Children's Understanding of Marital Conflict and the Marital Relationship

by

Janice Muriel Buccioni

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Janice Muriel Buccioni 1998

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-33981-5

Children's Understanding of Marital Conflict and the Marital Relationship
Master of Arts, 1998, Janice Muriel Buccioni
Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

Abstract

Children's understanding of marital conflict and the marital relationship was investigated in 60 children (30 girls, 30 boys) from three age groups (5 years, 7 years, & 9 years). Age differences were hypothesized in children's conceptions of the causes of conflict, conflict resolution, the spousal relationship, family triangulation, and simultaneity of emotions. Children answered questions about stories involving family interactions. Five year old children explained conflict in terms of one person being right and one person being wrong whereas seven and nine year old children understood conflict as resulting from diverging goals. Five year old children thought that conflict resolution occurred by people stopping angry behaviour whereas older children made reference to how at least one person's goals needed to change. Children's understanding of triangulation increased with age. Seven and nine year old children think about their parents as parents and as one another's spouse, a distinction rarely made by five year old children. Significant age differences were not found in children's understanding of how both a positive and a negative emotion may be simultaneously directed to one person. In the literature examining the effects of marital conflict on children, the developmental constraints on children's understanding of conflict are rarely investigated. This study makes it clear that marital conflict is a very different type of stressor depending on the level of cognitive development of the child.

Table of Contents

Introduction	page 1
Emotional and behavioural responses to conflict	page 3
Age differences in children's responding to conflict	page 5
Age differences in children's interventions into marital conflict	page 7
Understanding and responding to marital conflict	page 8
Understanding the role of mental states in behaviour	page 10
Understanding family triangulation	page 14
Children's understanding of roles in the family	page 16
Method	page 21
Coding	page 24
Analyses and Results	page 29
Discussion	page 33
Figures	page 42
Tables	page 46
References	page 48
Appendix	page 53

List of Figures

Figure 1	Conception of Conflict	page 42
Figure 2	Parental Resolution	page 43
Figure 3	Children's Role in Conflict Resolution	page 44
Figure 4	Understanding the Role of Spouse	page 45

List of Tables

Table 1.	Mean Score on Triangulation 1 (mother-child relationship) as a function of age.	page 46
Table 2.	Mean Score on Triangulation 2 (mother-father relationship) as a function of age.	page 47

Introduction

Family conflict has been recognized as having an adverse effect on children's social, emotional and behavioural development (e.g., Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, and Lake, 1991; see Cummings & Davies, 1994 for a review). Children exposed to this stressor are much more likely than children **not** exposed to conflict to exhibit emotional and behavioural disturbance (Jenkins & Smith, 1991). A review of marital conflict research, which had been conducted between 1974 and 1989, found that 79% of the studies provided support for the existence of a relationship between marital conflict and children's adjustment (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Although much of this research has examined the dimensions and contexts of families in conflict, very little is known about how the age of children affects the relationship between their adjustment and emotional functioning and exposure to marital conflict. The main purpose of this study was to examine age differences in how children conceptualize family relationships and marital conflict, and how they understand conflict resolution. Understanding how children of different ages conceptualize parental conflict is important for clinicians, educators, and other professionals working with children who are exposed to marital conflict.

Observing parental conflict is a common experience for children. At least 40% of children born in the United States in the late 1970's and early 1980's were deemed likely to experience the break up of their parents' marriage (census data cited in Glick & Lin, 1986). Only 48% of households in Canada are characterized by having a mother and father in the home (Census Canada, 1991). Although these numbers do not indicate

levels of conflict in the home, they suggest that many children may have been exposed to marital conflict. A general population sample in London England, found that approximately 18% of seven year old children were living in disharmonious homes (Jenkins, Smith & Graham, 1989). In this same sample, 75% of the families in which separation or divorce eventually took place had been previously rated as disharmonious. It is likely that marital conflict is not limited to homes which researchers would rate as disharmonious. Cummings, Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow (1984) found that in a sample of normal families, anger incidents were two to three times more common than incidents of affection.

Overt parental conflict has been found to be a stronger predictor of children's behavioural symptoms than other dimensions of marital disharmony such as marital apathy, child-rearing practices, and covert tension (Jenkins and Smith, 1991). Parental conflict may be deleterious to children by exposing them to displays of anger, and through children's reactions to the conflict. This conflict may also affect the quality of parental care that children in disharmonious homes receive, as well as the amount of care and nurturance the children receive (Jenkins & Smith, 1991).

Although marital conflict is a common stressor for children there has been little work on age differences in children's understanding of parental conflict. This paper will review the existing evidence that exposure to marital conflict affects children adversely, and that it affects children of different ages differently. In any effort to understand age differences in the effects of marital conflict on children and age differences in children's reactions to conflict, it is important to examine how children of different ages make cognitive sense of

marital conflict. Several cognitive-developmental theories will be discussed in terms of their relevance to age differences in children's understanding of marital conflict. It has been proposed that cognitive processes and emotional states interact with marital conflict to mediate or shape its impact (Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Cummings & Cummings (1988) proposed a process-oriented model for organizing and integrating research findings related to children's responses to interadult anger. Factors which describe children's cognitive, social and emotional responses to adults' angry behaviour include (a) Responses to stress, e. g. cognitions, feelings, emotional behaviour, social behaviour, and (b) Strategies for coping e. g. seeking support, escape-avoidance, problem-solving, intervening into conflict..

Emotional and Behavioural Responses of Children Exposed to Marital Conflict

Studies examining the relationship between exposure to marital conflict and children's adjustment have found a range of negative child outcomes including conduct disorder, aggression, antisocial behaviour, depression, and withdrawal (see Grych & Fincham, 1990, for a review). Jenkins and Smith (1991) found that about 15% of the variance in internalizing and externalizing problems of school age children was explained by marital conflict. In a study of children rated (by their mothers) on internalizing or antisocial symptoms, of the 25% most symptomatic children, 67% came from disharmonious homes and 33% from harmonious homes (Smith & Jenkins, 1991).

Children's reactions to anger, such as distress, emotional arousal, and anxious verbalizations (e.g. Cummings, Iannotti & Zahn-Waxler, 1985) have been found across

all ages from infancy to adolescence (Cummings, Ballard, & El-Sheikh, 1991). Children have reported feelings of sadness and anger when exposed to interadult anger, and some younger children describe feelings of fear (Cummings et al., 1991). Peterson & Zill (1986) found early adolescent children from highly conflicted families were rated as more depressed, withdrawn, antisocial and impulsive than children in families which reported less conflict.

In studies of intact families and non-clinic-referred children, maternal ratings of openly expressed conflict were correlated with conduct problems in toddlers (Jouriles, Pfiffner & O'Leary, 1988). High levels of overt marital conflict were positively correlated with maternal reports of greater levels of conduct problems in two year old children. For example, mothers who reported higher levels of marital discord expressed more disapproval statements towards their sons for misbehaviours. This relationship between exposure to marital conflict and aggressive childhood behaviour may be explained by children attributing hostile intent to the actions of others during social situations (Dodge, 1986). The hypothesis is that this attribution bias has been acquired through previous exposures to social interactions which are negative or hostile in nature.

Observing parental anger may promote the development of "over-sensitive" coping styles. These may then lead children to overreact when conflict occurs in the family and in ambiguous situations outside of the family context (Cummings & Cummings, 1988). A recent study observed how children's behaviours during a conflictual family discussion were related to previous exposure to physical marital aggression. Observations of the reactions of children aged eight to 11, in the context of marital conflict, significantly

correlated with observed parental hostility and physical marital aggression (Gordis, Margolin, & John, 1997). Boys who had been previously exposed to physical marital aggression were more anxious and appeared distracted in family discussions when their parents were more hostile toward them. Boys who had not been previously exposed withdrew more from the discussions. For girls, appearing distracted was significantly correlated with physical marital aggression. Overall, children with a history of more exposure to interparental physical aggression were rated as more anxious, more distracting, and withdrawing in family discussions which involved mild non-physical conflict. As well as observing significant behavioural differences between children who had a history of being exposed to physical marital conflict and those with no previous history, these results suggested that exposure to interparental aggression affects children's reactions to other instances of family conflict.

Age Differences in Children's Responding to Conflict

Age changes in children's responding to anger in the home suggest a developmental trend toward greater involvement in parental quarrels and a decrease in overtly emotional or affective responses. One way in which children have been shown to differ with age is in their attributions for the origins of parental anger. When asked why they felt a mother was angry, five to six year old children were more likely to attribute maternal anger to themselves. As well as themselves, children aged seven to nine, and 10 to 15 years, also mentioned other family members, or familial events as causes of maternal anger (Covell & Abramovitch, 1987). This suggests that younger children may perceive higher levels

of involvement in the conflicts of others. It is possible that for children of all ages, exposure to marital conflict increases distress but the mechanism for this relationship differs depending on the age of the child, due to social cognitive developmental differences.

Children of different ages differ in their perceived involvement in conflict and they also show different reactions to it. Being exposed to marital conflict may elicit emotional distress in children. Children's emotional responses to interadult anger have been found to vary with age, with young children showing more emotional distress than older children (Cummings, et al., 1984). Young children's behaviours have been found to change in response to background anger between adults. Distress has been found to be a prominent reaction in toddlers. Anger between adults heightened two year old children's distress reactions such as changes in their body posture or movements (e.g. freezing or stopping). Distress shown in facial expressions or in voices was shown by 33% to 23% of toddlers after a second exposure to background anger compared to only 17% and 15% after first exposure, suggesting cumulative effects of witnessing anger between adults (Cummings, Iannotti & Zahn-Waxler, 1985). Two year old children were significantly more aggressive towards their peers and friends after exposure to simulated arguments between adults. It is possible that children may learn or model the angry styles of their parents. In this study children did not simply learn specific aggressive behaviours nor did they imitate the specific actions they witnessed as the adult's quarrel was verbal, and children displayed acts of physical aggression (Cummings et al., 1985). The arousal of distress after exposure to marital conflict may sensitize children, leading to a negative

bias in their interpretation of subsequent events. Children may also become enmeshed in the conflicts themselves, leading to adverse effects on parenting and discipline styles and on parent-child relationships.

Age Differences in Children's Interventions into Marital Conflict.

Children's attempts to intervene in marital conflict have been conceptualized as direct attempts to alter a stressful event (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Older children are seen as having acquired a larger repertoire of coping skills, and a more extensive network of social support (such as peers, teachers). Younger children, who do not have the capacity to engage in more complex cognitive coping strategies, may rely instead on more simple solutions such as leaving the room or not intervening at all (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Six to seven year olds were found more likely than one to two year olds to comfort or intervene in family conflicts (Cummings et al., 1984). Older children might perceive that they have a greater responsibility for mediating or intervening into their parents' conflict.

Children's beliefs in the effectiveness of their own interventions into parental conflict, and the directness or subtlety of children's interventions have also been found to vary with age. Intervention strategies such as telling parents not to fight or playing games with parents were not endorsed as being effective strategies for reducing parental anger by children aged 10 to 12 years in contrast to children aged four to six who felt that these *were* effective strategies (Covell & Miles, 1992). Older children attempt to intervene into parental conflicts more often than younger children do, and they often take on the role of mediator (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1984). Six to seven year olds

were more likely than one to two year olds to comfort parents or to intervene into marital conflicts. In older children, higher rates of responding to interparental anger may suggest that they are more affected by the anger than younger children (Cummings et al., 1984).

Understanding and Responding to Marital Conflict

To examine the association between marital conflict and child problems, Grych and Fincham (1990) presented a cognitive framework which focuses on the attempts children make to understand and respond to conflictual episodes within the family. The content of the parental conflict, children's cognitions, and the children's developmental level appear to help moderate the stressfulness of conflict. Cognition was argued to play a central role in children's coping behaviour where they need to regulate their own emotional arousal, and enact a response to the conflict. Two stages of children's processing of marital conflict were proposed: primary processing, and secondary processing. Through primary processing, the child becomes aware that a stressful event is occurring and experiences an affective reaction. The child extracts information about the conflict regarding its negativity, threat and self-relevance. In secondary processing the child extracts further information about the situation in order to understand and cope with the conflict. The model hypothesizes that during secondary processing children may try to discover why the conflict is occurring, who is responsible for it, and whether they have adequate skills for successfully coping with the conflict.

Implicit in a model that proposes higher and lower levels of cognitive processing are age differences in children's understanding of marital conflict. Grych & Fincham's

model (1990) suggests developmental changes, positing that younger children may not have the cognitive ability necessary for secondary processing. Additionally, the level of emotional arousal in younger children may not be as great, and therefore younger children may cease to attend to the conflict. Secondary processing is seen as being influenced by the child's initial level of emotional arousal, which serves to modulate the affect aroused by the conflict. Both affect and secondary processing guide children's attempts to cope with adult conflict. Some children may feel overwhelmed by their own emotional reaction and they may not engage in further (or secondary) processing. Older children may have an increased ability to regulate their emotional responses, and therefore are better able to understand and cope with the conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Exposure to marital conflict is not an equivalent stressor to children of all ages. The way in which children understand and attribute events appears to change as social cognition develops. I was interested in whether these age differences in the responses and reactions of children exposed to marital conflict hinged on changes in children's social cognitions in the early school years. I know little about how children of different ages conceptualize interparental conflict. What do they see as the causes of conflict? How is conflict resolution achieved? What role do children see for themselves in parental conflict, and does this vary with age? Are there age changes in their understanding of how dyadic conflicts are affected by a third person's intervention into the conflict? I hypothesized that three main developments would have a major impact on how children understood parental conflict: 1) children's increasing ability to understand the role of

mental states in behaviour, 2) integrating information from several different relationships, and 3) understanding role relationships in the family.

Understanding the Role of Mental States in Behaviour

There is a general agreement among cognitive developmental theories that with age there are developmental shifts in children's abilities to analyze interpersonal events in terms of internal motivational states (e. g. Selman, 1980; Case, 1985; & Fischer, 1980). Around six years of age, children begin to interpret behaviour in terms of the intentions and goals of protagonists.

Social cognitive development has been viewed as proceeding from an awareness of others, moving towards an awareness of the underlying goals of others and then to an understanding of how the perspectives of more than one person are integrated within a social interaction (Selman, 1980). In infancy, babies learn how to take turns, how to talk to someone and they have learned procedures for influencing others. In early childhood, toddlers develop the concept of "self" and "other". They can represent other people as agents which act independently of the child's own actions. The first developmental shift is presumed to take place at age three, when children have clearly differentiated self from others. However, they do not yet differentiate subjective perspectives and do not recognize that someone else may be interpreting the situation differently.

Young children do not clearly differentiate between physical and psychological characteristics of persons. At about age five years children begin to differentiate between intentional and unintentional acts since they can now see the contrasts between physical

and psychological characteristics of persons. Children's subjective perspectives of "self" and "other" are now differentiated and recognized as potentially different. However, at this level, children understand another person's subjective state as being physically observable. Around the age of seven years, children develop the cognitive ability to take a self-reflective or second-person perspective on their own thoughts and actions. They also realize that other people can also do this. "Children understand that people have a visible appearance and a hidden appearance or reality" (Selman, 1980, p 38). At this stage, children see social interactions as having a reciprocal perspective. The child puts herself or himself in another person's shoes and realizes that the other person can do the same. Children do not yet comprehend the relationship "system" between two people both seeing self and other. They understand that two persons see self and other, but do not see the relationship between the two persons. The ability to see the "system" which operates between two or more people begins to emerge at about age 10 at the fourth level where relations are viewed as ongoing, and persons share thoughts and experiences within these relations.

Case (1992) has postulated that the beginnings of children's social awareness (near four years of age) appear to be simple observations of the behaviour of others within social situations. Behaviour is not understood in terms of underlying motives, feelings or judgements. By approximately the age of six years, children have moved to an awareness of one person's internal state. By age eight, they are able to consider two people each having a motive or goal. Children are now able to make reference to several internal states at the same time while analyzing action or conflict. The ability to integrate

two or more internal states into a dynamic social interaction does not appear until approximately 10 years of age.

Selman's model of social perspective taking and Case's theory appear to support each other. Both viewpoints show cognitive development as proceeding from an awareness of others, moving towards an awareness of the underlying goals of others and then to an understanding of how the motivational states of more than one person are integrated within a social interaction. This developmental shift is likely to be important for several aspects of children's understanding of marital conflict including children's conceptions of conflict and their understanding of conflict resolution. Based on these theories I expected that children would differ with age in their explanations of actions that are behavioural versus internal. That is, I felt that younger children would see the overt features of interpersonal conflict and would interpret it as a behavioural interaction. As children develop the ability to understand underlying motives, goals, and intentions, I expected that their responses would reflect the notion of a change in mental states. These hypotheses were tested in children's conceptions of conflict and of conflict resolution.

Conception of Conflict: A Divergence of Goals?

I expected the developmental shift in analyzing events in terms of mental states to affect children's explanations of conflict. In the data described here, it was hypothesized that older children would understand conflict as the divergence of two people's goals, without one position being regarded as superior to the other. In contrast, younger children would pay attention to features of the conflict (such as what the parents are

arguing about) and would see one position as superior to the other. This would lead them to make a judgment that one person is right and one person is wrong.

Conceptions of Conflict Resolution

I expected the development of children's conceptions of conflict resolution would reflect a shift from behavioural explanations of how conflict is resolved towards explanations which indicated children's understanding of the underlying mental states of others. When being asked how two parents could help themselves reach an agreement, I hypothesized that five year olds would explain conflict resolution in terms of stopping angry behaviour whereas seven and nine year olds would reflect on the internal goal states of people, knowing that these needed to be changed for resolution to occur.

Children's Role in Facilitating Conflict Resolution

As discussed earlier, children show marked differences in the extent to which they intervene during parental conflict (also see Cummings & Davies, 1994 for a review). This may be related to the same conceptual changes in their understanding of the underlying goals and intentions of others. It was hypothesized here, that five year old children will see their role in conflict resolution as stopping the parents' angry behaviour. I hypothesized that older children would be more likely to depict negotiation and compromise based on their ability to understand the underlying motivational states of the parents, and to consider how each one had a goal or plan which was being threatened.

Understanding Family Triangulation

The development of understanding that internal goals drive interpersonal conflict, combined with the developing ability to mentally represent and integrate the mental states of others, may affect children's understanding of triangulation. The scenario presented to children in this study involved a mother and child having an argument in which the father intervened and sided with the child. I was interested in seeing how the children in my age groups might differ in their understanding of how a third person (a father) who sides with one person in a conflict (the child) affects the ongoing conflict between a mother and child as well as the relationship between the mother and father.

These three person dynamics have been referred to in the family systems literature as triangulation. Working within the structural family therapy framework, Minuchin (1974) described a relational pattern in which one parent may establish a coalition with the child that excludes the other parent. This relational pattern has been found to be associated with increased behavioural problems in children (Kerig, 1995). What was investigated in the present study was whether children's understanding of triangulation followed a developmental progression based on their ability to integrate the internal motivational states of others. Between four to six years of age, children show a shift in their ability to analyze events in terms of the mental states or motivations of the persons involved. By eight years of age, children are able to make reference to several internal states at the same time in their analysis of events (Case, 1992).

In order to understand triangulation I reasoned that children would need to a) be able to analyze events between people in terms of the internal states of protagonists and

b) to integrate information about goals from several different relationships. The child needs to understand the mother's goals in relating to the child, and the mother's goals in getting the father's support for her mother-child goal. I hypothesized that the later requirement of integrating information about mother's goals across two relationships was more complex and required more cognitive capabilities. To examine how children of different ages reason about triangulation, I included children of five, seven and nine years of age.

I hypothesized that before the age of six years, children will analyze this dynamic in terms of the father stopping a behavioural conflict between a mother and child and that no further conflict exists. I expected that children over the age of six years would analyze the conflict in terms of the goals of the mother and father and would therefore know that the conflict had not ended with the father's intervention.

I also hypothesized that there would be differences between seven and nine year old children in understanding the consequences of the father's actions for the father-mother relationship. Understanding the process of family triangulation requires the ability to see that because the mother's goals have been thwarted, she will feel negatively towards her spouse. I expected that it would not be until approximately nine years of age that children would understand that a father implicitly siding with the child will affect the relationship between the mother and child, **and** the relationship between the father and mother. I expected children of nine to be able to offer an explanation for the triangulation process that occurred.

Children's Understanding of Roles in the Family

Some literature indicates that older children are better able to perceive the spousal relationship as a separate component within the family, that operates on its own, and I was interested in pursuing this hypothesis in my investigation. Fischer, Hand, Watson, Van Parys & Tucker (1984) described a social role as a cluster of behaviours and characteristics prescribed for a particular category of people. In order to examine the development social roles, Fischer et al. (1984) assessed children's conceptions of role relationships using an imitative pretend play task and small family figures. Age differences between the period of five to nine years were found for how children understand social roles. Around the ages four to five years, children could describe a father in terms of having children and taking care of them. This was labelled as a *social role*, where a person relates to another according to a complementary role relationship. During this stage children were able to perceive how two people can perform one social role and then one of them performs another social role with a third person but they do not understand that these two roles can be held at the same time (e.g. children describe how a father has children and then becomes a grandfather when he has grandchildren). It was not until the age of six to nine years that children conceived of how *roles may intersect*. At this level, children could understand how a father can simultaneously be both a father to his children and a grandfather to his grandchildren.

Bretherton, Prentiss & Ridgeway (1990) also investigated children's understanding of family relationships. Using a story-completion task, five year old children were found to have some understanding of their parents' relationship as spouses,

as they mentioned spousal activities performed while apart from their children. The five year olds produced significantly more spousal or non-parental activities than children aged three and a half years. This study however was not designed to investigate the social cognitive status of children at different ages. They were interested in developmental changes in the complexity of family interactions and relationships. In my investigation, I was interested in social cognitive changes which allow children to think of their parents as having a two-way relationship separate from that of the parent-child relationship or, to use the language of Fischer al. (1984), where children see how the roles of parent and spouse as intersecting. As Fischer found, somewhere between six and nine years of age children become able to understand how one person is simultaneously a parent and a spouse.

In the present study children were asked to describe the activities their parents would perform while their children were away at camp. I was trying to elicit a discussion of what parents do while children are away. I felt that the type of adult activities expressed by children could be used as an indication of their understanding of the spousal relationship as being separate from the parental relationship. Based on Fischer's theory of social roles, it was hypothesized that seven and nine year old children would describe more spousal activities (as opposed to parental activities) than five year old children.

Differentiating and Integrating Emotions

Another question I looked at was age differences in the number of emotion concepts children could simultaneously conceptualize. Based on theories of the number

of cognitive representations that a child can coordinate or integrate simultaneously (Case, 1985; Selman, 1980; and Fischer, 1980), Harter and Buddin (1987) found that children proceeded through a developmental sequence in their ability to differentiate and integrate emotion concepts. Around the age of five years, children could not coordinate two emotions simultaneously. They either placed the two emotions in temporal order or denied their co-occurrence. At age seven children begin to develop additional emotion concepts or basic emotion categories. While children were able to represent two emotions of the same valence (both positive or both negative), they were unable to direct two emotions to different targets at the same time. After the age eight years (approximately 8 1/2 years) children were able to take two emotions of the same valence and direct them to two different targets or aspects of a situation. They did not yet have the ability to integrate positive and negative emotions simultaneously. Integration of emotions of two different valences emerged around age 10 years, however each emotion was directed at a different target. At age 11 the child could now acknowledge that one target can provoke a positive and a negative emotion at the same time.

Based on previous experimental findings of children's increasing abilities to generate emotion concepts and to integrate positive and negative emotions, I predicted that seven and nine year olds would generate a greater number of emotions than five year olds. I also hypothesized that the nine year old children might suggest both positive and negative emotions occurring simultaneously and both directed at the child. I reasoned that it might be possible to see this ability earlier on in development than Harter and Buddin (1987) had found, if children were talking about conflicting feelings between

parents and children as this is a frequent aspect of everyday experience between parents and their children.

In the present study I was looking at children's developing understanding of how intentions guide or drive the behaviour of others. Children's abilities to understand and integrate the emotions and behaviours of others appear to follow a developmental sequence of increasing complexity in their ability to analyze events in terms of internal motivational states (i.e. thinking about how goals, intentions, and feelings are interrelated) (Fischer, Hand, Watson, Van Parys & Tucker, 1984). Here I was interested in how these cognitive changes would affect their ability to understand marital conflict and the marital relationship.

The aims of this study were to investigate age differences in how children conceptualize conflict, conflict resolution, family triangulation, in their conceptions of the spousal relationship and in their ability to integrate and differentiate emotion concepts. I hypothesized that younger children would understand conflict in absolute terms as *angry behaviour* whereas older children would conceptualize conflict as an occurring when the *goals* of the protagonists are opposing.

My second hypothesis centered around changes in children's conceptions of conflict resolution. I predicted that younger children would see conflict as being resolved when the angry behaviour stopped and that older children would understand that compromise or discussion is needed to alter the goal(s) of one or more person. I felt that the same age change in behaviour versus goals would also appear when children were asked to intervene into parental conflict. It was hypothesized that five year old children would

portray children's interventions in parental conflict as being aimed at stopping the behaviour while older children were hypothesized to suggest way in which they would facilitate discussion between parents.

Thirdly, I proposed that in order to understand triangulation in the family children needed to analyze events in terms of underlying goals **and** to be able to integrate the information about goals from more than one relationship. I hypothesized that children would not understand triangulation until approximately the age of nine years.

My fourth question surrounded children's abilities to conceptualize the spousal relationship as opposed to the parental relationship. I hypothesized that children seven and nine years of age would generate more spousal activities than parental activities.

The fifth age change hypothesized was in children's ability to understand the simultaneity of two emotions. I expected that five year old children would only mention one emotion occurring at a time, while the older children would mention two negative emotions and possibly a negative and a positive emotion occurring simultaneously.

The possibility of gender differences was investigated across age groups for all of the above concepts.

Method

Participants: Subjects were sixty children (30 girls and 30 boys) attending an elementary school in Toronto. The children were drawn from three grades: Senior Kindergarten (10 girls and 10 boys, $X=5:4$ years, S. D. 3.59 months), grade two (10 girls and 10 boys, $X=7:7$ years, S. D. 3.86 months), and grade four (10 girls and 10 boys, $X=9:6$ years, S. D. 3.71 months). The developments in cognition reviewed above occurred within the age range of five to nine years old (Case, 1985; Fischer, 1980; Selman, 1980). Teachers were asked if any child in the class had experienced a family breakup or marital conflict, and these children were not included in the sample as one of the stories involved two parents having a conflict. One child in the sample pool was excluded from the research due to a recent parental divorce. Subjects were middle to upper-middle-class in socioeconomic status. A consent form for research (which is an agreement with the parents of children in this school) is obtained at the beginning of each school year (see Appendix). Before research is conducted, it is reviewed by a panel of people, including lawyers and parents, who make decisions around the acceptability of the research. The present research was evaluated in terms of cognitive changes in children's understanding of events within the family.

Materials and Procedure. Two stories about family conflict and one about children being away from parents were developed to elicit children's understanding of family relationships.

Conflict between mother, father, and child. A mother and child were having a dispute about playing hockey before homework was completed, and the father intervened saying that the child could go outside and play:

"Mom and Max are having an argument about Max going out to play hockey.

(Mom) "You have to do your homework first."

(Max) "That's not fair! The game will be over by the time I finish my homework."

(Mom) "Well you still have to do it."

The dad is in the other room and hears them arguing. Then the father comes into the room, and says to Max that he can go out and play hockey now.

Conflict over Moving House. The conflict presented here had one parent wanting to move to a new house and the other parent not wanting to move:

"The mom and dad were talking together one night. The mother said to the father that she wanted to move to a new house. The father said that he was perfectly happy where they were and wanted to stay in their house. They start discussing this in an angry way".

Parent and Child Separation. Here the children were portrayed as having left the parents to go to camp:

"Sarah and her sister Emily are going away to camp for a week. Their mom and dad are staying at home. This is the first time that the girls have gone away for so

long. They get into the bus, and off they go. What do the mom and dad do while the children are away?"

During each story, children were asked questions about how they thought the people felt, and what they might do. They were also asked to give explanations for their answers as described below. Responses for children were recorded verbatim onto coding sheets.

Task administration for children in kindergarten and grade two began with a warm-up story about a birthday party, and small family figures and dollhouse props were used to engage the younger children in the task. Grade four children were administered the same stories but without the dolls and props as the first few older children interviewed found the dolls and props too childish. Six stories were read to each child individually, in a small room within their school building. Three stories about pleasant family interactions were used to separate the three stories which involved family conflict or parent-child separation. The three experimental stories were counter balanced for order within age group and gender. Significant differences were not found for story order. Children were advised that their responses were being audio-taped in order to obtain accurate descriptions of their responses and to make the administration procedure faster. The experimenter explained to each child that the tape would be erased after the responses had been transcribed onto the coding sheets. Children were not obligated to continue the story tasks if the questions made them feel uncomfortable. If a child appeared anxious about answering the questions, or if they consistently avoided the story issues, they were then asked if they wished to return to class, as finishing the task was not something they

were compelled to do.

Coding

A coding scheme was drawn up based on the theoretical principles outlined in the introduction relating to children's understanding of roles, explanations of actions that are behavioural versus internal, and the ability to integrate information across different cognitive structures. To establish coding reliability, fifteen response sheets (five from each age category) were randomly selected, and were independently coded by two raters. Reliability was assessed for nominal variables by Cohen's Kappa, and for continuous variables, the Pearson r is given (following the description of each measure).

Conception of Conflict: Divergence of Goals? In the story concerning parental conflict over moving to a new house, children were asked who they thought was right in the disagreement. Responses were coded into two categories, "one parent is correct", or "conflicting goals". If children responded that one parent is correct ("the mom is right" or "the dad is right") they were given a code of "0". Explanations of the argument in terms of conflicting goals were coded as "1" (examples: "nobody's right or wrong", "no-one really, because they both have their own opinion", "because they each want their own way, and they're trying to work it out"). (Kappa: 1.00)

Conflict Resolution. In the 'conflict over moving house' story, children were asked "What do parents need to do now to help them stop the disagreement?" Descriptions were coded

as either "behavioural" or "mind change". Behavioural responses (coded as "0") included children saying that parents could just terminate the argument without any reference to at least one person needing to change what they thought or wanted. The following examples will illustrate this category: "get over it, have a hug", "make themselves stop". "The dad can stay in his own house and the mom can move to a new house by herself and then they will both be happy", "sit away from each other". The other category, coded as "1", was mind change. This category included replies about changing one another's minds, coming to an agreement through discussion, or compromising. Examples: "talk, because maybe one of them will agree", "maybe one person needs to let the other person get their own way", "talk it all out because they may find some reasons why the house they are in is a lot better than another house", "they should really see why they want to move and why they don't want to move". (Kappa: .99)

Children's Role in Facilitating Conflict Resolution. Children were then asked what they might do to help their parents stop disagreeing after the 'conflict over moving house' story. These responses were also coded, as either "behavioural=0" or "mind change=1". Responses coded as behavioural included children's actions or suggestions which altered the parents' behaviour, altered their mood, or distracted them. Examples of behavioural responses: "tickle them with a feather", "tell them to calm down", "just forget about the whole thing" "one child says "stay here" and one child says "go". The mind change category included replies which referred to altering the goals of the parents, integrating the children's goals, or suggestions to alter the parent's thoughts in order to reach an

agreement. Examples: "have a vote, because that's fair", "give them ideas of how to solve the problem", or say "If you compromise it would be easier". (Kappa: .80)

Family Triangulation. In the "Conflict between mother, father and child" story, children were asked a series of questions about whether and how the father's intervention affected the argument between the mother and son, and the relationship between the mother and father. For each of their answers, children were asked to give explanations. Two separate variables were formed: one relating to the effect of the father's action on the mother-child relationship and the second relating to the effect of the father's action on the mother-father relationship as discussed in the introduction.

Triangulation 1. Effects of the father's intervention on the mother-child relationship.

Children were asked "Is the fight between mom and Max over now, or is it still going on? Why or Why not? If children thought the father's intervention had ended the fight between mother and child their response was coded as "0" If the children felt that the conflict between the mother and child would still be ongoing after the father's intervention, the response was coded as "1". Children were then asked "Has the dad made the fight between mom and Max worse in any way? How? Better in any way? How?" Their responses to both questions were examined for mentions of the mother and child relationship. If no mention was made of things being "worse" between the mother and child (e.g. "because Max goes outside now", "because the dad reached a decision"), responses were coded as "0". If children mentioned instances of how the mother child conflict was worse, the child's response was coded as "1" (e.g. "she wants him to do his

homework and so she's mad.", "She doesn't want him to play hockey now.", "He just goes out to play and he didn't do his homework, so the mom's going to be mad at him.").

Responses to these questions were summed to form the first triangulation variable (mother-child conflict and mother-child relationship). The internal consistency of this variable was satisfactory ($\text{Alpha} = .69$) and interrater reliability was high ($r = .88$).

Triangulation 2. Effects of the father's intervention on the mother-father relationship.

The coding for this variable was similar to that of the mother-child relationship.

Responses to the question "How will the mom and dad get along together now? Why?" were coded as "0" if the child had **not** thought the relationship was worse or if the child's explanation contained no mention of any conflict between the mother and father (e.g. "the mother and father will get along good because the dad stopped the fight", "the mom thought the father had a very good suggestion", "they won't be angry now"). If the relationship between the mother and father was mentioned as being worse the response was given a code of "1" (e.g. "when the dad came in the [mom and dad] started to fight" "now the mummy and daddy will fight" "the mom and dad will get along together "a lot worse", "but now [the fight is] with the father"). A second coding was given for explanations of why the mother was mad at the father (or how the spousal relationship was worse). Responses which mentioned that the mother's goals had been thwarted by the father's intervention were coded as "1" (e.g. "she's upset with the dad because she wants [the boy] to work", "She wants [the boy] to do his homework and the father wants the noise to stop"). A 'triadic' explanation, or one that indicated the relationship between three people had been affected by an alliance forming between child and adult, was coded

as "2" (e.g. "the mom is more angry now because the dad and the boy agree and the boy and the mom don't", "the mom is trying to tell the boy to do his homework, and the boy is on the dad's side", "now [the fight's] three people"). Children's responses to these questions were summed to form the second triangulation variable (father-mother relationship, explanation of mother-father relationship being worse). The internal consistency of this measure was satisfactory ($\text{Alpha} = .68$) and inter-rater reliability was high ($r = .82$).

Understanding the role of spouse versus parent. After the "Parent and child separation" story, children were asked what activities a mother and father might participate in while their children were away at camp for a week. The activities mentioned by the respondents were categorized as parental or spousal focused. Parent focused included activities that maintain the family, such as grocery shopping, cleaning, laundry or any that involved the children directly (e.g. writing letters to them, missing them, planning surprises for them). These could be done both together or with one parent on their own. Spousal focused activities were carried out together, and were pleasurable or recreational: going out to dinner, the movies, or meeting friends. A proportional score of spousal activities mentioned to total activities mentioned was calculated for each child ($\text{Kappa} = .95$).

Simultaneity of Emotions/Differentiating and Integrating Emotions. In the story which dealt with conflict between mother, father and child, children were asked "What are all

the feelings like love, sad, happy, angry the mom feels about Max when they are arguing?" The four emotions given as examples were counterbalanced for order within age group and gender. Children's responses were coded as "0" if one or no feelings were mentioned (e.g. "she's just angry", "I just think she's frustrated"). A code of "1" was given for mentioning two emotions of the same valence (e.g. "she feels sad and mad", "kind of sad and maybe...angry"). If the responses contained a mention of two opposite valence emotions they were coded as "2" (e.g. "she still loves him and is upset, kind of mixed feelings", "sad and happy", "anger and love"). ($Kappa=.89$).

Analyses and Results

Log Linear analysis was used for categorical variables and ANOVA was used for continuous variables.

Conception of Conflict: Divergence of Goals?

Five percent of five year olds, 39% of seven year olds, and 100% of nine year olds explained conflict in terms of the conflicting goals of two people, as shown in Figure 1. It is evident therefore that differences between age groups on their conceptions of conflict were marked. The fact that no nine year olds explained conflict in terms of one parent being right meant that log linear analysis, which is sensitive to sampling zeroes, could not be carried out. In consequence, two chi square analyses (with the continuity correction)

were carried out, in which five and seven year olds were compared with one another and seven and nine year olds were compared with one another. Five and seven year olds differed significantly $X^2(1)=4.3$, $p<.04$ and seven and nine year olds also differed significantly from one another $X^2(1)=12.4$, $p<.001$.

Conflict resolution. Using a log linear analysis, a good fit was found for the model specifying age, conflict resolution and the interaction between conflict resolution and age, Likelihood Ratio Chi Square = 7.96, $df=6$, $p<.24$. Gender was not significant in the model. Parameter estimates demonstrated that there was a significant difference between five and seven year olds, $z=2.03$, $p<.05$, and between seven and nine year olds, $z=2.16$, $p<.05$. Eighty-three percent of nine year old children, 47% of seven year old children and 12% of five year old children had an understanding of how a discussion or a compromise settles a conflict as can be seen in Figure 2.

Children's Role in Facilitating Conflict Resolution. A good fit was found for the model specifying age, children's roles in facilitating resolution, and the interaction between facilitating resolution and age, Likelihood Ratio Chi Square = 5.6, $df=6$, $p<.47$. Gender was not significant in the model. There was a significant difference between five and seven year olds, $z=2.42$, $p<.05$, but not between seven and nine year olds $z=.74$, NS. The younger children worked more on the behaviour of their parents, while older children attempted to help their parents compromise in order to reach an agreement. Sixty-eight percent of nine year olds, 56% of seven year olds and 13% of five year olds suggested

that children might try to facilitate a discussion or compromise between parents (see Figure 3).

Triangulation 1 (mother-child relationship). A two-way ANOVA was run initially, with gender and age as factors. Gender was not significant and was dropped from the model. The one-way ANOVA on Triangulation 1 indicated that children of different ages had a different understanding of the effects of the father's intervention on the mother-child relationship, $F(2, 57)=4.4, p<.02$. A post hoc analysis (Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference test) showed a difference between the five year olds and the nine year olds. Five and seven year olds did not differ significantly from one another and seven and nine year olds did not differ from one another. Nine year old children had a better understanding of how one parent's intervention into a dispute between the other parent and child could affect the quarrel between parent and child. See Table 1.

Triangulation 2 (mother-father relationship). A two-way ANOVA was run initially, with gender and age as factors. Gender was not significant and was dropped from the model. A one way ANOVA on Triangulation 2 (father-mother relationship) indicated that children of different ages had a different understanding of the effects of the father's intervention on the mother-father relationship, $F(2,53)=6.0, p<.005$. Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference test found that five year olds were significantly different from the seven year olds, but seven and nine year olds did not differ from one another on their understanding of triangulation. The hypothesis that children's understanding of

triangulation would increase with age was confirmed, but nine year olds did not show a higher level of understanding of the effect of the father's interventions on the mother-father relationship than seven year olds. See Table 2.

Understanding the Role of Spouse versus Parent. An analysis of variance indicated that age was significantly associated with children having more of an understanding of the spousal versus parent role, $F(2, 53) = 7.03$, $p < .002$. Five year olds offered a lower proportion of spousal focused activities ($M = .34$) than did the seven ($M = .71$) and nine ($M = .68$) year olds. See Figure 4.

Simultaneity of Emotions/Differentiating and Integrating Emotions.

A log linear analysis did not show significant differences in children's understanding that someone can experience more than one emotion at a time, or of how someone directs both negative and positive emotions at the same time towards another person. Parameter estimates between five and seven year olds ($z = 0.60$) and between seven and nine year olds ($z = 0.80$) were not significant. Approximately 80% of the five year olds and 50% of both seven and nine year olds mentioned one or no emotions. Twenty-five percent of the nine year olds were able to simultaneously direct two emotions of different valences towards the same person compared to 10% of five year olds and 5% of seven year olds.

Discussion

The data presented here support the hypothesized developmental sequence in children's understanding of marital conflict. As children get older they show a more sophisticated understanding of marital conflict and parental roles, related to their increasing ability to analyze events in terms of the internal motivation of characters and to understand how people occupy different social roles. Age differences were found in children's conceptions of what causes conflict, their understanding of how conflict resolution is achieved, their own role in conflict resolution, and their understanding of the process of triangulation between parents and their children. Age differences were also found in children's abilities to conceptualize the spousal relationship as separate from the parental relationship.

Most of the age differences reported in this study occurred between children aged five and seven years. This was the case in children's understanding of Triangulation 2, the recognition of the separate roles that parents have as parents and spouses, the child's understanding of conflict resolution between parents, and children's conceptions of conflict.

Five year old children showed a very limited understanding of triangulation. Seven and nine year old children were more likely to understand that a father intervening into a conflict between a mother and child will affect the mother-child relationship and the relationship between the mother and father.

Children aged seven and nine also had more understanding of the spousal roles of mothers and fathers, and they were better able to differentiate these spousal roles from

parental roles. The distinction between the parental and spousal role was infrequently made by five year old children. Both seven and nine year old children think about their parents both as parents and as one another's spouse.

When children thought about their own role in resolving marital conflicts, the same developmental patterns were evident. Seven and nine year olds knew that their role required actions which could mediate the conflict through changing the goals of at least one person, rather than just asking the parents to stop.

When children were asked to assess how parents could resolve their own conflicts and were asked to suggest whether one person was right in a conflict, differences between the seven and nine year olds were more evident. Five year old children explained conflicts between the parents in terms of one person being right and one person being wrong. Nine year olds consistently understood that when people disagree, their goals are in conflict and that neither person is necessarily correct. The responses of seven year old children were almost evenly divided between seeing that one person is wrong and understanding that two person's goals are conflicting.

At age five, few children understood conflict resolution between parents as involving a change in someone's mind. They were more inclined to think that conflict stopped when angry behaviour stopped. By age nine, the majority of children understood that for a conflict to be resolved, one or both parents needed to change their mind. Seven year old children showed elements of both ways of thinking. In both aspects of understanding, the data from the seven year olds indicated that they might be in a transition stage between the levels of understanding of the five and nine year old children.

The seven year olds seemed to have a better realization of how children might help parents resolve conflicts than of how parents could resolve the conflict on their own, as they were significantly better than five year olds at suggesting compromises between parents but were not significantly better at offering children's interventions which centered around discussion or compromise. Case (1992) argues that six year old children are aware of the internal state of one other person, and do not become aware of two people each having a motive or goal until the age of eight years. Selman (1980) suggests that around seven years, children see social interactions as having a reciprocal perspective but do not yet comprehend the system operating between two people who both can see "self" and "other". While I have suggested that seven year olds appear to be in a transition period, it is possible that seven year old children are able to suggest a child's intervention into parental conflict on a higher cognitive level (i. e. 56% suggested compromise or discussion) than the suggestion they provide for the parental resolution (i. e. 47% suggested compromise or discussion). It may be easier to conceive of their own point of view plus that of a parent, than to put themselves into the roles of both the mother and the father. An alternate explanation is that they may have developed social-cognitive "scripts" of how they, as children, respond to parental anger.

Five year olds conceptualized the social roles of mothers and fathers as parental more than spousal. At this age level, when parents argue children will likely interpret the conflict within their conception of the parental roles. This result may account somewhat for the finding that younger children tend to attribute parental anger to themselves (e.g. Covell & Abramovitch, 1987). This result may be explained by younger children's

limitations in their understanding of "role intersection", or of how one person occupies two social roles simultaneously (Fischer et al., 1984). Five year old children may be conceptualizing the dynamic between parents as being related to parental issues, which usually involve their children. They are not separating out the roles of parent and spouse. During conflict, five year olds may perceive themselves as being "in" the spousal relationship. This may be a way in which they are vulnerable when observing marital conflict.

Children of different ages are vulnerable in different ways to, and about different aspects of, marital conflict. Interventions around stopping conflict hold different meanings and purposes for children of different ages. Older children may be aware that conflict is ongoing when a resolution around goals has not been reached. Younger children conceptualize conflict between parents as being resolved simply because angry behaviour stops. In the present study, past the age of seven, children understood that a conflict lasts as long as the goals of the persons involved are still diverging. These data suggest that older children perceive conflict and experience negative affect differently from how younger children do.

Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake (1991) found that children showed increased sensitivity to certain resolution issues with age. From the age of five years young children focussed on whether overt conflict continued, whereas past nine years of age children appeared more focussed on the quality of the resolution. For example, Cummings et al. (1991) found that nine year olds reported stronger feelings of sadness in response to "the silent treatment", than in response to continued fighting. In comparison

to older children, five year old children perceived unresolved anger (when people stop expressing anger but the issue has not been resolved) as less distressing than resolved anger. This suggests that when parents quarrel, young children need to experience the cessation of angry behaviour whereas older children need to see that the source of the conflict has been resolved. Discussions and exchanges of opinion, if presented in an angry manner, are disturbing for young children.

These research findings appear to support the hypothesis that children's conceptions of conflict change as they shift from an understanding of the conflictual behaviour towards an understanding of the role of mental states in behaviour. Older children see a quarrel as ongoing, even if the parents do not look angry. This implies that older children have a lower threshold for interparental conflict. Younger children equate a conflict with angry affect. Older children will experience a conflict when a difference of opinion occurs.

A child's level of understanding appears important when considering conflicted and triangulated families. Younger children who side with one or the other parent in a dispute do not appear to understand that their actions may impact on their relationship with the other parent and on the relationship between the parents. Children in triangulated families have described their relations with their parents in negative terms. Between the ages of six and ten years "triangulated" children, as compared to children in families with other structures, reported more negative affect in their father-child relationships and similarly in mother-child relations (Kerig, 1995). Older children who understand what impact their actions can have, may experience more distress with the

realization that they need to extricate themselves from the "triangle". Further research is needed to investigate age differences in children's understanding of their own mediating or triangulating roles when involved in cross-generational coalitions, as well as age differences in their reactions to triangulation.

Age differences were not found in the number of emotions given by the children. nor in the ability to attribute both a negative and a positive emotion to the mother. Harter & Buddin (1987) found that the ability to do this did not appear until approximately eleven years of age. I had thought I might see this come in earlier as my questions surrounded the mother-child relationship. Harter & Buddin (1987) used a pictorial task where children were asked to select pictures representing emotions of different valences. My methodology differed in that I was asking children to select and generate emotion concepts based on a story-telling task, a more abstract procedure in the sense that my suggestions were only verbal rather than pictorial. As very few of my children responded with more than one emotion, and even fewer mentioned both a positive and a negative emotion it appears that my methodology may not allow for a comparison with that of Harter & Buddin (1987). Findings from an earlier study by Buddin (1985) had indicated that an understanding of the child's own emotions precedes their understanding of the emotions of their parents by approximately one level. Had I also asked the children how the boy was feeling about his mother while they were disagreeing, it may have been possible to examine a developmental progression in their ability to understand the emotions of self and others.

The methodology in the present study used an open-ended interview technique. Interview and questioning techniques can obtain knowledge of children's social cognitive "scripts" which help to determine a child's cognitive level of family-role understanding (Selman, 1980). Open-ended methods using props, pictures and guiding questions can elicit or emphasize what a child knows. When individual experience is an issue, very open-minded prompting is preferable (Bretherton, et al., 1990). Bretherton et al. (1990) postulated that when children are provided a well-supported context, they will appear quite knowledgeable about family relationships. As I was not investigating the individual experiences of children, my questions were not designed to elicit elaborated responses, or to obtain information about actual family experiences. A more structured question and answer format may have allowed for an assessment of the limits of their conceptual understanding. I was more interested in spontaneous thoughts about the topic of marital conflict than in forced-choice responses to categories. It remains quite possible that some of the responses given by children in this study reflected their individual experiences instead of their highest level of understanding. For example, when asked what parents might do to help themselves stop disagreeing, a nine year old might have observed parents leaving their conflict unresolved (where conflict just ends without compromise or discussion), and therefore may have suggested a strategy below their actual level of conceptual understanding. Although the present data do not allow me to establish absolute levels of understanding, the marked age differences in responses which were consistent with my hypotheses make it likely that the spontaneous replies I was looking for do reflect true conceptual change.

The implication of these data is that the way that five year old children understand conflictual events between their parents differs markedly from how these events will be seen by children even two years older. In the literature examining the effect of marital conflict on children, the developmental constraints on children's understanding of the conflict is rarely investigated. This study makes it clear that marital conflict is a very different type of stressor depending on the level of cognitive development of the child.

Children of all ages are vulnerable to parental conflict, but in different ways as they focus on different aspects of the conflict. Up to the age of approximately five years children understand the behaviours of others, and particularly the behaviour of parents during conflict. They do not understand conflict in terms of underlying feelings or goals. As children get older they will move towards an awareness of the internal mental states of others which guide conflict and conflict resolution. These cognitive changes have an important influence on the age changes in children's emotional and social behaviours when exposed to marital conflict. These cognitive differences are largely shown through the different ways in which children intervene into parental conflict and in the aspects of conflict which cause distress for children. Children as young as five years were shown to think about and pay attention to overt anger between parents. Older children have more subtle ways of thinking about the conflict and their involvement in it.

Having information about how children of different ages think about conflict, conflict resolution, and family relationships can improve the planning and delivering of interventions. We need to think more about these differences when planning interventions. For example, clinicians can be aware that if talking to five year olds about

the goals of their parents (during conflict), the children do not understand this concept.

To limit younger children's distress it would be best if they do not know about the conflict, and if they do not see it. When working with older children, one can talk with them about the conflicting goals of the parents.

Figure 1
Conception of Conflict

Figure 2
Parental Resolution

Figure 4

Understanding the Role of Spouse

Table 1

Mean Score on Triangulation 1 (mother-child relationship) as a function of age.

Age	Mean Score
5 years	.65
7 years	1.15
9 years	1.40

Table 2

Mean Score on Triangulation 2 (mother-father relationship) as a function of age.

Age	Mean Score
5 years	.74
7 years	1.55
9 years	1.74

References

Bretherton, I., Prentiss, C., & Ridgeway, D. (1990). Family relationships as represented in a story-completion task at thirty-seven and fifty-four months of age. *New Directions for Child Development*, 48, 85-105.

Buddin, B. J. (1985). *A comparison of children's understanding of the simultaneity of emotions for the self and for parents*. Paper presented at biannual meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Toronto, Canada.

Case, R. (1985). *Intellectual development: Birth to adulthood*. New York: Academic Press.

Case, R. (1992). A neo-piagetian approach to the issue of cognitive generality and specificity. In R. Case (Ed.), *The mind's staircase: Exploring the conceptual underpinnings of children's thought and knowledge* (pp. 17-35). Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Case, R. (1992). The mind and its modules: Toward a multi-level view of the development of human intelligence. In R. Case (Ed.), *The mind's staircase: Exploring the conceptual underpinnings of children's thought and knowledge* (pp. 343-393). Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Covell, K., & Abramovitch, R. (1987). Understanding emotion in the family: Children's and parents' attributions of happiness, sadness, and anger. *Child Development*, 58, 985-991.

Covell, K., & Miles, B. (1992). Children's beliefs about strategies to reduce parental anger. *Child Development*, 63, 381-390.

Cummings, E. M., Ballard, M., & El-Sheikh, M. (1991). Responses of children and adolescents to interadult anger as a function of gender, age, and mode of expression. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 37, 543-560.

Cummings, E. M., Ballard, M., El-Sheikh, M., & Lake, M. (1991). Resolution and children's responses to interadult anger. *Developmental Psychology*, 27, 3, 462-470.

Cummings, E. M., & Cummings, J. S. (1988). A process-oriented approach to children's coping with adults' angry behavior. *Developmental Review*, 8, 296-321.

Cummings, E. M. & Davies, P. (1994). *Children and marital conflict: The impact of family dispute and resolution*. New York: Guilford

Cummings, E. M., Iannotti, R. J., & Zahn-Waxler, C. (1985). The influence of conflict between adults on the emotions and aggression of young children. *Developmental Psychology*, 21, 495-507.

Cummings, E. M., Zahn-Waxler, C., & Radke-Yarrow, M. (1984). Developmental changes in children's reactions to anger in the home. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 25, 63-74.

Davies, P. T., & Cummings, E. M. (1994). Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 116, 387-411.

Dodge, K. A. (1986). A social information processing model of social competence in children. In M. Perlmutter (Ed.), *The Minnesota Symposium on Child Psychology* (Vol. 18, pp. 77-125). Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Fincham, F. D., Grych, J. H., & Osborne, L. N. (1994). Does marital conflict cause child maladjustment? Directions and challenges for longitudinal research. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 8, 2, 128-140.

Fischer, K. W. (1980). A theory of cognitive development: The control and construction of hierarchies of skills. *Psychological Review*, 87, 477-531.

Fischer, K. W., Hand, H. H., Watson, M. W., Van Parys, M. M., & Tucker, J. L. (1984). Putting the child into socialization: The development of social categories in preschool children. In L. Katz (Ed.) *Current topics in early childhood education* (Vol. 5, pp. 27-72). Norwood NJ: Ablex

Glick, P.C. & Lin, S. (1986) Recent changes in divorce and remarriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 48, 737-747.

Gordis, E. B., Margolin, G. & John, R. S. (1997). Marital aggression, observed parental hostility, and child behavior during triadic family interaction. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 11, 76-89.

Grych, J. H., & Fincham, F. D. (1990). Marital conflict and children's adjustment: A cognitive-contextual framework. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108, 2, 267-290.

Harter, S., & Buddin, B. J. (1987). Children's understanding of the simultaneity of two emotions: A five-stage developmental acquisition sequence. *Developmental Psychology*, 23 (3), 388-399.

Jenkins, J. M., Smith, M. A. & Graham, P. J. (1989). Coping with parental quarrels. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 28, 2, 182-189.

Jenkins, J. M., & Smith, M. A. (1991). Marital disharmony and children's behaviour problems: Aspects of a poor marriage that affect children adversely. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 32, 5, 793-810

Jouriles, E. N., Pfiffner, L. J., & O'Leary, S. G. (1988). Marital conflict, parenting and toddler conduct problems. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 16, 197-206.

Kerig, P. K. (1995). Triangles in the family circle: Effects of family structure on marriage, parenting, and child adjustment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 9, 1, 28-43.

Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and family therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Patterson, G. R. (1982). *Coercive Family Process*. Eugene, OR: Castalia Press.

Peterson, J. L., & Zill, N. (1986). Marital disruption, parent-child relationships, and behavior problems in children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 48, 295-307.

Selman, R. L. (1980). *The growth of interpersonal understanding: Developmental and clinical analyses*. New York: Academic Press.

Appendix

Parental Consent Form to Allow Children to Participate in Research

INSTITUTE OF CHILD STUDY, USES OF CHILDREN COMMITTEE

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

My signature indicates that I have read the document entitled "Research at the Institute of Child Study" and that I agree to allow my child/children,

_____ (children's names)

to participate in the Institute's research and training activities, as administered by the Uses of Children Committee.

I understand that I may also be contacted for permission for specific research projects.

Parent's signature _____

Date _____

Please return this form to the Institute of Child Study main office by September 4/97.

The University of Toronto supports the Laboratory School as a necessary facility for research and student training. Over the years, research findings from the Institute have appeared in books and professional articles. Some of this research is conducted by I.C.S. staff, some by other members of the University community and occasionally by researchers from other institutions. Your signature on the Parental Consent Form allows your child to take part in the ongoing research and training activities at the Institute, while your child is at the school.

The Uses of Children Committee was established in 1981 to monitor research and student training activities at the Institute. The objectives of the Committee are to ensure that research and training activities do not unduly occupy child and class time, while making reasonable provision for the laboratory functions of the Laboratory School. The Committee is composed of the Principal, a representative of the academic staff (Professor Jenny Jenkins or Professor Janet Astington), a representative of the school staff (Anne Tough), a representative of the Parents' Association (Joanne Kirlloss), the University's Human Subjects Officer (Susan Pilon), and an appointee of the Human Subjects Office (usually a lawyer, at present Professor Denise Reaume of the Faculty of Law). The Committee acts to ensure that proposed research falls within the guidelines described below, and that time demands on children and classes are not unreasonable.

Guidelines. Research that would normally be approved (pending consideration of time demands) includes assessments of skills and emotional functioning, observation of behaviour, and standard measures of social relations within a class. Standardized school achievement and IQ data are gathered in some or all grades. Such data are used in student training, as well as research, and we refer to these as "data gathered routinely". Studies involving parents or information about parents, or any other confidential information will require specific parental permission. Such studies are referred to as "studies requiring specific parental permission".

Although acceptance into the school is contingent on parental consent to projects involving data gathered routinely, parents are informed of their right to refuse consent to any study that requires specific parental permission. If parents have some reason for wishing their children temporarily exempted from studies involving data gathered routinely, they have the right to approach the school principal with this request. Parents will also be kept informed of research and related activities on an ongoing basis through newsletters and announcements of projects at parent meetings.

Children will be informed of the purposes of research activities and asked to participate. Children have the right to refuse to participate, and they will not be coerced to do so. Teachers may also indicate that particular children will not participate in a research project.

In reviewing research proposals, if any member of the Uses of Children Committee believes that a proposal should receive specific parental permission, this will be done. If the Principal and school staff representative find that the proposal involves excessive use of children's or staff time, the committee will either not approve the proposal or negotiate a reduction in time requirements. When the total number of projects involves excessive load on the school, the Committee will establish priorities reflecting the overall research goals and student training requirements of the Institute.

Records from various studies are maintained in a longitudinal research record. This is a record of all research information that has been collected about a child or family during the period of time that the child is attending the school. By pooling information from various research studies, we save duplication. This record also allows us to examine patterns in development over time. Each child is only identified by number in this record. The master list is kept by the Chair of the Uses of Children Committee. The information on the longitudinal research record is confidential.

and will only be accessible to research staff working at the Institute of Child Study. Information in this record is updated annually. The record includes: ³⁶

- data routinely gathered
- general information about the child's family. Parents will be asked each year to complete an information sheet about the family: sibling ages, education and occupation of parents, family members living at home, languages spoken at home, ethnicity of family members.
- studies requiring specific parental permission. For any studies that involve parental consent, parents will be asked whether the data that they have supplied for the individual study can be included in the longitudinal research record.

It should be noted that these research records are not part of the child's school record. When the research records are no longer needed they will be destroyed by the Chair of the Uses of Children Committee.

Confidentiality will be respected and no information which discloses the identity of you or your child will be released or published without your consent, except in circumstances where the law requires otherwise. These circumstances include where research documents are ordered to be produced by a court of law and where researchers are obliged to report to the appropriate child protection authorities information about suspicion of child abuse. Research activity at the Institute has never led to confidentiality of a child or family being broken, although it is possible that this situation could arise.

We appreciate your support for the Institute of Child Study's Laboratory School, and for the Institute's educational and research responsibilities.

The Uses of Children Committee of the Institute of
Child Study

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)

APPLIED IMAGE, Inc.
1653 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609 USA
Phone: 716/482-0300
Fax: 716/288-5989

© 1993, Applied Image, Inc., All Rights Reserved