

## Preface

Marital discord is a distressing occurrence in families, with direct consequences for the children. Considerable evidence indicates that children are highly sensitive to parents' discord. Indeed, prolonged exposure to some forms of marital conflict increases the likelihood of children's psychological and physical problems. More broadly, such conflict poses challenges to stable and satisfying interpersonal relations among all members of the family and has the potential for highly negative outcomes. Conflict can readily become uncontrolled and uncontrollable, with even the most well-meaning individuals falling into the escalating social trap posed by intense interpersonal discord, with negative implications for the quality and even continuity of relationships.

Psychological research can play an important role in discovering answers to the complex questions of how best to handle conflict within families. An impressive body of knowledge has accumulated over the years, with many advances since the publication of our first volume on this subject, *Children and Marital Conflict: The Impact of Family Dispute and Resolution* (Cummings & Davies, 1994a). What can be termed a first generation of studies focused on establishing that marital conflict is linked with child maladjustment. By the time our first volume was published, links between marital conflict on the one hand and parenting problems and child adjustment difficulties on the other were well established, but many, many questions remained about the explanatory processes underlying these associations.

Fortunately, there has been an upsurge in the past 15-plus years of studies directed toward identifying the multiple psychological and biological responses activated by marital conflict, with implications for the development of theories for explaining these processes. Advancing ecological validity, home-based studies documenting children's responses to marital conflict have increased. Another concern has been identifying the pathways over time through which marital conflict affects children, based on longitudinal and multimethod measures. The goal is to explain how, why, when, and for which children marital conflict has implications for child adjustment.

This book documents the status of what can be called a second generation of research focusing on processes underlying the effects of marital conflict on children (Cummings & Cummings, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990). One finding of this research is that multiple dimensions of children's responding to marital conflict have psychological meaning and significance and are related to their adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Another finding is that exposure to marital conflict and changes in parenting both contribute to pathways of child development. Process-oriented approaches have advanced an understanding of how children's emotional, social, cognitive, and physiological processes of responding in family and even community contexts are linked prospectively with the children's development over time. The accumulation of knowledge on marital conflict has also precipitated a new research direction: developing evidence-based programs for helping parents handle marital conflict in more constructive ways. Although advice about how to approach conflicts in families abounds in the popular culture, the research findings on marital discord and child adjustment are often not widely known. In this regard, the emergence of translational research aimed at making the findings of empirical research on marital conflict and children more readily available to the public is an exciting development.

A major focus of the present book, *Marital Conflict and Children: An Emotional Security Perspective*, is on explicating "emotional security theory" (EST; Davies & Cummings, 1994) and showing how EST provides a conceptual model for understanding the direct effects of exposure to marital conflict, the indirect effects of marital conflict in the context of parenting, and even the effects of marital conflict in the context of community and political conflict. At this time, a guiding theory is needed to provide a reasonably coherent perspective on the many advances in the study of familywide and extrafamilial pathways and contexts for the

effects of marital conflict on children. Theory is also critical for optimal prevention and intervention programs. Given these considerations, EST is employed throughout to provide the guiding perspective and unifying theme for this volume. Although theories in this area are similar in some key respects, and other theories have demonstrated merit, EST (Davies & Cummings, 1994) uniquely incorporates emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physiological responses to marital conflict into a unifying conceptual model. It is also distinguished from other theories in advocating for much broader views of processes underlying children's development.

### AN OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

This book provides an up-to-date review of research on marital conflict and children. Although this literature is considered widely, the focus is on research and theory since the publication of our first volume (Cummings & Davies, 1994a). Throughout the present volume, in addition to reviewing and discussing key findings and theory, we endeavor to identify many emerging directions for research, in order to provide a roadmap and stimulus for many advances to come. Toward this end, we also provide methodological tools for new advances in the Appendices, including specific instruments and discussions of advanced topics for multimethod research.

#### ***New Directions in the Study of Children and Marital Conflict***

Reflecting new directions for conceptualizing the study of children and marital conflict, Chapter 1 reviews evidence that marital discord is a characteristic of "risky families" (broadly defined). Marital conflict is widely and by multiple pathways associated with the development of behavior problems in children. The relation of marital discord and violence to the impact of risky families is considered, including new directions linking marital conflict with the effects of paternal depression and parental alcohol problems on children. We highlight the study of interadult conflict in single-parent families as an important direction for future research.

In Chapter 2, we outline the key elements of a process-oriented approach to the study of marital conflict and children, and introduce EST and the evidence in support of the theory. The building blocks

of the process-oriented approach are clearly and carefully described, including notions of the true nature of “mediation” as an explanatory process based on cutting-edge approaches, and the meaning of “moderation” as an explanatory construct. The inherent complexity of the influence of marital conflict on children necessitates a theoretical model to organize, guide, and direct research. Moreover, little sense can be made of the complex pattern of findings without a guiding conceptual model. The exponential increase in knowledge and research directions makes it essential to process and interpret the state of the literature from a coherent, focused theoretical perspective.

EST has some distinct conceptual advantages over some of the other theories in this area. One is its ability to integrate the ways in which children’s emotional, physiological, biological, cognitive, and behavioral systems are affected; another is its ability to demonstrate that pathways of development are affected in multiple ways, including direct effects due to exposure or awareness of marital conflict and indirect influences on parenting and other family systems. Moreover, a large body of research has directly and in some cases indirectly tested the assumptions of EST. Given the rapidly accumulating evidence, there is a need to evaluate, within a single volume, the correspondence between the theory and the state of the literature. Chapter 2 provides a seminal, up-to-date explication of EST, including its status in relation to the most recent tests of reciprocal and longitudinal pathways of causal influences on children’s development in families.

At the same time, although we highlight the advantages of EST throughout this book, we are not endorsing EST as the only viable theory for explaining the findings from marital conflict research. Other theories, such as the cognitive–contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990), provide important insights into the relationship between marital conflict and children’s adjustment. Therefore, we encourage readers to seek out alternative theories to get a complementary picture of the status of research in this area.

### ***Models of Direct Effects***

Part II of the book considers the observable effects and implications for child adjustment of exposure to marital conflict and domestic violence. Chapter 3 considers the multiple faces of marital conflict from the children’s perspective. We consider how children react to different forms of conflict expression and resolution, including the bases EST provides

for differentiating constructive and destructive conflict from the children's perspective. Other advances in recent years are tests of theoretical models for the effects of children's exposure to marital conflict on their adjustment, including theoretically guided tests of mediators and moderators of children's responding. Chapter 4 provides a systematic review of many recent studies that have tested theoretical models for the direct effects of marital conflict on multiple child outcomes; again, it focuses on recent advances from the perspective of EST, including recent tests based on multimethod and longitudinal research designs that support the explanatory value of EST.

### ***Contextualizing Marital Conflict***

Part III of the book considers the exciting new directions in this field for understanding marital conflict in multiple contexts; parenting; individual, familial, and extrafamilial processes; and time. Interparental conflict affects children not in isolation, but in the context of multiple family systems and processes. In order to fully understand children's development in discordant families, we must consider the broader pattern of influences on children within the family.

Chapter 5 considers recent advances in the study of what have come to be called "indirect" pathways and processes—that is, the specific and interactive effects within a family of marital conflict, parenting practices, parent-child attachment, and child adjustment. These new directions include tests of models (including longitudinal models) of pathways between and among marital conflict, parenting, and child adjustment. An exciting development described in this chapter is how EST provides a more compelling conceptual explanation for these pathways than past accounts, including advances over the "spillover" hypothesis.

Beyond considering parenting, relatively little research has examined the role of broader family contexts in affecting relations between marital conflict and child adjustment. Therefore, Chapter 6 places marital conflict within these broader familial (e.g., familywide cohesion) and extrafamilial (e.g., peer relationships) contexts to explore the potential value of contextual risk and protective models. Because children exposed to similar histories of marital conflict evidence wide variability in outcomes, identifying characteristics that may amplify or dilute the risk associated with marital conflict can help us understand why some children from higher-conflict homes develop severe psychopathology, while other children evidence resilience and good outcomes. Students

and scholars may be especially interested in the comprehensive guide provided for new research directions that will move the field toward a familywide understanding of children's development of adjustment problems, as well as normal development in families.

Chapter 7 considers these issues further by examining development over time in contexts of interparental conflict. Relatively naïve notions about the nature of time in research models for child development, and about how time can be incorporated in longitudinal research to advance understanding of causal processes. In fact, there are many pitfalls and challenges for discovering the "truth" of causal processes in the context of the highly complex domain of family functioning. The chapter is devoted to considering cutting-edge issues in this regard, essential for consumers of social science knowledge as well as for the students and scholars.

### ***Future Directions***

Part IV of the book is devoted to future directions in research on marital conflict and violence from the children's perspective. There is a need to expand this research to consider the applications of empirical findings to real-world problems, as well as the implications of these findings for understanding the impact of other social systems and processes. In Chapter 8, we consider some research messages that are applicable to real-world problems. The results of studies evaluating the efficacy of programs for communicating the results of empirical research on marital conflict and children to wider audiences are examined. There are increasing questions about whether simply identifying the implications of these results is sufficient to make a difference in the real world for parents, families, and children. At a minimum, there are strong grounds for suggesting that new approaches need to be tried for applications in the real world. Accordingly, we focus in this chapter on the concept of "translational research" and on steps toward advancing translational research in this area.

Chapter 9 is concerned with exporting models and methods derived from research on marital conflict and children beyond the marital dyad—from the study of attachment based on Bowlby's emotional security notions, to the possible relevance of this work for a better understanding of the effects of political violence on children. With regard to the latter, for example, the influence of marital conflict on children can be understood in terms of interrelations among family, community, and culture. Theory in terms of social ecological models may also be applied

to understanding pathways of influence, with emotional security posited as a key explanatory mechanism for understanding the effects on children of discord in the family, community, and culture. This chapter considers how the use of EST may serve to guide the interpretation of the influence of multiple levels of social ecological functioning on children's development; we illustrate the discussion with recent work on political violence and children in Northern Ireland.

### **Appendices**

Finally, studying the effects of marital conflict on children poses inherent methodological challenges for investigators. Many scholars or students may not be aware of the latest methodological approaches, including the pros and cons of these approaches. For example, important advances have been made in specific instruments for observationally differentiating dimensions of constructive and destructive conflict behaviors (e.g., see Appendix A) and for assessing children's emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses to marital conflict (e.g., see Appendices B and C)—all of which are critical for study of processes mediating the effects of marital conflict on children from an EST perspective. These new instruments are not readily accessible, but are critical for optimally studying many of the questions reviewed in this volume. These measures are provided in Appendices A–C. Moreover, creativity and methodological rigor are essential for cutting-edge research in this area. A detailed discussion of the latest methods and approaches for studying children and marital conflict—approaches that may not be widely known to those not reading about them in primary journal sources—is provided in Appendix D to supplement the coverage provided throughout the book. A particularly exciting direction is the study of physiological and biological processes activated by marital conflict, and their role in the impact of marital conflict on children.

In sum, this book updates and treats a variety of themes and issues, including many new topics, pertinent to families, conflict, and conflict resolution from the perspective of children. This is the first comprehensive authored volume devoted to research on family conflict in well over a decade. Many of the studies we cite have been published very recently (i.e., between 2002 and 2009), with additional studies in press. As such, this volume presents a much overdue review, analysis, and update of developments in what continues to be a dynamic and exciting field of study, with coverage provided that is unavailable in any other source.