

ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between marital conflict and the child's adjustment within extended and nuclear families. This study examined whether the presence of high destructive marital conflict had a negative effect on the child's holistic adjustment and if the family structure (nuclear or extended) influenced the relationship between conflict and adjustment. The Child's Perception of Interparental Conflict (CPIC) scale, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and questions about family structure were used to measure the variables of interest. These were administered to 80 grade seven learners between the ages of eleven and thirteen at a primary school in Athlone. The data were analyzed using factorial ANOVA's. This study provided compelling evidence across all findings that high levels of destructive marital conflict properties (frequency, intensity and poor resolution) negatively influenced the child's adjustment, with the exception of hyperactivity. Children from both nuclear and extended families with high levels of marital conflict reported more emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer problems and less prosocial behavior. The findings further show that high levels of marital conflict are associated with peer problems for children in extended families but not in nuclear families.

Key words: marital conflict, child adjustment, extended families, nuclear families.

This study explored the relationship between marital conflict and the child's holistic adjustment within extended and nuclear families. Conflict within the family is a common contemporary phenomenon and greatly impacts on the children in the home. In South Africa there are many children who are subject to family violence, stress and conflict on a daily basis. Little research has been done exploring whether living with other adults in the home influences or impacts on the way the child perceives and deals with marital conflict. This study explored the effects of marital conflict which is characterized by high frequency, intensity and poor resolution on the child's emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and prosocial behavior. It also investigated whether living in an extended family household helps to protect children from the potential adverse effects of marital conflict.

A Review of the Literature

Theoretical constructs of marital conflict: According to Koblinsky, Kuvalanka and Randolph (2006), marital conflict can be defined as openly expressed anger, aggression and disagreement between husband and wife. They understand conflict as being a fight, struggle, disagreement and clash of some sort. Interactions between maritally distressed couples are marked by mutual negativity, escalating anger and physical aggression. According to Cummings and Davies (1994) there are various causes for marital conflict some including incompatibility, role confusion, behavioral contingencies, dissatisfaction, difference in parenting styles and one of the most important is the breakdown in communication. Communication is more than just verbal content. It includes facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice and body language. If there is a breakdown in communication one partner in the marriage will have an inappropriate perhaps negative response causing marital conflict. (Please view Appendix A).

According to Shantz and Hartup (1992), conflict between married couples can be classified as being destructive or constructive. Destructive conflict will include frequent and intense violence, alienation, aggression, poor or no resolution, threat, blame and destructive family influences. Constructive conflict will include less frequent and intense disagreements with high reports of observable and explained resolutions. Cummings and

Davies (2002), suggest that destructive marital conflict includes interparental aggression or violence, withdrawal during conflict, non-verbal conflict, interparental and parent-child verbal aggression or hostility, aggression by members against objects, threats and conflicts about child related themes. On the other hand constructive conflict exists when parents explain how conflict can be resolved and how the conflict is not a serious threat and eventually can be worked out. Most of the research reviewed in this field is on destructive conflict and its effects on the child. Grych, Seid and Fincham (1992), suggest that when destructive conflict is present children may feel threatened for a number of reasons. Some children who blame themselves for the marital conflict may experience greater distress and shame and may be more likely to intervene in the conflict. Others might experience deficits in self-esteem or symptoms of depression. The presence of destructive conflict has a holistic effect and impacts the child's adjustment emotionally, socially, cognitively, physically, spiritually and behaviorally.

Cummings and Davies (1994) explain that conflict affects children in the context of the family not in isolation. The impact of exposure to conflict may be modified by the family context and structure. A nuclear family is described as a family where the household only consists of the mother, father and children. An extended family consists of a mother, father, children and perhaps other family relatives, such as grandparents, aunts or uncles. Family functioning could best be understood in terms of specific relations between family events and child outcomes/ adjustment. "Family subsystems may mediate the impact of exposure to marital conflict on the children and in some instances may even buffer children from negative outcomes" (Cummings & Davies 1994, p. 110).

Effects of destructive marital conflict on children: Marital conflict has both direct and indirect effects on the parent-child relationships and the child's adjustment. Fauchier and Margolin (2004), explains that children respond and adjust to marital conflict by either internalizing or externalizing the effects. Children internalize the effects of conflict through their emotional reactions; they could either show lots of mixed emotions or no emotions at all (showing withdrawal symptoms). According to Cummings and Davies (2002) children's emotional reactions to the marital conflict are understood as the

reflections of the child's emotional security regarding their family subsystem. If children interpret the conflict as threatening to the security and stability of themselves and their family they would experience, powerlessness and feelings of hopelessness. A study done by Cheng, Dunn and O'Conner (2005), showed that children may be genuinely concerned about their parent's well-being and physical distress may activate the child's empathy and feelings of sadness for the parents. When children internalize the effects they often seem to withdraw and adjust poorly to peer (social) relations.

Koblinsky, Kuvalanka and Randolph (2006), explored how marital conflict is associated with the children's externalizing problems such as anger, aggression and hostility. Some children respond, deal with and adjust to the presence of the conflict through behavioral means. Often there is an increased anger and aggression where the child models the conflict behavior they experience and observe in the home. The child does not know how to appropriately adjust (respond) to the exposed conflict and therefore simply imitates and models the behavior. The child could act out through constant fighting, screaming, irritability and violent behavior towards their parents and peers. According to Cummings, Goeke-Morey and Papp (2003), children who respond to marital conflict by externalizing their reactions often experience high levels of peer and conduct problems and struggle with social adjustment. (Please view Appendix A).

Child and family characteristics as moderating variables: According to Cummings and Davies (1994), when exploring the influence of marital conflict on the child's adjustment various moderating variables need to be considered. The first moderator variable is the child's characteristics as each individual child has their own unique characteristics which influence the degree to which the conflict impacts on them. The age and developmental stage of the child could indicate how vulnerable they are to the conflict. For example, adolescents might be more vulnerable than preschoolers as preschoolers are too young to fully understand the extent and possible implications of the conflict happening around them. The gender of the child could influence how they react and cope with the conflict. Gender may operate in different ways across different domains of the child's adjustment and their level of distress can be manifested in different ways. For example, girls might

show their distress through emotional and social means whereas boys could display their distress through physical and behavioral means. According to Cummings and Davies (2002) although little is known about the nature of temperament and the interface between temperament and personality, research suggest that temperament and personality also play a role in the way the child copes and adjust to the marital conflict present.

The second moderator variable to consider is the family's history. Fincham (1994) explains that family history and marital characteristics plays a key role as both moderators and mediators of the child's adjustment. It is therefore vital to explore the family dynamics, number and age of children in the home, other people present in the home (such as grandparents) and the actual living arrangements. Cummings and Davies (2002) add that parental symptomatology such as depression or parental alcohol problems could be related to marital conflict and child adjustment. It is important that we acknowledge, identify and understand the family history and structure when trying to understand the relationships and impacts of marital conflict on the child. The consensus however of current theory and research suggests that the child's perception of the meaning of the conflict is more important than the physical characteristics of the conflict (Cummings and Davies, 2002).

The vast majority of previous and current research on the relationship between marital conflict and child adjustment has been conducted in predominately middle class communities in northern countries particularly the United States of America and the United Kingdom. In these northern countries nuclear families are relatively common and extended families are relatively rare. In South Africa on the other hand, extended families are the most common family form in the black (African, Coloured and Indian) population (Society of Research and Child Development, 2007). There does not appear to be any previous published work looking at the effects of marital conflict on children in an extended family context. However the assumption is that destructive marital conflict has a negative impact on the child's adjustment, thus living in an extended family might reduce that negative influence as the child has other adults to guide and support them through the conflict. The purpose and aim of this study was to obtain a greater

understanding and gain a better perspective of the association between marital conflict and child adjustment of South African children living in either nuclear or extended family households. In South Africa many more children live in the extended family context, so this study brought new insight and understanding to what our local context has to offer.

Research Hypotheses: Through the acknowledgement and consideration of the reviewed literature this current study tested two possible hypotheses. The first hypothesis predicted that higher levels of destructive marital conflict would be associated with poorer adjustment in children. The second hypothesis predicted that marital conflict would be more strongly associated with children's adjustment problems in nuclear families than in extended families.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study were children both male and female in grade seven. They all ranged from eleven to thirteen years of age. All the participants were from a primary school in the Athlone area. Athlone is an area located in Cape Town and majority of its population is coloured. The questionnaire packs were administered to 80 of the learners and it was completed at the school. Of the 80 participants only 56 were eligible to be used in the study. The other 24 participants could not be used in the study as they were from single-parent, foster care or child-headed households and therefore did not qualify for the study. Of the 56 participants, 24 of them were from an extended family and 32 were living in a nuclear family context.

Materials

Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC scale - Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992): This scale was used to assess the children's exposure to marital conflict. According to Grych et.al (1992), the children's perception of interparental conflict scale (CPIC scale) measures and assesses multiple dimensions of marital conflict and is derived from the theoretical framework for investigating the relation between conflict and adjustment. Their framework further suggests that assessment of the nature

and not just the frequency of the conflict is vital, when trying to understand its relationship to child adjustment. The CPIC scale is a Likert scale (True, sort of true and false) which consist of 51 questions and is divided into three subscales. High scores on the first subscale (conflict properties) reflect conflict which is often intense (angry and aggressive) and which is poorly resolved. Scores on the second subscale (threat) indicate the ability of the children to cope when marital conflict occurs and the degree to which they feel threatened. The third subscale (content) assesses the degree to which the child perceives the conflict to be about themselves and blames themselves for the marital conflict present. This CPIC scale is the most appropriate scale to measure the presence and effects of marital conflict from the child's perspective. Grych, Seid and Fincham (1992) explain that the 51 questions in this scale addresses a number of areas of marital conflict some include frequency, intensity, resolution, content, perceived threat, coping efficacy, self-blame, and stability. Only the Conflict properties subscale was used in the present study.

The CPIC scale is both reliable and valid. According to Grych et.al (1992), the reliability of this scale was assessed by two methods: internal consistency and test-retest. Coefficient alpha was computed and across all the samples the scale demonstrated good internal consistency. The coefficient alphas for sample one and sample two respectively were .90 and .89 for conflict properties, .83 and .84 for threat, .78 and .79 for self blame. These all exceeded the level of .70 which was recommended for internal consistency. The test-retest correlations were satisfactory and therefore the test could be considered reliable. The validity of the questionnaire was measured by comparing the scores of the test done by the children with a parent-rated measure of marital conflict. According to Bickham and Fiese (1997) the validity was also assessed by examining whether the children's perceptions of the conflict were related to their adjustment. Therefore the CPIC scale is reliable, valid and appropriate for the analysis of the research question.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ – Goodman, 1997): The strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) was used to measure the dependant variable (the child's adjustment). The SDQ is a Likert scale (Not true, somewhat true and certainly true) which consists of 25 attributes, some positive and others negative. According to Goodman (1997), the 25 items on the questionnaire are divided into five scales each generating scores for conduct problems, hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, peer problems and prosocial behavior. The purpose and nature of the questionnaire is to examine and understand if there are any signs of adjustment issues with a child. There are three versions of the questionnaire one for the parents, one for the teachers and a self report version. In this study only the self report version was used and the children completed the questionnaire themselves. The population for which the self report version was designed is for children between 11 through to 17 years of age. Thus the sample in this study was of the appropriate age to complete the questionnaire. According to Goodman (1997), the SDQ is used internationally for clinical assessment, research and screening.

According to Goodman, Meltzer and Bailey (1998), this questionnaire is reliable and has been shown to have acceptable test-retest reliability and internal consistency. The alpha coefficient for the self report scale was 0.82 for the total difficulties score which exceeded the level of 0.7. Its criterion validity was assessed and found to be acceptable. Therefore the strengths and difficulties questionnaire is reliable, valid and appropriate to analyze the dependant variable which is the child's adjustment.

Family Structure: A criterion was drawn up to measure the participant's family structure (nuclear or extended). This was assessed by asking them to tick one of several options indicating who they live with, and to draw a labeled picture (drawing) of the people they live with.

Procedure

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Cape Town Psychology Department, Western Cape Education Department and the school principal. (Please view Appendix B). Thereafter a letter was given to each grade seven learner requesting their parent's permission for them to participate in the research study. This letter was sent to all the parents fully informing them of the nature, procedure and potential risks of the study. The letter was in the form of passive informed consent allowing both the parents and the child the freedom to decide whether they would like to participate or not. This means that if the parent did not want their child to participate in the study they would have returned the slip at the bottom of the letter. No response from the parent was taken as consent (Please view Appendix C). Informed assent was also obtained from the participants themselves. On the title page of the questionnaire packs the children were allowed to sign their name which served as an indicator of their willingness to participate voluntarily. Through this we received written assent from the child who participated in the study.

This research study did not anticipate harming any of the participants physically or psychologically. However if any concerns, problems or issues should have arisen as a result of participating, the school guidance counselor was available. Before the study proceeded or any questionnaires were administered the school guidance counselor was ready and available to deal with anything that could have arisen.

After the parents had granted permission for their child to participate, the questionnaire packs were administered to the learners. The learners then completed the questionnaire during school hours in their classrooms in the presence of the researcher and teacher. They were given approximately 45 minutes in which to complete the questionnaires. They were encouraged to ask any questions if they were uncertain about anything. The school has two grade seven classes and the questionnaires were administered to both of the classes on the same day but in different timeslots. Once the learners had answered and completed all the questions, the packs were directly collected from them.

(Please view Appendix D).

RESULTS

Data Analysis

The statistical test which was used in this study was Factorial ANOVA. According to Tredoux and Durrheim (2002) and Howell (2007), factorial ANOVA is a method that is used for research designs that have more than one independent variable. The benefits of this design is that it allows us to capture more complex social and psychological phenomena and it allows us to test multiple hypotheses simultaneously. Factorial ANOVA could test whether high destructive conflict properties had an impact on child adjustment and simultaneously test whether family structure (nuclear or extended) influenced the child's adjustment. Thus, in this study the independent variables were conflict properties (high or low conflict properties) and family structure (nuclear or extended). In this study five 2×2 ANOVAS were tested and in each analysis the dependent variable (child adjustment) changed. The five dependant variables of child adjustment were emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and prosocial behavior. The Levene's test was used to test the assumption of homogeneity of variance and the normality plots were used to test the assumption of normality. All of the assumptions in these analyses were upheld (Please view Appendix E). An alpha level of .05 was selected for all the analyses. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), factorial ANOVA is the most appropriate statistical test to use when trying to measure effects of more than one independent variable (conflict properties and family structure) with more then one level, measuring the relationship (impact) on the dependent variable (child adjustment).

Sample Descriptives

In this study there were 56 participants, 24 of whom were part of an extended family and 32 of whom lived in the nuclear family context. The conflict properties subscale of the CPIC had a mean of 34 for the sample as a whole, thus families who had a conflict score between 23 – 34, were considered as low in marital conflict and families who scored between 35-51 were considered as having high levels of destructive marital conflict. 33 families were categorized as low in marital conflict and 23 as high in marital conflict.

A series of factorial ANOVA's were used to investigate whether more frequent, intense and poorly resolved marital conflict was associated with child adjustment and whether family structure moderated this association.

Analysis one – the DV is Emotional Symptoms: Means and standard deviations for emotional symptoms in each group are presented in Table 1 and the ANOVA results for emotional symptoms are presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Emotional Symptoms

	High Conflict	Low Conflict
Extended Family		
- Mean	4.62	2.81
- Std.Dev	2.61	1.79
- N	8	16
Nuclear Family		
- Mean	4.73	3.58
- Std.Dev	2.52	1.69
- N	15	17

Table 2: ANOVA Results for Emotional Symptoms

	SS	df	MS	F	P
Emotional Symptoms					
- Family Structure (A)	2.49	1	2.49	0.56	0.45
- Conflict Properties (B)	27.94	1	27.94	6.28	0.01*
- AB Interaction	1.42	1	1.42	0.31	0.57

Note: * $p < 0.05$ (the alpha has been set as 0.05, anything less is significant)

Through the analysis we can see that family structure had no significant effect on the child's adjustment. The main effect of conflict was however statistically significant. The mean for high conflict within nuclear families ($\mu= 4.73$) is higher than the mean for high conflict within extended families ($\mu= 4.62$). From the means presented in table 1 it is evident that children from high conflict homes reported more emotional symptoms.

Analyses two – the DV is Conduct problems: Means and standard deviations of conduct problems for each group are presented in Table 3 and the ANOVA results are presented in Table 4.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for Conduct Problems

	High Conflict	Low Conflict
Extended Family		
- Mean	4.37	2
- Std.Dev	2.32	1.46
- N	8	16
Nuclear Family		
- Mean	3.26	2.23
- Std.Dev	2.01	1.20
- N	15	17

Table 4: ANOVA Results for Conduct Problems

	SS	df	MS	F	P
Conduct Problems					
- Family Structure (A)	2.43	1	2.43	0.84	0.36
- Conflict Properties (B)	37.07	1	37.07	12.86	0.00*
- AB Interaction	5.76	1	5.76	2	0.16

Note: * $p < 0.05$ (the alpha has been set as 0.05, anything less is significant)

In the above analysis we can see that family structure has no effect on child adjustment. However the mean for high conflict in extended families ($\mu = 4.37$) is higher than the mean for high conflict with nuclear families ($\mu = 3.26$). The means in table 3 shows that children have higher conduct problems when high conflict is present in both extended and nuclear families.

Analysis three – the DV is Hyperactivity: Means and standard deviations for hyperactivity are presented in Table 5 and the ANOVA results are presented in Table 6.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Hyperactivity

	High Conflict	Low Conflict
Extended Family		
- Mean	5.25	3.87
- Std.Dev	3.05	2.09
- N	8	16
Nuclear Family		
- Mean	3.60	3.41
- Std.Dev	2.32	2.52
- N	15	17

Table 6: ANOVA Results for Hyperactivity

	SS	df	MS	F	P
Hyperactivity					
- Family Structure (A)	14.26	1	14.26	2.40	0.12
- Conflict Properties (B)	7.80	1	7.80	1.31	0.25
- AB Interaction	4.49	1	4.49	0.75	0.38

Note: * $p < 0.05$ (the alpha has been set as 0.05, anything less is significant)

The results of this analysis showed that neither family structure nor conflict properties were significantly associated with hyperactivity. There was also no significant interaction between conflict and marital structure.

Analysis four – the DV is Peer Problems: Mean and standard deviations for peer problems for each group is presented in Table 7 and the ANOVA results are presented in Table 8.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics for Peer Problems

	High Conflict	Low Conflict
Extended Family		
- Mean	4.12	2.18
- Std.Dev	2.10	1.79
- N	8	16
Nuclear Family		
- Mean	2	2.17
- Std.Dev	1.25	1.55
- N	15	17

Table 8: ANOVA Results for Peer Problems

	SS	df	MS	F	P
Peer Problems					
- Family Structure (A)	14.57	1	14.57	5.42	0.02*
- Conflict Properties (B)	9.90	1	9.90	3.68	0.05*
- AB Interaction	14.27	1	14.27	5.31	0.02*

Note: * $p < 0.05$ (the alpha has been set as 0.05, anything less is significant)

In this analysis we see quite a different set of results as family structure seems to have a significant effect on the child's adjustment. The interaction between family structure and conflict properties also has a significant impact on adjustment. The mean for high conflict in extended families ($\mu=4.12$) is significantly higher than the mean for high conflict with nuclear families ($\mu= 2$). Results of a Tukey's HSD post hoc test indicated that high conflict within extended families has a significant impact on the child's peer adjustment. We further did a Whole Model R test to examine the effect size of peer problems, the multiple R^2 ($=0.16$) and the adjusted R^2 ($= 0.11$). (Please view Appendix F).

Analysis five – the DV is Prosocial Behavior: Mean and standard deviations for prosocial behavior for each group is presented in Table 9 and the ANOVA result for prosocial behavior is presented in Table 10.

Table 9: Descriptive Statistics of Pro-social Behavior

	High Conflict	Low Conflict
Extended Family		
- Mean	5.50	7.26
- Std.Dev	3.33	2.50
- N	8	16
Nuclear Family		
- Mean	6.73	7.25
- Std.Dev	2.28	1.73
- N	15	17

Table 10: ANOVA Results for Prosocial Behavior

	SS	df	MS	F	P
Prosocial Behavior					
- Family Structure (A)	4.13	1	4.13	0.73	0.39
- Conflict Properties (B)	27.26	1	27.26	4.83	0.03*
- AB Interaction	5.64	1	5.64	1	0.32

Note: * $p < 0.05$ (the alpha has been set as 0.05, anything less is significant)

The interaction between family structure and conflict properties has no significant effect on the child's prosocial behavior. However conflict properties has a significant effect on the child's behavior. The mean for high conflict within extended families ($\mu = 5.50$) is less than the mean of high conflict within nuclear families ($\mu = 6.73$). The means in table 9 shows us that children in high conflict homes both extended and nuclear are less prosocial.

These above results provide some compelling evidence across all the findings that more frequent, intense and poorly resolved marital conflict is negatively associated with child adjustment with the exception of hyperactivity.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the relationship between marital conflict and the child's adjustment. Firstly the study was designed to examine whether high destructive conflict properties impacted on the child's adjustment. The second aim was to explore whether family structure (extended or nuclear) could moderate the relationship between marital conflict and the adjustment of the child. The hypotheses were that higher levels of marital conflict would be associated with poorer adjustment and that conflict would be more strongly associated with children's adjustment problems in nuclear families than in extended families.

High Destructive Marital Conflict and Child Adjustment

The results of this study showed that across all the findings, high levels of frequent, intense and poorly resolved marital conflict was negatively associated with child adjustment with the exception of hyperactivity. These results are consistent with Cummings and Davies (1994, 2002) who suggest that destructive conflict often makes children feel threatened and some children who blame themselves for the marital conflict present may experience greater distress, shame and struggle to adjust appropriately.

Firstly, the results of this study show that high levels of destructive marital conflict are associated with more emotional symptoms in children. Cummings and Davies (1994), explain that children may experience deficits in self-esteem or symptoms of depression. Children also adjust to the situation by internalizing the effects of the conflict through their emotional reactions, showing lots of mixed emotions or showing no emotions at all. These results are also consistent with Cheng, Dunn and O'Conner (2005), who suggest that high conflict often threatens the child's emotional security and stability impacting on their adjustment.

Secondly, the results of this particular study show that high levels of destructive marital conflict are associated with more conduct problems in children. According to Fauchier and Margolin (2004), conduct problems can be understood as the inappropriate behavior of the child either at home or any other social setting. The child might throw tantrums, scream, fidget constantly, respond through fighting or violence, or they could express themselves through withdrawing and not responding at all. These results are consistent with Koblinsky, Kuvalanka and Randolph (2006), where children respond and adjust negatively to marital conflict through behavioral means. Children often deal with conflict through externalizing their feelings, through anger, aggression and hostility.

Thirdly, this study yielded results that the presence of high marital conflict was associated with poorer peer relations for children living in extended families but not for those in nuclear families. These results are consistent with Cummings, Goeke-Morey and

Papp (2003), who explained that children who respond to marital conflict by externalizing their reactions often experience high levels of peer problems and struggle with social adjustment. When children are faced with marital conflict they often are not able to deal with all the implications which are associated with the conflict and thus when they relate to others they express their own experiences. Children see their parents disagreeing, arguing, fighting and they would model that inappropriate behavior, because that is all they know. Therefore when children are placed in social settings such as school, youth groups and sports clubs they struggle tremendously with peer relations and social adjustments.

Fourthly, the results of this study showed that high levels of frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict were associated with less prosocial behavior. It is assumed that all children would be pro-social, meaning that they would be kind to others, share their belongings and offer help and assistance where needed. However when the child is faced with high destructive marital conflict properties their willingness to be pro-social significantly decreases. Therefore, high marital conflict negatively influences the child's pro-social behavior and adjustment.

In interpreting these results it should be recognized that these different aspects of children's adjustment are not independent but are interrelated. For example, emotional adjustment may influence the child's conduct problems which may in turn influence their peer relations and prosocial behavior (Please view Appendix G).

Family Structure (extended or nuclear) and child adjustment

The results of this study showed that the structure of the family whether extended or nuclear had no significant influence on the way the child adjusted to the marital conflict with the exception of peer problems. The second hypothesis will therefore be rejected as family structure does not influence child adjustment, with the exception of peer problems.

High levels of destructive marital conflict were associated with more peer problems in children living in extended families but not those in nuclear families (Please view Appendix F).

These results are inconsistent with Cummings and Davies (1994) who suggest that the impact of exposure to the marital conflict may be modified by the family context and structure. Their argument suggest that family structure, specifically extended families could buffer children from negative outcomes. However, the results of this study suggest that children respond to and deal with conflict properties in much the same way regardless of their family structure. One possible explanation for this finding is that the conflict between the parents has both direct and indirect effects in the parent-child relationship, regardless of the presence of other family members in the home.

High conflict is associated with peer problems in extended families

This is a new and significant finding in this specific study. The results showed that high conflict was associated with more peer problems in extended families but not in nuclear families (Please view Appendix F). This is in opposition to what the second hypothesis suggested, where extended families could serve as a support for children and buffer against negative outcomes.

High conflict being associated with peer problems in extended families could perhaps be explained in terms of family systems theory. According to Cottrell and Boston (2002), general systems theory purports that living organisms can be seen as a group of elements in interaction with one another, forming stability overtime with boundaries within itself and between itself and the environment. When we view the family as being a system we acknowledge that there will be interactions between the family members and these are known as subsystems (e.g. the mother-father subsystem, the father-child subsystem). There are constant interactions between subsystems, systems and suprasystems. A suprasystems is the larger systems of community and culture within which the family is embedded.

(Figure 2: This diagram shows the relationship between subsystems, systems and suprasystems, Barker, 1992 p. 38).

From the perspective of family systems theory conflict in one family system (e.g. parent-parent or parent-child) may 'spill over' or influence other family systems. In an extended family context, it is possible that conflict between mother and grandmother could 'spill over' into conflict between grandmother and child. Such a 'spill over' effect not only reduce the possibility of extended family members being able to provide the child with support, but may mean that the child comes to see high levels of conflict (or destructive conflict strategies) as normal and acceptable. If these lessons are transferred to peer interactions, their peer relationships are likely to suffer. Children from nuclear families, in contrast, may have more exposure to different styles and strategies of dealing with conflict from contact with extended family members who live outside of the home.

Limitations to the study

There are a few limitations to the study which need to be considered and addressed. The first limitation could be the size of the sample. In this study there were only 56 participants, 24 from an extended family context and 32 from a nuclear family context. This is a relatively small sample size when striving to explore the complexity of family structures and child adjustment which could have reduced the reliability and validity of results (Babbie & Mouton ,1998). A larger sample size could have perhaps enhanced the results and findings in this study. In South Africa family structure is often linked to culture, as many 'black' children live in extended family contexts and many 'white' children live in nuclear or stepparent families. The second limitation is that the study was limited to one particular geographical area Athlone and one particular population group (coloured learners). Thirdly, all the information in this study was obtained from the children's self report; the parents and teacher's understandings and perspectives were not considered. Finally it is important to note that this study was cross-sectional and correlational in nature, it could not establish any causal relationships between marital conflict and child adjustment.

Future Recommendations and Research

Future research can be done to explore the relationships between marital conflict and child adjustment in other family structures (e.g. divorced parents, foster households or stepparents). Secondly, further studies could be done to see why high conflict within extended families influences child peer and social adjustment. Thirdly, it could be interesting to explore whether there are ways of marital fighting that are linked with optimal functioning in children. Fifthly, research could be done to see what other elements of family life mediate or moderate the impact of marital conflict on child development. The last recommendation for future research could be to explore what strategies parents and clinicians could use to maximize the quality of family life.

CONCLUSION

This research study explored the association of high levels of frequent, intense and poorly resolved marital conflict on the child's emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and prosocial behavior. It also examined whether living in an extended family context helped to protect the child from the potential adverse effects of marital conflict. The results and findings showed that high levels of destructive marital conflict properties had a negative association with child adjustment, with the exception of hyperactivity. Family structure (extended or nuclear) had no influence on child outcomes or adjustment with the exception of peer problems. There was a significant relationship between high conflict within extended families and the child's peer relationships. This study has allows us to obtain a greater understanding and gain a better perspective of the influence that conflict within the marriage has on children's adjustment. It also provided new insight and understanding of children's responses to marital conflict in our local South African context, where many children live in extended families.