

**The Relationship Between Parental Marital Conflict, Maternal Hostility and  
Externalising Problematic Behaviours in Australian Children**

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## **The Relationship Between Parental Marital Conflict, Maternal Hostility and Externalising Problematic Behaviours in Australian Children**

The effects of parental marital conflict on children's risk for behavioural maladjustment problems is of great importance in the fields of developmental and child psychology (Cummings & Davies, 2002). An extensive body of research has focused on the negative aspects of a couple's relationship, revealing that higher levels of marital discord are linked to a greater probability that the child will "act out", that is, show externalising problematic behaviour (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Externalising problematic behaviour is defined by Buehler et al. (1997) as outward-oriented behaviour that reflects maladjustment and an inability to engage constructively in society. For instance, a child who exhibits high levels of externalised problematic behaviour is more likely to have a high temper as well as a higher likelihood of stealing, cheating on a test and getting into fights (Liu, 2004).

While it can be perfectly normal for children to be impulsive and disobedient from time to time, some children possess exceptionally challenging behaviours that are not typical to their age group. Externalising problematic behavioural disorders such as oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder are seen to be more prevalent in dysfunctional families, when the child is exposed to domestic violence or poor parenting skills (Better Health Channel, 2012). While some children outgrow behavioural problems, an even larger number of children do not and are required to undergo further assessment at child psychiatric facilities (Lavigne et al., 1998). Furthermore, children with a diagnosed behavioural problem that continues from ages 7 to 13 have a 26-to-62% likelihood of having a behavioural problem diagnosis across their lifespan (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014). Increased levels of problematic behaviours in children have been associated with a variety of negative outcomes in later years. This includes a greater risk of unemployment following school, a higher

likelihood that the individual will develop criminal behaviour and also mental health comorbidities, such as anxiety and depression (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014).

Parental conflict is a common and pressing concern in society, with nearly 30% of married partners experiencing spousal violence at some stage in their marriage (Straus et al., 1980). As well, it was reported that children were present at 44% of parental marital violence incidents for the year 2003 to 2004 (Taylor, 2006). Prior research shows that children who live in these maritally violent homes display much higher levels of externalising problematic behaviours compared to children who are not exposed to interparental violence (Moylan et al., 2010). When examining the link between parental marital conflict and behavioural maladjustment in children, former studies document that it is not only necessary to look at the direct link, but especially how this conflict is handled when trying to understand the effect that it has on the child (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003; Goodman et al., 1999).

Cummings et al. (2003) coined the terms constructive and destructive marital conflict strategies, which classify a child's emotional and behavioural reactions into two categories built upon their parents marital conflict. For instance, if marital partners possess high levels of marital conflict and use constructive strategies such as support, affection and the ability to resolve their problems, this will in turn elicit positive reactions from the child. In contrast, if marital partners possess high levels of conflict but use destructive strategies such as physical aggression and punitive parenting approaches, this is likely to elicit negative emotional reactions from the child such as behavioural dysregulation and anger (Cummings et al., 2003). Destructive marital conflict strategies are more likely to make children susceptible to developing an externalised behavioural problem (Buehler et al., 2007). In contrast, constructive marital conflict may help the child learn effective communication skills and the ability to problem solve (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017).

Together, these studies demonstrate that parental conflict and parental behaviour are each related to a child's developmental process, and dysfunction within these domains is most evidently linked to externalising problematic behaviours (Nunes et al., 2013). What has been less studied however, are the pathways from parental marital conflict to children's levels of externalising problematic behaviours. Therefore, it is not only necessary to examine the direct effect of parental marital conflict on children's externalising problematic behaviours, but also if a negative parenting style such as a hostile parenting approach mediates this relationship.

### **Marital Conflict and Parenting Styles**

Marital quality is well-established as being the foundation of a functional family (Robles et al., 2014). Marital conflict, on the other hand, serves as a source of tension and can have a negative impact on how a parent behaves in the parent-child relationship (Ogundele, 2018). According to the family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997) the family is a collection of interactions and behaviours, with relationships in one family subsystem impacting other family subsystems. More specifically, the spousal subsystem is reflected as having the largest influence on other family subsystems, including the parent-child subsystem.

The spill-over hypothesis, theorised by Repetti (1987), suggests that when a conflict occurs in the marital dyad, this is then transferred onto the parent-child relationship. This has been hypothesised to transpire as a result of frustration or hostility felt in the marriage that can enable parents to feel more irritable and impatient with their child. On the other hand, parents might feel too emotionally exhausted from their marital problems to host a secure and sensible parenting approach (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). Holden and Ritchie (1991) found that marital couples who are violent are also more inconsistent with their parental discipline approaches and display less affection and involvement with their children. Findings by

Durrant and Ensom (2012) further demonstrate that parents in violent marriages are more likely to adopt harsher discipline methods than nonviolent parents, as well as exhibiting more aggressive parenting styles. However, in contrast, marital couples who are more satisfied and experience lower levels of marital stress tend to display more warmth and less hostility when interacting with their child (Kiecolt-Glaser & Wilson, 2017). In summary, these studies give light to the relationship between marital conflict and a hostile parenting approach. In addition to this, couples who are more satisfied with their marriage are less likely to exhibit parental stress and are more likely to adopt a warm parenting approach.

## **Externalised Problematic Behaviours in Children**

### ***Parental Marital Conflict***

Theoretical models propose that children are likely to develop problematic behaviours as a result of direct exposure to parental conflict and through observing how their parents interact with one another. For instance, according to social learning theory devised by Bandura (1977), children who witness aggressive marital conflict may then imitate and generalise these same behaviours in other conflict situations, such as home and school (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Exposure to aggressive marital conflict is also likely to provoke children to engage in conflict, which in turn increases a child's stress and elicits aggressive reactions (Erath & Bierman, 2006). It is also important to note that a large body of the literature examining the link between parental marital conflict and externalising problematic behaviours in children has focused on spouses who cohabit (Hosokawa, 2019). Furthermore, it has been suggested that a stronger relationship exists between parents who live together and externalising problematic behaviours in children, compared to parents who do not live together (Hosokawa, 2019). In accordance with social learning theory, this can be expected, as the child is then exposed to more frequent episodes of parental violence.

This, in turn, increases the likelihood of the child perceiving and adopting these aggressive behaviours.

Some authors note that children's problematic behaviours are also a result of poor emotional security. The emotional security hypothesis, coined by Cummings and Davies (1996), asserts that a secure parental relationship provides children with an emotionally secure base. However, exposure to destructive family aggression poses as a threat to a child's emotional security. This, in turn, leads children to become more behaviourally and emotionally reactive to parental conflict (Fosco & Grych, 2008). Therefore, direct exposure to parental conflict is likely to have a negative impact on a child's emotional well-being, sequentially leading to a higher likelihood that the child will react and act out.

### ***Hostile Parenting***

In addition to parental conflict, a hostile parenting approach is also likely to elicit problematic behaviours in children. A study by Weston and Qu (2014) using data from The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) demonstrates that children scored higher on levels of behavioural problems when the mother reported a hostile parenting approach. Their study also suggests that behavioural problems were more evident when the mother disapproved of their child's behaviour, displayed anger when punishing their child and when the child was infrequently praised (Weston & Qu, 2014). This was further demonstrated in a study by Mackenback et al. (2014), which suggests that harsh parenting, including verbal and physical threats and negative consequences for certain actions can lead to increased levels of externalising problematic behaviours, such as violence and inability to follow directions at school. Together, these studies suggest that externalising problematic behaviours in children are related to not only increased levels of parental conflict, but also when the child's mother has a hostile parenting approach.

## **The Present Study**

The overarching aim of the present study is to examine the direct and mediated pathways linking parental marital conflict with externalising problematic behaviours in children at home and school. The present study will focus on children aged 12 to 13 by applying a cross-sectional study design which uses data from the LSAC to represent children within Australia. To examine children's externalising problematic behaviours at home and school, mothers and teachers reports will be used to measure the study child's conduct problems. Investigating how children behave in different social settings may reveal more useful information, as previous studies tend to only focus on how children respond to interparental conflict at home.

Previous research indicates that parental marital conflict has been linked to higher levels of externalised problematic behaviours in children (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Further evidence suggests that parental marital conflict is also related to negative parenting strategies, such as a hostile parenting approach (O'Keefe, 1994; Ogundele, 2018). While parental marital conflict and a hostile parenting approach have both been demonstrated to increase levels of problematic behaviours in children, the literature reveals a number of gaps to assess if a hostile parenting approach mediates this link (Erath & Bierman, 2006). Mediators are known as the mechanisms by which an independent variable (e.g., marital conflict) influences outcomes (e.g., behavioural maladjustment) (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Mediators are conceptualised as explaining, to some extent, how a risk factor (e.g., marital conflict) leads to maladaptive outcomes, rather than searching for a single causal mechanism (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Therefore, the present study aims to examine the direct and mediated relations linking parental marital conflict with child externalising problematic behaviours at home and at school, with maternal hostility as a possible mediator of these



relationships. The present study will also examine the correlates of externalising problematic behaviours at home and school. Further, the literature reports that marital couples who are more satisfied tend to display more warmth when interacting with their child, which may help to protect against behavioural maladjustment in children (McCoy et al., 2013). Therefore, the present study will also investigate the correlates of positive influences such as parental marital quality and maternal parental warmth.

## Method

The dataset for this study was taken from the *Growing Up In Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (2018) dataset. This dataset addresses a range of research questions following the development of 10,000 children and families from all parts of Australia (Qu & Weston, 2014).

The data for the current study was taken from the K Cohort, at Wave 5 (2012), when the children were 12 to 13 years old ( $N = 2,157$ ). In order to be included in the current study, the study child had to have a mother that was legally married and currently co-habiting with their partner. The reason for this were that marital couples report lower relationship quality and higher levels of conflict and perpetration than unmarried or defacto individuals (Brown & Bulanda, 2008). In addition to this, children exposed to parents who live together are more likely to develop increased levels of externalising problematic behaviours (Hosokawa, 2019).

The LSAC data used in this study was obtained via face-to-face interviews, which was carried out by a trained researcher. As well, written questionnaires were distributed during this same interview which were completed by the study child's mother and teacher. The LSAC study was approved by the Australian Institute of Family Studies Ethics Committee, with written informed consent given by the study child's mother and teacher (Liu et al., 2018).

## Measures

### *Parental Marital Conflict*

Parental marital conflict was measured using the Co-Parenting Relationship: Exposure to Conflict sub-scale. This sub-scale was designed to measure the extent to which parents exposed their children to their marital conflicts (Feinberg et al., 2012). The Co-

Parenting Relationship: Exposure to Conflict sub-scale is a 5-item Likert-scale measure which asks questions concerning how often the couple: disagree re child-rearing, has stressful conversations, argues with partner, shows hostility with partner, and shows violence with partner. For the present study, data was collected from the study child's mother to measure parental marital conflict. The study child's mother responded to the scale as 'never' being 1 through to 'always' being 5. The CRS-E revealed a high internal consistency of  $a = .83$  to  $.88$  (Feinberg et al., 2012), and the mean score of these items were used in analyses, with higher scores indicating higher levels of marital conflict.

### ***Maternal Hostility***

Maternal hostility was measured using the Parent Anger Scale. This scale was designed for assessing anger specific to the parent-child dyad, with a high internal consistency of  $a = .95$  (Gavita et al. 2011). The Parent Anger Scale is a 6-item Likert-scale measure which asks the following questions concerning how often the parent: praises their child's behaviour, disapproves of child's behaviour, is angry when punishing, has problems managing the child, tells the child they're not good, and the punishment depends on their mood. Data was collected from the study child's mother to measure levels of maternal hostility. The study child's mother responded as 'never/almost never' being 1 through to 'all the time' being 5. The LSAC dataset reverse coded the variable 'praises behaviour' to ensure that higher scores indicated more increased levels of hostile parenting. The mean score of these items were used in analyses.

### ***Child Externalising Problematic Behaviours (home and school)***

Externalising problematic behaviours were measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: Conduct Disorder sub-scale. The Strengths and Difficulties

Questionnaire: Conduct Disorder sub-scale is a short screening assessment of conduct problems for 4 to 17 year olds that is extensively used across clinical and community settings (Goodman & Scott, 1999). It is a 5-item Likert-scale measure that examines the study child's temper, if they obey requests, fights/bullies other children, often lies or cheats, or steals. The study child's mother and teacher responded to these questions as 'not true' being 0, 'somewhat true' being 1 or 'certainly true' being 2 and demonstrates a decent internal consistency of  $a = 0.71$  (Bøe, 2016). The mean score of these items were used in analyses with higher scores indicating higher levels of externalising problematic behaviours.

### ***Parental Marital Quality***

Parental marital quality was measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale. This scale was designed to measure how satisfied an individual is with their relationship (Hendrick 1988). The Relationship Assessment Scale demonstrates good criterion validity with a high internal consistency of  $a = .91$  (Vaughn & Baier, 1999). The RAS is a 7-item Likert scale measure, with the study child's mother completing the following questions: partner meets needs, satisfaction with relationship, quality of relationship, wish never married, relationship meets expectations, love partner and number of problems in relationship. The study child's mother responded as 1 indicating 'never' or 'not at all' through to 7 indicating 'very often' or 'very much'. The LSAC dataset reverse coded the variables 'wish never married' and 'number of problems in relationship' to ensure that higher scores indicated higher levels of relationship satisfaction. The mean score of these items were used in analyses.

### ***Parental Warmth***

Parental warmth was measured using the Parent Child Relationship Inventory. This scale was designed to measure a parents attitudes and skills towards parenting and towards

their child (Gerard, 1994). The Parent Child Relationship Inventory demonstrates a reasonable internal consistency score of  $\alpha = .79$  and good test-retest reliability (.81). The Parent Child Relationship Inventory is a 6-item Likert-scale measure, with the study child's mother responding to the following questions to assess if they: hug their child, express happiness to their child, warm encounters with their child, enjoy doing things with their child, close when happy or upset and display physical affection. The study child's mother responded as 'never/almost never' being 1 through to 'almost/always' being 5. The mean score of these items were used in analyses with higher scores indicating higher levels of parental warmth.

## Results

Statistical analyses were conducted using R Studio Version 1.2.5001. All participants with missing data were removed from further analyses, reducing the dataset from 2,845 to 2,157 subjects. Out of the 2,157 children in this study, 1,076 were male (49.88%) and 1,081 were female (50.11%).

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics and total scores among all measures included in the present study as well as the measures minimum and maximum values. As can be seen in Table 1, a large proportion of children in the present study did not exhibit high levels of externalising problematic behaviours at home or school.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Total Scores Among all Measures*

Measure	M( <i>SD</i> )	Minimum	Maximum
Parental Marital Conflict	2.06(.63)	1	5
Child EPB (home)	.93(1.29)	0	10
Child EPB (school)	.52(1.19)	0	10
Maternal Hostility	1.91(.55)	1	4.5
Maternal Parental Warmth	4.18(.63)	1.5	5
Parental Marital Quality	4.26(.74)	1	5

*Note.* EPB = Externalising Problematic Behaviour. *SD* = Standard Deviation.

## Correlations

Table 2 indicates that parental marital conflict showed a statistically significant, weak positive association with levels of child externalising problematic behaviours at home and school. Moreover, maternal hostility revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive association with levels of child externalising problematic behaviours at home and a weak positive association at school. As well, parental marital conflict showed a statistically significant, weak positive association with maternal hostility.

Table 2 further demonstrates that parental marital quality had a statistically significant, weak positive correlation with maternal parental warmth. While on the other hand, parental marital conflict showed a statistically significant, weak negative correlation with maternal parental warmth. Additionally, maternal parental warmth revealed a statistically significant, weak negative association with levels of child externalising problematic behaviours at home and school.

**Table 2**

*Pearson's Correlation Matrix Among all Measures*

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Parental Marital Conflict	-	.21***	.07***	.29***	-.17***	-.66***
2 Child EPB (home)		-	.32***	.51***	-.29***	-.14***
3 Child EPB (school)			-	.20***	-.09***	-.07***
4 Maternal Hostility				-	-.43***	-.18***
5 Maternal Parental Warmth					-	.18***
6 Parental Marital Quality						-

*Note.* EPB = Externalising Problematic Behaviour.

\*\*\*  $p < .000$ , two-tailed.

### Causal Mediation Analyses

Two separate causal mediation analyses were performed in the present study using Preacher and Hayes' (2004) approach to mediation. In their article, Preacher and Hayes (2004) argue that a necessary component of mediation is to directly test the significance of the indirect effect by implementing a bootstrap approach to obtain the confidence intervals in addition to using the traditional approach advocated by Baron and Kenny (1986).

Figure 1 shows the effect of parental marital conflict on levels of externalising problematic behaviours in children at home was partially mediated via maternal hostility. The regression coefficient between parental marital conflict and levels of externalising problematic behaviours at home was significant. The indirect effect was  $(.25) * (1.14) = .28$ . The significance of this indirect effect was tested using bootstrapping procedures. Unstandardised indirect effects were computed for each 1,000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5<sup>th</sup> and 97.5<sup>th</sup> percentiles. The bootstrapped unstandardised indirect effect was .28 and the 95% confidence interval ranged from .23 to .35. Thus, the indirect effect was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the mediation analysis bootstrapped coefficients, displaying the indirect (or average causal mediation effect; ACME) ( $\beta = .28, p < .001$ ), the effect of parental marital conflict on child externalising problematic behaviours at home with maternal hostility as the mediator (or average direct effect; ADE) ( $\beta = .13, p < .001$ ), and the total effect ( $\beta = .42, p < .001$ ). These results further demonstrate that after finding a significant indirect effect, the direct effect remains statistically significant after controlling for maternal hostility, again, indicating that partial mediation has occurred (Rucker et al., 2011, p. 361).

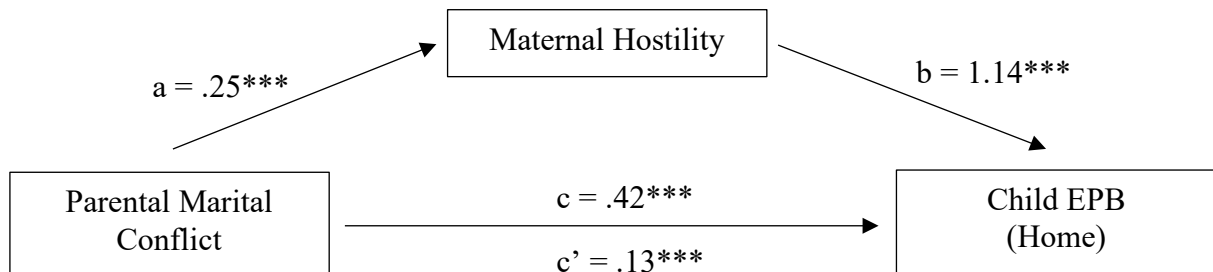


Figure 3 shows the effect of parental marital conflict on levels of externalising problematic behaviours in children at school was also partially mediated via maternal hostility. The regression coefficient between parental marital conflict and levels of externalising problematic behaviours at school was significant. The indirect effect was  $(.25) \times (.42) = .10$ . The significance of this indirect effect was then tested using bootstrapping procedures. Unstandardised indirect effects were computed for each 1,000 bootstrapped samples, and the 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5<sup>th</sup> and 97.5<sup>th</sup> percentiles. The bootstrapped unstandardised indirect effect was .10 and the 95% confidence interval ranged from .07 to .14. Thus, the indirect effect was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the mediation analysis bootstrapped coefficients, displaying the indirect (or average causal mediation effect; ACME) ( $\beta = .10, p < .001$ ), the effect of parental marital conflict on child externalising problematic behaviours at school with maternal hostility as the mediator (or average direct effect; ADE) ( $\beta = .02, p < .01$ ), and the total effect ( $\beta = .13, p < .01$ ). These results further demonstrate that after finding a significant indirect effect, the direct effect remains statistically significant after controlling for maternal hostility, again, indicating that partial mediation has occurred (Rucker et al., 2011, p. 361).

**Figure 1**

*Causal Mediation Analysis of the Relationship Between Parental Marital Conflict and Child Externalising Problematic Behaviour at Home as Mediated by Maternal Hostility*

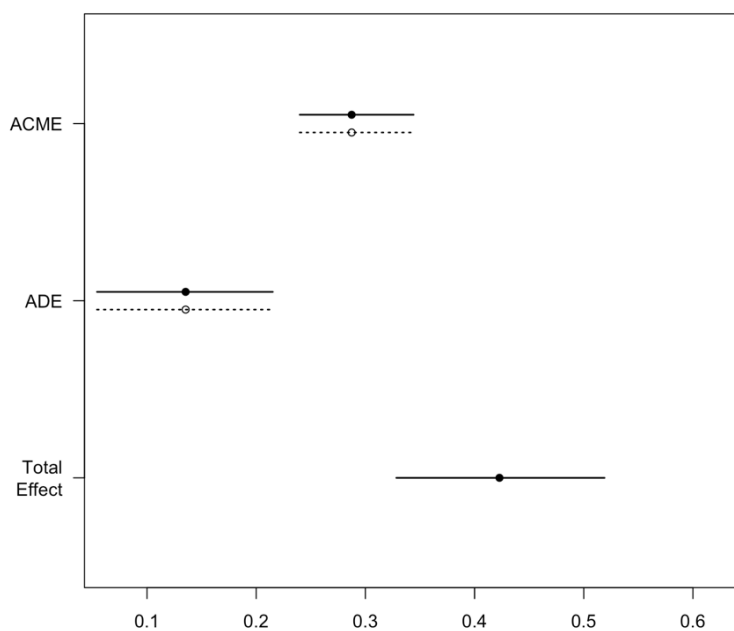


*Note.* EPB = Externalising Problematic Behaviour. Values are unstandardised regression coefficients. For the final model in mediation analyses,  $R^2 = .25$ ,  $F(2, 2154) = 378.9$ .

$*** p < .001$ , two-tailed.

**Figure 2**

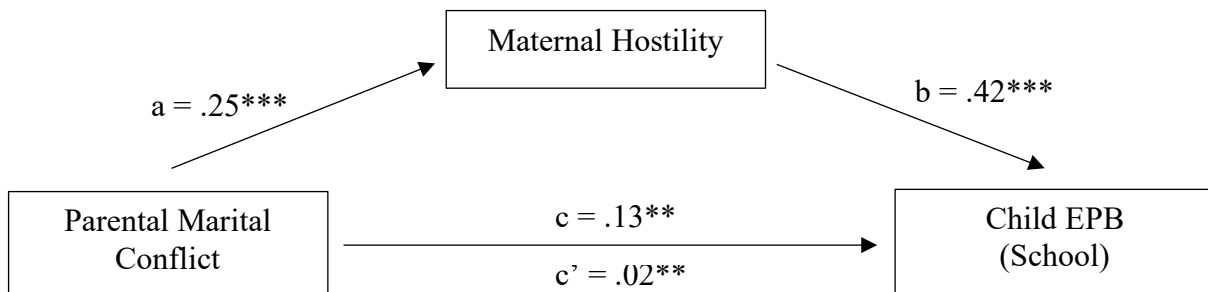
*Causal Mediation Analysis Bootstrapped Coefficients displaying ACME, ADE and the Total Effect of the Relationship Between Parental Marital Conflict and Child Externalising Problematic Behaviour at Home as Mediated by Maternal Hostility*



*Note.* ACME = Average Causal Mediation Effects. ADE = Average Direct Effects.

**Figure 3**

*Causal Mediation Analysis of the Relationship Between Parental Marital Conflict and Child Externalising Problematic Behaviour at School as Mediated by Maternal Hostility*

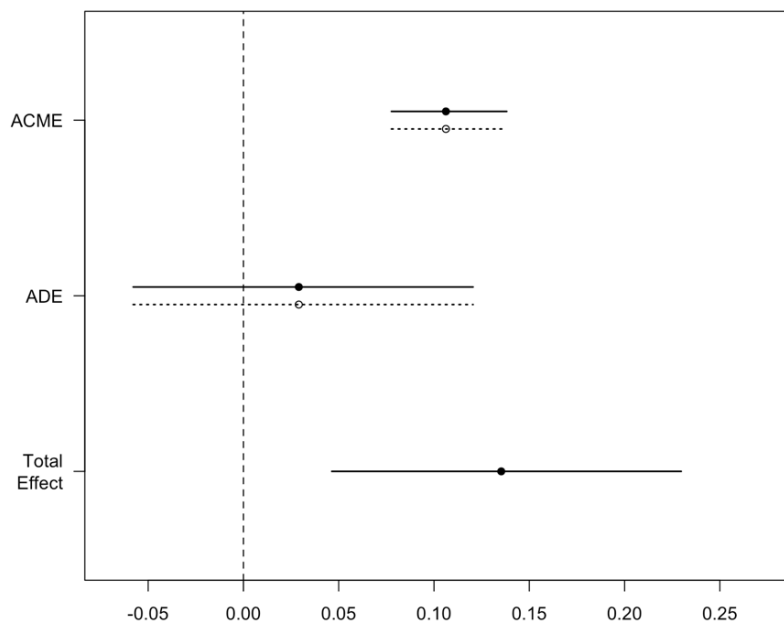


*Note.* EPB = Externalising Problematic Behaviour. Values are unstandardised regression coefficients. For the final model in mediation analyses,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(2, 2154) = 44.72$ .

$***p < .001$ , two-tailed.  $**p < .01$ , two-tailed.

**Figure 4**

*Causal Mediation Analysis Bootstrapped Coefficients displaying ACME, ADE and the Total Effect of the Relationship Between Parental Marital Conflict and Child Externalising Problematic Behaviour at School as Mediated by Maternal Hostility*



*Note.* ACME = Average Causal Mediation Effects. ADE = Average Direct Effects.

## Discussion

### **Direct Links Between Parental Marital Conflict and Child Externalising Problematic Behaviours**

Results from the present study suggest that parental marital conflict has a direct impact on children's levels of externalising problematic behaviours. This finding is consistent with previous studies, which have also indicated that higher levels of marital conflict are linked to a greater likelihood that the child will have an externalised behavioural problem (Bolsoni-Silva & Loureiro, 2020; Cummings & Davies, 2002). Additionally, the findings in the present study may also be supported by Bandura's social learning theory, in that children are likely to develop problematic behaviours as a result of direct exposure through observing how their parents interact with one another (Cummings & Davies, 1994). For instance, if marital partners are violent with one another or express hostility in front of their children, the child is then more likely to adopt and model these same behaviours. These results may also be explained by the emotional security hypothesis, as parental violence is one of the biggest threats to a child's emotional security, which in turn can make the child feel unsafe and more at risk of developing an externalised problematic behavioural disorder (Davies & Woitach, 2008).

While the relationship between parental marital conflict and externalising problematic behaviours has been well-documented, potential research examining how children behave in different settings has been less explored (Harold & Sellers, 2018). The present study sought to investigate how children respond to interparental violence in different settings and found that child scored higher on levels of externalising problematic behaviours at home, and less so at school. A possible explanation for this occurrence might be due to the child trying to hide their problematic behavioural symptoms in front of their peers. According to Yap and

Jorm (2015), some children might want to appear less symptomatic in order to maintain their social perception and fit in without having to feel ashamed. A study by Ogundele (2018) found that it was common for teachers to report that the child is well-behaved at school even when the child has a diagnosed behavioural disorder. Another possible explanation is that children may feel less threatened at school compared to at home where the interparental conflict takes place (Yap & Jorm, 2015). Therefore, it is plausible that children in the present study fared higher on levels of externalised problematic behaviours at home, as this is where the child feels less emotionally secure and unsafe.

### **Parental Marital Conflict and Child Externalising Problematic Behaviours as Mediated by Maternal Hostility, and Positive Influences**

Causal mediation analyses were used in the present study to examine if maternal hostility would mediate the relationship between parental marital conflict and externalising problematic behaviours in children at home and school. Results from the present study reveal support for partial mediation, with maternal hostility accounting for 68% of the variance linking parental marital conflict with externalising problematic behaviours at home and 78% at school. While the link between parental marital conflict and problematic behaviours in children is well-documented, fewer studies have examined hostile parenting as a potential mediator of this link (Harold & Sellers, 2018). Some studies, however, offer explanations to support why hostile parenting may mediate this relationship. For instance, research indicates that parents may feel too emotionally drained from their marital issues to provide their child with a stable and secure parenting approach (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). Furthermore, findings from the present study may be explained by the spill-over hypothesis, which posits that marital conflict serves as a source of tension and can enable parents to feel more irritable and impatient with their child (Repetti, 1987). Additional studies highlight that parents who

are more violent in their marriage are also likely to adopt harsher discipline methods and exhibit more aggressive parenting styles (Robles et al., 2014). The present study reports similar findings, revealing that parental marital conflict has a weak, positive association with maternal hostility. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the reason for a correlation this weak being significant is that the size of the sample was very large.

While marital conflict can have a negative influence on how a parent behaves in the parent-child relationship, studies show that positive influences, such as marital quality, are likely to elicit more positive parenting behaviours (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014). For instance, a study by Gattis et al. (2008) reported that mothers who exhibit high levels of marital satisfaction showed less hostility towards their child. With this in mind, the present study found a weak, negative correlation between parental marital quality and maternal hostility. This finding suggests that mothers who fared higher on levels of marital quality are less likely to display negative parenting techniques, including physical aggression and punitive parenting approaches with their children.

In addition to parental marital conflict relating to maternal hostility, maternal hostility was also found to have a strong, positive correlation with levels of externalising problematic behaviours in children at home. Moreover, the association between maternal hostility and child externalising problematic behaviours at home was much stronger than the association between parental marital conflict and externalising problematic behaviours at home. This finding demonstrates that children fared higher on levels of externalising problematic behaviours when the mother reported a hostile parenting approach more so than when the mother reported high levels of interparental conflict. A study by Harold et al. (2012) examining interparental conflict, hostile parenting and child behavioural outcomes reported similar results, suggesting that while children were negatively impacted by interparental violence, hostile parenting had a more detrimental effect on a child's conduct problems when

the mother frequently revealed harsh disciplinary confrontations. Another study by Mackenback et al. (2014) drew similar conclusions, suggesting that harsh parenting and verbal and physical threats can lead to exceptionally increased levels of externalising problematic behaviours in children, including aggressive behaviour.

While parental marital conflict has been demonstrated to increase negative parenting styles, studies have found that marital couples who are more satisfied tend to display more warmth when interacting with their child (McCoy et al., 2013). Furthermore, the present study examined this link and found that mothers who fared higher on levels of marital quality showed a weak, positive correlation with maternal parental warmth. These findings are similar with McCoy et al. (2013), concluding that mothers who are more satisfied with their marriage are likely to display more warmth, including more affection and happiness towards their child. In addition to this, results in the present study reveal that maternal parental warmth had a weak, negative correlation with child externalising problematic behaviours at home and school. One explanation for this might be that high levels of parental warmth has been linked with positive development outcomes in children including healthy emotional regulation capacities (Etkin et al., 2014). Consequently, it may be suggested that if parents are able to demonstrate constructive marital conflict strategies, this may have a positive influence on parenting, which in turn may help buffer against externalising problematic behaviours in children (Buehler & Gerard, 2002).

### **Limitations**

Several limitations should also be considered. First, the present study contained a relative degree of bias, as the sample only included children of married mothers who cohabitate with their spouses, limiting the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the wider population. Second, the measure of parental marital conflict in the present study

was taken exclusively from the mothers perceptions of their own and their spouses marital conflicts. With no data regarding the father's perspective of their overall marriage, this leaves a significant source of influence unmeasured. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study did not allow for causation to be inferred. Although the pathway was specified from marital conflict to maternal hostility to child externalising problematic behaviours, it is probable that these constructs are complex and multidirectional (Erath & Bierman, 2006). Finally, the measures in the study were reliant on self-report data. Although participants were kept anonymous to encourage honest responses, there is still risk for response biases such as social desirability, which has a consequence on data validity. However, in support of the present study, the results are relatively consistent with a large body of research on the intercorrelations among marital conflict, maternal hostile parenting and child behavioural outcomes.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

The present study provides evidence for both direct and mediated pathways linking parental marital conflict, maternal hostile parenting and child externalising problematic behaviours. These results suggest the possibility that theoretical models proposing behavioural modelling, emotional security, and negative parenting styles each play an important role in the transmission of problematic behaviour from marital functioning to child behavioural outcomes. However, it is important for future research to examine the processes of these theoretical models more directly to further explain how marital conflict affects problematic behaviours in children.

Few practical implications also need to be considered for future research. The direct relationship between marital conflict and child problematic behaviours suggest that interventions at the parent-child level alone may not be enough to protect children from the



negative outcomes of interparental marital conflict. However, given that constructive marital conflict strategies have been shown to have a positive influence on parenting, greater attention towards anger management and emotional regulation among parents may thereby have a protective influence on parenting and, in turn, on child behavioural adjustment.

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