Marital Aggression and Childrearing Disagreements: Relations to Child Secure Base Behavior in a Preschool Sample  
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Introduction
In the context of child-mother attachment relationships, children learn about their environment and themselves, and develop a sense of trust in their caregivers. When mothers are skillful in facilitating and participating in smooth interactions with their children, their children in turn are confident in their mother’s availability and response. Consequently, mothers who provide adequate secure base support are likely to have children who are securely attached to them (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Goldberg, Grusec, & Jenkins, 1999).

Interparental conflict has been implicated as a salient contextual factor with the potential to negatively influence the quality of parent-child relations (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Previous research has found that children discriminate between verbal and physical marital conflict (Cummings et al., 1989).

When conflicts center on childrearing issues (e.g., disagreements about discipline strategies), they seem to be particularly distressing to the child (Grych & Fincham, 1993). However, the degree to which verbal and physical aggression, and childrearing conflicts differentially impact children’s attachment security had not been explored.

Research Questions
1) Are verbal and physical aggression against the mother related to children’s secure base use?  
2) Are disagreements about childrearing related to children’s secure base use?

Participants
- 74 middle class, mother-child dyads  
- Children were around 5 years of age (M = 64.44 months, (SD = 3.28). Approximately equal numbers of boys and girls participated in the study (55.4% female)  
- Mothers were 35.43 years old on average (SD = 6.18), and most (91.9%) were married or cohabiting with a partner.  
- The majority of mothers worked at least part-time (78.4%), and had an average annual household income of $78,470 (SD = 48,010).

Procedures
- Mother-child dyads were visited once in the home and twice at the park.  
- Children’s secure base behavior was assessed at home and at the park using the Attachment Q-sort (Waters, 1995).  
- 55% of visits had multiple observers; inter-rater reliability was .78. A global composite was created by averaging home and park security scores.  
- Mothers completed the Family Behavior Survey (Posada & Waters, 1990) to indicate on average, how frequently (‘0 = never ’to ‘5 = every week or more’) they experienced:  
  - Verbal Aggression (42 items, α = .90)  
  - Physical Aggression (15 items; α = .83)  
  - Childrearing Disagreements (30 items, α = .91).

Analyses and Results
Overall, mothers reported low levels of verbal and physical aggression, as well as disagreements with their partners regarding childrearing.

Table 1.  
Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>.11 (.17)</td>
<td>.00 – 1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Physical Aggression</td>
<td>.04 (.10)</td>
<td>.00 – .47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Childrearing Disagreements</td>
<td>.40 (.39)</td>
<td>.00 – 2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Secure Base Behavior</td>
<td>.41 (.16)</td>
<td>-.06 – .66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Square root transformations were performed on the three marital conflict variables to correct for positive skew, though raw scores are presented here for ease of interpretation.

Child gender was found to be a significant covariate of secure base behavior, r(73) = -.43, p < .001, with girls having higher security scores than boys. Thus, it was controlled for in analyses with secure base behavior as the outcome.

Analyses revealed that the three aspects of marital conflict were significantly related to one another.

Table 2.  
Correlation Matrix of Associations Between Marital Conflict Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Physical Aggression</td>
<td>.62***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Childrearing Disagreements</td>
<td>.68***</td>
<td>.52***</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. One-tailed. *p < .05; **p < .01. Square root transformations were performed on the three marital conflict variables to correct for positive skew

Discussion
Despite low reports of marital conflict among this non-clinical sample, such conflict was adversely related to child security, indicating that even low levels of verbal or physical aggression and arguments about child-related issues may threaten a child’s security. The study reveals the importance of studying attachment relationships within the context in which they form, in order to examine the ways in which subsystems within the family may influence each other. Further, it is useful to study specific aspects of conflict in the marital relationship, as well as how they relate to children’s secure base use.

Mothers who reported greater verbal aggression had children with lower security scores. Likewise, physical aggression was negatively related to children’s attachment security. Lastly, more frequent marital disagreements about childrearing were related to lower levels of children’s attachment security.

Table 3.  
Partial Correlations between Marital Conflict and Secure Base Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Secure Base Behaviorb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Aggression</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childrearing Disagreements</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. One-tailed. *p < .05; **p < .01. Partial correlations controlling for child gender

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