

**THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT AND TASK
COMPLETION OVER-TIME: PARENTAL CLOSENESS AS A MEDIATOR**

by

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COMPLETION OVER-TIME: PARENTAL CLOSENESS AS A MEDIATOR**

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ABSTRACT

Current literature suggests that interparental conflict negatively impacts children's psychological and behavioral development. However, less is known about the impact of interparental conflict on children's cognitive development. Research also suggests that positive parenting may act as a protective factor against poor developmental outcomes in children. The purpose of the current study was to examine the association between interparental conflict and children's task completion over time, as well as examine whether parental closeness mediated this relationship. This study utilized data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a large nationally representative sample of low-income families, which included data from mothers, fathers, and children from five waves (n= 4,897). Results from regression models suggested that interparental conflict during early childhood from both parents' perspectives had a significant negative impact on children's task completion. Additionally, while controlling for early childhood conflict, mothers' perspectives of interparental conflict during middle childhood negatively impacted children's task completion. However, this relationship was not significant for the father's perspective of conflict during middle childhood. Regarding mediation analyses, only *paternal closeness* significantly mediated the association between interparental conflict and task completion. Findings from this study suggested that exposure to present interparental conflict may impact children's ability to complete tasks. Additionally, paternal closeness may act as a protective factor against the

negative effects of interparental conflict. The findings of this study may inform families about the importance of positive conflict resolution and positive parenting.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Interparental conflict is described as frequent and prolonged disagreements and arguments between parents (Buehler et al., 1997; Fear et al., 2009). Depending on its severity and the child involved, research suggests that it can be a risk factor for youth who are exposed to it (Buehler et al., 1997; Fear et al., 2009; Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010; Siffert et al., 2012). Specific outcomes for youth experiencing interparental conflict include internalizing behaviors, which are negative behaviors focused inwards such as anxiety and depression, externalizing behaviors, described as negative or antisocial behaviors directed towards one's outer environment such as aggression and classroom disruption, and to a lesser extent, lower cognitive development (i.e., mental processes that allow individuals to perceive, interpret, and learn about information from their environment) (Buehler et al., 1997; Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010; Pendry & Adam, 2013).

The apparent negative effects interparental conflict has on the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development of children has further implications for other aspects of the children's lives. For example, children who experience interparental conflict are more likely to have lower academic achievement than those who do not experience such conflict (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010). Additionally, children who are

exposed to interparental conflict have a tendency towards poor academic achievement relative to those who do not experience this conflict, and may also have lower cognitive abilities, which may further impede their future development (Davies et al., 2008).

Though the current body of literature links interparental conflict to children's academic achievement, less is known about the specific cognitive factors that may be impaired as a result of exposure to this particular kind of conflict. This is important however, as such information may provide insight related to tailoring a developmental plan that meets the individual and precise needs of children, particularly those from contentious home environments.

Research has consistently shown that specific cognitive skills are important to children's development (Dent & Koenka, 2016). For example, cognitive skills such as executive functioning (e.g., task completion) allow children to learn and process information more efficiently, and complete assignments and tasks given to them in school (Best et al., 2011). Therefore, identifying specific cognitive functions may be helpful in determining what skills are being hindered as a result of negative experiences such as interparental conflict; in turn, this may lead to beneficial interventions for this particular population. Unfortunately, previous measures of cognitive factors often do not focus attention on any one skill. This may lead to failure in adequately highlighting which cognitive skill is most at-risk, as a focus on general cognitive factors (e.g., general cognition, intelligence) does not allow for an individualized treatment plan, as it may be too extensive and broad in scope.

Furthermore, a salient component of a child's development is their relationship with their parents. Positive parent-child relationships have been found to encourage children's positive development despite being exposed to negative circumstances. For example, children who have a quality relationship with their parents, characterized by positive interactions, are shown to perform better on executive and cognitive functioning tasks (Bernier et al., 2012). However, relative to emotional and behavioral development, the influence of positive parent-child relationships on specific cognitive skills is a less explored phenomenon in the current research literature. Though interparental conflict negatively impacts children's adjustment, having a quality relationship with a parent may mediate this association (Richardson & McCabe, 2001).

A specific cognitive skill that may be impacted by interparental conflict is task completion. Children who are exposed to interparental conflict may have lower task completion than children who are not exposed. However, this relationship may be alleviated by positive parent-child relationship (e.g., parental closeness). That is, the negative effects of interparental conflict on children's ability to complete tasks may be lessened when parents have a close relationship with their children.

Other factors related to exposure to interparental conflict may also influence children's task completion. For example, children who are exposed to interparental conflict in early childhood may have varying task completion abilities than children who are exposed in middle childhood. Prior research attributes this difference to the increased likelihood that repeated exposure of interparental conflict correlates with

worsened developmental outcomes (e.g., Ingoldsby et al., 1999). Additionally, there may be differences based on gender (Naglieri & Rojahn, 2001), race (Davis-Kean, 2005), and age (Rhoades, 2008). Therefore, based on previous literature, the current study investigates the association between interparental conflict and task completion. The study also explores whether positive parenting characteristic of a close parent-child relationship mediates the relationship between interparental conflict and task completion over time, while controlling for such factors as gender, age, and race. This study investigates the aforementioned relationships within the context of the risk and resiliency theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework: Risk and Resilience

Norman Garmezy pioneered the research on resilience within at-risk populations by studying mothers with schizophrenia and their children who were at risk of developing schizophrenia (Garmezy et al., 1984). Garmezy's research led other scholars within the field to expand on the risk and resilience theoretical framework. Concepts pertinent to this framework include risk factors, protective factors, and resilience. The risk and resilience framework examines the factors that contribute to resiliency after an individual has experienced adversity and aims to distinguish the positive outcomes of these individuals (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Accordingly, this framework proposes that when individuals are exposed to risk factors, they have an increased probability of developing negative outcomes (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010). For example, when children are exposed to interparental conflict, they are more likely

to develop a series of negative outcomes including internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Bradford et al., 2008). Despite the propensity towards negative outcomes however, when individuals are exposed to protective factors after exposure to risk, they are less likely to experience negative consequences (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010).

Risk factors are considered to be negative factors that increase the potential for maladjustment or negative outcomes (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Among children and adolescents in particular, negative outcomes include poor academic performance, delinquent behaviors, and internalizing problems (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010). Additional risk factors that may place children at a disadvantage for experiencing negative outcomes include experiencing child abuse, exposure to interparental conflict, and parents' divorce (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010; Luthar, 2003). Oftentimes, risk factors co-occur and accumulate, which in turn, exacerbates the probability of negative experiences (Masten, 2001).

Conversely, protective factors are those factors that allow individuals to experience resilience (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Exposure to protective factors ultimately decreases the likelihood of poor outcomes associated with risk factors (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Examples of protective factors include positive parent-child relationships, social support, and demographic factors such as age and gender (e.g., Davies et al., 2019; Masten, 2001; Taylor, 2010).

Lastly, resilience is a process that is identified as positive outcomes (e.g., high academic achievement) exhibited by an individual despite having been exposed to risk factors (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Luthar, 2003; Masten, 2001; Rutter, 2012). Persons who are characterized as resilient have reduced vulnerabilities to negative outcomes and additional risk factors (Rutter, 2012). It is important to note that a person cannot exhibit resilience unless they have been exposed to risk factors (Masten, 2001). That is, an individual must have experienced adversity in order to be considered resilient.

Previous research utilizing the risk and resilience framework suggests that positive outcomes are exhibited in spite of individuals experiencing risk factors. Ghazarian and Buehler (2010) noted that interparental conflict is considered a risk factor for children who witness the conflict. Additionally, interparental conflict is a risk factor for outcomes such as increased behavioral problems within youth and decreased academic achievement (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010). In other words, children who are exposed to interparental conflict are more likely than those who have not been exposed, to exhibit behavioral problems and poor academic achievement.

Ghazarian and Buehler (2010) found that positive parenting behaviors such as maternal acceptance and monitoring acted as protective factors for children who were exposed to interparental conflict. Accordingly, children who were exposed to interparental conflict, but also experienced maternal acceptance and quality parent-child interactions were less likely to exhibit negative outcomes than those children who were exposed but did not experience maternal acceptance and quality parent-child

interactions. In sum, utilizing a risk and resilience theoretical framework will be beneficial in examining the association between interparental conflict and the developmental outcomes of children who have been exposed to it. However, a thorough review of the literature pertaining to interparental conflict, what it entails, and how it is conceptualized is also necessary in order to understand its impact on children's development.

Interparental Conflict (IV)

Conflict is a normal and unavoidable part of family functioning. Interparental conflict, in contrast, is a taxing experience that is multidimensional and pertains to disagreements between parents (Bradford et al., 2008; Buehler et al., 1997; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Interparental conflict is characterized by the frequency, intensity, duration, content, degree of resolution, and expression of conflict, which are differentiated from everyday conflict (Bradford et al., 2008; Buehler et al., 1997; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). For example, parents demonstrate interparental conflict when arguments about topics such as finances or parenting practices lead to one or both parents exhibiting physical aggression (e.g., throwing items) or nonverbal anger (e.g., eye-rolling) (Cummings et al., 2012). Additionally, exposure to interparental conflict negatively impacts children's well-being. Children's well-being, according to the literature, is characteristic of a child's health in multiple domains such as their physical, cognitive, and behavioral development. The negative impact of interparental conflict on children's well-being

places them at risk for developing a host of negative outcomes, such as internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and lower general cognition (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Pendry & Adam, 2013).

Interparental conflict that is not properly resolved or poorly managed is likely to have a spillover effect such that tension between the two parents may lead to ineffective parenting behaviors and strained parent-child relationships (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Bradford et al., 2008; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). There are exhibited parenting behavior changes (e.g., aggressive parenting, less emotional support, and involving children in the conflict) that stem from interparental conflict, consequently impacting the child's well-being (Bradford & Barber, 2005; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). For example, when parents are actively engaged in interparental conflict, they may involve the child by asking him or her to deliver hostile messages to the other parent, thus creating undue stress for the child (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Children who become involved in interparental conflict are more likely to exhibit internalizing behaviors such as anxiety, relative to children who were uninvolved in their parents' conflict (Buchanan et al., 1991).

When assessing interparental conflict, the majority of the current literature gathers information from the children rather than the parents. For example, in their study, McDonald and Grych (2006) collected information from young children by having them complete the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale for Young Children (CPIC-Y). The CPIC-Y prompts children to respond to questions regarding different dimensions of their parents' conflict as well as their interpretation

of the conflict their parents demonstrate (Grych et al., 1992; McDonald & Grych, 2006). Tschann et al. (1999) also measured interparental conflict using offspring as respondents. Although it is important to understand how children perceive interparental conflict, it is not likely that they are exposed to the entirety of their parents' conflict, and as such, are also not privy to the nuances that are undoubtedly embedded within such conflict. Therefore, research should also prioritize assessing interparental conflict from the parents' views separately rather than singularly relying on the perspectives of the children. Also, it would be beneficial if studies measured interparental conflict from mothers and fathers separately as the two may perceive and interpret conflict differently as well (Dillaway & Broman, 2001; Jackson et al., 2014).

Differences in Perception of Interparental Conflict among Mothers and Fathers

Overwhelmingly, findings from the literature have suggested that mothers and fathers parent their children differently, even within the context of the same household (Dufur et al., 2010). Not only do mothers typically spend more time with their children than fathers do, they also do more household chores, even while working full time outside of the home (Craig, 2006). Furthermore, should parental separation occur, differences in parenting become even more disparate. For example, in custodial arrangements, Judges are more likely to grant full custody of children to mothers than to fathers (Artis, 2004), and children, therefore, spend considerably more time with their mothers than with their fathers. This discrepancy between mothers and fathers in time spent parenting contributes to differences in parenting and may also be a point a

conflict for parents. According to Chen and Johnston (2012), inconsistencies within childrearing practices (e.g., the mother believing the father is too lenient) are likely to generate interparental conflict.

A point of contention from women's perspectives stems from women's reports of being less satisfied in their marriages than men (Dillaway & Broman, 2001; Jackson et al., 2014). Factors that are likely to contribute to wives' being less satisfied, include their reporting of more household labor and parenting responsibilities than husbands (Dillaway & Broman, 2001). Additionally, as mothers, they are often tasked with the day-to-day caring for their children such as feeding and bathing, while fathers often spend more time engaged in leisure activities with their children (Dufur et al., 2010). This imbalance of responsibilities between parents may contribute to women being less satisfied in the marriages and as such, may be a source of conflict for mothers more so than for fathers.

A further point of marital contention centers on the ways in which conflict relating to specific topics are handled (e.g., parenting and finances), as discrepancies relating to a particular topic may be more salient for one partner over the other. For women especially, a perception of relationship inequity may be a source of conflict within the relationship (Dillaway & Broman, 2001). In contrast to mothers, fathers typically have more choices in terms of when they physically care for their children, even within intact families (Craig, 2006). For example, fathers typically care for their children through play and enjoyable activities, which do not have a set timetable (Craig, 2006). Mothers, however, are typically responsible for nursing their children,

which follows a relatively strict schedule (Craig, 2006). Wall and Arnold (2007) suggest that fathers are considered to be secondary parents such that their career duties come first, and parenting responsibilities are adjusted around their employment. Mothers on the other hand, are parents first and foremost, and their involvement in their children's lives is essential to their children's development (Wall & Arnold, 2007). Because fathers' responsibilities are traditionally to be the breadwinners of the family (Wall & Arnold, 2007), they typically spend less time physically caring for their children than mothers. Fathers, therefore, may view this imbalance in parenting as justified due to their financial responsibility to the family, while mothers may not believe that being the breadwinner is justification for contributing less to parenting. This is perhaps another reason why men report higher marital satisfaction than their wives (Jackson et al., 2014), and furthermore, why this imbalance in parenting responsibilities may be a point of conflict between parents.

The discrepancies between mothers and fathers are not only exhibited in the perceptions of conflict and division of responsibilities, but these differences also extend to the method either parent uses when engaging in conflict. For example, fathers utilize more physical aggression, domination, and withdrawal behaviors than mothers (Tschann et al., 1999). Mothers, in contrast, are more expressive when engaging in conflict (Tschann et al., 1999). Because of such differences, it is also possible that the perception and interpretation of the conflict between mothers and fathers is also vastly different.

Despite these noted differences, much of the existing literature that pertains to parenting disagreements are conducted solely on mothers while fathers' input is limited (Tavassolie et al., 2016). However, due to the exhibited differences in parents' perceptions of conflict, it is important to consider mothers' perceptions of interparental conflict independently from fathers', as exposure to interparental conflict may impact children's development differently, based on the interpretation of conflict of each parent. However, in addition to exploring parents' perception of interparental conflict (i.e., mother or father) on child outcomes, a review of the effects of interparental conflict on children's development is also warranted.

The Effects of Interparental Conflict on Children

Children exposed to interparental conflict are at risk for developing internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and decreased cognition (van Eldik et al., 2020). Interparental conflict is especially associated with detrimental psychological health in children when the conflict is directly observable by the child (Gonzales et al., 2000). It is also associated with negative cognitive appraisals, such as self-blame (Fosco & Grych, 2007; van Eldik et al., 2020). Children who experience self-blame as a result of interparental conflict may develop further internalizing problems such as anxiety (Rhoades, 2008). Similarly, children of parents who engage in interparental conflict are at risk of developing depressive symptomology (Bradford & Barber, 2005).

Interparental conflict may be worsened when presented with anger. According to researchers, when presented with anger, children who are exposed to this conflict may begin to display externalizing behavioral problems (e.g., aggression), and as such, may themselves become overly aggressive at home and in school (Marcus et al., 2001; Pendry et al., 2013). This tendency may be explained by children's inclination to reproduce the behavior of their parents during conflict (Pendry et al., 2013). In addition to children's emotional and behavioral development, cognitive development is also a salient aspect that is impacted by interparental conflict. However, relative to emotional and behavior development, cognitive development has garnered limited empirical investigation.

Despite the limited empirical inquiry regarding the impact of interparental conflict and its impact on children's cognition, cognitive development has important implications on children's development. For example, positive cognitive development, even among younger children, can be derailed in contentious contexts such as in environments where interparental conflict is taking place. Accordingly, even though younger children do not have the capacity to understand the nuances of conflict as compared to older children, they may still be affected by exposure. For example, an infant's exposure to interparental conflict is significantly related to lower cognitive abilities in early childhood (Pendry & Adam, 2013).

In early childhood, when children are exposed to interparental conflict, they may have difficulties with intellectual adjustment. According to researchers, interparental conflict may negatively impact children's ability to remain engaged with

tasks, and maintain attention in school (Davies et al., 2008; Sturge-Apple et al., 2008; Zemp et al., 2014). The problems in early childhood regarding intellectual adjustment resulting from interparental conflict exposure may therefore lead to lowered cognitive abilities, especially in regard to its impact on academic achievement. This issue is likely to continue in late childhood as well, as Ghazarian and Buehler (2010) reported that children who experienced high levels of interparental conflict in early childhood also experienced lower academic achievement in late childhood.

As the aforementioned research suggests, interparental conflict may have lasting effects on development, even throughout their lifespan (Cummings et al., 2006). Understanding how interparental conflict influences different domains of development related to cognition may therefore provide useful information to those invested in the well-being of children (e.g., educators, parents) over the long term. Such empirical findings may lead to best practices of intervention and preventative programs for children who have been or have the propensity of being exposed to interparental conflict. Future researchers, therefore, should investigate the effects of interparental conflict over time using longitudinal data in an effort to provide age-appropriate assistance to children who may be impacted.

In an effort to appropriately address the impact of interparental conflict on children's cognition, it is important to identify and target the specific cognitive skill that may be most at risk. Accordingly, task completion has been recognized in the literature as a significant cognitive skill relative to children's immediate and future development (e.g., Bang et al., 2011; Claessens et al., 2010).

Task Completion (DV)

Cognition is a broad term used to describe a multitude of mental processes such as the ability to perceive, interpret, and interact with one's environment. Cognition, both in terms of general and specific abilities has been shown to be associated with a host of positive outcomes for children, including academic achievement (Brock et al., 2009; Rohde & Thompson, 2007). For example, Rohde and Thompson (2007) found that specific cognitive skills such as processing speed (i.e., the amount of time it takes for a person to complete a mental task) predicted students' SAT math scores. Although cognition is often measured as the predictor of positive outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, career attainment), cognitive skills are in and of themselves significant components of development due to their implications on intellectual functioning.

Given the various impacts of cognitive skills on everyday life, especially intellectual ability, it would be beneficial to delineate among the cognitive skills that attribute to improving development in specific ways. This knowledge would further allow parents, educators, and others involved in improving children's cognitive development to determine what skills children may need assistance with, and as such, provide help in strengthening this particular cognitive skill. Such efforts may in turn, lead to the enhancement of children's overall functioning and intellectual abilities.

One cognitive skill to consider when identifying success in current and future performances is task completion. Task completion consists of completing assigned tasks in a time deemed appropriate for that particular task, while also staying on track

and doing so with accuracy. Task completion requires individuals to self-regulate, manage their time efficiently, persist with completing tasks, and monitor their own performances. This in turn, may lead to an increase in intellectual functioning (e.g., academic success) (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011; Zimmerman, 2002).

Task completion is particularly important within the context of schools, as teachers may use it as a way to gauge their students' academic performance and level of mastery (Patall et al., 2010). For example, teachers may present their students with assignments that are required to be completed in and out of the classroom in an effort to provide the students with additional practice and eventual mastery of the concepts that were taught. Completion of such tasks allows teachers to gauge their students' understanding of certain topics so they may be able to further assist them in areas that are needed.

Variations within students' ability of task completion are to be expected. Some students with or without disabilities have difficulties completing school assignments (e.g., homework) (Bryan & Burstein, 2004), which is often linked to the students' own lack of motivation or interest (Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Morgan, 2006). There are other potential challenges to task completion among school-aged children however, that are contextually based. One such challenge according to Bang et al. (2011) is family conflict. According to the authors, students in home environments that are disruptive and/or high in conflict tend to complete tasks (e.g., homework) less efficiently than students in households that provide a quiet and less contentious environment.

Additionally, the current literature suggests there may be differences in task completion as a result of various demographic characteristics, as variations have been noted across similar cognitive skills (e.g. sustained attention, effortful control, etc.). For example, Bang et al. (2011) suggested that girls were more likely to meet teachers' expectations and complete homework assignments than boys. Further, although there is limited research supporting differences in age regarding task completion among children, there has been support for differences in other cognitive abilities such as sustained attention. Accordingly, children's sustained attention has been found to improve as they get older, which may also be the case with task completion (Betts et al., 2006). Lastly, though a link between children's race or ethnicity in relation to task completion has not been well-established in the current literature, cognitive abilities, such as effortful control (i.e., one's ability to inhibit behavioral responses to regulate emotions and behaviors) has been shown to have a slight variation among different racial or ethnic backgrounds (Sulik et al., 2010).

Notably, the majority of the literature that focuses on task completion involves individuals who have some form of disability such as emotional disorders or learning disabilities (e.g., Ramsey et al., 2010; Scime & Norvilitis, 2006). However, it is necessary that future research on task completion samples from larger and more diverse populations, as such samples may provide greater insight into what factors may impact task completion among typical school-aged children. Findings may lead to a greater understanding of the cognitive abilities that are most pertinent to children's overall development. Furthermore, findings may garner implications as to what

interventions may be most appropriate in increasing task completion among children, and subsequent eventual academic and other long-term success.

Interparental Conflict (IV) and Task Completion (DV)

As previously mentioned, the impact of interparental conflict on children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors has been well documented in the literature (Cummings et al., 2012; Rhoades, 2008). In contrast, interparental conflict and its relationship with cognitive development in children has not been as well-established. Despite the limited research, child cognition is a salient domain of development that lays the foundation for achievement and successes in later life (Feinstein & Bynner; Pendry & Adam, 2013). Cognitive development, therefore, may be equally as important to children's development, if not more so, as it has the potential to foster or hinder adjustment in other key areas of development as well (Feinstein & Bynner, 2004; Cheng & Furnham, 2012).

Although sparse, there is some existing literature that has investigated the influence interparental conflict has on children's cognition. For example, Pendry and Adam (2013) found that exposure to interparental conflict in early childhood was related to lower general cognition. Also, children who have been exposed to interparental conflict exhibited poor behavioral inhibition (Pauli-Pott & Beckmann, 2007). An additional finding provided by Sturge-Apple et al. (2008) suggested that children who have been exposed to interparental conflict during early childhood may

have difficulties adjusting to school, specifically with displaying avoidance behaviors and attention difficulties.

Though there are multiple facets of cognitive abilities, task completion may be particularly impacted by conflict within the home (Bang et al., 2011). Nonetheless, at the time of the study, previous studies have not examined the impact of interparental conflict on task completion at present or as it develops over time. Given the increased likelihood of general cognitive abilities being negatively impacted as a result of interparental conflict (Davies et al., 2008) during childhood, it is also likely that similar to other cognitive skills (e.g., attention-span), such impact continues throughout the lifespan. It is important therefore, that the effects of task completion on early and later development are empirically assessed. Therefore, the current study investigates the impact that interparental conflict on task completion during early development, as well as how this conflict may impact children's task completion over time.

The Continued Effect of Interparental Conflict on Children over Time

Previous literature has established that interparental conflict is associated with children's problem behaviors (Buehler et al., 1997) and their poor academic achievement (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010), often using cross-sectional designs (e.g., Bradford et al., 2008). However, in an effort to gain a more in-depth understanding of the impact of interparental conflict on developmental outcomes (e.g., task completion) over time, a longitudinal approach is needed. Early and middle childhood are

especially significant developmental periods to consider when investigating child outcomes as these developmental periods often set the stage for life-long developmental trajectories (Feinstein & Bynner, 2004; Masten & Gewirtz, 2006). Therefore, an examination of the relationship between interparental conflict and children's task completion at varying stages will increase our understanding of this relationship from one stage to the next.

In a previous study, Ingoldsby et al. (1999) found that children's witnessing of interparental conflict at age two was related to behavioral problems and lower self-esteem in boys between the ages of three and five. Additionally, exposure to interparental conflict in early childhood was related to children's emotional insecurities, which in turn was associated with internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Cummings et al., 2012), as well as poor school adjustment in later years (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). These findings shed light on the fact that interparental conflict may have lasting effects on children's adjustment and therefore may also have profound impacts on their cognitive abilities over time.

It is also important to consider how developmentally different children's conceptualization of their parent's conflict may be as a result of their age. For example, despite children in early childhood being able to accurately perceive interparental conflict (Clements et al., 2014), their understanding of the conflict may not be as complex as that of older children in middle or late childhood; as such, they may also experience conflict differently. Young children tend to interpret interparental conflict as a result of their own faults more so than older children (Clements et al.,

2014). This interpretation may be due in part, to their limited understanding of the complexities of the conflict itself. Children's understanding of interparental conflict is likely to increase in complexity as they get older, and as such, may be attributed to maturation. Accordingly, Cummings et al. (2006) found that the association between interparental conflict and emotional security in middle childhood is more substantiated than in early childhood. Additionally, children in middle childhood who experienced interparental conflict also had lower coping efficacies and higher self-blaming appraisals (Wild & Richards, 2003). Higher self-blame appraisals stemming from interparental conflict among older children was also found to be associated with lower levels of academic achievement (Harold et al., 2007).

Similar to early childhood, exposure to interparental conflict in middle childhood impacts the socio-emotional and behavioral development of children. Cummings et al. (2004) found that exposure to interparental conflict was related to aggressive behaviors in children in middle to late childhood. The aforementioned findings further attest to the variations in perceptions of interparental conflict as children mature and how their adjustments/outcomes may be different as they get older as well.

An investigation into the specific components (e.g., home environment) of children's lives that impact their cognitive abilities is important given that development of cognitive skills is a significant proponent of children's overall functioning. Additional research that focuses on interparental conflict and the relationship it may have with specific cognitive skills (e.g., task completion) are

needed however (Bang et al., 2011). Moreover, future research should investigate the impacts of experiences (e.g., interparental conflict) at different developmental stages due to the qualitative differences that is characteristic of development at each stage. Nonetheless, despite evidence that interparental conflict has a negative impact on children's development, findings from previous literature suggests there are contextual factors that may alleviate its impact.

The Importance of Positive Parenting

Positive parenting is an important aspect of a child's environment that impacts their development in numerous ways (Amato & Fowler, 2002). Positive parenting is defined as "... the continual relationship of a parent(s) and a child or children that includes caring, teaching, leading, communicating, and providing for the needs of a child consistently and unconditionally" (Seay et al., 2014, p. 207). For example, children of parents who are involved in various aspects of their child's schooling often perform better academically, than children whose parents are less involved (Gordon & Cui, 2012). Among other things, positive parenting involves child-rearing practices such as non-violent discipline (e.g., time-out), parental involvement (e.g., reading, support, and high communication), and parental closeness (Knerr et al., 2013; Shah et al., 2015; Smith, 2010; Smokowski et al., 2015). In contrast, less desirable parenting tactics comprise of violent disciplinary tactics (e.g., spanking), lack of parental warmth, and interparental conflict (Bradford et al., 2008; Gershoff et al., 2012; Smokowski et al., 2015).

It is important to note, that the ideals of positive parenting are often contextualized within a Westernized framework, as is the case in this study, and may in fact not apply to all cultural backgrounds. Literature has shown that there are cultural variations in what constitutes positive parenting across families (e.g., Emmen et al., 2013). As such, parents from differing racial and ethnic backgrounds may conceptualize positive parenting differently (e.g., parental warmth, non-violent discipline) (Magariño et al., 2020). Further, the use of some parenting practices that are deemed as harmful (e.g., spanking, high parental control) may differently impact children's developmental outcomes (e.g., social, cognitive functioning) across cultures depending upon the expression, perception, and interpretation of the parenting behaviors (Ho et al., 2008; Sangawi et al., 2015). For example, among White families, mothers typically use fewer controlling practices (e.g., suggestions) to correct children's behaviors, while Hispanic mothers often utilize more parental control (e.g., commands) (Bornstein, 2012). Interestingly however, the use of higher parental control among Hispanic families may not elicit the same detrimental effects to the child's development as White families due to the cultural normalcy characteristic of high parental control in Hispanic cultures (Hoskins, 2014). In addition to Hispanic families, Black families are also more likely to utilize parenting behaviors that are often seen as harmful within the majority culture, such as high parental control, low parental warmth, and corporal punishment (Friedson, 2016). Unlike White children however, Black children who are disciplined by these parenting strategies may interpret the behaviors as positive and view it as their parents' efforts at protecting or

preparing them for experiences with discrimination or high-risk environments (Hoskins, 2014). Thus, they may not exhibit the same negative outcomes as White children whose parents utilize the same behaviors.

It is important to consider cultural differences when determining what practices are considered positive parenting; however, research has shown that positive parenting tactics such as parental warmth and high responsiveness are associated with positive child development in multiple domains (e.g., cognitive and behavioral development) cross-culturally (Mesman et al., 2012; Pastorelli et al., 2016).

Various aspects of positive parenting are associated with a myriad of positive outcomes in multiple domains of development throughout their children's lifespan. For example, children whose parents utilized positive parenting strategies (e.g., parental warmth) in early childhood are likely to exhibit a decrease in externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression) than children whose parents engaged in negative parenting tactics (Boeldt et al., 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2005; Gershoff et al., 2012). Also, positive parenting in the form of quality parent-child relationships in the formative years is associated with increased psychological well-being (e.g., high self-esteem) and high academic achievement (Smokowski et al., 2015), well into adolescence, and has been shown to have implications for successes in adulthood. Gordon and Cui (2015) found that positive parenting in the form of close, parent-adolescent relationship was associated with young adults' success such that positive parenting impacted educational attainment, which in turn, impacted adult children's career success.

In addition to the direct effects of parenting, the literature suggests that positive parenting may act as a mediator of child outcomes. Findings provided by Ying et al. (2018) suggested that the association between exposure to interparental conflict and children's depressive symptoms was mediated by parent-child communication. This relationship was such that interparental conflict impacted parent-child communication, which in turn reduced the negative effects of depressive symptomology in children (Ying et al., 2018).

An abundance of the current literature focuses on behavioral issues and academic achievement in relation to parenting strategies (Hollenstein et al., 2004; Smokowski et al., 2015), while cognitive outcomes (e.g., task completion) relative to positive parenting are less explored. Despite limited research on the impact of positive parenting on the cognitive skills of children, cognitive development is a significant component due to its implications on current and later developmental outcomes (e.g., Feinstein & Bynner, 2004). Extending the knowledge of parenting factors that impact cognitive development may garner a greater understanding of what promotes cognition. Additional research is needed therefore, that further investigates the mediating effect of positive parenting as possible mechanisms on developmental domains such as cognition.

Parental Closeness as a Mediator

Parent-child relationships that are comprised of parental involvement, positive parent-child communication, and emotional closeness, are reflective of close parent-

child relationships (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Goncy & van Dulmen, 2010; Wilder, 2014). Parental closeness is one aspect of positive parenting that has many encouraging implications on the developmental outcomes of children (Fosco et al., 2012). According to the literature, parental closeness is somewhat stable during early childhood (Driscoll & Pianta, 2011), and is particularly important among younger children. This importance may be due to the limited social interaction that young children have with other adults outside of their immediate family. Unlike adolescents, younger children are less likely to seek autonomy from their parents and are more likely to experience trust and communication with them (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005).

A close relationship with parents, especially during the formative years, prepares children for positive development in all developmental stages and domains. For example, Özdemir et al. (2017) suggested that adolescents who are close to their parents are less likely to portray aggressive behaviors. In addition to its negative association with externalizing behaviors, parental closeness is also associated with increased psychological well-being. Accordingly, adolescents who perceived themselves as close with their parents and had parents who were available (e.g., parental involvement) also reported higher levels of self-esteem, in comparison to adolescents who perceived lower levels of closeness and lower levels of parental involvement (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009). These findings suggest that parental closeness is directly associated with positive development and appropriate adjustment among children. As is the case in the aforementioned studies, findings related to parental closeness and youth outcomes often focus on parents' relationships with their

adolescent children. However, given the fundamental importance of building such relationships early on, it is important that researchers also explore the impact of positive parent-child relationships on development during the formative years of childhood as well.

In consideration of the impact of parental closeness on child outcomes, it is important that possible differences in parenting are also taken into consideration. More specifically, research findings have indicated that children experience variations in parental closeness, as a result of parent gender. For example, research suggests that mothers and fathers do not experience closeness with their children in the same way (Driscoll & Pianta, 2011). Driscoll and Pianta (2011) found that mothers reported increased closeness with boys and girls relative to fathers, and in this particular study, fathers reported that they were closer to their daughters than they were to their sons. Additionally, daughters reported that they experienced increased closeness to both parents in comparison to sons (Özdemir et al., 2017), again echoing past findings that suggests that there are variations in the closeness that mothers and fathers experience with their children, depending on the gender of the parent.

One study found a negative association between father-child closeness and youth problem behaviors (e.g., delinquency). Interestingly however, the authors reported that mothers' closeness to their children was not significantly associated with youth problem behaviors. This finding further suggests that perhaps fathers' closeness is a more salient feature when considering youth problem behaviors than mothers' closeness (Fosco et al., 2012). Additionally, Rostad et al. (2014) reported that

adolescent girls who were close with their fathers were less likely to engage in risky behaviors (e.g., illicit drug use and risky sexual behaviors) than girls who did not report such closeness with their fathers. These findings further highlight the inconsistencies in research examining the relationship between parental closeness for mothers and fathers and outcomes for their children.

Although current literature has increasingly shifted the focus of positive parenting to include fathers in addition to mothers (e.g., Rostad et al., 2014), a number of studies continue to examine mothers' and fathers' parenting as if the two were one and the same (Wilder, 2014). Even more, some studies focus exclusively on mothers' closeness (Sieving et al., 2000), disregarding the significance of the father-child relationship altogether. Given the differences in parenting and the substantial contribution of each parent to their child's development, it is important that research on parental closeness not only include both parents but also makes a distinction between mother and father closeness by parceling out their respective effects on children. Lastly, not only does prior research suggest the gender of the parent matters to the child's development, but the child's gender, age, and race are important individual-level factors to consider as well.

The Influence of Other Individual-Level Factors

According to the literature, the association between interparental conflict and task completion may vary as result of several demographic characteristics, specifically the gender, age, and race of the child. For one, there are inconsistencies in findings

regarding gender differences among children who have experienced interparental conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Ghazarian and Buehler (2010) reported that interparental conflict negatively impacted both girls' and boys' outcomes (i.e., academic achievement) equally. Conversely, Davies and Lindsay (2004) reported that girls exposed to interparental conflict in late childhood experienced greater vulnerability to developing internalizing behaviors than boys who were also exposed to interparental conflict. Additionally, Bang et al. (2011) found that school-aged girls were more likely to complete tasks such as homework, than boys.

Regarding age, interparental conflict has been found to impact children differently across developmental periods (Davies et al., 2006). As children grow older, their understanding of conflict increases in complexity, which in turn, may affect their development across various domains (Cummings et al., 2006). For example, children in middle childhood or later who were exposed to interparental conflict had significantly pronounced internalizing and externalizing behaviors than children who were exposed at a younger age (Rhoades, 2008).

Although there is limited research specifically examining the age differences of task completion in children, there has been support of age differences in similar cognitive skills. Sustained attention for example, which is an important component of task completion, has been found to increase with age. Sustained attention in children in middle childhood was significantly better than that of children in early childhood (Betts et al., 2006). This finding suggests that as children develop, so does their ability to accurately and more efficiently focus on tasks. Therefore, task completion among

older children is likely to be more proficient than task completion among children in early childhood.

Lastly, the effects of interparental conflict across different races and/or ethnicities have received limited empirical attention. Nonetheless, Krishnakumar et al. (2003) reported that externalizing behaviors among youth exposed to interparental conflict is similar among European American and African American youth. Notably in this study, differences in problem behaviors were only observed when considering ineffective parenting behaviors across the groups. Although there have been limited studies that have examined race as a focal variable pertaining to performances in task completion, current literature has garnered support for differences in academic achievement between races. According to Lee and Bowen (2006), elementary school teachers reported higher levels of academic achievement among European American students than among minority students.

Due to the inconsistencies and limited research in the literature regarding the influence of various demographic characteristics on gender, age, and race as it relates to the association between interparental conflict and cognitive outcomes such as task completion, additional research is needed. To further understand how interparental conflict impacts task completion, research that considers the variations among demographics should be examined. The current study, therefore, includes these covariates, as they have the potential to impact the association between interparental conflict and task completion in significant ways.

Chapter 2

PRESENT STUDY

To address the inconsistencies as well as the gaps in the current literature regarding the impact of interparental conflict on children's cognitive development and identify what factors may mediate this association, this study proposes three research questions:

1. Does interparental conflict impact children's task completion differently for mothers and fathers during early childhood, while controlling for gender, age, and race (Figures 1 and 2)?
2. Does interparental conflict impact children's task completion different for mothers and fathers, over time (e.g., middle childhood), while controlling for conflict in early childhood, gender, age, and race (Figures 3 and 4)?
3. Does parental closeness mediate the association between interparental conflict and task completion differently for mothers and fathers during early childhood, while controlling for gender, age, and race (Figures 1 and 2)?

Based on the theory of risk and resilience, as well as previous literature, the following hypotheses will be explored:

1. Interparental conflict during early childhood will have a significant negative association with task completion, for mothers only, while controlling for gender, age, and race.
2. Interparental conflict will have a significant negative association with task completion over time (e.g., middle childhood), for mothers only, while controlling for interparental conflict during early childhood, as well as gender, age, and race.
3. Parental closeness will mediate the association between interparental conflict during early childhood and task completion differently for mothers and fathers while controlling for gender, age, and race.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Interparental Conflict during Early Childhood from Mother’s Perspective

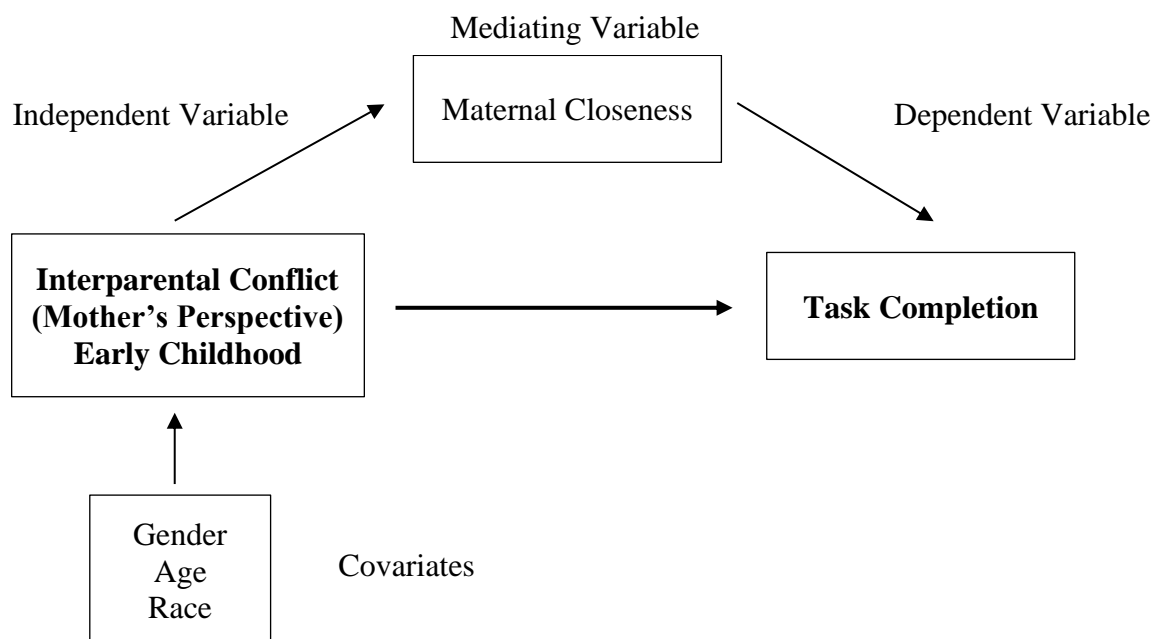


Figure 2. Conceptual Model for Interparental Conflict during Early Childhood from the Father's Perspective

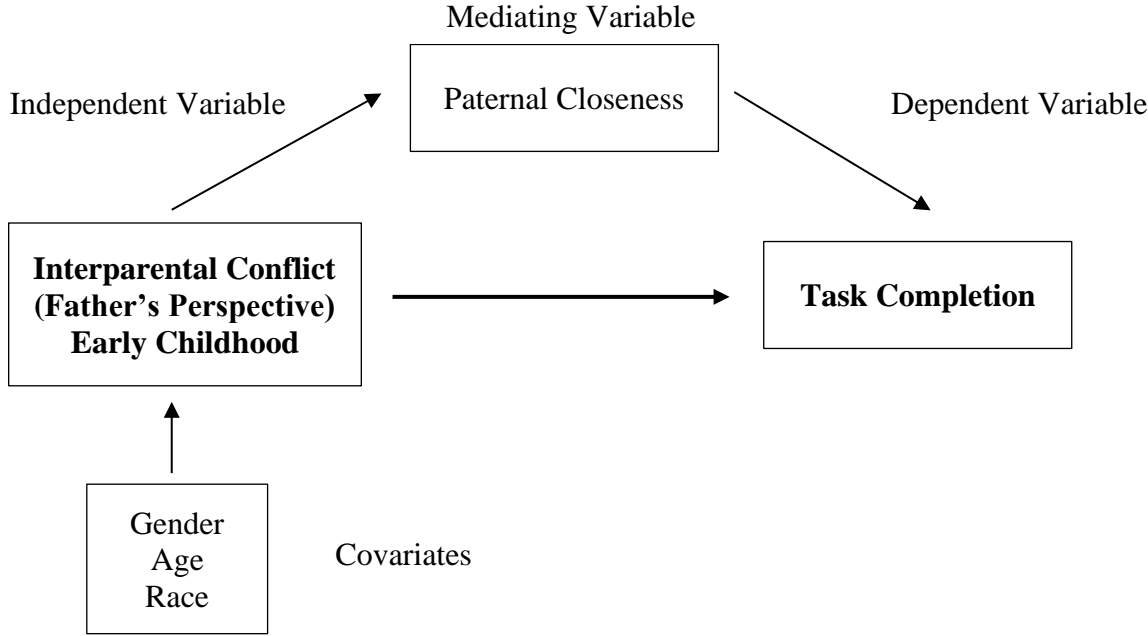


Figure 3. Conceptual Model for Interparental Conflict during Middle Childhood from the Mother's Perspective

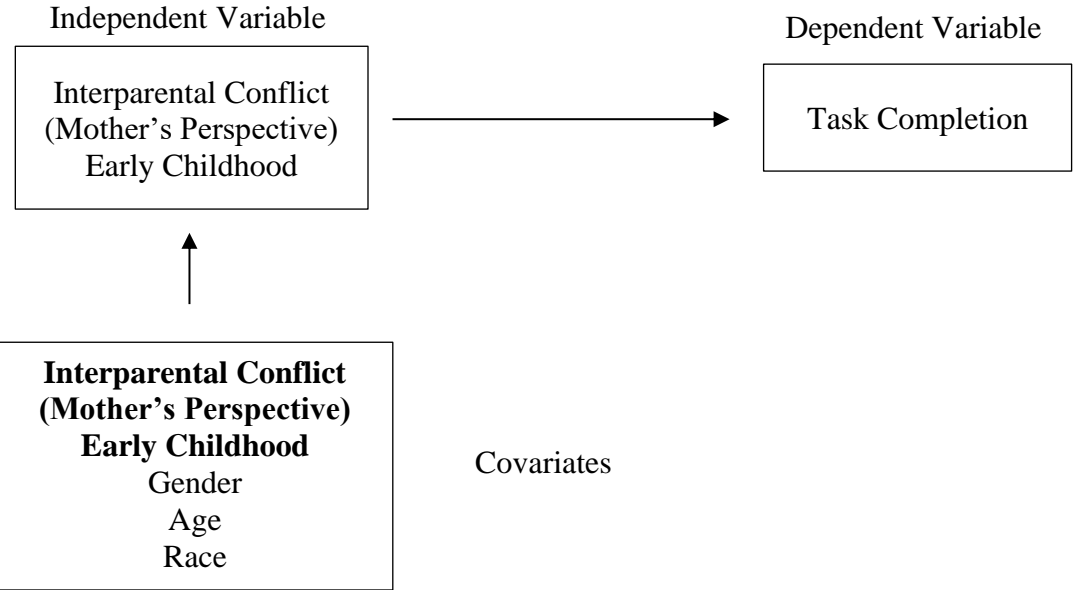
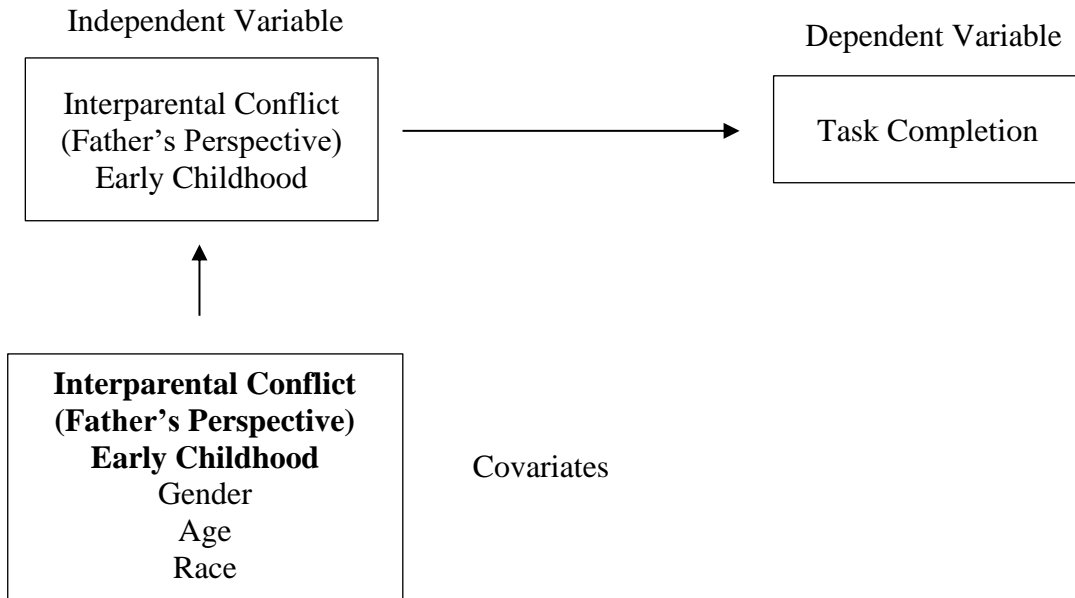


Figure 4. Conceptual Model for Interparental Conflict during Middle Childhood from the Father's Perspective



Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Data and Sample

Data for this study were extracted from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). FFCWS is a large, nationally representative sample of parents and their children across 20 large US cities. Researchers collected data on a cohort of almost 5,000 families, most of which were unmarried and had children that were born between 1998 and 2000. The original purpose of FFCWS was to address questions about the experiences and outcomes of unmarried parents and their children. Data collection for FFCWS began at baseline, when the focal children were born and then again at ages one, three, five, nine, and fifteen. The data consists of interviews with mothers, fathers, and/or primary caregivers that collected information such as their demographics, relationships, as well as information on the focal child. For example, in-home assessments gathered information about the focal children's development (e.g., emotional and cognitive) and home environment. Detailed descriptions of sample and procedures can be found at <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/about>.

In the original data set, FFCWS included all racial and ethnic identities, including: Black, White, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and multi-racial. For the purposes of this study, White and Black participants are the only races incorporated in data analyses. One reason for the exclusion of other races is that the FFCWS data consists

of a disproportionately large sample of Black families, compared to other minority races/ethnicities. Hispanic/Latino families had a large representation in the data set; however, the development of Black children in relation to White children was the focal interest in this study. The current study utilized data that included the biological mothers, fathers, and children from the FFCWS at baseline (birth), Wave IV (age five), Wave V (age nine), Wave VI (age fifteen) ($n= 4,897$).

Measures

Interparental conflict during early childhood from the mother's perspective (Independent Variable). Interparental conflict at Wave IV was measured independently from the mother's and father's perspectives. Mother's recollection of interparental conflict was created using a composite of six responses from their questionnaire. Items for the variable were chosen based on the content of the interparental conflict, specifically, if the conflict was related to the child. Mothers were asked questions about how they worked with the father in rearing the child and responded on a Likert scale with the options of *always true*, *sometimes true*, *rarely true*, and *never true*. Items from the mother's survey included: trust (e.g., how much she trusts the father to take care of the child), respect (e.g., how much the father respects the mother's schedules and rules for the child), and support (e.g., how much the father supports the mother in the way she wants the child to be raised). The Cronbach's alpha for the variable interparental conflict from the mother's perspective was 0.82. Higher numbers suggested higher interparental conflict reported from the mother's perspective during early childhood.

Interparental conflict during early childhood from the father's perspective (Independent Variable). Interparental conflict at Wave IV was also created using a composite of six responses from fathers' reports of interparental conflict from their questionnaire. Items chosen to create this variable were identical or similar to the mother's questions. Similar to mothers, fathers responded to questions on a Likert scale with the options of *always true*, *sometimes true*, *rarely true*, and *never true*. The Cronbach's alpha of this variable was moderate ($\alpha = 0.74$). Higher numbers suggested higher interparental conflict reported from the father's perspective during early childhood.

Interparental conflict during middle childhood from the mother's perspective (Independent Variable). Interparental conflict for Wave V from the mother's perspective was created by summing six comparable items to those on the Wave IV questionnaire for interparental conflict. For Wave V, mothers responded to questions about the trust, respect, and support they have for the fathers regarding raising their child. Responses were also measured on a Likert scale. Items were summed to create this variable; Cronbach's alpha was moderate ($\alpha = 0.78$). Higher numbers suggested higher interparental conflict reported from the mother's perspective during middle childhood.

Interparental conflict during middle childhood from the father's perspective (Independent Variable). This variable included comparable items to the questionnaire from the Wave IV questions. Six responses from fathers reflected their

trust, respect, and support of the mothers regarding child rearing. The Cronbach's alpha for this variable was 0.70. A higher score in interparental conflict indicated higher conflict between mothers and fathers, from the father's perspective. Higher numbers suggested higher interparental conflict reported from the father's perspective during middle childhood.

Task Completion (Dependent Variable). Task completion at Wave V was created by the focal child answering nine questions about how often they had difficulties with starting and finishing tasks (0= *never*, 1= *rarely*, 2= *sometimes*, 3= *always*) and their persistence to complete the task (0= *never*, 1= *rarely*, 2= *sometimes*, 3= *always*). Nine items were summed for the focal child at the age of nine. Task completion's Cronbach's alpha was 0.67. A higher score in task completion designated children's higher task completion.

Parental Closeness (Mediating Variable). Parental closeness was created by summing four items that assessed the focal child's perception of closeness with each parent at the age of nine. The first item asked the focal child to report on how often their parent spends time with them (0= *never*, 1= *sometimes/not very often*, 2= *often*, 3= *always*). The second item asked the child how often their parent missed events or activities that were important to the child (0= *never*, 1= *sometimes/not very often*, 2= *often*, 3= *always*). The third item asked the child to explicitly report how close they felt with their parent (1= *extremely close*, 2= *quite close*, 3= *fairly close*, 4= *not very close*), which was reverse coded. The final item assessed how well the child and parent communicated (1= *extremely well*, 2= *quite well*, 3= *fairly well*, 4= *not very*

well). Four items for each parent were summed to create the parental closeness variable. The focal child answered the same questions for mother and fathers separately. Higher scores suggested a closer relationship with their mother or father.

Covariates

Gender was assessed using the data from the baseline survey. The child's gender was coded initially as 1= *boy* and 2= *girl* and was recoded to indicate 0= *boy* and 1= *girl*. Age was assessed using the data from the Wave V mother and father questionnaires separately. The child's age was coded as 8.00 through 8.99= *8-years-old*, 9.00 through 9.99= *9-years-old*, and 10 through 11= *10-years-old*. Lastly, race was assessed at Wave VI for Black and White children. Children who identified as Black were coded as 0= *not Black* and 1= *Black*. Children who identified as White was coded as 0= *not White* and 1= *White*.

Data Analyses

This study incorporated multiple linear regression models using the structural equation modeling (SEM) function in STATA 13. Multiple regression models are appropriate for these analyses because there are multiple variables that may influence the dependent variable, and this procedure would model any relationship that may exist between variables. Multiple linear regression models are primarily employed to understand the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable while also controlling for demographic variables such as gender and race of the child. In order to perform these analyses, several assumptions must be met. These

include a linear relationship between the independent variables and dependent variable, multivariate normality, and no multicollinearity. In this study, there is an assumption of a linear relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable; specifically, that as interparental conflict increases, task completion decreases. There is also an assumption of multivariate normality such that the independent variables and covariates are normally distributed. Lastly, there is an assumption of no multicollinearity, that is, the independent variables in this study are not highly correlated with other variables.

To address the research questions, several steps were included in the analyses. First, multiple linear regression models were used to assess the association between interparental conflict for children during early childhood (i.e., Wave IV when children were approximately five years old) and children's task completion abilities at Wave V ($M_{age} = 8.84$). One regression model tested the association between interparental conflict from the mother's perspective at Wave IV and children's task completion while controlling for covariates, gender, age, and race. A second multiple linear regression model assessed the association between interparental conflict during early childhood from the father's perspective and children's task completion while controlling for covariates.

Next, to address whether interparental conflict impacted children's task completion differently for mothers and fathers over time, two additional multiple linear regression models were assessed. The first model tested the relationship between interparental conflict at Wave V, from the mother's perspective, and

children's task completion, while controlling for interparental conflict from the mother's perspective at Wave IV, age, gender, and race of the child. The second model tested the relationship between interparental conflict at Wave V, from the father's perspective and children's task completion, while controlling for interparental conflict from the father's perspective at Wave IV, age, gender, and race of the child.

Lastly, the structural equation modeling (SEM) command was used to test whether parental closeness mediated the association between interparental conflict and task completion, differently for mothers and fathers, while controlling for gender, age, and race. Models were assessed separately for mothers and fathers. The post hoc command '*estat teffects*' was included in analyses to provide the direct, indirect, and total effects of interparental conflict, task completion, and parental closeness. More importantly, the model allowed for the calculation of the proportion of parental closeness that was mediated through interparental conflict and task completion.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Utilizing the statistical software SPSS, descriptive analyses were performed on the variables, presented in Table 1. The mean score for task completion was 19.57, with a standard deviation of 4.57. This mean and distribution of scores suggested that children in this sample on average had high task completion in school. The variable interparental conflict from the mother's perspective when the children were age five had a mean of 10.27 and a standard deviation of 4.22. Interparental conflict from the mother's perspective when the children were age nine had a mean of 10.56 and a standard deviation of 4.38. The means of interparental conflict from the mother's perspective at ages five and nine suggested that mothers in this sample are typically reporting low conflict than they are high conflict. Additionally, the increase in means of conflict from the mother's perspective during early childhood to middle childhood suggested that conflict from the mother's perspective increased over time.

The mean for the father's reported interparental conflict when the children were aged five was 9.13 and the standard deviation was 3.2. Interparental conflict from the father's perspective when the children were aged nine had a mean of 10.21 and a standard deviation of 3.41. Similar to mothers, fathers' perspective of conflict exhibited an increase in means from early childhood to middle childhood, suggesting that they perceived greater conflict during middle childhood than they did at early

childhood. The variable maternal closeness had a mean of 10.03 and a standard deviation of 2.01. Children's scores of reported closeness with their father had a mean of 10.89 and a standard deviation of 3.07.

Descriptive analyses were performed on the covariates as well. The distribution of male and female children was about the same, with 52.2% reporting they were male. The average age of the child during middle childhood was 8.84, with a standard deviation of 0.50 and ages ranging from 8 to 10 years old. The majority of the children in this sample identified as Black or African American (36.7%), whereas 15.9% of children identified as White or Caucasian.

Table 1. Summary of descriptive statistics (N= 4897)

Variable	Mean/%	SD	Min	Max
Task Completion	19.57	4.57	0	27
Interparental Conflict (Mother's Perspective) Wave IV	10.27	4.22	1	24
Interparental Conflict (Mother's Perspective) Wave V	10.56	4.38	1	24
Interparental Conflict (Father's Perspective) Wave IV	9.13	3.20	2	24
Interparental Conflict (Father's Perspective) Wave V	10.21	3.41	1	24
Maternal Closeness	10.03	2.01	0	14
Paternal Closeness	10.89	3.07	0	15
Covariates				
Male	52.2%			
Female	47.8%			
Age	8.84	.5	8	10
White or Caucasian	15.9%			
Black or African American	36.7%			

Hypotheses Testing

The current study utilized multiple linear regression models using the SEM function in STATA 13 to study the relationship between interparental conflict and task completion. Table 2 shows the results of the data analyses. Research question one investigated whether interparental conflict during early childhood impacted children's task completion differently from the mother's perspective and the father's perspective. Interparental conflict from the mother's perspective during early childhood (Wave IV) had a significant negative association with children's task completion ($b = -0.06$, $p < .01$). In other words, during early childhood, the more interparental conflict that was

reported from the mother's perspective, the lower the child's task completion. Additionally, female children were significantly more likely to complete tasks than male children ($b= 1.14, p < .001$) when their mothers reported interparental conflict. Children who identified as Black had significantly fewer completed tasks than those who did not identify as Black ($b= -0.55, p < .01$).

Reported interparental conflict from the father's perspective when the children were five years old also had a significant negative relationship with children's task completion ($b= -0.08, p < .01$). This finding suggests that children whose fathers reported higher levels of interparental conflict during early childhood were more likely to exhibit lower task completion abilities than children whose fathers report lower levels of interparental conflict. Within the relationship between interparental conflict from the father's perspective (Wave IV) and task completion, females had significantly greater task completion than males ($b= 1.14, p < .001$).

The race of the child was not statistically significant in the relationship between father's conflict during early childhood and task completion ($b= -0.33, p > .05$). The age of the child was not a significant predictor of task completion abilities when interparental conflict from the mother's perspective ($b= 0.17, p > .05$) or father's perspective was observed ($b= 0.09, p > .05$).

Research question two investigated the association between interparental conflict (separately for mother's and father's perspectives) during middle childhood and children's task completion. Table 2 displays the results of the second research question. During middle childhood, mothers' reports of higher conflict was

significantly related to lower levels of task completion in children ($b = -0.11, p < .001$). This model controlled for interparental conflict from the mother's perspective during early childhood. However, interparental conflict from the mother's perspective during early childhood was no longer significantly related to task completion ($b = 0.01, p > .05$). Female children exhibited significantly higher task completion than male children ($b = 1.15, p < .001$). Additionally, children who identified as Black had lower task completion scores than those who did not identify as Black when their mothers reported interparental conflict during middle childhood ($b = -0.52, p < .01$).

Interparental conflict from the father's perspective during middle childhood was not significantly associated with children's task completion ($b = -0.07, p > .05$). Conflict reported by the fathers during early childhood was also not a significant predictor of children's task completion ($b = -0.04, p > .05$). However, children's gender had a significant association with task completion. Specifically, when fathers reported interparental conflict during middle childhood, female children reported significantly higher task completion than males ($b = 1.15, p \leq .001$).

The race ($b = -0.31, p > .05$) and the age ($b = -0.18, p > .05$) of the child were not significant predictors of task completion in children when their father's perspective of conflict was observed.

Mediation Effect

The results for the third research question, which investigated if parental closeness mediated the relationship between interparental conflict and task completion

differently for mothers and fathers during early childhood while controlling covariates are listed in Table 2. Upon executing the SEM function in STATA 13, the analyses indicated that maternal closeness did not significantly mediate the relationship between interparental conflict from the mother's perspective and task completion ($b=0.00, p > .05$). However, the model for paternal closeness was found to significantly mediate the association between interparental conflict from the father's perspective and task completion ($b=0.27, p < .001$). Additionally, post hoc analyses indicated that the direct effect ($b=0.28$), indirect effect ($b=0.38$), and total effects ($b=1.38$) were statistically significant.

Table 2. Association between Interparental conflict and task completion, mediated by parental closeness

Variable/Effects	<i>b</i>	SE
Interparental Conflict (Mother's Perspective) Wave IV	-0.06**	0.02
Gender	1.14***	0.15
Age	0.17	0.16
White or Caucasian	0.14	0.22
Black or African American	-0.55**	0.19
Interparental Conflict (Father's Perspective) Wave IV	-0.08**	0.03
Gender	1.14***	0.16
Age	0.09	0.19
White or Caucasian	0.00	0.22
Black or African American	-0.33	0.19
Interparental Conflict (Mother's Perspective) Wave V	-0.11***	0.03
Interparental Conflict (Mother's Perspective) Wave IV	0.01	0.03
Gender	1.15***	0.15
Age	0.19	0.16
White or Caucasian	0.12	0.22
Black or African American	-0.52**	0.19
Interparental Conflict (Father's Perspective) Wave V	-0.07	0.04
Interparental Conflict (Father's Perspective) Wave IV	-0.04	0.03
Gender	1.15***	0.16
Age	0.18	0.16
White or Caucasian	-0.01	0.22
Black or African American	-0.31	0.19
Paternal Closeness***	0.27***	0.03
Direct Effect	0.28	
Indirect Effect	0.38	
Total Effect	1.38	

Note: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of the current study was to investigate the association between interparental conflict and children's task completion, at present, as well as over time. An additional goal was to test if parental closeness mediated this association. The risk and resilience theory proposes that individuals who are exposed to risk factors have an increased probability of experiencing poor outcomes (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). However, if an individual is exposed to protective factors then the likelihood of exhibiting poor outcomes in spite of experiencing risk factors decreases, which is a phenomenon deemed as resilience (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003).

Current literature suggested that interparental conflict was associated with detrimental outcomes to children's well-being such as anxiety (Rhoades, 2008), depressive symptomatology (Bradford & Barber, 2005), and to a lesser extent, decreased cognitive functioning (van Eldik et al., 2020). Additionally, prior research suggested that mothers and fathers engaged with and parented their children differently (Dufur et al., 2010), due to mothers typically being tasked with more child-rearing responsibilities than fathers (Wall & Arnold, 2007). Because of variations in parenting, children may be impacted by mothers and fathers differently.

Limited research focusing on interparental conflict and cognitive development has suggested that interparental conflict negatively impacted children's cognitive development (van Eldik et al., 2020), in that, interparental conflict was associated with

decreased cognitive processes (e.g., poor behavioral inhibition) (Pauli-Pott & Beckmann, 2007). Based on previous findings and the risk and resilience theoretical framework, it was hypothesized that interparental conflict during early childhood would have a significant negative association with task completion, for mothers only, while controlling for gender, age, and race.

Results suggested that hypothesis one was partially supported. Findings from this study indicated that *both* mothers' and fathers' perspectives of interparental conflict have a significantly negative impact on children's task completion. Results from the multiple linear regression model indicated that interparental conflict from the mother's and father's perspectives during early childhood had a significant negative impact on children's task completion. That is, the higher the score of interparental conflict reported by both mothers and fathers during early childhood, the lower the task completion score of the child. This finding suggested that interparental conflict impacts children's ability to complete tasks in school.

This is consistent with previous literature that found that interparental conflict may have a negative impact on children's cognitive development (e.g., Pauli-Pott & Beckmann, 2007; Pendry & Adam, 2013). Specifically, interparental conflict exposure during early childhood is associated with decreased general cognition (Pendry & Adam, 2013) and difficulties with maintaining attention in school (Pauli-Pott & Beckmann, 2007). Findings extend the current literature; in particular, it suggests that interparental conflict from both parents was negatively associated with the specific cognitive process, task completion.

Previous literature pertaining to interparental conflict and its impact on children's development largely focused on mother's reports (Tavassolie et al., 2016) and children's reports (McDonald & Grych, 2006) of interparental conflict. While gathering information of this particular conflict from mothers and children are essential in understanding how parties within the family perceive and interpret interparental conflict, previous research has often failed to include fathers' input of the conflict. With support from the results of this data analyses however, the current study suggested that mothers as well as fathers' reported interparental conflict significantly impact children's task completion, not just the mothers. Therefore, future research should also include fathers' perceptions of interparental conflict as evidence from this study suggested that fathers' perspectives of conflict have a significant impact on children's task completion as well.

Hypothesis two proposed that interparental conflict would have a significant negative association with task completion over time, for mothers only, while controlling for interparental conflict during early childhood as well as the covariates. The findings from the data analyses fully supported this hypothesis. Results suggested that interparental conflict reported by the mother during middle childhood was negatively associated with children's task completion and was statistically significant. Interestingly, mothers' reported conflict during early childhood (i.e., age five) was no longer significant once conflict during later development (i.e., age nine) was included in model. This finding suggests that there may be less of a "carry-over" effect from interparental conflict during early childhood and present exposure to interparental

conflict may be more impactful to children's task completion. In other words, previous exposure to interparental conflict during early childhood from the mother's perspective had a significant negative impact on children's task completion. However, when present interparental conflict is considered, early childhood exposure to interparental conflict may not be as impactful on children's task completion. This finding suggests that present exposure to interparental conflict from the mother's perspective may be more stressful to children, which in turn, may be more impactful to them than previous exposure to interparental conflict.

As hypothesized, the relationship between interparental conflict from the father's perspective during middle childhood and children's task completion was not significant. Results suggesting that fathers' perspective of present interparental conflict may not be as impactful to children's task completion as it is for mothers, may be explained by the differences in time spent with their children. During early childhood, children are generally dependent on both of their parents, more so for mothers than for fathers. As the descriptive findings also suggested, there is less conflict between parents at this stage of development as well. Children at this developmental stage spend a significant amount of their time with their parents. When children reach middle childhood, they may become more independent and do not require as much assistance and social interaction from their parents in comparison to when they were young children. Because of the decreased dependence children have on their parents, they subsequently spend less time with them. Additionally, children typically spend more time with their mothers than their fathers, therefore, mother's

perspective of interparental conflict may be more salient to children's development than father's perspective. Therefore, interparental conflict during middle childhood from the mother's perspective (i.e., present interparental conflict) may have a significant impact on children's task completion, while conflict during early childhood may not be as impactful.

The changes in interparental conflict over time found in this study are consistent with the notion that the frequency and perhaps even intensity of conflict between parents may change over time (Baltes et al., 1990). The changes within the relationship between parents may impact the way they interact with their children, which in turn, may influence the outcomes (e.g., task completion abilities) children exhibit. It is important to not only include both parents' perspectives of interparental conflict, but also how they change to better understand the developmental trajectory of the parental relationship and what components of their lives (e.g., disciplinary strategies) may be a point of conflict over time. Furthermore, it is important to understand the development of the parents' relationship and conflicts within the relationship to assist parents in addressing any points of conflict in an effective and productive manner before the conflict becomes harmful to the child's development.

Other Individual-Level Factors

Findings from this study suggested that girls have higher task completion than boys. This finding is consistent with previous literature that suggests that school-aged girls complete homework more than boys (Bang et al., 2011). Additionally, there is

evidence that suggests that school-aged girls have better attention and planning abilities than boys (Naglieri & Rojahn, 2001). The current study found that there is a significant difference between boys' and girls' task completion after being exposed to interparental conflict, which, interestingly, is not in line with some of the current literature that suggests that there are no gender differences in the impact interparental conflict has on child outcomes (e.g., academic achievement) (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010). However, the finding in this study suggesting that girls have higher task completion than boys is in line with the notion that females conduct brain processes to perform tasks more efficiently than males (Christova et al., 2008).

In addition to gender differences, there were differences among the racial identities of children. Specifically, results suggested that Black children who have been exposed to interparental conflict have lower task completion than White children exposed to interparental conflict. Similarly, there is evidence to suggest that White children have higher academic achievement than minority children (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Although cognitive processes are not interchangeable with academic achievement, cognitive processes may impact children's ability to achieve academic success. Because of the relationship between cognition and academic success and evidence that suggests White children have higher academic performance than minority children (e.g., Lee & Bowen, 2006), the findings from this study regarding the disparities in task completion across racial identities was anticipated.

The racial differences in task completion may be due to the racial inequality embedded within the school system. For example, Black children have fewer

resources and opportunities for a quality education than White children (Flores, 2007). Additionally, Barton and Coley (2010) reported that schools serving a population comprised of low-income and minority children have larger classroom sizes than schools in more affluent communities. Due to limited resources and larger classroom sizes that are disproportionately experienced by Black children, they may have less opportunities for cognitive growth than White children, which in turn, may result in a difference between cognitive abilities such as task completion.

Lastly, the results from the data analyses suggested that there is no difference among ages in regard to task completion. Specifically, children who are older did not have significantly better task completion than younger children. This finding contradicts literature that suggests that older children have better sustained attention (Betts et al., 2006), which is an essential proponent to task completion. Although this finding was not expected based on findings from previous literature, the results may be due to the sample of children's ages when task completion was assessed. Though interparental conflict was measured at different developmental periods, children's age when their task completion was assessed did not differ. Betts et al. (2006) reported that children in middle childhood had better sustained attention than children in early childhood. The differences in age group was significant in the Betts et al. (2006) study; however, this study measured task completion at different ages.

Parental Closeness as a Mediator

Parental closeness is important to children's development because it is associated with a multitude of positive outcomes such as high academic achievement (Wilder, 2014), high self-esteem (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009), and low alcohol use (Goncy & van Dulmen, 2010). Because current research suggests that parental closeness is beneficial for children's development, it was hypothesized that parental closeness would lessen the negative effects among children exposed to interparental conflict. Specifically, the third hypothesis posited that parental closeness would mediate the association between interparental conflict during early childhood and task completion differently for mothers and fathers while also controlling for the gender, age, and race of the child.

Results fully supported the third hypothesis, as findings indicated that paternal closeness, but not maternal closeness, significantly mediated the association between interparental conflict and task completion. That is, greater interparental conflict from the father's perspective was associated with decreased task completion among children in early childhood. However, children's task completion abilities will be higher after exposure to interparental conflict if the child reported having a close relationship with their father, than if the child did not report having a close relationship with their father.

Although it was hypothesized that maternal closeness would be a significant mediator as well, paternal closeness has been recognized as a significant factor in protecting children from developing poor outcomes. For example, Goncy and van

Dulmen (2010) found that paternal closeness was a significant factor impacting adolescent's alcohol use, despite their children being close with their mother. The findings from previous research and the current study suggested that although fathers' involvement and closeness in parenting have been limited in the past, there is evidence to surmise that fathers influence their children's development much more than previously thought.

It is possible that maternal closeness was not a significant finding due to several reasons. On average, children in this sample reported being closer with their fathers than with their mothers. This finding contradicts previous literature that supports the notion that mothers report being closer to their children than fathers (Driscoll & Pianta, 2011). However, the paternal mediation finding may be due to the fact that maternal closeness may be expected due to the greater time mothers spend with their children in comparison to fathers (Craig, 2006). Because of this, facets of parental closeness (e.g., parent-child communication and parental warmth) may have a more substantial impact on children's development when the child is closer with their father than their mother. These findings are reflective of studies that suggest that paternal closeness may be more important than maternal closeness in protecting children against poor outcomes (e.g., Fosco et al., 2012). Despite some results yielding unanticipated findings, the current study contributes to the literature by including children's perceptions of closeness to both mothers and fathers.

Study Significance and Limitations

Findings from this study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, these findings contribute to the literature by utilizing longitudinal data, whereas previous studies have often employed cross-sectional designs (e.g., Bradford et al., 2008). Longitudinal data are essential in determining how facets of a child's life (e.g., interparental conflict) may impact their development over time. Children may be exposed to interparental conflict at varying ages or have continuous exposure as they develop. Prior research has suggested that children perceive interparental conflict differently across age groups (i.e., younger children attribute conflict as their own fault more often than older children) (Clements et al., 2014) and thus may be affected by interparental conflict differently. Consequently, the differences in perception and interpretation of interparental conflict may be associated with varying child outcomes (e.g., task completion) depending on the child's age when they were exposed to interparental conflict. Utilizing a longitudinal data set addresses this issue by examining the effects interparental conflict may have on task completion at different developmental stages. Longitudinal data sets are important to examine the lasting effects of interparental conflict within the context of children's maturation over time.

Another contribution to the current literature is that findings extend the limited research available that examines interparental conflict and its impact on cognitive development. Much of the current literature focuses on interparental conflict and outcomes such as emotional development (e.g., Rhoades, 2008), behavioral development (e.g., Marcus et al., 2001), and academic achievement (e.g., Ghazarian &

Buehler, 2010). In contrast to these outcomes, cognition has received little attention in research pertaining to the effects of interparental conflict. This study investigated the relationship interparental conflict has with a specific cognitive ability, task completion, which is beneficial to understanding the effect interparental conflict has on children's development.

A third contribution this study makes to the current literature is that it includes fathers', as well as mothers', reports of interparental conflict as well as the child's perceived closeness to both parents. Prior research on parenting behaviors and relationships often focus on the mother's influence on their child (Tavassolie et al., 2016). However, there is evidence that suggests mothers and fathers impact their children differently and fathers play an important role in children's development as well (e.g., Goncy & van Dulmen, 2010). The current study utilized a large sample of mothers and fathers to investigate their perspectives of interparental conflict and how they may differently impact children's task completion. Additionally, this study recognizes the importance of both maternal and paternal closeness and gathers information from children and how close they perceived to be to both parents, not just their mothers.

Nonetheless, findings from this study should be also be considered within the context of several limitations. First, the researchers that collected data in the FFCWS did not include the context of the home environment of the child in terms of family structure. This is an important component of a child's life to include when investigating interparental conflict because this conflict may impact families

differently across various family structures. For example, Krishnakumar and Buehler (2000) found that interparental conflict between married parents impacted family functioning differently than the conflict between divorced parents. Future studies should gather information about interparental conflict as well as the household structure to have a stronger understanding of how interparental conflict may impact children's development, while also considering the variations across family structures.

A second limitation in this study is that it does not consider the multiple dimensions of interparental conflict. This study includes interparental conflict that is related to the child and the frequency of the conflict. However, the expression of the conflict such as hostile and disengaged behavior from the parents are important dimensions of interparental conflict (van Eldik et al., 2020) that may be salient components when investigating its impact on child development. Other characteristics of interparental conflict (e.g., hostility) aside from frequency may also influence children's development. Future research should gather more information about how parents engage in interparental conflict to have a stronger understanding of the specific aspects of interparental conflict that create a stressful experience for the child.

An additional limitation in this study is that interparental conflict was only collected from the mothers' and fathers' perspectives. Although parents that are involved in interparental conflict are directly impacted by this experience and have a greater understanding of the nuances of the conflict, children's perceptions of interparental conflict are essential in understanding how it may impact their development. Research has suggested that children perceive and interpret conflict

differently across age groups (Clements et al., 2004). Therefore, future research should collect information from the parents as well as the children to not only examine how children perceive interparental conflict, but to investigate how children's understanding of interparental conflict may impact their development as well.

Lastly, a limitation in this study is that the FFCWS sample is not nationally representative of the entire population. Although FFCWS sampled from many cities across the United States, the data is highly representative of unmarried, low-income families. Therefore, the results of this study should be interpreted within the context of the sample and it may not be applicable across all family backgrounds. To further understand the association between interparental conflict and cognitive development in children, future research should consider the family structure of the child, the multiple dimensions of interparental conflict, as well as sampling from a large, nationally representative sample including families from all backgrounds.

Implications

The findings from the current study suggested that children of parents whose relationships are characterized by conflict may be at risk for poor cognitive development. Because of the increased risk for lower cognitive functioning these children experience, it may be important for school staff to intervene if interparental conflict is suspected. Specifically, children who speak to their school counselors or psychologists and report that their parents are frequently arguing or fighting, may need interventions in schoolwork. School counselors or psychologists may advocate for

children to teachers to incorporate cognitively stimulating activities and provide additional help as needed to promote cognitive development. This collaboration between school counselors and teachers may foster positive cognitive development and positive social interactions to lower the likelihood of experiencing the detrimental effects associated with exposure to interparental conflict.

Findings from this study also suggested that interparental conflict at the present time within the parents' relationship had a more profound effect on children's task completion than past conflict exposure. Because of this result, it is important for school counselors and other professionals assisting children to monitor children's progress who have been previously exposed to interparental conflict to determine if intervention is still needed for them. If immediate intervention actions are taken to protect the child by providing social or academic support, exposure to current interparental conflict may not be as harmful to the child, relative to not receiving intervention.

An additional implication of these findings is that paternal closeness should be emphasized in family interventions. Much of the current literature focuses on maternal closeness as a predictor for positive child outcomes (e.g., Harmeever et al., 2016). However, the current study suggests that paternal closeness may be just as important, if not more so, in influencing positive development in children. Social workers and family therapists should work with fathers to increase ways they can become involved in their children's lives and foster positive father-child relationships. From these findings, family therapists or social workers can inform parents that although their

child may not be directly involved in interparental conflict, exposure can still be detrimental to their child's development. Social service workers can also inform parents of healthier ways to address conflict and come to compromises to modify their behavior. These changes in how to approach conflict may protect children from developing poor outcomes.

Conclusion

The current study found that interparental conflict over time had a negative impact on children's task completion. Additionally, both mothers' and fathers' perspectives of conflict are important to consider and may impact children's development differently. This study contributes to the growing literature on interparental conflict and the cognitive development of children. Specifically, the current study investigated the association between parents' conflict and a specific cognitive ability such as task completion. In addition to this, the current study included both mothers' and fathers' perceptions of conflict and how close children feel to each parent. An additional contribution this study makes to the current literature is that it utilized a longitudinal design instead of cross-sectional. The findings from this study highlight the importance of family relationships and how they may impact children's development, both as a risk factor and a protective factor.

An implication of this study is that it may encourage individuals working with children (e.g., school staff) to intervene when children's cognitive development does not follow with a normal developmental trajectory, as this may be a sign a contentious

home environment, such as interparental conflict. Lastly, the finding that paternal closeness is a significant protective factor may inform family practitioners to emphasize the importance of the father's role in a child's life. These interventions are important to ensure that children who are exposed to risk factors are able to experience positive developmental outcomes.

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