as short-term followup assessments
 - is presented in a highly accessible format
 - includes assessment of consumer satisfaction

Methods: Sample

See Cummings et al. (2008, Journal of Family Psychology) for more detail

- Recruited from South Bend, IN area
- Inclusion criteria:
 - married or cohabitating for at least 3 years
 - a child between the ages of 4 and 8 years.
- The Community Sample:
 - 90 two-parent families
 - 46 boys and 44 girls (mean = 5.9 years)
 - 80.6% White, 10.6% Black or African American, 5.0% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 3.3% Hispanic

Methods

- Groups
 - Couples were randomly blocked into one of three groups:
 - Parent-Only group (PO, n = 24): received parent education program
 - Parent-Child group (PC, n = 33): received parent education program and child program
 - Self-Study group (SS, n= 33)): received books

Self-Study control group

- The comparison group was a self-study control (SS) given text-based resources
- Provides a more stringent test of treatment main effects than wait-list control

Methods - Procedures

- Following enrollment, parents completed the pre-intervention measures and a marital problem solving task
- Couples from the parent-only and parent-child groups participated in 4 weekly psycho-educational visits
- The Self-Study couples completed their corresponding reading assignments
- Immediately following the 4 visits, couples again completed the assessment package, and a marital interaction was videotaped
- Similar follow-up assessments at 6-months and 1-year
- Questionnaires assessed: knowledge about conflict, marital adjustment, parenting style and discipline, and children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors

Observing Marital Conflict

- Marital Conflict Resolution Task:
 - Identify a problematic topic to discuss as they would at home, working toward a solution, coded:
 - Destructive behaviors
 - verbal hostility, nonverbal hostility, and defensiveness
 - Constructive behaviors
 - support and problem solving
 - Emotions
 - positive or negative emotionality (anger, sadness, fear)
 - Global ratings reflecting:
 - the constructiveness of the responses throughout the interaction
 - the extent to which resolution was achieved.

Nature of PHF Program

- Multi-media: PowerPoint slides, videotaped clips, trivia games, and other engaging activities
- Educational content:
 - Effects of marital conflict on adults and children
 - Constructive and destructive conflict behaviors
 - Maintain emotional security about multiple family relationships during marital conflict
- Each week, parents practiced communication skills with a communication coach
- Homework assignment: Couples completed diaries of marital conflicts in the home

Child Component

- Children in the PC group were taught:
 - how to cope effectively in response to interparental conflict
 - how to regulate both their behaviors and emotions when witnessing marital conflict

Booster sessions

- Booster given at the 6-month and 1-year follow-ups
- The facilitators highlighted the main points of the program and addressed any questions about the program

Preliminary Data Analyses:

No relations between attrition and outcome variables were found; concluded data Missing At Random (MAR); missingness of data was not a factor in the analyses.

Results: Group comparisons (ANCOVA)

- Outcomes at post-test, 6 month, 1 year
- In relation to control group, the treatment group:
 - exhibited improved knowledge about marital conflict at all follow-up assessments
 - exhibited improved observed marital conflict behavior at all follow-up assessments (decreased destructive behaviors such as verbal hostility, negative emotionality and increased constructive behaviors such as support, positive emotionality, resolution)

Results: Change to Change

- Changes in marital conflict knowledge subsequently improved marital conflict behavior, marital satisfaction, parenting and child adjustment
- Changes in marital conflict resolution subsequently improved marital satisfaction, parenting and child adjustment

Participants' Satisfaction

- Parents' responses overwhelmingly supported that the program was:
 - engaging
 - visually appealing
 - readily understandable
 - valuable from the parents' perspective
 - and promoted program participation
- 100% of participants rated the program staff as good or excellent

Discussion

- Brief psychoeducational program may be effective in teaching research-based lessons about marital conflict
- Increase in research-based knowledge linked with improvements in marital conflict behavior
- Improvements in marital function over time linked with other improvements in other family processes
- Program is appealing for community participants

Future Directions

- Determine if effects are longer lasting than 1 year (Faircloth et al., 2009, supports)
- Test program with families with children in other age groups. New study for families with adolescents funded by the WT Grant Foundation (e.g., FCP study)
- Further examine implications of changes in marital conflict for changes in parenting and child outcomes
- Test theoretical models regarding mediating or moderating processes

Family Communication Project (FCP)

Focus on inter-parental conflict +
parent-adolescent conflict

In addition to PHF elements, added more
interactive, engaging program

- * movie clips
- * Wii gaming
- * multiple activities

Family communication coaching (Mom and dad
coaching, and triadic coaching)

Goals of FCP

1. Strengthen family relationships and emotional security by teaching parents and teens how to communicate in ways that increase the constructive behaviors and decrease the destructive behaviors that are used during conflict.
2. Provide a test for the effectiveness of the program, based on RCT design

Themes of Psycho-educational Component

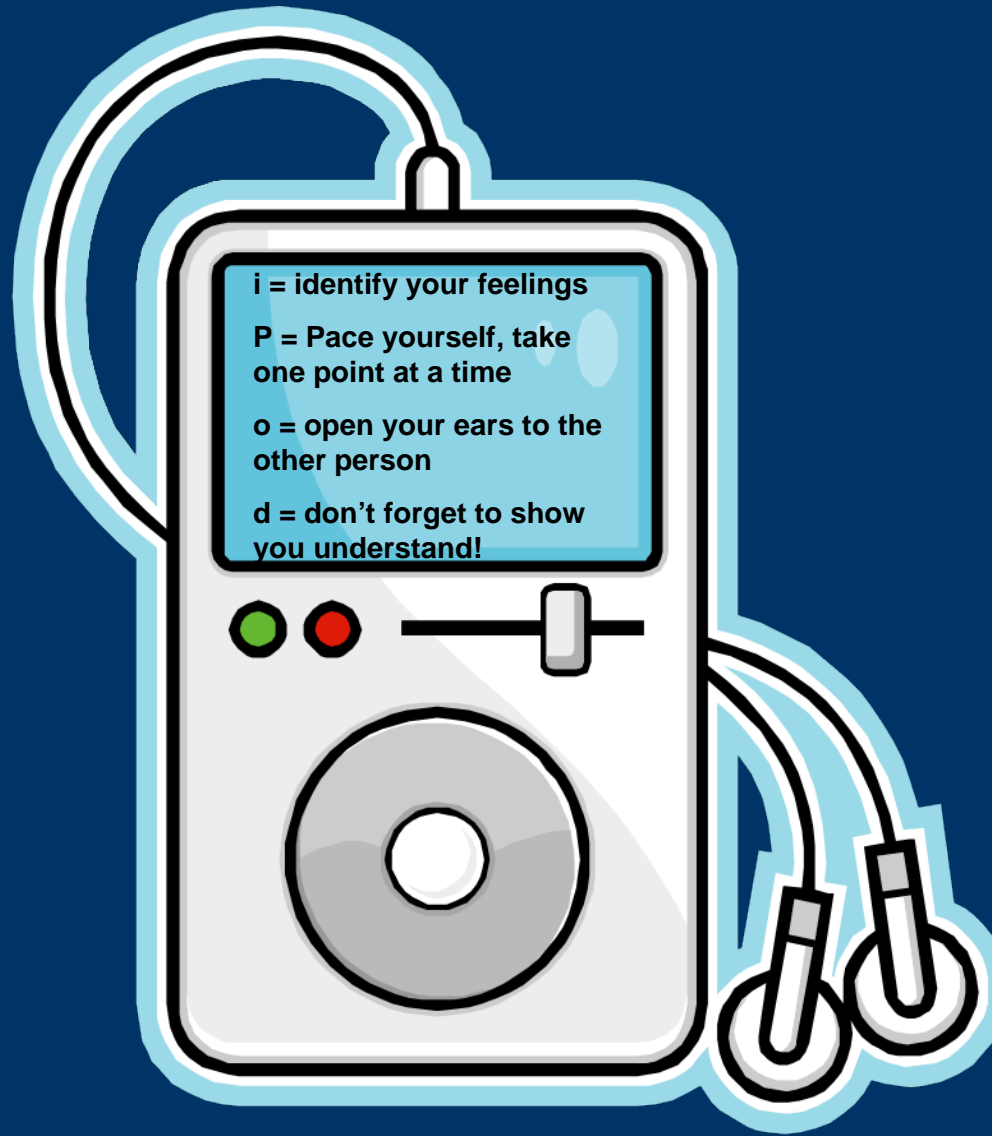
PARENT COMPONENT TEEN COMPONENT

Visit 1	Marital conflict	Types of conflict
Visit 2	Conflict's effects on kids	Resolution and reasons/wants
Visit 3	Parent-adolescent conflict	Parent-adolescent conflict
Visit 4	Family emotional security	Family emotional security

FCP Adolescent Program

- New in FCP, similar to parent program in themes
- Multi-media: PowerPoint slides, activities, role-plays, movie clips, open discussions about conflict
- Educational content:
 - Effects of conflict
 - Identifying constructive and destructive conflict behaviors
 - Importance of maintaining emotional security about multiple family relationships during marital conflict
- Each week, adolescents practiced communication skills with a communication coach

iPod Communication Technique – new element



Methods - Procedures

- Parent program similar to PHF project; much more comprehensive child component
- Extensive lab assessment including observation of dyadic and triadic conflict and communication
- Ecologically valid assessment of conflict and communication: daily diaries

Daily Diaries

- Innovative immediate assessment of outcomes in the home
- Mothers, fathers, adolescents complete
- Assessed inter-parental conflict, parent-teen conflict, and teen's perception of inter-parental conflict
- Allows differentiated assessment of each visit's effects

Sample Description (to date)

- **RACE**
 - 68.9% White
 - 13.2% Black or African American
 - 2.8% American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 1.9% Asian
- **PARENT EDUCATION LEVEL**
 - Completion of Associate's Degree
 - Range: 9th, 10th, or 11th grade to Doctoral Degree
- **TOTAL FAMILY INCOME**
 - Mean: \$55,000-\$74,999
 - Range: less than \$6,000 to \$125,000 or over
- **ADOLESCENT SAMPLE**
 - 48 girls, 43 boys
 - Mean age: 13.5 years
 - Range: 11-17 years

Attrition

- Only 5 of 86 families have discontinued involvement with the program so far
 - Reasons
 - Hospitalization
 - Scheduling conflicts
 - Frustration at being placed in a control group

Preliminary Program Effects (ANCOVA)

Several significant group differences were found among post-program assessments (treatment groups always scored in a more positive direction than control)

In comparison to control, family members in treatment groups reported:

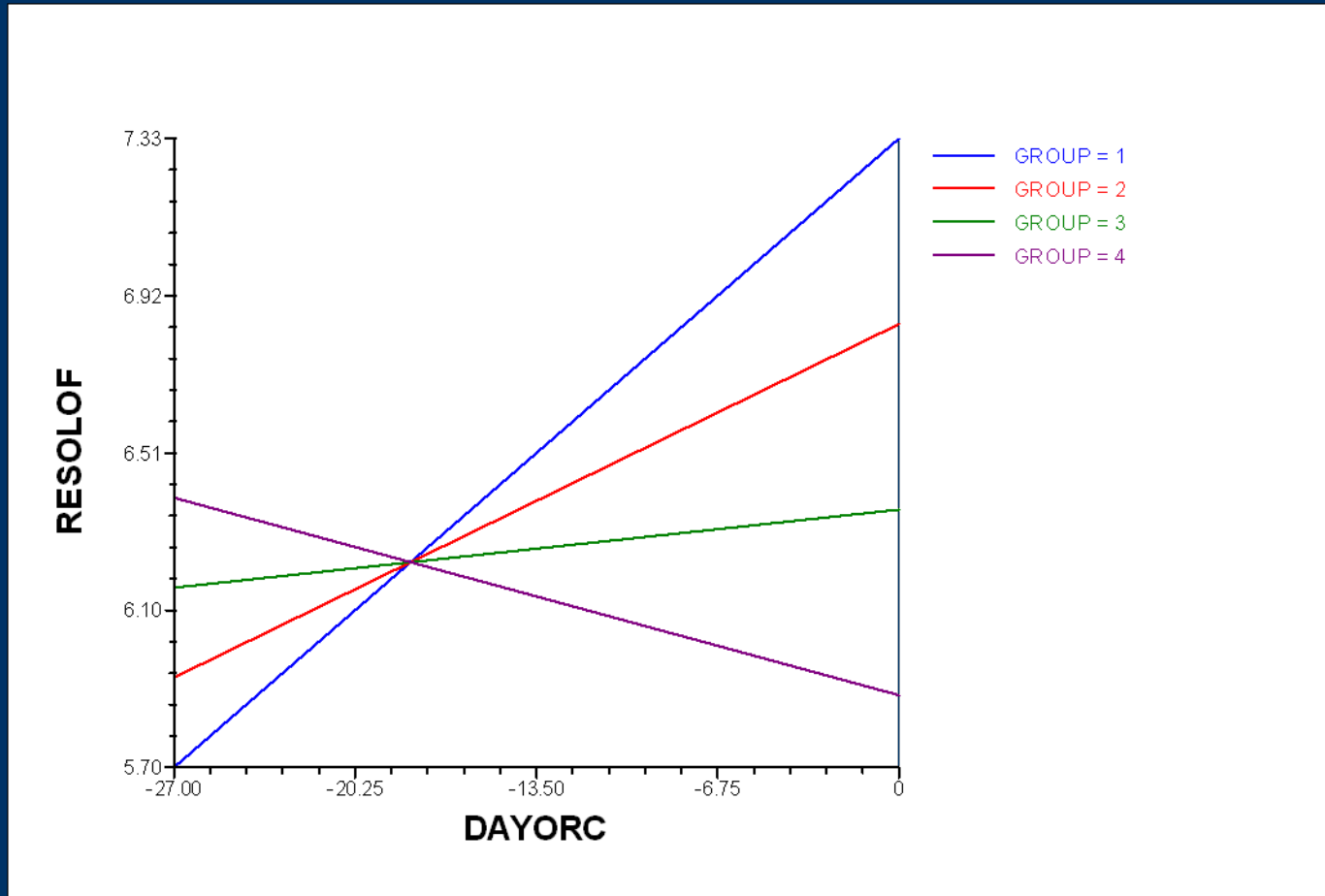
- Mom, Dad, and Teen all exhibited improved knowledge about marital conflict
- Dads reported less emotional reactivity to and avoidance of conflict as reported by their adolescents
- Dads and Teens reported more constructive family conflict
- Both Moms and Dads exhibited greater acceptance of their children
- Both Dads and Teens reported better parent – adolescent communication

Preliminary Observed Conflict Differences

In comparison to the control, treatment groups evidenced more constructive conflict behaviors including:

- Mothers' used more constructive behaviors including support, verbal and physical affection, and problem-solving
- Mothers' and Fathers' demonstrated greater overall constructiveness
- Mothers' and Fathers' showed greater resolution in their recorded discussion

Diary: Teen's Conflict Resolution with Dad



Piecewise growth modeling

- Currently being explored based on 28 day diary reports:
 - Preliminary findings highlight differential rates of change dependent upon the program visit
 - Initial evidence suggests that the final week of program involvement is associated with the greatest increases in constructive conflict in the home

Participants' Satisfaction

- Parents' and Adolescents' critiques of program:
 - 80% rated the overall quality of the program as good or excellent
 - Over 95% rated the facilitator(s) as good or excellent
 - 84% rated the overall materials of the project as good or excellent

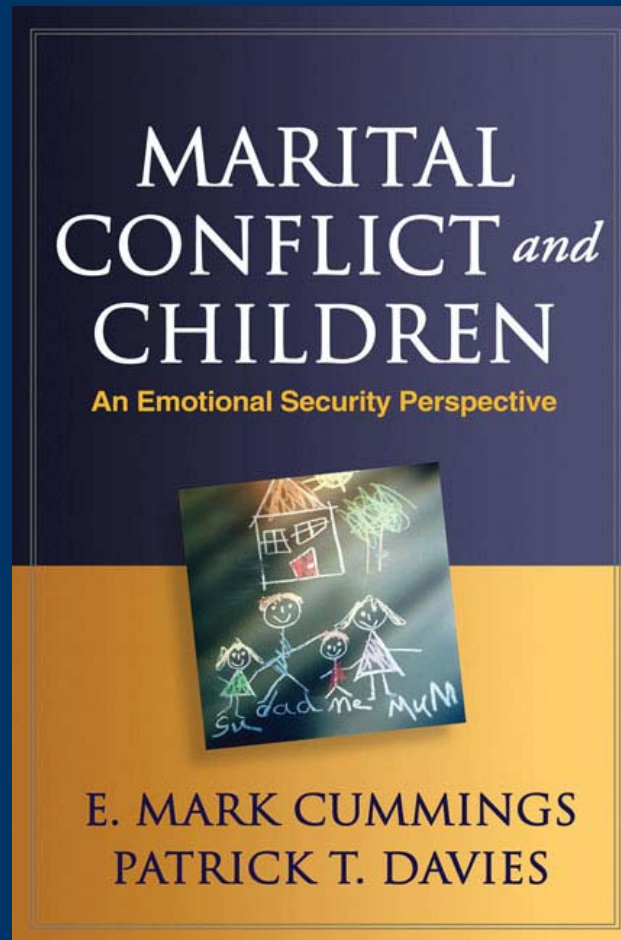
Discussion

- The preliminary results suggest multiple beneficial effects on marriage, parenting and family:
 - Parenting
 - Family communication
 - Conflict behaviors
 - Parent-adolescent relationship
- Full sample goal of 150
(over 110 have started participation)
- Diary assessment and associated analyses will allow for novel assessments of intervention effects

Future Directions

- Follow-up with these families beyond a year and investigate enduring treatment effects
- Continue to explore methodological approaches that allow for more specific program component evaluation (i.e. piecewise growth analyses of diary data)
- Further examine the effects of including the adolescent as part of the intervention program

Additional Information



Available January 2010!