

## **Affiliative and Instrumental Marital Discord, Mother's Negative Affect, and Children's Negative Interactions with Unfamiliar Peers**

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*Indices of marital discord and mother-child affective processes were used to predict levels of negativity children displayed with unfamiliar peers. Thirty-nine mothers and their 5-year-olds were observed with 5–7 other mother-child dyads during a 30-minute free play session. Mother and child negativity were coded and two types of marital discord were assessed via mother self-report: affiliative discord (e.g., distress due to the lack of affiliative behaviors in the marriage) and instrumental discord (e.g., disagreements about the accomplishment of marital tasks, such as finances, time management, and goal setting). Affiliative discord was found to relate to the child's negativity with unfamiliar peers, but instrumental discord was not. Furthermore, maternal negativity moderated the link between marital discord and child's negativity with peers, such that high levels of affiliative discord combined with heightened maternal negativity was associated with child negativity. Practical implications are discussed.*

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**KEY WORDS:** marital discord; negative affect; peer interaction; preschoolers.

Marital discord occurs more frequently during the child-raising years than any other time in the marital relationship (Belsky & Pensky, 1988). A considerable body of research investigating the negative effects of marital discord on child functioning within the family and peer group has been amassed (see Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994, and Kelly, 2000, for reviews). Boys from homes with high

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levels of marital discord are rated as less liked by their peers (MacKinnon-Lewis & Lofquist, 1996). Four- and five-year-old children from maritally distressed families play less and have more negative interactions with their close friends than do children from nondistressed families (Gottman & Katz, 1989) and generally demonstrate higher levels of problem behaviors (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). An underlying research question in the current study is whether children from families experiencing higher levels of marital discord are more likely to exhibit negative behavior with peers than are children from low-discord families.

There is some evidence that marital discord can have a direct impact on children's peer behavior via modeling of inappropriate parent behavior (Cummings & Davies, 1994). However, children need not directly observe interparent conflict to be affected by it (Cummings, Ballard, & El-Sheikh, 1991; Mahoney, Lape, Query, & Weiber, 1997), and evidence suggests that the greatest influence of marital discord appears to be an indirect one, through its effect on parent-child relations (Fincham et al., 1994; Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Parents in discordant relationships have been found to engage in multiple practices that disrupt the parent-child relationship, such as frequent expressions of anger, infrequent displays of affection, inconsistent use of discipline, rejection, withdrawal, or general disengagement (e.g., Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1988; Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989; Fincham et al., 1994). A second research question in our study, then, is whether marital discord is predictive of nonoptimal maternal behavior.

We suggest that a particularly important parent behavior linking marital discord to child adjustment is the expression of negative emotion. Cummings (1998) has proposed that the expression of negative emotions by parents in marriages characterized by high levels of discord is one of the primary mechanisms through which conflict impacts children, yet the link between discord and parent emotion expression has not yet been comprehensively studied. There is evidence, however, that parental negative affect—facial or behavioral expressions which appear angry, unhappy or disturbed—is associated with child problems. Within the family, parental displays of negative emotion tend to elicit negative emotions from the child (e.g., irritation, disappointment; see Deater-Decker, 2000; Morrow, 1999) as well as negative behavior (e.g., resistance, noncompliance; see Dix, 1991, for a review). Parental negative affectivity and use of harsh coping strategies appears to affect children's emotion and behavioral management (Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001).

While these expressions of negativity within the family are likely disruptive to the child's sense of security (Davies & Cummings, 1994), they also have the potential to disrupt relationships outside the family. In a study investigating the relation of parents' control behaviors and emotions to children's classroom acceptance, parental negative affect showed stronger associations with the child's social acceptance in first grade than the parent's attempts to control the child's behavior

(Islet, O'Neil, & Parke, 1996). Among preschool children, mutual negative affect between parent and child has been related to child aggression, unwillingness to share, and avoidance of peers (Carson & Parke, 1996). Various theories have been proposed to account for the link between parental negativity and children's social problems, including modeling of negative behavior (e.g., Curtner-Smith, 2000), parent's socialization of emotion (e.g., modeling of expressive styles, emotional responsiveness to child emotions; Denham, 1997), and children's learning of parental social-cognitive patterns (e.g. a threat-orientation, Bugental, 1992). How parents express themselves emotionally to their children appears important in understanding the development of children's behavior problems with peers. Thus, a third research question in our study is whether maternal negative affect is related to her child's negativity with peers.

A further (and most important) piece in the rationale for the current study is the notion that there are individual differences in the relation between marital discord and parenting behavior. Although the tendency for parents to express positive versus negative emotion in different situations appears to be relatively stable across time (LaFreniere & Sroufe, 1985) and resistant to change (Patterson, 1979), it may be that some parents, in the context of marital discord, are able to modulate their emotions so that they are not negative towards their children. If this is the case, children might be protected from the effects of marital discord due to the buffering effects of parenting behaviors (or, more specifically, the lack of negative parenting behaviors). The fourth research question in this study examines this issue by determining whether the relation between marital discord and child behavior is moderated by the mother's negative affect with her child, something that has not previously been examined. Mothers who are experiencing low levels of marital discord should not have difficulty managing their emotions with their children; when mothers are experiencing problems in their marital relationships, however, some may also experience difficulty in managing their emotions with their children, and some may not. We predict that in the case where discord is high and mother's negative affect with her children is also high, the child will display the highest levels of problem behavior.

In addition to the four research questions outlined above, we sought to further explore the discord/parenting/child behavior link by refining current thinking about the *causes* or *types* of marital discord, since recent researchers suggest the characteristics of discord, rather than discord per se, may determine its negative impact on the child (see Demo & Cox, 2000, for a review; also Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1993). To date, attempts to explore the characteristics of marital conflict as it relates to child outcomes have tended to focus on whether the conflict is child-related, whether conflict is resolved in front of the child, and the interpretations the child makes about the conflict (e.g., Grych & Fincham, 1993; Jouriles, Bourg, & Farris, 1991). Because it is not as clear how various types of non-child-related marital discord impact parenting and child adjustment, in the

current study we operationalize two types of marital discord defined by the issues underlying the discord, and examine whether they differentially relate to mother and child outcomes, specifically, negativity.

Because we were interested in the link between marital discord and observed negative emotion, we wanted to deconstruct global marital discord into two subtypes, one type that centered on emotion expression in the marriage, and one that did not. We thus employed the classic affiliative/instrumental distinction (see Maslow, 1954; Schooler, Hogarty, & Weissman, 1986) to conceptualize these two subtypes of discord, and used existing measures (the DAS and the LES; see Methods) to operationalize them. In the social support literature, instrumental and affiliative (i.e., emotional) behaviors of close others have been found to play very different roles in helping individuals cope with life stressors (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Within this tradition, *affiliative* behaviors are defined as caring, warm, and intending to build trusting relationships, while *instrumental* behaviors are those intended to help the person in need perform tasks s/he is unable to perform alone (House, 1980). Both are venues of support but one focuses on creating a sense of emotional availability and the other on more goal-oriented problem-solving. We suggest that both types of behavior exist within marriages, and that both can be sources of support or discord. Specifically, we propose that *affiliative discord* be conceptualized as discord caused by the lack of affiliative support, in other words, the lack of positive, emotion-focused behavior. Affiliative discord might be seen as disagreement in how partners express affection, in problems with intimacy and sexual relations, and/or in their inability to express disagreement without destructive arguing. We propose that *instrumental discord* be conceptualized as discord caused by the lack of instrumental support, in other words, disagreement about marital tasks or problem-solving, including concrete tasks such as planning free time or dealing with family finances, and abstract tasks, such as the coordination of goals, religious beliefs, and life philosophies. We hypothesize that the parenting of mothers experiencing affiliative discord in their marriages will be more impaired (i.e., they will be more likely to express negative affect with their children) than mothers experiencing instrumental discord.

In order to examine the behavior of mothers and children from families of differing levels and types of marital discord, mother-child dyads were observed in the context of play with a group of unfamiliar, same-sex children. The rationale for observing maternal affect in this context was based on the finding that most studies of marital discord and parental negative affectivity have focused on anger in the context of parents' use of coercive, punitive discipline techniques or have used clinical samples (e.g., Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Johnson, 1997; Weber & O'Brien, 1999); we were interested in whether this link exists among nonclinical samples in nondiscipline contexts. Although the incidence of negativity in clinical samples is higher than in nonclinical samples (Chorpita, Albano, & Barlow, 1998), and the display of negative affect is relatively rare in observations of non-clinic referred

families (Harrist, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 1994), we reason that if a link between marital discord, parental negativity, and child problem behavior is found among our normative sample, the results have the potential to generalize to a greater number of families.

There are several advantages to assessing child negativity with unfamiliar peers. Because we were interested in observed maternal emotion, we reasoned that an observable child emotion variable would show stronger predictive associations than would a more global measure of child behavior, such as a problem checklist or a parent rating. Also, there is evidence that the expression of negativity among preschool peers is representative of other social problems, such as poor peer acceptance (LaFreniere & Sroufe, 1985). Because preschool children are frequently presented with groups of unfamiliar peers, and a child's ability to navigate socially in such a setting represents an important developmental step (see Howes, 1987), behavior with unfamiliar peers should be a particularly telling indicator of their level of social competence. Furthermore, there is evidence that children generalize perceptions of parental behavior to unfamiliar peers more consistently than they do to familiar peers (Rabiner, Keane, & MacKinnon-Lewis, 1993). We also wanted to mitigate the possibility that, in some cases, friendship relationships could serve a compensatory function, such that children who have unsatisfying relations with parents might seek comfort from close friends, and be less negative with them than with peers in general.

In summary, Hypotheses for the current study are as follows:

## HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis I: Marital discord will be associated with both mother and child negativity in the play session, with affiliative discord showing a stronger relation than instrumental discord.

Hypothesis II: Mothers' observed negative affect will be related to the child's expressions of negativity with peers in the play session.

Hypothesis III: Maternal negative affect will moderate the effect of marital discord, such that high levels of both maternal negative affect and discord will be associated with the highest levels of child-to-peer negativity. This pattern may be more significant among affiliatively discordant families than instrumentally discordant ones.

## METHOD

### Participants

Thirty-nine mothers ( $M$  age = 34 years,  $SD$  = 4.1 years) and their 5-year-old children (19 girls, 20 boys;  $M$  age = 62 months) were participants in this

study. The mothers and children were predominantly Euro-American (3 families were Mexican-American) and lived in a metropolitan area. Mothers had a mean of 15.6 years of education ( $SD = 2.3$ ) and fathers 16.5 years ( $SD = 2.7$ ). The children were originally solicited to participate in a study on the effects of daycare, thus, 34 of the children in the study were actively involved in child care situations ( $M = 28.7$  hr/week,  $SD = 17.0$ ) and had both parents who were working outside the home. Hours in childcare were not significantly related to any of the study's variables.

### Overview of Laboratory Observations

The mothers and children were observed for 30 minutes in unstructured play sessions involving 4–6 other mother-child dyads. The children in the play sessions were assigned to play group conditions based on their proximity in age. Play sessions involved unfamiliar, same-sex children and were videotaped through a one-way mirror. Each mother was instructed to encourage her child to interact with the other children and to remain seated during the session. Mothers were told they could soothe their children if necessary and were not asked to ignore the social gestures of their children, however, it was clarified that the setting was designed to facilitate peer interaction. Chairs were provided for the mothers to sit in during the session and attractive toys were present for the children to use in their play.

### Measures

#### *Measures of Affiliative and Instrumental Discord*

At the end of the play session mothers completed a set of questionnaires, including the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976; Spanier & Thompson, 1982) and the Life Events Survey (LES; Sarason, Johnson, & Siegal, 1978), both self-report assessments in which the participant rates level of agreement to various statements about marriage and life stressors on Likert-type scales. The DAS has demonstrated strong construct validity through associations with measures of marital adjustment including the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). The Life Experiences Survey assesses how life events impact individuals by determining the occurrence and impact of 47 life changes from a variety of domains. The items for the affiliative and instrumental discord scales were determined a priori based on the conceptual distinctions made in the social support literature, as described above.

Two marital discord measures were derived from these instruments. An *affiliative discord* score was derived to represent disagreement about or problems caused by a lack of affiliative support within the marriage. This measure assessed whether demonstrations of affection and intimacy had caused problems in the

relationship, as well as the negative impact caused by arguing on the marriage. The measure was obtained by summing the raw score from the Affective Expression subscale of the DAS (two items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “always disagree” to “always agree” and two dichotomous items, either “no” to “yes”) with one item from the LES that measured the impact of an “increase in (the) number of arguments with the spouse” on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “extremely negative” to “extremely positive” impact (five items,  $\alpha = .62$ ). Specifically, the DAS items asked the mothers to indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement pertaining to demonstrations of affection and sex relations as well as whether there were problems in the marriage regarding being too tired for sex and not showing love. The LES item was included with the DAS items because we wanted to capture not only disagreement—which could be on a somewhat intellectual level—but also negative affectivity. In other words, couples scoring high on the affiliative discord measure not only lack affiliative support expressed by being in-sync about the emotional issues of sex and affection, but they also are having difficulties expressing disagreement without a disturbing level of argument. The LES item was strongly positively associated with the other items in the affiliative discord measure (and, in comparison, uncorrelated with the items of the instrumental discord measure). Because the items from the DAS and the LES were assessed using different measurement scales, all items were converted to z-scores before the composite mean score was computed ( $M = .006$ ,  $SD = .59$ , range =  $-1.42$  to  $1.14$ ). Four cases were dropped from all analyses because their pattern of response on the survey items suggested the participants were not attentive to the response scales of the items, thus, the final sample consisted of thirty-nine mother-child dyads. Dropping these four cases had no effect on the subsequent results but improved scale reliability (e.g.,  $\alpha$  for affiliative discord increased from .52 with the four cases to .62 without them).

An *instrumental discord* score was derived to represent marital discord related to instrumental issues. This score represented the mean among 13 DAS items on a six-point Likert scale ranging from “always disagree” to “always agree” in which the items were converted to Z-scores before the scale score was created (13 items,  $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = .004$ ,  $SD = .64$ , range =  $-2.31$  to  $1.11$ ). Specifically, the instrumental discord items measure agreement or disagreement related to the handling of family finances, recreation, religion, friends, conventionality, philosophy of life, interactions with family and in-laws, aims and goals, time spent together, major decisions, leisure time, and career decisions.

As discussed earlier, the conceptual commonality among the instrumental discord items is that they are not directly about the expression of emotion, although they certainly evoke emotion among couples; affiliative items are more directly about the expression of emotion. Affiliative and instrumental discord were correlated but only marginally ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .10$ ), suggesting that these two forms of conflict are related, yet may assess relatively independent aspects of marital discord.

### *Measures of Child Negativity and Mother Negative Affect*

Mothers' affect and children's negativity were rated as positive, negative, or neutral depending on which emotional or behavioral state, respectively, were most predominant in every-other 15-second interval for 26.5 minutes of the play session. From a total of 53 separate intervals coded for each mother and child within the play setting, the percentage of intervals where negative affect or negativity were observed was calculated for the participants. To establish interrater reliability, 10% of cases were coded by separate observers with an average Cohen's  $k$  of .87 for the ratings of the child's affect and .82 for ratings of the mother's affect. All of the coders were blind to the hypotheses of the study.

*Child's expression of negativity with peers* was defined as the percentage of all peer-interaction intervals in which the child's affect or behavioral state was coded as negative ( $M = 2.10\%$ ,  $SD = 3.77$ , range = 0% to 15.6%). Negativity was defined as an emotional state that appeared angry, unhappy, or disturbed during interactions with one or more peers as well as the expression of antisocial or aversive behaviors (e.g., trying to take another child's toy, child plays aggressively with another toy, the child's verbalizations are aggressive or negative).

*Maternal negative affect* was operationalized as the percentage of all mother-child interaction intervals where the mother affect was coded as negative ( $M = 1.11\%$ ,  $SD = 3.02\%$ , range = 0% to 10.5%). For mothers, negative affect was defined as appearing angry, unhappy, or disturbed. Only intervals when the child was directly interacting with the mother were coded for negative maternal affect by the raters, and the mother's behavior was not coded during intervals when the child was interacting with the peers.

## RESULTS

### Bivariate Relations

Two of our hypotheses were addressed via bivariate correlations. Hypothesis I sought to determine whether affiliative or instrumental discord were related to child negativity and if so, which was more strongly related. Results indicate that affiliative discord was positively, significantly related to the child's expression of negativity with peers but instrumental discord was not related to the child's negativity (see Table I).

Hypothesis I also proposed that affiliative and instrumental discord would be differentially correlated with maternal negative affect (see Table I). The results indicate that affiliative discord was significantly correlated with mother's negative affect while instrumental discord demonstrated a positive but nonsignificant association with maternal negative affect. However, we lacked the power to determine whether the strength of the correlations were significantly different from one

**Table I.** Bivariate Relations Among Marital Variables, Maternal Negative Affect with the Child, and Child Negativity with Unfamiliar Peers (*N* = 39)

	Child negativity	Maternal negative affect
Maternal Negative Affect	.65**	
Instrumental Discord	.06	.11
Affiliative Discord	.37*	.33*

\* *p* < .05, \*\* *p* < .001.

another. Table I also shows that mother negative affect and child negativity were significantly related, in support of Hypothesis II.

### Moderation Analyses

Hypothesis III, that maternal negative affect would moderate the relation between marital discord and child negativity, was investigated via regression. Separate regression equations were calculated with instrumental and affiliative discord as independent variables, respectively, and child negativity with peers as the dependent variable. On the first step of each regression equation, sex of child and age in months were entered. In the second step, the level of marital discord (affiliative or instrumental) and maternal negative affect were entered simultaneously. Finally, a multiplicative interaction term (marital discord × maternal negative affect) was entered on the third step. The hierarchical regression analyses we computed allowed us to examine the interactive properties of marital discord and maternal negative affect independent of the contributions of sex and age. Following the procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991), all variables were centered—in this case converted to *Z*-scores—before the interaction term was calculated.

#### *Instrumental Discord*

Neither sex nor age was a significant predictor of child negativity with peers (see Table II). While maternal negative affect remained a significant predictor of child negativity after controlling for age and sex, instrumental discord did not contribute unique variance to the equation. The interaction between instrumental discord and maternal negative affect also failed to add significant predictive value to child negativity.

#### *Affiliative Discord*

A second regression equation was computed with affiliative discord as the independent variable. The step containing maternal negative affect and affiliative

**Table II.** Predicting Child Negativity with Unfamiliar Peers from Instrumental Discord and Maternal Negative Affect

Criterion/predictors (step)	$\beta$	$R^2$ Change	$F$ Change
Step 1			
Age	.01		
Sex	-.11	.07	1.34
Step 2			
Maternal Negative Affect with Child	.65*		
Instrumental Discord	.03	.37	11.60*
Step 3			
Maternal Negative Affect with Child X			
Instrumental Discord	.01	.00	.07
Multiple $R$		.66	

Note.  $N = 39$ .  $\beta$ s are standardized regression coefficients from the final step of the equation.  
\*  $p < .001$ .

discord was significant after controlling for age and sex (see Table III). In addition, the interaction between affiliative discord and maternal negative affect significantly added to the prediction of child negativity with peers. Following the suggestions of Aiken and West (1991), the interaction was graphed as the relation between affiliative discord and child negativity when discord was “low” (1  $SD$  below the mean), at the mean, and “high” (1  $SD$  above the mean). As Fig. 1 shows, the relation between affiliative discord and child negativity is most salient when maternal negative affect is high; when high levels of affiliative discord are associated with low levels of maternal negative affect, children’s negativity with peers is low, and when affiliative discord is low—regardless of mother’s affect with her child—child’s negativity with the peers also is low.

**Table III.** Predicting Child Negativity with Unfamiliar Peers from Affiliative Discord and Maternal Negative Affect with Child

Criterion/predictors (step)	$\beta$	$R^2$ Change	$F$ Change
Step 1			
Age	.03		
Sex	-.06	.07	1.34
Step 2			
Maternal Negative Affect with Child	.41*		
Affiliative Discord	.12	.39	12.26**
Step 3			
Maternal Negative Affect with Child X			
Affiliative Discord	.34*	.07	5.18*
Multiple $R$		.73	

Note.  $N = 39$ .  $\beta$ s are standardized regression coefficients from the final step of the equation.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ .

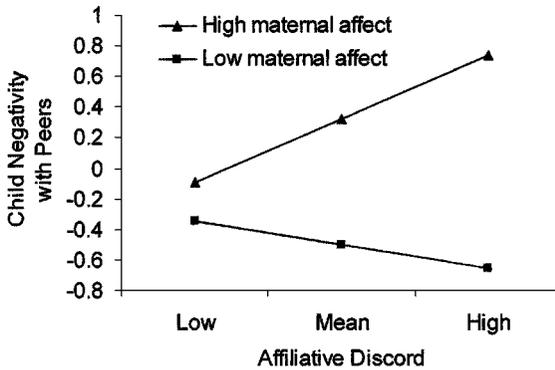


Fig. 1. Interaction effect of affiliative discord and maternal negative affect on child negativity with peers.

### DISCUSSION

This study addressed Fincham’s (1994) call to examine the characteristics of marital discord that are related to child outcomes, and found that what we termed affiliative discord—problems caused by a lack of warm, trust-building behavior—better predicted child negativity than did what we termed instrumental discord. Further, this study found that the mother’s negative affect moderated the relation between discord and child negativity, confirming the notion that marital processes are related to child behavior, in part, through parenting behavior. It is when marital negativity “spills over” into the parent-child relationship that children are affected most (see Margolin, Christensen, & John, 1996). The fact that affiliative discord, but not instrumental discord, was related to child negativity suggests that examining this type of marital disagreement and conflict is important. Work by Porter and O’Leary (1980) found that marital hostility but not marital satisfaction was related to problematic child outcomes. The results of our study suggest that some types of marital discord may be predictors of subsequent child adaptation, even in samples that are not extreme in their level of discord (i.e., nonabusive, non clinic-referred families). If parents can shield their children from the emotional exchanges associated with affiliative marital discord—or perhaps use incidents of negativity as opportunities for growth (e.g., as opportunities to discuss the implications of emotional expressiveness with their children; see Dunn & Brown, 1994)—the impact of marital discord on children may be limited. Alternatively, even if children are aware of discord in the marriage, our moderation finding suggests that the more proximal process of mother-child affective interaction may override the distal effects of marriage issues.

In risk and resiliency terms, the moderation effect found in our data fits Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker’s (2000) description of a “vulnerable-reactive” model. There

are two ways to interpret this finding. One is that, when marital tension is high and mothers are (presumably consequently) negative with their children, the children's behavior suffers. This interpretation fits with the growing and substantial literature linking marital discord to child problems via parenting (e.g., Coiro & Emery, 1998; Erel & Burman, 1995). The process at work in this linkage may be, for example, that children from discordant homes that also have negative mother-child interactions "overlearn" negativity as a way of responding (see, e.g., Patterson & Dishion, 1988).

However, an alternative interpretation of the moderation finding is that mothers in our sample were responding to their children's negativity in the play session, and that it was in the context of higher-level marital discord that mothers were unable to cope (i.e., to remain neutral or positive). This interpretation is interesting in light of the recent work of Fabes and colleagues (e.g., Fabes et al., 2001), who find individual differences in the level of distress parents experience when their children express negative emotions. If parental distress in the face of child negativity is a forerunner to child social problems, our study suggests that affiliative marital discord may play a part in the parent's level of distress. Our research design does not allow these rival interpretations to be tested, but each suggests a direction for theoretical and empirical work.

Further research in this area should more fully address affiliative discord and its relation to maternal behavior. Affiliative discord, as it is operationalized in this study, represents a breakdown in the emotional tenor of the relationship. Mothers who feel supported in the parenting role by their spouses and who indicate high levels of coparenting also tend to feel more efficacious in their role as parents (Cookston, 2000). Couples in marriages where affiliative discord prevails likely evidence greater intensity and emotionality than is found in homes with limited affiliative discord. Future efforts exploring affiliative discord may benefit from attempts to discriminate between the frequency and intensity of affiliative discord and the negative effects of such behaviors on couples. In the present study, these potentially disparate processes are aggregated.

There are certain limitations of the present study worth discussing. First, maternal negative affect was extremely infrequent among our sample; however, the effect was not driven by outlier cases and was apparently salient enough to significantly correlate with child negativity and moderate the relation between discord and child negativity. A similar pattern was observed in a study where the incidence of observed negative coercive exchanges among parents and children was very low, but was nevertheless predictive of children's aggression in kindergarten (Harrist, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 1994). Given the fact that the observation setting—a room filled with attractive toys and other children—was not a context in which maternal negativity was particularly likely, and also given that the mothers were aware they were being observed, it may be that the negativity observed in the play session was indicative of behavior that occurs more frequently in the home, hence the relation

with marital discord. Another limitation is that the behavioral observations of maternal affect and child negativity were coded in alternate intervals rather than continuously. Continuous coding or sequential analysis would have provided a more thorough record of the interactions. Furthermore, the mother and child variables may not be independent estimates because both were coded from the same interaction session and because our ratings of mother affect and child negativity were made by the same coder, thus, increasing the likelihood of contamination between variables. Subsequent research should attempt to replicate these findings based on ratings of mother-child dyads and peer groups collected and rated independent of one another. Finally, the scale construction methods we employed in the development of our affiliative and instrumental discord measures merit further study. Although we developed our scales *a priori*, by employing subscales based on items from established surveys, we did not have adequate sample size to perform a true study of the psychometric properties (John & Benet-Martinez, 2000). It is our contention that our results demonstrate construct validity based on our *a priori* estimations that affiliative discord would associate with child negativity and mother negative affect while instrumental discord would not.

In conclusion, this study provides new information regarding the nature of the connection between marital issues and the behavior of children with their peers. We found that not all forms of marital disagreement are associated with problems for children. But how much and what kind of conflict the child is exposed to may be more manageable for parents to control. Furthermore, while it may sometimes be difficult for parents to avoid marital discord, as long as they do not translate that into negativity with the child, the child may be buffered from negative consequences. In light of the statistics on the incidence of marital conflict and dissolution, this is a finding parents will likely find hopeful.

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