Adolescence is the period of formative changes marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. These changes include physical, complex psychological, emotional, and social skill development. Research suggests that interpersonal conflict can cause maladjustments in adolescents, including psychological distress, behavioral problems, decreased self-efficacy, and the inability to regulate emotions. Furthermore, maladjustment from interpersonal conflict can impair adolescents' abilities to positively develop social skills and emotion regulation abilities. Inadequacies in these areas of development during adolescence can cause psychological difficulties that inhibit their potential for close relationships outside of their families. Prevention and intervention strategies should be incorporated to help mediate the psychosocial effects of interpersonal conflict on adolescents and their close relationships within and outside of their families. Collective and separate programs for parents, as well as adolescents, can help alleviate the negative outcomes that interpersonal conflict can cause adolescents.

The Emotional Security Theory:

- The Emotional Security Theory (EST; Davies & Cummings, 1994) holds that children’s responses to interpersonal conflict are affected by the impact of their own emotional security and children’s abilities to manage difficulties for the purpose of preserving family stability (Zemp et al., 2016, p. 103).
- Children’s inability to minimize exposure of intense interparental conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994) constrains their emotional insecurity and insecure internal representations of the interpersonal relationship (Zemp et al., 2016).
- Research suggests that emotional insecurity leads to future emotional internalizing and externalizing. Which, in turn, could have a negative impact on children’s social competence and ability to make social relationships (Fosco & Grych, 2008; Larson et al., 2007; Schwarz et al., 2012; Weymouth et al., 2019).

Cognitive-Contextual Framework:

- “The cognitive-contextual framework conceptualizes threat as a key cognitive appraisal, along with self-blaming attributions of conflict, as underlying mechanisms that account for the influence of interpersonal conflict on youth maladjustment” (Fosco & Feinberg, 2015, p. 239).

Social Learning Theory:

- Social Learning Theory postulates that children will learn social interactions based on observations from their parents and imitate these behaviors (Zemp et al., 2016).

Spillower theory:

- Spillower theory suggests that conflict between parents can carry over into the parent-child relationship. This can cause insecure representations in the child’s social relationship internal working model (Schwarze et al., 2012; Simpson, 2020).

Triangulation theory:

- Triangulation theory proposes adolescents become affected by interpersonal conflict through involvement in the conflict between parents (Fosco & Grych, 2008; Simpson, 2020).

The Effects of Interparental Conflicts on Adolescents’ Social-Emotional Development:

Adolescent maladjustment

The American Psychological Association (APA) dictionary of Psychology defines maladjustment as the “inability to maintain effective relationships, function successfully in various domains, or cope with difficulties and stresses.”

Self Blame:

- Shahmizadeh & Akhtar (2016) examined adolescents perceptions of interpersonal conflict and psychological distress. Results from the present study suggested a positive relationship between high self-blame and psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, low well-being). Furthermore, for adolescents who observe and become involved in an interpersonal conflict, self-blame is a sense of coping efficacy and perceived control (Shahmizadeh & Akhtar, 2016).
- Delfourd-Lucas et al. (2010) found that self-blame in adolescents predicted both internalizing and externalizing problems in families where parents were unresponsive and dismissive.

Interparental Conflict and Adolescents’ Social-Emotional Development

The Effects of Interparental Conflicts on Adolescents’ Social-Emotional Development

Threat Appraisal Threat Perception:

- Threat appraisal may predict psychological distress for adolescents experiencing interpersonal conflict (Fosco & Feinberg, 2015; Shahmizadeh & Akhtar, 2016; Weymouth et al., 2019).
- According to Grych and Fincham (1990), children’s emotional and behavioral impairments to conflict is based on their threat perceptions of the conflict, ability to cope effectively, and the cause of the conflict (Fosco & Feinberg, 2015; Shahmizadeh & Akhtar, 2016).
- Shahmizadeh & Akhtar (2016) found a positive relationship between threat and psychological distress in adolescents. Moreover, when adolescents are unable to cope with interpersonal conflict they more likely express anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Shahmizadeh & Akhtar, 2016).
- Perceived threat has been linked to internalizing problems (Delfourd-Lucas et al., 2010; Fosco & Feinberg, 2015; Weymouth et al., 2019). Results from Fosco & Feinberg (2015) suggest adolescents exposed to frequent and intense interpersonal conflict had increased threat perceptions and in turn, higher levels of emotional distress two years later. These results support their hypothesis that threat mediates the link between interparental conflict and emotional distress. In the same study, results suggest an indirect effect between interpersonal conflict and self-efficacy via perceived threat (Fosco & Feinberg, 2015).
- Adolescents who witness frequent and intense interpersonal conflict and perceive the conflict as threatening may interpret that interpersonal relationships will function the same. Therefore, adolescents avoid friendships due to hypersensitivity and perceived coerciveness or competitiveness (Weymouth et al., 2019).

Peer Relationships:

- In a longitudinal study examining interparental conflict and peer relationships, researchers found that in a 12 month follow-up, early adolescents who perceived high levels of interparental conflict reported increased negative interactions with their best friend. Emotional regulation was also a consecutive mediator in this study. Within a year, best friends were twice as likely to become former best friends for adolescents who perceived witnessing more frequent and intense interparental conflict (Weymouth et al., 2019).
- Researchers found that increased interpersonal conflict was positively correlated with increased externalizing difficulties in preadolescence. Further, increased externalizing difficulties also predicted increased social problems (Kouros et al., 2010).

Social Anxiety:

- Weymouth et al. (2019) found that adolescents in the 6th grade with higher threat appraisal also had heightened social anxiety symptoms. In addition, a decrease in friendship support and increase in loneliness was reported by 7th graders with heightened anxiety symptoms.

Parenting:

- Parenting styles (e.g. coercive & dismissive) can affect adolescents’ perceptions of threat and levels of self-blame (Delfourd-Lucas et al., 2010). Delfourd-Lucas et al. (2010) suggested externalizing problems among children for experiencing negative parenting styles. In the same study, it was suggested that supportive parenting decreased self-blame in adolescents.
- Interparental conflict can cause withdrawal within the family system, causing a lack in parental knowledge. Lu et al. (2010) found delinquency and deviant peer affiliations to be more likely to occur when parents were knowledgeable about their adolescent’s life.
- Davies et al. (2016) found that interpersonal conflict categorized as dismissing or hostile (strongest predictor for behavioral problems) were related to greater adolescent depression and internalizing, reactive-avoidance, negative appraisal, and social anxiety. Adolescents with greater levels of emotional insecurity were associated with increased externalizing problems.

Prevention and Intervention

Prevention

- Cooperative conflict-constructive problem solving behaviors, conflict resolution

Interventions for Parents

- Couples Coping Enhancement Training (CCT; Larreamendy et al., 2007, as cited in Acquah et al., 2017; Zemp et al., 2016; Zemp et al., 2015)
- Triple P (Zemp et al., 2015)
- Couple Relationship Education (CRE) (Hallford et al., 2016; Wilde & Doherty, 2013 as cited in Acquah et al., 2017)

Family-based Interventions

- Family Communication Programme (Miller-Graf et al., 2015)
- Attachment-based family therapy (ABFT) (Schlinske & Weisz, 2017)
- Stress-Busters (Schlinske & Weisz, 2017)
- Happy Couples and Happy Kids HCHIP program (Zemp et al., 2014)
- 4 Rs (Ri, Re, Rn, Rf) Family Strengthening Programme (Small et al., 2015, as cited in Acquah et al., 2017)

Interventions for Youth

- I CAN DO Program (Bradford & Barber, 2005)
- Resourceful Adolescent Program (RAP) (Bradford & Barber, 2005)
- Penn Prevention Program (PPP) (Bradford & Barber, 2005)

Mindfulness

- I Can Breathe (ILBC) (Lucas-Thompson et al. 2019; Lucas-Thompson et al., 2020)

Conclusion

- Interparental conflict can have major implications on adolescents’ social-emotional development.
- Cognitive appraisals from interpersonal conflict can cause psychological distress and maladjustments in adolescents.
- Though programs have been created to promote healthy parenting, more research is needed for interventions that focus specifically on targeting adolescents experiencing interpersonal conflict.

Select References

Thompson et al. 2019; Lucas et al. 2019; Lucas-Thompson et al., 2020

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