11-1-1997

The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict and its Relationship to the Psychosocial Adjustment of Elementary and Junior High Students

Christie Lynn Poe

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork

THE CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT AND ITS

RELATIONSHIP TO THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF ELEMENTARY

AND JUNIOR HIGH STUDENTS

An Ed. S. Project

Presented to the

Department of Psychology

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Specialist in Education

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Christie Lynn Poe

November, 1997

Ed S Project Acceptance

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of

Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Specialist in

Education, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Ed S Project Committee

Name	Department/School
Joseph C. LaVoie	Psychology
Douglas Abbott	Family & Consumer Studies
Roni Reiter-Palmon	Psychology
Brigitte O. Ryalls	Psychology

Chairperson _Lisa Kelly-Vance_

Date_ November 20, 1997_

ii

Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Appendices

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between a child's perception of interparental conflict and a child's level of self-esteem and social skills. Furthermore, gender and grade differences were analyzed to determine how they play a role in this relationship between interparental conflict and a child's level of self-esteem and social skills. Self-report questionnaires were administered to 127 5th grade (elementary school) students and 137 6th grade (junior high school) students. Results indicated that a child's self-report of interparental conflict was significantly and negatively related to the child's self-report of self-esteem and social skills, even when controlling for the intercorrelations between self-esteem and social skills. Although grade and gender were not found to mediate the relationship between interparental conflict and childhood adjustment, grade and gender effects were found for social skills usage. Girls reported higher levels of social skills than boys, and 5th grade students reported higher levels of social skills than did 6th grade students. Differences among the three subscales of the CPIC were also noted. Although all three subscales were found to significantly account for self-esteem differences, only reports of self-blame and conflict properties accounted for social skills differences. Implications of the results are discussed.

Chapter I

The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict and Its Relationship To The

Psychosocial Adjustment of Elementary and Junior High Students

Statement of the Problem

Throughout childhood parents and the home environment they provide

have a great influence on many area's of a child's development (Battle, 1987;

Emery, 1982), with self-esteem and social skills being two such areas. When the

child enters school, parents and educators begin to share the responsibility of

shaping the child's development. Therefore, it is important for schools and

parents to work together to help children develop a strong, positive sense of self

and good social skills. In addition, it is the responsibility of both parents and

education professionals to find ways to help children with low self-esteem and

poor social skills to gain self-confidence and develop appropriate social skills. In

order for school psychologists to help these children, they must first determine the

specific variables related to self-esteem and social skill development.

In early childhood, parents are the primary caregivers and thus exert the

most influence on the child. Many family variables have been found to influence

a child's development such as parental involvement in school (Steinberg,

Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992), family cohesion (Hein & Lewko, 1994),

and family structure/divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery, 1982; Mechanic &

Hansell, 1989). A closer look at the divorce literature, however, indicates that

parental conflict rather than divorce is more detrimental to a child's development,

especially in reference to child behavior problems (Emery, 1982).

The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict (CPIC; Grych, Seid, &

Fincham, 1992) is a recently developed measure designed to take into account

several aspects of parental conflict that may affect a child's development. Through the use of the CPIC, the present study examines how a child's feelings about parental disagreements are related to the child's level of self-esteem and social skills. This study will also attempt to determine if gender and grade influence the relationship between interparental conflict and a child's self-esteem and/or social skills. Not only can school psychologists use this information to implement interventions to improve the low self-esteem and poor social skills of children at-risk, they can also use this information to initiate preventative measures such as incorporating this information into regular classroom curriculum and incorporating it into adult education classes such as parent training and divorce mediation.

Review of the Literature

Divorce and Interparental Conflict

Several studies have addressed the issue of divorce, parental conflict, and the psychosocial adjustment of children. Emery's (1982) review of research on divorce and interparental conflict is one of the first to indicate that although divorce has a negative impact on childhood adjustment, interparental conflict is more strongly related to childhood problems. This review found that children from divorced, but conflict-free families exhibited fewer behavior problems than did children from intact, conflict-ridden families. Children from divorced families that continued to display conflict after the divorce displayed more behavior problems than did children from divorced, conflict-free families. Lastly, children from divorced families displayed behavior problems prior to the divorce. Based on these findings, Emery's review indicates that interparental conflict is a more important variable to examine than is divorce.

Long, Forehand, Fauber, and Brody (1987) examined other areas of childhood adjustment in addition to child behavior problems and found support for Emery's findings. Regardless of marital status, children from high-conflict families scored lower on measures of social and cognitive competence, behavior problems, and had lower grade point averages. Moreover, a meta-analysis conducted by Amato and Keith (1991) found that children in intact, high-conflict families scored significantly lower on measures of self-concept (encompassing the concepts of self-esteem and perceived competence) and conduct as compared to children from intact, low-conflict families. Furthermore, children from intact high-conflict families scored significantly lower on measures of self-esteem as compared to children from divorced families.

Taken together, these studies on the effects of divorce support the claim that regardless of family structure, interparental conflict has a negative impact on many childhood psychosocial outcomes. Additional research shows that the impact of interparental conflict on childhood adjustment is widely extended, ranging from externalizing problems such as conduct problems (Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Jouriles, Murphy, & O'Leary, 1989; Reid & Crisafuli, 1990; Wierson, Forehand, & McCombs, 1988) and aggression (Fauber, Forehand, McCombs-Thomas, Wierson, 1990; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Rogers & Holmbeck, 1997) to internalizing problems such as depression (Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987; Rogers & Holmbeck, 1997) and anxiety (Long, Slater, Forehand, & Fauber, 1988; Osborne & Fincham, 1996; Wierson et al., 1988). Higher levels of interparental conflict are associated with increases in conduct problems, aggression, depression, and anxiety. Other variables, however, have been the focus of research as well, such as cognitive competence

and school achievement (Long et al., 1987; Wierson & Forehand, 1992; Wierson et al., 1988; McCombs & Forehand, 1989) and social competence (Long et al., 1987). Specifically, higher levels of parental conflict have been associated with lower social and cognitive competence and school achievement.

<div align="center">Self-Esteem</div>

Despite the wealth of research showing a relationship between parental conflict and childhood problems, the relationship between interparental conflict and self-esteem is less clear, especially in terms of how gender and grade differences influence this relationship. According to Battle (1987), self-esteem influences not only a person's social relationships but also his/her achievement patterns. Thus, self-esteem plays an important part in a child's academic and social success.

Self-Esteem Defined

Battle (1987) discusses four universal assumptions agreed upon by most authorities in the field of self-esteem. First, self-esteem is a subjective evaluation of self-worth. Second, self-esteem is determined by a number of interrelated variables including a person's general, overall self-view, view of self in relation to peers, view of academic competence, and perception of standing with parents. Third, it is generally agreed that unless interventions are implemented, a person's level of self-esteem remains stable and fairly resistant to change. Fourth, self-esteem begins to develop during the first year of life as the child begins to interact with others and stabilizes around the age of ten years. Based on these assumptions, parents must have a major impact on a child's level of self-esteem because children spend a significant amount of each day interacting with parents.

The Relationship Between Interparental Conflict and Self-Esteem

The research indicates that higher levels of interparental conflict are associated with lower levels of self-esteem in children, adolescents, and adults. Berg and Kelly (1979) compared the self-esteem of children from three different family types. Children classified their families as either intact and satisfactory, intact but unsatisfactory (i.e., "my family fights a lot"), and divorced. Children who viewed their families as intact but unsatisfactory had the lowest self-esteem. Interestingly, children from divorced families were not different from the children from intact, satisfactory families. Young adolescent females from families with low marital hostility and high marital affection also scored significantly higher on measures of self-concept (Bishop & Ingersoll, 1989). The effects of parental conflict have been found to hold true as well for young adults whose parents exhibit high levels of conflict, regardless of family structure (Long, 1986). Not only does this relationship between conflict and self-esteem exist among many age groups, the effects appear to be long-term (Garber, 1992). Interparental conflict, therefore, not only affects a child as the conflict is happening but can also have a continued impact as the child passes into young adulthood.

Gable, Belsky, and Crnic (1992) have attempted to explain the relationship between marital conflict and child functioning by examining the direct effect of conflict on child functioning. In addition, they suggest an indirect effect of marital conflict on child functioning through parenting behavior. Gable et al.'s review of the research indicates that marital conflict is directly associated with many childhood problems such as anxiety and internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Indications of an indirect pathway are evident by the research showing that parents who are in harmonious marriages tend to be sensitive parents and

have warm relations with their children, while interspousal hostility has been linked to less effective and more authoritarian (i.e., controlling and lacks nurturnace) parenting styles. Oliver and Paull (1995) found that students who viewed their parents as displaying "affectionless control", defined as "parenting characterized by lack of acceptance or affection and excessive parental control" (p. 468), scored lower on measures of self-esteem as compared to students who did not view their parents as displaying "affectionless control". Thus, the relationship between parental conflict and a child's level of self-esteem may be in part due to the type of parenting style used by the child's parents. Specifically, parents who argue more show less nurturance and demand more control from their children. This, in turn, leads to lowered self-esteem.

The parent-child relationship is another variable that may be mediating the relationship between parental conflict and a child's level of self-esteem. In a study examining the impact of parental conflict and parent-child relationships on a child's level of self-esteem, Amato (1986) found mixed results. Parental conflict was negatively and significantly related to the self-esteem of primary school girls but not related to the self-esteem of primary school boys. Although parental conflict was negatively associated with the self-esteem of both adolescent males and females, only the association between conflict and adolescent males reached significance. Parental conflict was negatively associated with the father-child relationship in primary school girls and in both adolescent males and females but not in primary school boys. Furthermore, this negative relationship was found to be greatest when the children's relationships with both parents were poor. The one exception was found with the primary school girls; parental conflict was negatively related to this group's level of self-esteem even when the relationships

with both parents were good. Thus, this study provides support for the relationship between parental conflict and child self-esteem, mediated in part by the parent-child relationship. It also suggests that grade and gender may influence this relationship.

Whether the pathway that leads to the relationship between parental conflict and self-esteem is direct or indirect, the available research has shown that the relationship exists. What is less clear is how grade and gender play a role in this relationship. Most of the research literature has focused on age rather than grade differences; therefore, much of this review will focus on age differences. Grade and age, however, are very closely related, and research pertaining to both will be discussed.

Age differences. Although the existing research on the effects of parental conflict on a child's self-esteem indicates that increased marital disharmony is associated with lowered self-esteem, research has found inconsistent relationships in terms of grade differences Some have argued that older children are better able to cope with parental conflict due to their increased cognitive ability to understand the events that occur within the family and their increased separation and independence from the family (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Hetherington (1979), on the other hand, suggests that despite the fact that children of different ages differ in their awareness and ability to cope with parental conflict, all children are equally influenced by the conflict. Younger children may be less likely to cope, but they are less able to identify conflict and understand its implications; older children are better able to cope with the conflict, but they also are more aware of the negative implications of the conflict.

Although it is likely that all children experience difficulties due to parental conflict, there may be certain times during a child's development that proves to be more sensitive to such conflict. As children reach the beginning of adolescence and begin to need more autonomy from their parent's control, parental conflict with its corresponding "affectionless control" may prove to be even more detrimental to a child's self-esteem. Many physical, social, and cognitive events are taking place during the transition to adolescence. Adolescents are beginning to experience physical maturation with the onset of puberty; friendships are changing and are becoming more complex; and they are beginning to form a personal identity and take into account how others judge them (Cole & Cole, 1993).

Another important change that these children are facing is the transition from elementary school to junior high school. Self-esteem changes during the transition from elementary school to junior high school (Eccles, Wigfield, Flanagan, Miller, Reuman, & Yee, 1989). In one longitudinal study, for example, children's level of self-esteem declined during the transition from elementary school to junior high school (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Furthermore, this study not only reported a decline in children's self-esteem during the junior high years as compared to children in late elementary school, but it also reported a decline in self-esteem in junior high students as compared to students in high school. A decline in self-esteem during the junior high transition is especially evident for girls (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987; Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983).

Because of these many changes that are occurring, negative self-feelings increase during the first half of adolescence, starting around the age of 10-12 years (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1992). Thus, a child who is just beginning junior

high school may be more negatively influenced by parental conflict than would a child not yet dealing with these changes.

Gender differences. Research on parental conflict and gender differences has not found consistent results. Some of the research indicates that the negative effect of parental conflict on boys is greater than it is on girls (Hetherington et al., 1982; Porter & O'Leary, 1980). Others have argued, however, that both boys and girls are impacted by parental conflict; boys and girls just respond differently to the conflict, with boys exhibiting more externalizing behaviors such as aggression and conduct problems and girls exhibiting more internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety (Emery, 1982).

The research that has been conducted focuses mainly on overt behavior problems rather than self-esteem issues. It is possible, therefore, that parental conflict has a greater impact on girls' levels of self-esteem than it does on boys' levels of self-esteem. Because the research indicates that girls from high-conflict families display more internalizing problems, this may lead to unhappiness, withdrawal, and lowered self-esteem (Amato, 1986). Furthermore, because boys and girls are socialized differently, girls may blame themselves more than boys for the conflict that is occurring between parents. According to Grych and Fincham (1990), if a child blames himself/herself for parental conflict, this will affect his/her self-esteem. Grych et al. (1992) found a positive relationship between a child's report of feelings of self-blame for parental conflict and internalizing problems. If it is true that girls blame themselves more than boys do, then girls may have lower self-esteem because of this.

<u>Summary</u>

Self-esteem has been found to be influenced by parental conflict, however, the relationship between self-esteem and parental conflict is not as clearly established as is the relationship between parental conflict and childhood behavior problems. The studies that have focused on gender and age issues have found conflicting results, some suggesting that boys are more influenced by parental conflict and some suggesting that there are no gender and age differences. Even so, these studies have not focused on self-esteem. This study will attempt to identify any gender and grade differences that exist in the relationship between parental conflict and self-esteem.

Social Skills

Another area of interest to school psychologists is social skills development. Although the academic education of children is the primary goal of schools, an equally important goal of schools is to help parents in educating children to be socially competent. Functioning in the adult world requires just as much, if not more, social competence as it does academic competence. It is important to identify variable that influence the acquisition of social skills. By identifying these variables, school psychologists can use this information to implement interventions designed to assist in the acquisition and usage of social skills. The identification of specific variables influencing social skills acquisition would also allow school psychologists to use more preventative measures by being able to educate parents about what they can do as parents to ensure proper social skills development in their children.

Social Skills Defined

Social skills are sometimes referred to as social competence (Elliott & Gresham, 1993), but many authors distinguish the two areas. For example, Hops (1983) defines social skills as specific, identifiable skills which set the foundation for socially competent behavior, while Harter (1982) defines social competence as having many friends, being liked by others, and being an important member of one's peer group. Acquisition of these social skills, therefore, is an important means by which children learn to effectively interact in social situations with peers and teachers, thereby becoming socially competent and accepted by peers. In other words, in order to be socially competent, an individual must first have learned specific skills that will enable him/her to be competent. Thus, examining the social skills children are utilizing or not utilizing should be the first step in determining a child's social adjustment. The present study examines these social skills and their relationship with parental conflict.

The Relationship Between Interparental Conflict and Social Skills

Elliott and Gresham (1993) have identified three assumptions regarding social skills acquisition and usage that provide useful information regarding the relationship between interparental conflict and social skills. The first assumption is that social skills are generally acquired through observing, modeling, rehearsing, and receiving feedback. Second, social skills are acquired by interacting with others, and having effective and appropriate responsiveness from others is a necessary part. Third, characteristics of the environment influence whether or not the appropriate social skills will be used. These three assumptions can be used to explain how children acquire inappropriate social

skills through observing parental disagreements and the disagreements' corresponding influence on reduced parental responsiveness.

One possibility concerning the relationship between parental conflict and poor social skills, therefore, is that children learn social skills by observing how their parents interact with each other. Emery (1982) has argued that children learn many of their inappropriate behaviors by observing and then modeling the behavior of their parents. If interparental conflict entails high levels of hostility and threatening behavior, then children will start to model this behavior. Instead of learning more appropriate social skills, children will be learning the more negative behaviors being modeled by their parents.

Similarly, Grych and Fincham (1990) propose that the association between parental conflict and child problems is influenced, in part, by social learning of how to handle conflict and by social learning of the emotional reaction to the stress that the conflict brings. According to this theory, children observe their parents' interactions and emotional responses and from this learn similar, inappropriate behaviors and emotional responses. Even though the acquisition of social skills is one of the most important outcomes learned during the school years (Elliott & Gresham, 1993), social skills are skills that most children begin to learn from their parents. Therefore, if the parents display patterns of continuous, maladaptive behavior through their constant fighting, then children will begin to model and thus learn these inappropriate behaviors and will not develop more appropriate social skills.

Research indicates that parental conflict is related to both social competence and prosocial behavior. Long et al. (1987) found that children whose parents display high levels of interparental conflict have lower levels of

teacher-rated social competence. Furthermore, Hetherington et al. (1982) provide support for an association between high-conflict families and lower prosocial behavior. Two years after divorce, boys from low-conflict, divorced families were reported to show more prosocial behaviors such as helping, sharing, and cooperation than boys from high-conflict, intact families. Because few studies have examined the relationship between parental conflict and social skills, further research on this relationship needs to be conducted.

Support for the hypothesis that children from families with high parental conflict have poor social skills comes from a study conducted by Webb and Baer (1995). In this study, family disharmony was defined in terms of a lack of family cohesion and increased conflict. Webb and Baer found that family disharmony was related to adolescent alcohol use and social skills. Higher levels of family disharmony corresponded to an increase in alcohol use and low scores on a social skills measure. According to Webb and Baer, the level of family disharmony appears to provide the context for social skills learning, and in disharmonious families, social skills for coping are less available, and alcohol usage may help deal with stress. Thus, even though this study does not focus on parental conflict specifically, it does provide initial support for the influence of family conflict on the acquisition of social skills and the need to examine the relationship between conflict and social skills.

Grade differences. Because of the lack of research in this area, little is known about how grade or age influences the relationship between parental conflict and social skills. The information that is available indicates that a relationship between age and social skills has not been found (Gresham & Elliott, 1990).

<u>Gender differences.</u>   Another area that is lacking sufficient research is how gender influences the relationship between parental conflict and social skills. What is known is that females are consistently rated as exhibiting more social skills than males (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). No research, however, was located examining gender differences in the relationship between parental conflict and social skills.

Summary

Social skills is an area of interest to many school psychologists, and social skills interventions are the focus of many school psychologist-led groups. Because little is known about the causes of poor social skills, effective preventative measures are difficult to initiate. Studies that address this issue can prove to be beneficial not only to interventions designed to correct the lack of social skills knowledge and usage among some children but also to design more preventative plans such as parent education programs. This study is intended to help increase the level of information concerning the relationship between a child's perception of parental conflict and the child's social skills and to determine whether or not gender and grade influence this relationship.

Focus of Current Study

This study will examine the relationship between child-report of parental conflict through the use of the recently developed CPIC and a child's self-reported level of self-esteem and social skills. Finding a significant relationship between a child's perception of parental conflict and the child's self-esteem and between perceptions of parental conflict and a child's social skills has important implications, namely providing information about specific family variables that can be used to predict the psychosocial adjustment of children.

Once this information is known, specific programs designed to prevent childhood problems from occurring and programs aimed at helping improve existing childhood problems can be developed. Based on the review of the existing literature, the following hypotheses will be examined in this study:

1. Interparental conflict will be negatively related to self-esteem, with higher levels of interparental conflict being related to lower levels of self-esteem.

2. Because children in 6th grade are beginning to experience physical, social, and cognitive changes, 6th grade students who report higher levels of interparental conflict will have lower self-esteem as compared to 5th graders who report higher levels of conflict. No differences are expected between the 5th grade low-conflict and 6th grade low-conflict groups.

3. Regardless of grade, boys who report high levels of parental conflict will have higher self-esteem as compared to girls who report high levels of parental conflict. When students report lower levels of conflict, however, no significant differences between males and females are expected.

4. Interparental conflict will be negatively related to social skills, with higher levels of interparental conflict being related to lower levels of reported social skills usage.

5. Boys who report higher levels of parental conflict will report lower levels of social skills usage as compared to girls who report higher levels of parental conflict. At lower levels of conflict, boys and girls will report similar levels of social skills usage.

6. No grade differences are expected when examining the relationship between interparental conflict and social skills usage. In other words, 5th and 6th grade students who report higher levels of parental conflict will report similar levels of

social skills, while 5th and 6th grade students who report lower levels of parental conflict will report similar levels of social skills.

Chapter II

Method

<u>Setting</u>

Five hundred fifty-two fifth and sixth grade students attending school in a

Midwestern rural community were asked to participate in this study.

<u>Participants</u>

A total of 281, or 51%, volunteered to participate in this study. All students

who volunteered were Caucasian. Seventeen students, or 6% of those who

volunteered, were dropped from the study. Students who answered the

interparental conflict scale in terms of a biological parent and that parent's

boyfriend/girlfriend and those students who answered the conflict scale questions

based on how their parents interacted in the past were excluded from this study.

Only those students who at the time of the study either lived with both biological

parents, a biological parent and step-parent, or whose parents were divorced but

still maintained contact with both parents were used as subjects. The

questionnaires answered by 264 subjects (151 females and 113 males) were

analyzed. Of the 264 subjects, 82% answered the conflict scale questions in

terms of both biological parents and 18% answered in terms of a biological parent

and a step-parent. Table 1 lists the number of participants by age and grade, and

Table 2 lists the number of participants by grade and gender. All 6th grade

students experienced a transition to a junior high school setting at the beginning

of the 1996-1997 school year.

<u>Materials</u>

<u>Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC).</u> The CPIC

was used in this study to measure children's perception of several aspects of

Table 1

Number of Participants by Age and Grade

Age	Grade		Total
---	5th	6th	Total
10	68	0	68
11	59	76	135
12	0	60	60
13	0	1	1
	127	137	264

Table 2

Number of Participants by Gender and Grade

Females:	151
5th Grade:	72
6th Grade:	79
Males:	113
5th Grade:	55
6th Grade:	58

parental conflict. The Total CPIC includes 49 items, and the response format consists of a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1-"true" to 2-"sort of true" to 3-"false" (See Appendix A).

Although interparental conflict has been consistently shown to be associated with negative childhood outcomes, the types and content of the interparental measures used to determine this relationship have varied greatly. In addition, even though many parental conflict measures are available, some measures may provide more accurate information and thus be more useful. Instruments may differ in terms of who reports the extent of marital conflict and what aspects of marital conflict is measured. For example, parental conflict can be assessed by questioning parents, by questioning children, or by observing family interactions in order to determine parental conflict. Furthermore, conflict can be assessed by using instruments that measure only one aspect of parental conflict such as the frequency of conflict or by using instruments that measure several aspects of conflict. By measuring several aspects of conflict, one can obtain a better picture of the relationship between parental conflict and child's psychosocial adjustment. In addition, an instrument that measures a child's perception of parental conflict can provide a more accurate picture of the relationship between conflict and adjustment. Regardless of actual conflict or parental perception of conflict, how the child perceives the situation will strongly influence the child's reaction to it. According to Compas (1987), how a child responds to a stressful event is best understood by knowing how the child interprets the event. One important aspect of the present study, therefore, is to examine the use of child-report measures instead of the more commonly used parent or teacher report measures.

The importance of using child report measures has been supported by studies involving adolescent adjustment and interparental conflict. Using adolescent and adult perceptions of marital conflict, Wierson et al. (1988) found that both maternal report and adolescent report of marital conflict negatively correlated with teacher-rated cognitive competence and GPA and positively correlated with behavior problems. Parental report of conflict, however, was not significantly related to child outcomes. In addition, adolescent perception accounted for unique variance that was not provided for by parent report. Specifically, five to ten percent of the variance in deficits in adolescent functioning was accounted for solely by adolescent perceptions of interparental conflict. Even though this may seem minimal, it does indicate that child-report provides unique information and thus supports the use of adolescent reports of interparental conflict when studying adolescent adjustment.

Similar differences between child-report and parent-report of marital conflict have been found elsewhere. For example, Grych and Fincham (1990) compared the O'Leary-Porter Scale (OPS; Porter & O'Leary, 1980) which measures open marital conflict and the CPIC and found that parent reports of conflict correlated significantly only with parent ratings of adjustment, while child reports of conflict correlated significantly with judgments of adjustment made by parents, teachers, and peers. Thus, using adolescent report of interparental conflict has been shown to provide unique contributions to the study of childhood adjustment and has been shown to correlate significantly with more measures of adjustment than parent-report.

As mentioned previously, the CPIC examines the child's perception of interparental conflict. In order to improve upon current measures of interparental

conflict, Grych and Fincham (1990) developed this scale so that several different aspects of parental conflict can be examined. They proposed that the effect of interparental conflict on the child depends on the child's understanding of the conflict in addition to the intensity, content, frequency, duration, and resolution of the conflict.

In their study, Grych et. al. (1992) found acceptable levels of internal consistency and test-retest reliability. Reliability coefficients were given for the three subscales of the CPIC: Conflict Properties (assesses the frequency, intensity, and the extent to which the child feels that the conflict will be resolved), Self-Blame (assesses the content of the conflict and the extent to which the child blames himself/herself for the conflict), and Threat (assesses the extent to which the child perceives threat and how well he/she feels able to cope with the conflict). Internal consistency for Conflict Properties was .89, while the two-week test-retest correlation was .70. Internal consistency for the Threat Subscale was .83, and the test-retest correlation was .68. The Self-Blame Subscale had an internal consistency coefficient of .84 and a test-retest coefficient of .76. Thus, Grych et. al. propose that the CPIC has acceptable levels of reliability as indicated by internal consistency and test-retest correlations. The reliability of the overall scale of the present study was alpha = .95. Similar to the Grych et. al. study, the present study found the internal consistency of the three scales to be alpha = .84 for self-blame, alpha = .85 for threat, and alpha = .94 for conflict properties.

Evidence for the convergent and divergent validity of the CPIC was established first by comparing scores on the three subscales on the CPIC with commonly used and well-established parent-rated measures of marital conflict

(O'Leary-Porter Scale) and interspousal aggression (Conflict Tactics Scale; Straus, 1979). Of the three CPIC subscales, the Conflict Properties Subscale was found to be the most strongly associated with the OPS ($r = .30$) and the Conflict Tactics Subscale ($r = .39$), while Threat (OPS: $r = .06$; CTS: $r = .26$) and Self-Blame (OPS: $r = .08$; CTS: $r = .10$) were not as strongly associated with the measures. This was expected because the OPS and the CTS measure the frequency and intensity of parental conflict, and this is what the Conflict Properties Subscale also measures.

Evidence for the validity of the CPIC was also established by comparing the CPIC to children's adjustment. Greater exposure to more frequent, intense, and poorly resolved conflict was correlated with higher levels of parent and teacher reported externalizing problems and with child reports of internalizing problems. The Threat and Self-Blame Subscales were associated with higher scores on self-reports of internalizing problems for both boys and girls.

Finally, the validity of the CPIC was assessed by looking at the relationship between children's scores on the three subscales of the CPIC and their responses to taped vignettes of parental conflict. The validity of the CPIC was supported by (1) significant correlations between the Threat Subscale and children's report of negative affect, threat, and coping efficacy in response to the vignettes and (2) a significant relationship between the Self-Blame Subscale and children's ratings of degree to which the child is seen at fault for the conflicts. Based on these findings, Grych et. al. concluded that the three subscales of the CPIC are valid instruments in the assessment of children's perception of interparental conflict.

Despite the fact that the CPIC was developed only a few years ago, the research has shown that it may provide a more accurate and effective measure to use when examining the effects of interparental conflict on a child's adjustment as compared to measures that assess parental perception of conflict or that assess only one or two aspects of conflict. According to Grych et al. (1992), most parental conflict measures do not take a multidimensional approach to conflict and thus tend to look at only one or two aspects of parental conflict. For example, the O'Leary-Porter Scale (OPS), one of the most common instruments used to assess parental conflict, provides a measure of overall frequency of conflict as reported by parents. The OPS does not, however, provide information about the type of conflict that occurs. The Grych et al. study provides support for the need to examine several different dimensions of parental conflict instead of just one dimension such as frequency of conflict.

Social Skills Rating System (SSRS). The SSRS was used in this study to measure children's self-report of social skills that encompass the following four areas: Cooperation, Self-Control, Empathy, and Assertion. Gresham and Elliott define cooperation as including behaviors such as "helping others, sharing materials, and complying with rules and directions". Assertion is defined as including behaviors such as "asking others for information, introducing yourself, and responding to the actions of others". Empathy includes behaviors such as "showing concern and respect for others' feelings and viewpoints". Lastly, self-control includes behaviors such as "responding appropriately to teasing, taking turns, and compromising". The total SSRS includes 34 items. The response format of the SSRS consists of a 3-point Likert scale, ranging from 0-"never" to 1-"sometimes" to 2-"very often" (See Appendix B).

Many social skills measures exist, and the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) appears to be an important addition to this group of measures. According to Gresham and Elliott (1990), the SSRS provides a broad assessment of student social behaviors that can influence peer acceptance and academic performance. Importantly, the SSRS emphasizes positive behaviors a child has or is lacking, and this information can be obtained by the teacher, parent, or child. Thus, the SSRS has the potential to provide unique and important contributions to the areas of parental conflict research by providing information about the social skills children from high-conflict families have.

According to Gresham and Elliott (1990), the SSRS is an efficient and useful measure that provides a means of assessing a child's social skills and determining what social skills the child possesses and what social skills need to be learned. They base their conclusions on research evidence that indicates that the SSRS is a reliable and valid measure.

All three forms of the SSRS, the teacher-report, the parent-report, and the child-report forms have been found to have good reliability and validity, with the teacher report form showing the highest degree of reliability, followed by parent and student forms. For example, the internal consistency estimates for all forms ranges from .83 to .94, while the test-retest reliability for all forms ranges from .68 to .87. Even though the teacher report form has the highest reliability of the three forms, all three forms are adequate measures of social skills.

Studies of the SSRS-Child Report Form indicate adequate reliability. The internal consistency reliability of the Total Scale was .83 and the test-retest reliability was .68.

The validity of the SSRS has also been examined. Content validity for the SSRS was supported by the extensive research that was done when developing the scale. In order to determine the criterion-related validity of the SSRS, it was compared to the Child Behavior Checklist-Youth Self-Report Form (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). Low, but significant correlations were found between the Cooperation and Assertion subscale of the SSRS and the Social Competence scores of the CBCL.

Construct validity of the SSRS was supported by first examining developmental changes and gender differences. For example, no strong, consistent developmental trends in social skills were found when using the SSRS. This is consistent with the results of Walker and McConnell (1988) who found near-zero correlations between grade level and each scale of the Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment. Furthermore, the underlying theory of the SSRS was supported by the examination of gender differences on the SSRS. There were large and consistent gender differences on the SSRS scores as rated by teachers, parents, and students. Females consistently were rated as demonstrating more social skill behaviors, while boys were consistently rated as exhibiting more problem behaviors.

The validity of the SSRS was further supported by the internal consistency of the items, by correlations with other tests, and by group separation studies. Even though internal consistency is a component of reliability, Gresham and Elliott (1990) suggest that it may also be an indicator of the validity of a measure. Scales that are internally consistent have items that all measure the same construct. All social skills subscales positively correlated with each other and

were negatively correlated with the problem behavior subscales across all forms of the SSRS. Furthermore, the SSRS correlates with other tests, correlating .75 with the Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment.

Finally, the SSRS-Student Form reliably differentiated groups of handicapped from non-handicapped children. For example, non-handicapped children had higher social skills scores than learning disabled and other handicapped children. Thus, the construct validity of the SSRS has been supported by several different methods. Overall, the SSRS has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of social skills and is an important addition to the study of interparental conflict and child adjustment.

The child form was used not only because it allows for consistency in report of adjustment (i.e., all reports in this study are child-reports), but it is also the only form that includes the Empathy Subscale. Empathy is an important aspect of social behavior because it deals with showing concern and respect for others' feelings and viewpoints. Children who are from high-conflict families may not see their parents showing much concern and respect for each other, and thus the children will not be able to learn empathy by watching their parents interact.

Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965). The RSES was used as a self-report measure of self-esteem in this study. This scale consists of 10 items to be responded to on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1-"strongly agree" to 2-"agree" to 3-"disagree" to 4-"strongly disagree" (See Appendix C).

The rationale for using this measure includes the following: its extensive use in self-esteem research with a large variety of individuals including children to older adults; its high reliability; and its strong construct validity (Garber, 1992; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). Hagborg (1996) surveyed middle-school-age students

(Grades 5-8), and his findings indicate that the RSE is a unidimensional measure of global self-esteem within this age group. Furthermore, the RSE was found to have a high internal consistency (alpha = .84).

Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as "a positive or negative attitude toward the self" (p. 30). Accordingly, a person with high self-esteem is someone who has high levels of self-respect and self-worth yet is aware of his/her limitation. Low self-esteem, on the other hand, refers to someone who is unhappy with himself/herself and lacks self-respect. This person sees his/her limitations, whether they are accurate or not, and wishes he/she was "better".

Rosenberg has found that low scores on his measure of self-esteem is associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety. Furthermore, lower scores on this scale is associated with lower sociaometric status with peers and reduced respect from others. Thus, Rosenberg has shown that his scale correlates with several aspects that one would expect to find with someone who has low self-esteem. This scale, therefore, can provide useful information about the relationship between a child's perception of interparental conflict and self-esteem. It can be assumed that when high levels of conflict are evident within the family setting, children will feel more anxious and depressed. From this, its seems logical that self-esteem will be related to the child's perception of parental conflict.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from classrooms of teachers who agreed to take two class periods for data collection. Parents were sent home consent forms, and those students who agreed to participate and who returned the parent-signed consent forms were included as subjects. As an incentive to return

consent forms in on time, any student who returned both the parent- and child-consent forms, signed either "yes" or "no", were given a candy bar. Participants were also told that if they agreed to participate in the study they would also be given a pencil, folder, and bag of chips.

Those students who volunteered for the study filled out the questionnaires during the first semester of school. In addition to maintaining the validity and reliability of the interparental conflict scale, the use of 5th and 6th grade students was expected to be beneficial in determining whether or not developmental changes that occur in the transition from an elementary school setting to junior high setting influences the effects of parental conflict on a child's self-esteem and social skills.

The three self-report measures (RSE, SSRS, and CPIC) were administered in groups of 10-15 participants. Participants were taken out of class for 45 minutes to fill out the self-report measures. The participants were read the instructions and were given examples for each measure. In addition, each question was read aloud to the students in order to control for reading level. Each student was given an answer sheet and a cover sheet to ensure confidentiality. Before and after data collection, time was allowed for students to ask questions. The self-esteem measure was given first followed by the social skills measure. A short break and snack was then provided to reduce fatigue. After the break, the parental conflict measure was administered. Counterbalancing was not used because it was felt that the conflict measure with its negative theme may bias the results of the other two measures. Furthermore, it was felt that the social skills measure might bias the responses given on the self-esteem measure.

Statistical Analyses

SPSS-X was used to perform the statistical analyses. Means and standard deviations for each variable were examined first. Next Pearson correlations were computed to determine if there were any significant associations among the variables. Partial correlations were also conducted in order to control for the associations among the variables.

Regression analyses were then conducted to test the main effects and interaction predications discussed previously. The main effects were entered first, followed by the interaction terms (i.e., interparental conflict x grade, interparental conflict x gender). By testing for interaction effects using these procedures, it is possible to assess the potential moderating effects of gender, grade, and interparental conflict variables.

Independent and Dependent Variables

The independent or predictor variables in this study are interparental conflict (CPIC), gender, and grade. The CPIC is a continuous variable, and grade and gender are dichotomous variables (i.e., 5th grade/6th grade, boy/girl). The two dependent or criterion variables are both continuous variables, self-esteem (RSES) and social skills (SSRS). Because self-esteem and social skills are known to be strongly correlated, the intercorrelation between the two variables was controlled for in this study.

Chapter III

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Children reported a range of interparental conflict, self-esteem, and social skills scores (Refer to Table 3). Mean and standard deviation social skills scores from the original standardization sample (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) are compared to the sample from the present study in Table 4. Students from this study reported overall lower social skills scores than did the original standardization sample. The standard deviations of every group from this study were smaller when compared to the original sample, however, the sixth grade-female group was the only group whose mean score deviated over one standard deviation from the 1990 standardization sample. The sixth grade females in the present study reported lower social skills (M = 45.6, SD = 7.0) when compared to the original sample (M = 55.1, SD = 8.4). Means and standard deviations for both the self-esteem and interparental conflict scales were not able to be obtained from the original norm group so a comparison between the present study's sample and the original norm groups was not possible. Means and standard deviations by grade and gender for the interparental conflict and self-esteem variables are presented in Table 5. Table 6 lists mean scores for individual CPIC items, while Table 7 provides mean scores for the Total CPIC and subscales. Children reported lower levels of self-blame (item mean = 1.32) when compared to self-reported levels of conflict properties (item mean = 1.76). Of all three areas, children reported feeling of threat as occurring most often (item mean = 1.83).

Pearson correlations were computed for the five variables in order to examine intercorrelations among the variables. (See Table 8). Several

Table 3

Range of Interparental Conflict, Self-Esteem, and Social Skills Scores in Present
Study

Interparental Conflict	49-129
Self-Esteem	14-40
Social Skills	16-66

Note. The possible range of scores for the CPIC was 49-129, for the RSES was
10-40, and for the SSRS was 0-68.

Table 4

Comparison of Mean and Standard Deviation SSRS Scores Between Present Study and Original Standardization Sample

	Present Study		Original Sample	
5th Grade:	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Females	50.7	7.6	55.9	8.6
Males	42.7	9.8	49.3	10.3
6th Grade:				
Females	45.6	7.0	55.1	8.4
Males	44.6	9.0	48.7	10.7

Note. SSRS variable represents raw scores. n = 264. SSRS items were scored 0, 1, or 2, with higher scores indicating higher levels of social skills.

Table 5

Mean and Standard Deviation Scores for the CPIC and RSES

	CPIC		RSES	
5th Grade:	__M__	__SD__	__M__	__SD__
Females	82.18	19.99	30.92	5.29
Males	80.91	18.50	31.64	4.87
6th Grade:				
Females	80.81	19.86	30.90	4.78
Males	76.45	19.80	32.36	4.47
Total:	80.25	19.61	31.38	4.89

Note. All variables represent raw scores. n = 264. CPIC items were scored 1, 2, or 3, with higher scores indicating greater conflict. RSES items were scored 1, 2, 3, or 4, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem.

Table 6

Mean Scores for Individual CPIC Items

Item Number	Mean	Item Number	Mean	Item Number	Mean
1	2.28	17	1.25	33	1.60
2	1.42	18	1.79	34	1.45
3	1.30	19	1.49	35	1.62
4	2.02	20	1.30	36	2.11
5	1.77	21	1.47	37	1.41
6	1.84	22	1.89	38	1.53
7	1.76	23	2.21	39	1.56
8	1.53	24	1.95	40	1.82
9	1.75	25	1.41	41	1.15
10	1.58	26	1.31	42	1.36
11	1.34	27	1.85	43	1.35
12	2.21	28	1.89	44	1.52
13	1.75	29	1.32	45	1.80
14	1.45	30	1.27	46	1.51
15	1.87	31	2.10	47	1.33
16	1.54	32	1.97	48	1.36
				49	1.81

Note. Number = 264. Possible range of scores is 1-3.

Table 7

Mean Scores for the Total CPIC and Subscales

	Overall Mean	SD	Item Mean
Self-Blame	10.57	3.13	1.32
Conflict Properties	33.42	10.07	1.76
Threat	21.92	5.94	1.15
Total	80.19	19.63	1.64

Note. Item mean scores represent the average score for those items included

in each subscale. The Self-Blame Subscale included items numbered 3, 8,17,

20, 26, 29, 37, 41. The Conflict Properties Subscale included items numbered

5, 6, 13, 15, 23, 24, 32, 33, 40, 44, 45, 49. The Threat Subscale included

items numbered 1, 2, 4, 9, 10, 12, 14, 18, 19, 22, 27, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39,

43, 46.

Table 8

Zero-Order Correlations Among the Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Conflict	-	-.402**	-.243**	.068	.072
2. Self-Esteem		-	.295**	-.030	-.112
3. Social Skills			-	.120	.247**
4. Grade				-	
5. Gender					

**p < .01

intercorrelations were found to be significant. First, interparental conflict was significantly and negatively related to self-esteem. Higher levels of conflict were associated with lower levels of self-esteem. Second, interparental conflict was also significantly and negatively related to social skills, with higher levels of conflict related to lower levels of self-reported social skills. Third, self-esteem and social skills were significantly and positively related. Higher levels of self-esteem were correlated with higher levels of social skills. Fourth, social skills was significantly related to gender. Specifically, girls reported higher level of social skills than did boys.

Hypothesis 1

Interparental conflict will be negatively related to self-esteem, with higher levels of conflict being related to lower levels of self-esteem.

The zero-order correlation between self-esteem and interparental conflict was found to be significant (See Table 8). Because social skills were found to be significantly correlated with self-esteem and parental conflict, a partial correlation between interparental conflict and self-esteem was computed while controlling for the effect of social skills. This allowed for a test of a more direct relationship between self-esteem and parental conflict (see Table 9). The partial correlation between self-esteem and parental conflict was also found to be significant and negatively related. Higher levels of parental conflict were associated with lower levels of self-esteem. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported even after controlling for social skills usage.

Interestingly, after taking out the effects of social skills differences, the association between interparental conflict and gender became significant. In

Table 9

Partial Correlations Among the Variables When Controlling for Social Skills

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Conflict	-	-.357**	-.101	.140*
2. Self-Esteem		-	-.069	-.200**
3. Grade			-	-
4. Gender				-

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

other words, girls reported more conflict than boys after controlling for differences in social skills. Another interesting finding was that the relationship between self-esteem and gender also became significant after controlling for differences in social skills. Girls reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem than did boys after controlling for social skills differences.

Hypothesis 2

Because children in 6th grade are beginning to experience physical, social, and cognitive changes, 6th grade students who report higher levels of interparental conflict will have lower self-esteem as compared to 5th graders who report higher levels of conflict. No differences are expected between the 5th grade low-conflict and 6th grade low-conflict groups.

The results of the analyses involving self-esteem, grade, and interparental conflict are summarized in Table 10. The regression of self-esteem on parental conflict and grade was conducted (Step 1), and then the interaction of conflict and grade was added to the regression (Step 2). The results revealed that the regression of self-esteem on interparental conflict and grade was significant. Interparental conflict and grade accounted for 16.2% of the variance found in self-esteem. As stated previously, higher levels of interparental conflict were found to be significantly associated with lower levels of self-esteem, however, no significant relationship was found between grade and self-esteem. In other words, 5th and 6th grade students reported similar levels of self-esteem.

Furthermore, the interaction between conflict and grade did not add significantly to the amount of variance in self-esteem already accounted for by the separate effects of conflict and grade. When adding the interaction to the regression equation, the amount of variance accounted for increased by only 1%.

Table 10

Summary of Regression Analyses for Parent Conflict and Grade Effects on
Self-Esteem

Step	Variables	R Square	R Square Change	B	Beta
1		.162*			
	Conflict			-.100	-.402*
	Grade			-.022	-.002
2		.172*			
	Conflict			-.124	-.496*
	Grade			-4.048	-.415
	Conflict X Grade		.010	.050	.441

*p< .01

In summary, although conflict was found to be significantly and negatively related to self-esteem, grade differences in self-esteem scores were not shown to exist in the present study. The interaction between conflict and grade was not found to be significant; therefore, hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3

Regardless of grade, boys who report high levels of parental conflict will have higher self-esteem as compared to girls who report high levels of parental conflict. When students report lower levels of conflict, however, no significant differences between males and females are expected.

The results of the analyses involving self-esteem, gender, and interparental conflict are summarized in Table 11. The regression of self-esteem on conflict and gender was conducted (Step 1). The interaction between conflict and gender was then added to the regression (Step 2). The results revealed that the regression of self-esteem on interparental conflict and gender was significant. Interparental conflict and gender accounted for 16.9% of the variance found in self-esteem. Although a significant main effect was found for interparental conflict, a main effect for gender was not found (Refer to Table 11). In other words, boys and girls reported similar levels of self-esteem.

When the interaction between gender and conflict was then entered into the regression equation, the interaction was not found to add significantly to the prediction of self-esteem. By adding the interaction to the regression equation, the amount of variance accounted for remained the same (16.9%). Thus, hypothesis 3 was not supported because the interaction between conflict and gender did not add to the amount of variance in self-esteem already accounted for by the combined effects of conflict and gender.

Table 11

Summary of Regression Analyses for Parent Conflict and Gender Effects on
Self-Esteem

Step	Variables	R Square	R Square Change	B	Beta
1		.169*			
	Conflict			-.099	-.396*
	Gender			-.820	-.083
2		.169*			
	Conflict			-.100	-.399*
	Gender			-.900	-.091
	Conflict X Gender		.000	.000	.009

*p< .01

In order to gain insight into possible differences among the three CPIC subscales in their prediction of self-esteem, further regression analyses were conducted. Table 12 reports the amount of variance found in self-esteem scores accounted for by child-reported levels of self-blame, threat, and conflict properties. All three subscales were found to account for a significant amount of self-esteem differences, with threat accounting for the greatest amount of variance followed by conflict properties and self-blame, respectively.

Hypothesis 4

Interparental conflict will be negatively related to social skills, with higher levels of conflict being related to lower levels of social skills usage.

Refer to Tables 8 and 13 for a review of zero-order correlations and partial correlations when controlling for self-esteem. The zero-order correlation between interparental conflict and social skills was significant. Because self-esteem was found to be significantly correlated with social skills and parental conflict, a partial correlation between interparental conflict and social skills while controlling for self-esteem was conducted. This allowed for a more direct relationship between social skills and parental conflict. The partial correlation between social skills and parental conflict was found to be significant. Increases in reports of interparental conflict were associated with decreases in reported social skills usage. Thus, hypothesis 4 was supported even after controlling for the effects of self-esteem. Furthermore, girls continued to report significantly higher levels of social skills even after controlling for self-esteem differences.

Hypothesis 5

Boys who report higher levels of parental conflict will report lower levels of social skills usage as compared to girls who report higher levels of parental

Table 12

Summary of Regression Analyses for CPIC Subscale Effects on Self-Esteem

Variables	R Square	B	Beta
Self-Blame	.051*	-.315	-.227
Threat	.174*	-.342	-.417
Conflict Properties	.130*	-.175	-.360

*$p < .01$

Table 13

Partial Correlations Among the Variables When Controlling for Self-Esteem

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Conflict	-	-.142*	.061	.030
2. Soc. Skills		-	.135	.295**
3. Grade			-	-
4. Gender				-

* p < .05

** p < .01

conflict. At lower levels of conflict, boys and girls will report similar levels of social skills usage.

The results of the analyses involving social skills, gender, and interparental conflict are summarized in Table 14. The regression of social skills on conflict and gender was conducted (Step 1), and then the interaction between conflict and gender was added to the regression equation (Step 2). The results revealed that the regression of social skills on interparental conflict and gender was significant. Interparental conflict and gender accounted for 12.9% of the variance found in social skills. Results indicated significant main effects of interparental conflict and gender on social skills usage (Refer to Table 14). Increases in interparental conflict were significantly associated with decreases in social skills usage. Furthermore, girls reported higher levels of social skills usage.

The interaction between conflict and gender did not significantly add to the prediction of social skills. By adding the interaction to the regression equation, the amount of variance accounted for increased by less than 1%. To summarize, hypothesis 5 was not supported because the interaction between conflict and grade did not add significantly to the amount of variance in self-esteem already accounted for by the separate effects of conflict and grade.

Hypothesis 6

No grade differences are expected when examining the relationship between interparental conflict and social skills usage. In other words, 5th and 6th grade students who report higher levels of parental conflict will report similar levels of social skills, while 5th and 6th grade students who report lower levels of parental conflict will report similar levels of social skills.

Table 14

Summary of Regression Analyses for Interparental Conflict and Gender Effects
on Social Skills

Step	Variables	R Square	R Square Change	B	Beta
1		.129*			
	Conflict			-.117	-.262*
	Gender			4.693	.266*
2		.135*			
	Conflict			-.157	-.353*
	Gender			-.803	-.046
	Conflict X Gender		.006	.069	.339

*p< .01

The results of the analyses involving social skills, grade, and interparental conflict are summarized in Table 15. The regression of social skills on conflict and grade was conducted first (Step 1), and then the interaction between conflict and grade was added to the regression equation (Step 2). The results revealed that the regression of social skills on interparental conflict and grade was significant. Interparental conflict and grade accounted for 7.8% of the variance found in social skills. In addition, significant main effects for interparental conflict and grade were found. Increases in interparental conflict was associated with decreases in social skills usage, and fifth grade students reported higher levels of social skills usage than the 6th grade students.

The interaction between conflict and grade did not significantly add to the prediction of social skills. By adding the interaction to the regression equation, the amount of variance accounted for increased by less than 1%. In summary, hypothesis 6 was supported because the interaction between conflict and grade did not add significantly to the amount of variance in social skills already accounted for by the separate effects of conflict and grade.

In order to gain insight into the possible differences among the three CPIC subscales in their prediction of social skills, further regression analyses were conducted. Table 16 reports the amount of variance found in social skills scores accounted for by child-report of self-blame, threat, and conflict properties. Although all three subscales were found to significantly account for self-esteem differences, only self-blame and conflict properties were found to significantly account for social skills differences.

Table 15

Summary of Regression Analyses for Interparental Conflict and Grade Effects on Social Skills

Step	Variables	R Square	R Square Change	B	Beta
1		.078*			
	Conflict			-.112	-.252*
	Grade			2.397	.137**
2		.079*			
	Conflict			-.126	-.282*
	Grade			.078	.004
	Conflict X Grade		.001	.029	.142

* $p < .01$

**$p < .05$

Table 16

Summary of Regression Analyses for CPIC Subscale Effects on Social Skills

Variables	R Square	B	Beta
Self-Blame	.072*	-.664	-.268
Threat	.013	-.166	-.113
Conflict Properties	.061*	-.214	-.247

*$p < .01$

Chapter IV

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between children's perceptions of interparental conflict and their self-reported levels of self-esteem and social skills usage. Grade and gender differences were hypothesized to be moderating variables, interacting with conflict to have an impact on self-esteem and social skills. Although not all hypotheses were supported, several interesting findings were noted. Implications, limitations, and future research are discussed.

Hypothesis 1

It was believed that higher levels of interparental conflict would be associated with lower levels of self-esteem. Similar to previous research in this area (Berg & Kelly, 1979; Bishop & Ingersoll, 1989; Garber, 1992; Long, 1986), the present study found interparental conflict to be significantly related to self-esteem. Higher levels of conflict were found to be associated with lower levels of self-esteem, while lower levels of conflict were associated with higher levels of self-esteem. The difference between the previous research and the current study is that this study established an association between parental conflict and self-esteem based solely on child-report. Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis on parental divorce and well-being indicated that child-report is more strongly associated with many childhood outcomes than is parent and teacher report. Interestingly, the relationship between interparental conflict and self-esteem remained significant even after controlling for differences in social skills usage among the participants. Even though self-esteem and social skills were significantly related and part of the relationship between interparental

conflict and self-esteem was accounted for by differences in social skills, conflict and self-esteem continued to be significantly related after controlling for social skills differences.

Some reasons are offered for the relationship between children's report of interparental conflict and self-esteem. First, children from conflictual families are often exposed to the negative comments made during parental arguments. In this study, although all three subscales were found to account for self-esteem differences, threat and conflict properties were found to account for more of the variance than self-blame. The threat and conflict properties subscales focus on feelings of danger and more exposure to the conflict than does the self-blame subscale. Perhaps this negative atmosphere makes the child feel stressed and helpless which may, in turn, lead to lowered self-esteem. Feelings of self-blame also account for a significant amount of the variance in self-esteem. Parental arguments may not always be perceived as involving the child, and this may explain why feelings of self-blame account for less of the variance found in self-esteem when compared to threat and conflict properties. Another explanation for the relationship between parental conflict and self-esteem is that children with lower levels of self-esteem may have fewer coping skills and thus may perceive more conflict between parents than do children with higher levels of self-esteem.

Although interparental conflict has been found to predict self-esteem, a direct causal link is difficult to establish. A number of indirect, third variables likely exist that help to mediate the relationship between conflict and self-esteem in children. Variables such as parenting style, the parent-child relationship, and the child's temperament may also be contributing to the relationship between

children's report of conflict and personal self-esteem and have been supported in other studies focusing on childhood adjustment (i.e., Compas, 1987; Fauber, et. al., 1990; Osborne & Fincham, 1996; Wierson & Forehand, 1992)

Hypothesis 2

Because previous research has shown self-esteem differences in children transitioning into junior high (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987; Simmons et. al, 1987), it was predicted that the fifth and sixth grade students would report different levels of self-esteem depending upon the varying levels of reported parental conflict. Grade differences were expected in the high conflict group (with 5th grade students reporting higher levels of self-esteem than the 6th grade students), but no grade differences were expected in the low conflict group. Hypothesis 2, however, was not supported. Although approximately 16% of the variance found in self-esteem was accounted for by interparental conflict and gender, conflict was found to be the strongest and only significant predictor of self-esteem. Higher levels of perceived parental conflict were significantly related to lower levels of child-reported self-esteem. In this study, self-reported levels of self-esteem were the same for the fifth and sixth grade group, with no apparent drop in self-esteem during the transition to junior high. Because the sixth grade students in this study were from small school districts, the transition to the junior high setting did not have the added stress of meeting new peers and familiarizing themselves with a large, new building and several new teachers. Furthermore, they were less likely to be facing the task of re-establishing themselves into a new social order and competing for their previous social status.

Previous research has found a decline in self-esteem for both boys and girls during the transition from sixth grade (Eccles et. al., 1989). If this drop in

self-esteem during the transition to junior high is conceptualized from the perspective that several biological, social-emotional, and environmental changes cause added stress and pressure, then the lack of self-esteem differences found in the present study may be explained by fewer changes being experienced by the students when they transition at a younger age, perhaps prior to the onset of puberty, and where living in a smaller school district buffers the social-emotional and environmental stress of transitioning to junior high. The results of the present study suggest that students who enter the transition to junior high at an earlier age and who live in small school districts where students already know each other and where the new school is not large and impersonal are less likely to experience a decline in self-esteem during the transition to junior high. This study also suggests that the relationship between interparental conflict and self-esteem does not change during the sixth grade transition to junior high. Regardless of grade, higher levels of perceived parental conflict were found to be related to lower levels of self-esteem.

The lack of support for grade differences in the relationship between parental conflict and self-esteem may also be explained by the sample obtained in this study. It is possible that the children who were facing many changes were missing from this study. Childhood adjustment problems often arise when the transition to junior high occurs concurrently with other stressors occurring in the child's life. Simmons et. al (1987) found that when a child is faced with multiple life changes all at one time in terms of family, school, social status, maturation, he/she is at-risk for developing academic and social-emotional problems. Children who are high in distress and moderate or low in self-restraint have been found to be less willing to participate in an in-class study (Weinberger, Tublin,

Ford, and Feldman,1990). Because multiple life changes are considered stressors, it is reasonable to assume that children faced with many changes are high in distress. In turn, many of these children could be missing from this research study, and this range restriction may explain why significant grade differences were not found in this study. Most parents and students did not provide reasons for not participating in this study, however, a few parents did report that their decision not to participate was based on current family problems impacting the child. Thus, it is possible that the students who could provide the most critical information to this study are the ones who decided not to participate. This range restriction may attenuate the correlation between parental conflict and self-esteem and thereby reduce the likelihood of finding significance. Because previous studies did not provide CPIC norms, the range of interparental conflict scores from the present study could not be compared to a standardization group. Thus, it is difficult to establish the extent to which the results of this study is representative of the general population.

<u>Hypothesis 3</u>

Hypothesis 3 stated that gender differences would impact the relationship between interparental conflict and self-esteem. In other words, it was believed that boys and girls would respond differently from each other when confronted with high levels of interparental conflict, with girls reporting lower levels of self-esteem in this group. Although approximately 17% of the variance found in self-esteem differences was found to be accounted for by conflict and gender differences, the interaction between conflict and gender did not add to differences in self-esteem already accounted for by the separate effects of conflict and gender. Similar to hypothesis 2, conflict was the strongest and only significant

predictor of self-esteem. Thus, in this study boys and girls reported similar levels of self-esteem.

The results of this study suggest that regardless of gender, a child's perception of parental conflict predicts that child's level of self-reported self-esteem. In other words, levels of interparental conflict reported by 5th and 6th grade students predicted levels of self-esteem equally for girls and boys.

An examination of the self-esteem literature consistently reveals a strong, negative relationship between interparental conflict and childhood self-esteem, and the present study provides further support for this relationship. Gender differences are not as clearly established in the self-esteem literature, however, with some finding differences and others not. Furthermore, many studies have not incorporated gender as a variable. Amato (1986) found gender differences in the relationship between interparental conflict and self-esteem for third grade students (with a significant relationship for girls but not for boys) and for tenth grade students (with a significant relationship for boys but not girls). Thus, the present study suggests that the relationship between interparental conflict and self-esteem is significantly and negatively related when surveying fifth and sixth grade students. Perhaps when children are on the verge of adolescence, with its corresponding changes, the association between conflict and self-esteem is more clearly evident for all students, boys and girls alike. Cognitively, they are more aware than the third grade students of the implications of the conflict, and they are still more dependent on parents than tenth grade students for support and nurturnace. At third grade, girls may respond by lowered self-esteem, while boys may respond with more externalizing behaviors. At older grades, girls may have

formed more supportive friendship ties, while the boys may not have such support in their friendships.

Both the present study and the study by Garber (1992) did not find gender differences in the relationship between self-esteem and interparental conflict, and both used a global measure of self-esteem (i.e., "I am satisfied with myself"). The study conducted by Amato, however, used a more specific measure (i.e., "I have pretty eyes"). Perhaps a measure of the specific domains in self-esteem (i.e., popularity, physical appearance, academic competence, athletic ability) would provide support for gender differences at all age levels in the relationship between interparental conflict and self-esteem. On the other hand, the discrepancies found among the studies regarding the influence of gender on the relationship between conflict and self-esteem may be reflecting actual developmental differences in this relationship. For example, Amato surveyed 3rd grade and 10th grade students, the present study surveyed 5th and 6th grade students, and Garber surveyed undergraduate students. Thus, the discrepant findings in the self-esteem literature may be suggesting that the relationship between conflict and self-esteem is mediated by gender only during specific times in a person's life. In other words, at certain times in a person's life, the relationship between conflict and self-esteem is different for males and females, whereas at other ages, this relationship is not mediated by gender differences. If this is true, than perhaps developmental age is a more important variable to examine rather than grade differences and the transition to junior high.

Hypothesis 4

The relationship between interparental conflict and social skills usage was supported in this study. Higher levels of interparental conflict were found to be

related to lower levels of social skills usage, while lower levels of conflict were related to higher levels of social skills. After controlling for differences in self-esteem, the relationship between interparental conflict and social skills usage remained significant. Although the relationship between conflict and social skills usage was mediated, in part, by the relationship between social skills and self-esteem, higher levels of conflict continued to be associated with social skills usage once the relationship between social skills and self-esteem was removed. An examination of the CPIC subscales revealed that conflict properties and feelings of self-blame signficantly accounted for differences in social skills, with little difference in prediction between the two subscales. Interestingly, child-reports of threat did not signficantly account for social skills differences.

Various explanations are possible for this relationship between conflict and social skills. Perhaps the most obvious explanation for this relationship is that children learn to model the behavior of their parents. Children from families with high levels of interparental conflict do not have as many opportunities to observe appropriate social interactions between their parents. According to the subscale analyses, conflict properties (frequency, intensity, and resolution) signficantly accounted for social skills differences, while feelings of threat (perceived threat and coping efficacy) did not significantly account for social skills differences. The conflict properties subscale assumingly measures the direct, overt interactions between parents, while the threat subscale assumingly measures the internal behaviors of the children (i.e., coping efficacy and feelings of threat). Children who are directly exposed to conflict may observe aggressive interactions and fewer instances of self-control and cooperation between parents. Not all children who report high levels of parental conflict may directly experience the conflict,

however. For these children, their parents may not talk and interact as often with each other, therefore, the children do not observe appropriate social skills being modeled by their parents. In other words, children learn their emotional responses and behavior by observing their parents interacting with each other (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Another explanation for this association between conflict and social skills is that children may isolate themselves from their peers and others because of the conflict at home. They may come to school depressed or sad and not want to interact with others. They may also not want to invite friends over to their house out of fear that their parents will argue in front of their friends. In turn, they do not have as many opportunities to learn and practice appropriate social skills. On the other hand, children with lower levels of social skills (i.e., less cooperative, less self-control) are more likely to put strain on their parents' marriage. Therefore, the relationship between parental conflict and self-esteem is likely to be reciprocal (Emery, 1982).

Although all of these are possible explanations for the relationship between interparental conflict and social skills, the results of this study do not suggest causality; it only suggests an association between interparental conflict and social skills. Children who display lower levels of social skills (i.e., less cooperation and self-control), may contribute to increases in parental disagreements regarding how to handle the behavior problems. It is important for future research to address the issue of causality.

Hypothesis 5

It was hypothesized that gender differences would mediate the relationship between interparental conflict and social skills. Specifically, it was believed that

boys who report higher levels of parental conflict would report lower levels of social skills usage as compared to girls who report higher levels of parental conflict. No gender differences were expected at lower levels of conflict. Approximately 13% of the variance found in social skills was accounted for by conflict and gender, however, the interaction between conflict and gender did not significantly add to the information provided by the separate effects of gender and conflict. Conflict and gender were found to be equally significant predictors of social skills. In other words, higher levels of interparental conflict were associated with lower levels of child-reported social skills usage, and girls reported higher levels of social skill usage than did the boys. Behavior differences in males and females are commonly known and have been firmly established in research (Gresham and Elliott,1990). Whether these differences are due to societal influence, genetic predisposition, or a combination of genes and environment, boys have consistently been reported to display lower levels of social skills than girls.

As stated previously, the interaction between conflict and gender was not significant. In other words, examining the interaction between conflict and gender did not significantly add to the amount of prediction provided by gender and conflict separately. One explanation for this is that both genders learn social skills by observing and modeling parental behaviors. Increases in conflict may also result in reduced interactions with parents, in addition to reduced responsiveness and feedback. All of these variables are considered important aspects of social skills acquisition. Furthermore, it is possible that parents, regardless of the level of interparental conflict, interact similarly in front of their

sons and daughters, and thus both sons and daughters equally learn to model social skills from their parents.

A second explanation for the lack of significance in the interaction between gender and conflict in social skills may be due to the stability of behavior over time. In this study, children reported current levels of interparental conflict, which may not reflect past levels of conflict. It is difficult to know if the current level of conflict was consistent throughout their childhood. In other words, the level of conflict that children were exposed to at the time of the study may not be a reflection of what the children have experienced over the course of their childhood. Interparental conflict may have been low or high at the time of the survey, but this does not suggest that the current level of conflict is the same as what was occurring at the time the children first observed and thus began learning how to interact and socialize with others. Although the stability of behavior is not clearly established, some research suggests that for the majority of people, behavior shows high levels of stability across different situations (Epstein,1979). It is possible that by the time the children in the present study reached 5th and 6th grade, their own personal behavioral response sets and socialization patterns were already in place and fairly stable. Thus, even though a child may have reported that the current level of parental conflict was low, it is possible that when the child first began to model parental behavior, conflict was higher. Consequently, the child may have learned inappropriate social interactions at a time when parental conflict was high. Because research suggests that behavior is fairly stable (when interventions are not implemented), the child may continue to display inappropriate social skills even though the child is no longer exposed to high levels of conflict. This may explain why the

interaction between gender and conflict was not significant. This may also explain why conflict and gender accounted for only 13% of the variance found in social skills. If this is true, it is important to establish original and long-term levels of interparental conflict when attempting to identify the relationship between conflict and social skills and any corresponding gender differences in this relationship.

Hypothesis 6

No grade differences were expected when examining the relationship between interparental conflict and social skills usage. Specifically, 5th and 6th grade students who report higher levels of parental conflict were predicted to report similar levels of social skills, while 5th and 6th grade students who report lower levels of parental conflict were expected to report similar levels of social skills. As predicted, the interaction between conflict and grade did not significantly add to the information provided by the separate effects of conflict and grade. Both interparental conflict and grade significantly predicted social skills, however, conflict accounted for more of the variance found in social skills than what was accounted for by grade. Conflict continued to be negatively associated with social skills usage, with higher levels of interparental conflict being associated with lower levels of social skills. Despite the research supporting a near-zero correlation between grade level and social skills/social competence (Gresham & Elliott, 1990), the present study found that 5th grade students reported higher levels of social skills than did the 6th grade students.

Although previous research has not found grade differences in social skills, explanations exist for the relationship between grade and social skills. Sixth grade students are beginning to experience a growing need to be independent

and form an unique identity. In other words, it is possible that the sixth grade group is "testing the limits" of culturally-accepted behavior and trying to form unique identities. In turn, they reported using fewer social skills when interacting with peers and teachers than did the 5th grade students.

Interestingly, it was the 6th grade girls who reported lower levels of social skills compared to the 5th grade female students. Sixth grade boys reported slightly higher levels of social skills than the 5th grade boys. Thus, it appears that the 6th grade female students are the ones who are "testing the limits" more so than the 6th grade boys.

Even though Gresham and Elliott (1990) did not find significant grade differences in social skills usage, an examination of the mean scores from their standardization of the Social Skills Rating System revealed that for girls, the 7th grade students reported the lowest mean social skills score. For the males, 8th grade students scored the lowest, followed by the 7th grade students. Although the male students scored the lowest during the 7th and 8th grade years, the males scores did not drop as much as did the female students scores did during 7th grade. The Social Skills Rating System provides two separate sets of questions for elementary and secondary students, with elementary including K-6 and secondary including 7-12. It was not specified if all the 6th grade students included in the standardization were still in an elementary setting with all the 7th grade students being transition into junior high. Regardless of when the students began the transition to junior high, there does appear to be a slight drop in social skills during the 7th and 8th grade years. In general, this would suggest that there are developmental trends in social skills usage, perhaps associated with the individualization process beginning with the onset of adolescence. Because the

present study examined only 5th and 6th grade students, it is possible that the decline in self-reported social skills usage was not observed in the male group because they may start exhibiting a drop in social skills developmentally later than their female peers.

Summary of Findings

Findings from this study support an association between interparental conflict and childhood adjustment. Specifically, children's perceptions of parental conflict predicted self-reports of self-esteem and social skills. Higher levels of parental conflict were related to lower levels of self-esteem and social skills usage. This association between conflict and self-esteem and social skills usage was found regardless of gender and grade differences. Although gender and grade differences were not established for self-reports of self-esteem, grade and gender differences in self-reports of social skills usage were found. Parental conflict's prediction of global self-esteem was equally strong for boys and girls and for 5th and 6th grade students. Girls reported higher levels of social skills usage than the boys and 5th grade students reported higher levels of social skills usage than the 6th grade students. Gender differences in social skills has been firmly established, however, previous research has not supported grade differences in social skills. This decline is social skills during the transition to junior high may be reflecting the 6th grade students transition into adolescence.

Differences were found between the parental conflict subscales. Specifically, all three subscales were found to account for self-esteem differences, with reports of threat accounting for more of the variance, followed by conflict properties and self-blame, respectively. When examining social skills differences, feelings of threat, which had originally accounted for most of the

variance found in self-esteem scores, did not significantly account for social skills differences. Only the conflict properties and self-blame subscales were found to account for social skills differences, with both providing similar levels of prediction.

Implications for Practitioners

These findings have several implications for the school psychologist and others who work with families. Because parental conflict was found to predict self-esteem and social skills in 5th and 6th grade children, it is important for school psychologists and other educators to build working relationships with families so that information such as parental conflict and other sensitive topics are more easily obtained. It is often difficult, however, to obtain information from parents about family functioning in general, and parental conflict specifically. Because of this, it may be beneficial to attempt to detect symptoms in children. For both 5th and 6th grade students, it is important to be able to identify early warning signs in order to prevent later problems. Low self-esteem and poor social skills are two possible warning signs of family problems. Self-esteem and social skills are two variables that continue to impact a person throughout his/her life. Thus, it is important that psychologists and other professionals in the field of education to be aware of the factors that are related to and/or predict self-esteem and social skills.

Knowledge of parental conflict and its relationship to self-esteem and social skills usage can be utilized in order to develop intervention strategies as well as preventative techniques such as parent training classes, social skills training, and self-esteem enhancement. Many school districts offer school-psychologist- and/or counselor-led parent training classes. By informing

parents early on of the relationship between interparental conflict and childhood problems, many childhood problems may be prevented and/or alleviated. It is important to let parents know that their own perceptions about family functioning are often different from their child's perceptions. By letting parents know of the relationship between parental conflict and self-esteem and social skills usage, parents may begin to look beyond their own marital problems and see the impact these arguments have on their children. These parent training classes should emphasize more appropriate ways to deal with interparental problems, suggestions for parents on how to talk to their children about these problems but also how keep the children out of the disputes, and inform parents of counseling agencies and other community support services available to them.

Even though many schools and other community agencies offer parent training courses, parent attrition rates are high (Powell, 1986). It is important, therefore, to provide children with ways to cope with family problems and to educate them about how self-esteem and social skills are related to parental conflict. Most schools already offer social skills training and self-esteem enhancement activities, however, those professionals involved with providing these services should be familiar with the research on parental conflict and childhood problems. Such activities should incorporate discussions about coping with family problems and providing children with support networks, whether it be teachers, counselors, or their peers. All of these things should be incorporated into activities that focus on increasing self-esteem and social skills usage.

Based on the present study, it appears that 6th grade students report fewer social skills usage. A closer examination reveals that it is the 6th grade female students who report lower levels of social skills. Therefore, assistance

and support should be offered during the transition to junior high, and these interventions should focus on the female students especially. Support could be provided through peer mentoring, social skills training programs, and encouragement to become active in school functions. By becoming active in various school functions, these children will be better able to establish their own social networks and feel better about themselves.

Limitations

One limitation of this study, which has been discussed throughout this discussion, is that the results are impacted by the sample obtained. The study conducted by Weinberger et. al (1990) found that sixth grade boys who were prone to high levels of distress and low to moderate levels of self-restraint were less likely to participate in a study about family interaction. In the present study, teachers reported that some of the boys who refused to participate exhibited behavior problems in the classroom setting. Furthermore, some parents reported that current family problems made the survey topics too harmful to their child's well-being. Weinberger et. al.'s study and anecdotal notes made during the present study suggest that it is those children who need to be studied the most are the ones that are missing in the samples being obtained.

A second limitation is related to the generalizability of the results. Data used in this study was obtained from a rural community and was limited to white, middle-class students who come from either intact families (whether it be biological or step-parent) or from divorced families in which the child continues to interact with the non-custodial parent. Thus, the findings of this study should not be generalized to minority children or children who do not have contact with two parent-figures, whether it be biological or step-parents.

A third limitation is that a norm group was not available to compare to the means and standard deviations found in this study. It is difficult to establish the true meaning of high, average, and low conflict in the general population. Furthermore, the effects found in this study may be due to high levels of conflict, whereas at moderate to low levels, conflict may not be significant related to childhood adjustment.

A final limitation is that counterbalancing was not utilized when collecting the data. All participants were given the surveys in the following order: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Social Skills Rating System, and the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale. The rationale for not counterbalancing the surveys was that by giving the interparental conflict scale last, the children's responses on the self-esteem and social skills survey would not be impacted by some of the negative wording on the conflict scale. Furthermore, it was believed that the children's response on the self-esteem measure would be impacted by the questions on the social skills scale. If the child felt that he/she was socially inept, this may have had a negative impact on the child's self-esteem responses. Despite these arguments, it is possible that the results of this study were biased due to the lack of counterbalancing the surveys.

Future Research

Self-esteem and social skills are two variables that impact school success and success in life after school. Thus, it is important that psychologists and other professionals in the field of education to be aware of what factors are related to and/or predict self-esteem and social skills. Parental conflict was found to account for only a small percentage of the differences found in self-esteem and

social skills in 5th and 6th grade students. Therefore, future research should focus identifying other variables that are related to children's levels of self-esteem and social skills.

Because research suggests that several life changes at once are more detrimental than when only a few changes occur at once, other research would benefit to examine the combined influences of parental conflict and other family and non-family variables impacting on child and adolescent development. For example, parenting style (i.e., authoritarian, authoritative, indulgent, neglectful) may be mediating the relationship between parental conflict and psychosocial adjustment. Parents who have incongruent parenting styles have adolescents with lower levels of adjustment, including self-esteem, G.P.A., and appropriate classroom behavior (Johnson, Shulman, & Collins, 1991). As discussed by Fincham et. al (1994) interparental conflict impacts all aspects of the family system. They emphasize that problems arise when child adjustment research focuses on only one variable

(i.e., interparental conflict) because by doing so, inaccurate associations may be inferred. Without the inclusion of familial and nonfamilial influences, the research on child adjustment is not complete.

Research also needs to include those variables that have an intervening effect on the negative implications of interparental conflict. For example, Jenkins and Smith (1990) found an association between children who have one good relationship with an adult outside of the family and better childhood adjustment. Rogers and Holmbeck (1997) found greater childhood maladjustment when children had problematic beliefs about interparetnal conflict (paternal or maternal blame, fear of abandonment, peer avoidance) and utilized ineffective coping

strategies (self-destruction, change situation, ventilation). In other words, children who are able to view interparental conflict as temporary and "normal" and who utilize effective coping strategies are better adjusted. Because most families experience some level of interparental conflict and other conflictual family problems, it may be more important to identify those variables that can help children cope with such problems. In addition, this type of research may prove more beneficial to the school psychologist and others who work with children and their families. Many parents are hesitant to have their child's school become involved in family problems due to their beliefs about rights to privacy and/or fears of losing custody of their children. By offering families positive interventions that do not focus merely on parental child-rearing shortcomings but instead offer support by (1) teaching children effective cognitive appraisals and coping strategies, (2) increasing children and their families social support networks, and (3) teaching and reinforcing children to have effective conflict resolution skills and social skills, families in need may be more willing to ask schools and other health-related personnel for help and assistance.

Future research should also focus on children younger and older than the students in the present study. Because there was little difference in age between the 5th and 6th grade students in this study, it was not surprising to find nonsignificant grade differences in self-esteem. As stated previously, perhaps developmental age is a more important factor than grade differences when examining the relationship between conflict and adjustment. For example, the biological and social-emotional changes that occur during adolescence may not have developed yet. Girls begin puberty around the age of 12.5 years, with boys generally beginning puberty two years later than girls (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff,

1992). Fifty percent of the subjects were 11-years-old, and only 23% were 12-years-old, therefore, most of these students had not begun to experience all the maturational changes associated with adolescence. In fact, some researches describe age 13 (or grade 7) as the approximate point of entry into adolescence. Future research should examine developmental trends regarding the shifts in self-esteem and social skills that occur, or do not occur, during the transition into adolescence.

Although the present study briefly examined differences among the subscales of the CPIC, future research may provide insight into how reports of self-blame, threat, and conflict properties impact childhood functioning. Preliminary reports suggest that feelings of threat are most strongly related to self-esteem but are not signficantly related to social skills. Conflict properties were significantly related to self-esteem and social skills, however, the relationship was strongest for self-esteem. Self-blame equally predicted self-esteem and social skills, and self-blame accounted for more of the variance in social skills than threat and conflict properties.

The statistical analyses utilized in this study suggest a linear relationship between parental conflict and childhood adjustment. It is important to understand that the relationship between conflict and adjustment may not be a direct linear relationship. Other mediating variables may be influencing this relationship, and it is important for other studies to examine these mediating variables. To do this, these future studies should utilize more complex, structural modeling approaches.

Longitudinal designs should also be incorporated in future research. Currently, the parental conflict research focuses primarily on the association between conflict and childhood adjustment rather than causation. In order to

support causation, research needs to devise empirically sound theories that utilize longitudinal studies.

Summary

Children's perceptions of parental conflict were associated with child-reports of self-esteem and social skills, with higher levels of parental conflict related to lower levels of self-esteem and social skills usage. This association between conflict and self-esteem and social skills usage held true regardless of gender and grade differences. Although gender and grade differences were not established for self-esteem, there appear to be grade and gender differences in social skills usage, with girls reporting higher levels of social skills usage than the boys and 5th grade students reporting higher levels of social skills usage than the 6th grade students. Differences among the subscales were also found.

Several differences between the present study and most previous studies are apparent. First, all information was obtained by child-report rather than parent or teacher report. This allowed for a more direct assessment of the relationship between a child's interpretation of interparental conflict and the same child's interpretation of his/her emotional and behavioral functioning. Second, the interparental conflict scale used in this study measures several aspects of interparental conflict, including not only such areas as frequency, duration, and intensity of the conflict but also the extent to which the children blame themselves and feel threatened by the fighting. Thus, the interparental conflict score in the present study provided a comprehensive, and thus more accurate reflection of the overall impact of interparental conflict. Third, although the relationship between conflict and self-esteem has been established in previous studies, the research on conflict and social skills usage defined in terms of assertion,

cooperation, self-control, and empathy has not been as clearly established. Fourth, this study allowed for the comparison of 5th grade students and 6th grade students who were beginning the transition to junior high.

References

Achenbach, T., & Edelbrock, C. (1983). Manual for the child behavior checklist and revised child behavior profile. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Department of Psychiatry.

Amato, P. R. (1986). Marital conflict, the parent-child relationship and child self-esteem. Family Relations, 35, 403-410.

Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 110, 26-46.

Battle, J. (1987). 9 to 19: Crucial years for self-esteem in children and youth. Seattle, WA: J. B. Preston.

Berg, B., & Kelly, R. (1979). The measured self-esteem of children from broken, rejected, and accepted families. Journal of Divorce, 2, 363-369.

Bishop, S. M., & Ingersoll, G. M. (1989). Effects of marital conflict and family structure on the self-concepts of pre- and early adolescents. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 18, 25-38.

Blyth, D. A., Simmons, R. G., & Carlton-Ford, S. (1983). The adjustment of early adolescents to school transitions. Journal of Early Adolescence, 3, 105-120.

Brooks-Gunn, J., & Paikoff, R. L. (1992). Changes in self feelings during the transition towards adolescence. In H. McGurk (Ed.), Childhood social development: Contemporary perspectives (pp. 63-97). Hillsdale, NY: Album.

Cole, M., & Cole, S. R. (1993). In The development of children (2nd ed.) (pp. 568-651). New York: Scientific American Books.

Compas, B. E. (1987). Coping with stress during childhood and adolescence. Psychological Bulletin, 101, 393-403.

Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., Flanagan, C. A., Miller, C., Reuman, D. A., & Yee, D. (1989). Self-concepts, domain values, and self-esteem: Relations and changes at early adolescence. Journal of Personality, 57, 283-309.,

Elliott, S. N., & Gresham, F. M. (1993). Social skills interventions for children. Behavior Modification, 17, 287-313.

Emery, R. E. (1982). Interparental conflict and the children of discord and divorce. Psychological Bulletin, 92, 310-330.

Emery, R. E., & O'Leary, K. D. (1982). Children's perceptions of marital discord and behavior problems of boys and girls. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 10, 11-24.

Epstein, S. (1979). The stability of behavior: I. on predicting most of the people much of the time. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37, 1097-1126.

Fauber, R., Forehand, R., McCombs-Thomas, A., & Wierson, M. (1990). A mediational model of the impact of marital conflict on adolescent adjustment in intact and divorced families: The role of disrupted parenting. Child Development, 61, 1112-1123.

Gable, S., Belsky, J, & Crnic K. (1992). Marriage, parenting, and child development: Progress and prospects. Journal of Family Psychology, 5, 276-294.

Garber, R. J. (1992). Long-term effects of divorce on the self-esteem of young adults. Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 17, 131-137.

Gresham, F. M., & Elliott, S. N. (1990). Social skills rating system. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.

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

Grych, J. H., Seid, M., & Fincham, F. D. (1992). Assessing marital conflict from the child's perspective: The children's perception of interparental conflict scale. Child Development, 63, 558-572.

Hagborg, W. J. (1996). Scores of middle-school-age students on the rosenberg self-esteem scale. Psychological Reports, 78, 1071-1074.

Harter, S. (1982). The perceived competence scale for children. Child Development, 53, 87-97.

Hein, C., & Lewko, J. H. (1994). Gender differences in factors related to parenting style: A study of high performing science students. Journal of Adolescent Research, 9, 262-281.

Hetherington, E. M. (1979). Divorce: A child's perspective. American Psychologist, 34, 851-858.

Hetherington, E. M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1982). Effects of divorce on parents and children. In M. Lamb (Ed.), Nontraditional Families (pp. 233-288.. Hillsdale, NJ: Album.

Hirsch, B. J., & Rapkin, B. D. (1987). The transition to junior high school: A longitudinal study of self-esteem, psychological symptomatology, school life, and social support. Child Development, 58, 1235-1243.

Hops, H. (1983). Children's social competence and skill: Current research practices and future directions. Behavior Therapy, 14, 3-18.

Jenkins, J. M., & Smith, M. A. (1990). Factors protecting children living in disharmonious homes: Maternal reports. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 29, 60-69.

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

Johnson, B. M., Shulman, S., & Collins, W. A. (991). Systemic patterns of parenting as reported by adolescents: Developmental differences and implications for psychosocial outcomes. Journal of Adolescent Research, 6, 235-252.

Johnston, J. R., Gonzalez, R., & Campbell, L. E. (1987). Ongoing post-divorce conflict and child disturbance. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 15, 497-509.

Jouriles, E. N., Murphy, C. M., & O'Leary, K. D. (1989). Interspousal aggression, marital discord, and child problems. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 57, 453-455.

Long, B. H., (1986). Parental discord vs. family structure: Effects of divorce on the self-esteem of daughters. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 15, 19-27.

Long, N., Forehand, R., Fauber, R., & Brody, G. H. (1987). Self-perceived and independently observed competence of young adolescents as a function of parental marital conflict and recent divorce. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 15, 15-27.

Long, N., Slater, E., Forehand, R., & Fauber, R. (1988). Continued high or reduced interparental conflict following divorce: Relation to young adolescent adjustment. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 56, 467-469.

McCombs, A., & Forehand, R. (1989). Adolescent school performance following parental divorce: Are there family factors that can enhance success? Adolescence, 24, 871-880.

Mechanic, D., & Hansell, S. (1989). Divorce, family conflict, and adolescents' well-being. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 30, 105-116.

Oliver, J. M., & Paull, J. C. (1995). Self-esteem and self-efficacy; Perceived parenting and family climate; and depression in university students. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 51, 467-481.

Osborne, L. N., & Fincham, F. D. (1996). Marital conflict, parent-child relationships, and child adjustment: Does gender matter? Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 42, 48-75.

Porter, B., & O'Leary, K. D. (1980). Marital discord and child behavior problems. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 8, 287-295.

Powell, D. (1986). Parent education and support programs. Young Children, 41, 47-53.

Reid, W. J., & Crisafulli, A. (1990). Marital discord and child behavior problems: A meta-analysis. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 18, 105-117.

Rogers, M. J., & Holmbeck, G. N. (1997). Effects of interparental aggression on children's adjustment: The moderating role of cognitive appraisal and coping. Journal of Family Psychology, 11, 125-130.

Rosenberg, M. (1965). Society and the self-image. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Simmons, R. G., & Blyth, D. A. (1987). Moving into adolescence: The impact of puberty change and school context. Hawthorne, NY: Alpine.

Steinberg, L., Lamborn, S. D., Dornbusch, S. M., & Darling, N. (1992). Impact of parenting practices on adolescent achievement: Authoritative parenting, school involvement, and encouragement to succeed. Child Development, 63, 1266-1281.

Straus, M. A. (1979). Measuring interfamily conflict and violence: the conflict tactics (CT) scales. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 41, 75-88.

Walker, H. &, McConnell, S. (1988). Walker-McConnell scale of social competence and school adjustment. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.

Wallerstein, J. S., & Kelly, J. B. (1980). Surviving the breakup: How children and parents cope with divorce. New York: Basic Books.

Webb, J. A., & Baer, P. E. (1995). Influence of family disharmony and parental alcohol use on adolescent social skills, self-efficacy, and alcohol use. Addictive Behaviors, 20, 127-135.

Weinberger, D. A., Tublin, S. K., Ford, M. E., and Feldman, S. S. (1990). Preadolescents' social-emotional adjustment and selective attrition in family research. Child Development, 61, 1374-1386.

Wierson, M., & Forehand, R. (1992). Family stressors and adolescent functioning: A consideration of models for early and middle adolescents. Behavior Therapy, 23, 671-688.

Wierson, M., Forehand, R., & McCombs, A. (1988). The relationship of early adolescent functioning to parent-reported and adolescent-perceived interparental conflict. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 16, 707-718.

Appendix A

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

I am a :   girl   boy

I am in: 5th grade   6th grade

How old are you?

I live with ____both my mom and dad.
                  ____only my mom.
                  ____only my dad.
                  ____my mom and step-dad.
                  ____my dad and step-mom.
                  ____another relative. _____
                  ____other. _____

In every family there are times when the parents don't get along. When their parents argue or disagree, kids can feel a lot of different ways. We would like to know what kind of feelings *you* have when your parents have arguments or disagreements.

If your parents don't live together in the same house with you, think about the times that they are together when they don't agree or about times when both your parents lived in the same house, when you answer these questions.

1. I never see my parents arguing or disagreeing.

      True   Sort of True   False

2. When my parents have an argument they usually work it out.
      True   Sort of True   False

3. My parents often get into arguments about things I do at school.

      True   Sort of True   False

4. My parents get really mad when they argue.

      True   Sort of True   False

5. When my parents argue I can do something to make myself feel better.

       True   Sort of True   False

6. I get scared when my parents argue.

       True   Sort of True   False

7. I feel caught in the middle when my parents argue.

       True   Sort of True   False

8. I'm not to blame when my parents have arguments.

       True   Sort of True   False

9. They may not think I know it, but my parents argue or disagree a lot.

       True   Sort of True   False

10. Even after my parents stop arguing they stay mad at each other.

       True   Sort of True   False

11. My parents have arguments because they are not happy together.

       True   Sort of True   False

12. When my parents have a disagreement they discuss it quietly.

       True   Sort of True   False

13. I don't know what to do when my parents have arguments.

       True   Sort of True   False

14. My parents are often mean to each other even when I'm around.

    True   Sort of True   False

15. When my parents argue I worry about what will happen to me.

    True   Sort of True   False

16. I don't feel like I have to take sides when my parents have a disagreement.

    True   Sort of True   False

17. It's usually my fault when my parents argue.

    True   Sort of True   False

18. I often see my parents arguing.

    True   Sort of True   False

19. When my parents disagree about something, they usually come up with a solution.

    True   Sort of True   False

20. My parents' arguments are usually about something I did.

    True   Sort of True   False

21. The reasons my parents argue never change.

    True   Sort of True   False

22. When my parents have an argument they say mean things to each other.

    True   Sort of True   False

23. When my parents argue or disagree I can usually help make things better.

    True   Sort of True   False

24. When my parents argue I'm afraid that something bad will happen.

    True   Sort of True   False

25. My mom wants me to be on her side when she and my dad argue.

    True   Sort of True   False

26. Even if they don't say it, I know I'm to blame when my parents argue.

    True   Sort of True   False

27. My parents hardly ever argue.

    True   Sort of True   False

28. When my parents argue they usually make up right away.

    True   Sort of True   False

29. My parents usually argue or disagree because of things that I Do.

    True   Sort of True   False

30. My parents argue because they don't really love each other.

    True   Sort of True   False

31. When my parents have an argument they yell a lot.

    True   Sort of True   False

32. When my parents argue there's nothing I can do to stop them.

    True   Sort of True   False

33. When my parents argue I worry that one of them will get hurt.

    True   Sort of True   False

34. I feel like I have to take sides when my parents have a disagreement.

    True   Sort of True   False

35. My parents often nag and complain about each other around the house.

    True   Sort of True   False

36. My parents hardly ever yell when they have a disagreement.

    True   Sort of True   False

37. My parents often get into arguments when I do something wrong.

    True   Sort of True   False

38. My parents have broken or thrown things during an argument.

    True   Sort of True   False

39. After my parents stop arguing, they are friendly toward each other.

    True   Sort of True   False

40. When my parents argue I'm afraid that they will yell at me too.

      True   Sort of True   False

41. My parents blame me when they have arguments.

      True   Sort of True   False

42. My dad wants me to be on his side when he and my mom argue.

      True   Sort of True   False

43. My parents have pushed or shoved each other during an argument.

      True   Sort of True   False

44. When my parents argue or disagree there's nothing I can do to make myself feel better.

      True   Sort of True   False

45. When my parents argue I worry that they might get divorced.

      True   Sort of True   False

46. My parents still act mean after they have had an argument.

      True   Sort of True   False

47. My parents have arguments because they don't know how to get along.

      True   Sort of True   False

48. Usually it's not my fault when my parents have arguments.

      True   Sort of True   False

49. When my parents argue they don't listen to anything I say.

      True   Sort of True   False

Appendix B

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

I am a :   girl   boy

I am in: 5th grade   6th grade

How old are you?

This paper lists a lot of things that students your age may do. Please read each sentence and think about yourself. Decide **how often** you do the behavior described.

If you want to change an answer, be sure to erase completely. Please answer all questions. When you are finished, wait for further directions. Be sure to ask questions if you do not know what to do. There are no right or wrong answers, just your feelings of how often you do these things.

1. I make friends easily.

    very often   sometimes   never

2. I smile, wave, or nod at others.

    very often   sometimes   never

3. I ask before using other people's things.

    very often   sometimes   never

4. I ignore classmates who are clowning around in class.

    very often   sometimes   never

5. I feel sorry for others when bad things happen to them.

    very often   sometimes   never

6. I tell others when I am upset with them.

    very often   sometimes   never

7. I disagree with adults without fighting or arguing.

    very often   sometimes   never

8. I keep my desk clean and neat.

    very often   sometimes   never

9. I am active in school activities such as sports or clubs.

    very often   sometimes   never

10. I do my homework on time.

    very often   sometimes   never

11. I tell new people my name without being asked to tell it.

    very often   sometimes   never

12. I control my temper when people are angry with me.

    very often   sometimes   never

13. I politely question rules that may be unfair.

    very often   sometimes   never

14. I let friends know I like them by telling or showing them.

    very often   sometimes   never

15. I listen to adults when they are talking with me.

    very often   sometimes   never

16. I show that I like compliments or praise from friends.

     very often   sometimes   never

17. I listen to my friends when they talk about problems they are having.

     very often   sometimes   never

18. I avoid doing things with others that may get me in trouble with adults.

     very often   sometimes   never

19. I end fights with my parents calmly.

     very often   sometimes   never

20. I say nice things to others when they have done something well.

     very often   sometimes   never

21. I listen to the teacher when a lesson is being taught.

     very often   sometimes   never

22. I finish classroom work on time.

     very often   sometimes   never

23. I start talks with class members.

     very often   sometimes   never

24. I tell adults when they have done something for me that I like.

     very often   sometimes   never

25. I follow the teacher's directions.

     very often   sometimes   never

26. I try to understand how my friends feel when they are angry, upset, or sad.

     very often   sometimes   never

27. I ask friends for help with my problems.

     very often   sometimes   never

28. I ignore other children when they tease me or call me names.

     very often   sometimes   never

29. I accept people who are different.

     very often   sometimes   never

30. I use my free time in a good way.

     very often   sometimes   never

31. I ask classmates to join in an activity or game.

     very often   sometimes   never

32. I use a nice tone of voice in classroom discussions.

     very often   sometimes   never

33. I ask adults for help when other children try to hit me or push me around.

     very often   sometimes   never

34. I talk things over with classmates when there is a problem or an argument.

     very often   sometimes   never

Appendix C

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

I am a :   girl   boy

I am in: 5th grade   6th grade

How old are you?

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

        strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

2. At times, I think I am no good at all.

        strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

        strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

        strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

        strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

6. I certainly feel useless at times.

        strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

7. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal
    plane with others.

        strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

        strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

    strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

    strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree