Developmental Trajectories of Maternal Sensitivity across the Preschool Years: The Role of Marital Conflict

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Introduction
Attachment theory positions quality of caregiving (i.e., sensitivity) at the forefront of explanations for inter- and intra-individual differences in the quality of attachment relationships (Bowby, 1969/1982).

Importantly, research has implied that sensitivity may be impacted by changing life circumstances, such as marital problems (Waters et al., 2000).

Indeed, marital conflict has been implicated as a key determinant of parenting (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Yet the developmental trajectory of sensitivity as it relates to changes in marital conflict has not been explored.

Despite the continued importance of sensitivity for promoting attachment security in the preschool years (Posada et al., 2016), studies on changes in sensitivity over this period are few.

Existing research in infancy has been mixed, with some studies showing stability in maternal sensitivity (e.g., Behrens et al., 2013) while others have reported positive trajectories over the first 3 years for low-risk subsamples (Mills-Koonce et al., 2008).

Participants
86 mothers were recruited when their children (52% female) were 3.5 years old (M = 3.74, SD = .20).

At this time, mothers were 34 years old (SD = 6.03), non-Hispanic Caucasian (89%), and married or cohabiting with a partner (94.19%). Average maternal education was 16.66 years (SD = 2.23) while mean annual income was $71,960 (SD = 44,990).

Procedures
Mother-child interactions were observed 6 times when children were between 3.5 and 6.5 years old, across two contexts: twice at home (2 hours each) and four times (1 hour each) at the park. Mothers also completed questionnaires to assess marital conflict on Visits 1 and 4 (M = 1.61 years apart).

17 mothers had some missing observational data (86% completed at least 4 visits).

Measures
Maternal sensitivity was assessed on each visit using the Maternal Behavior for Preschoolers Q-Set (Posada et al., 1998). 30.86% of visits had two independent observers (mean inter-observer reliability of .84); all other visits had one observer.

Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Intercept</th>
<th>Marital Conflict (V1)</th>
<th>Sensitivity (V1)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Change in Conflict</th>
<th>Age X Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.61 (0.2)**</td>
<td>0.61 (0.2)**</td>
<td>0.62 (0.2)**</td>
<td>0.02 (0.1)*</td>
<td>-0.03 (0.1)**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.61 (0.2)**</td>
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After controlling for visit context (park or home), child age significantly predicted maternal sensitivity, with linear decline in sensitivity over time, p < .004 (See Model 1).

Yet the significant variance of age in Model 1 indicates variability in rate of change, p > .04.

Change in conflict was added (Model 2) to account for this variability. Results revealed a significant interaction between change in conflict and age (see Figure 1), p = .003.

Discussion
Findings suggest that even with the low levels of marital conflict and moderately high levels of maternal sensitivity found in this non-clinical sample, increasing conflict can threaten the quality of care mothers provide to their children across the preschool period.

Parenting interventions designed to support maternal sensitivity should consider the quality of the marital relationship as a crucial factor that must be addressed in such interventions to best support mothers and their children.

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The Role of Marital Conflict

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Discussion

FIGURE 1

Figure 1

Child Age:

- 1SD Change in Conflict
- 1SD Change in Conflict

Only mothers who report increased marital conflict show decreased maternal sensitivity across the preschool period, p < .001.

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