

Short Communication

Examining the longitudinal relations among adolescents' conflict management with parents and conflict frequency


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ABSTRACT

Parent-adolescent conflicts are not necessarily detrimental for adolescent development. The way adolescents handle conflicts with parents is of crucial importance. The present five-wave longitudinal study ($N = 1313$) focuses on how adolescents' conflict management behaviors and conflict frequency with parents are interrelated over time. Four conflict management behaviors were investigated: positive problem solving, withdrawal, engagement, and compliance. Using cross-lagged panel analysis, results for conflict behaviors toward mothers indicated that conflict frequency predicted more engagement, withdrawal and compliance, and less positive problem solving one year later. Positive problem solving predicted fewer conflicts and maladaptive conflict management behaviors over time, pointing to the potential protective role of positive problem solving against a conflictual climate and maladaptive management behaviors. Results were largely replicated in the father model. Ancillary multi-group analyses revealed no moderation by gender or age. Suggestions and implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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Conflicts are an inevitable feature of human interactions. Especially in adolescence, conflicts with parents about everyday issues are common mainly due to the realignment of the parent-adolescent relationship and adolescents' striving for autonomy (Smetana, 2008). A meta-analysis by Laursen, Coy, and Collins (1998) revealed that conflicts with parents occur most frequently throughout early adolescence and decrease gradually thereafter. Further, the intensity of conflicts with parents tends to increase from early to mid-adolescence (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; McGue, Elkins, Walden, & Iacono, 2005). Conflicts as such are not necessarily detrimental because they play an important role in adolescents' separation and individuation process (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). In addition, conflicts provide adolescents the opportunity to consider opposing or alternative views which is an important and healthy hallmark of social functioning (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). To capture conflict mechanisms, it is essential to move beyond the presence and

intensity of conflicts and concentrate on conflict management (or the behaviors adolescents enact during a conflict). Furthermore, how adolescents deal with conflicts is expected to influence their social functioning as young adults in various life domains (e.g., work, studies, and romantic relationships). Both hostile and constructive conflict interactions with parents are transferred to relationships with friends and romantic partners (Trifan & Stattin, 2015; Van Doorn, Branje, VanderValk, De Goede, & Meeus, 2011).

We focused on four conflict management behaviors that substantially impact adolescents' psychosocial functioning (Branje, Laursen, & Collins, 2012; Laursen, Finkelstein, & Townsend-Betts, 2001; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993). Positive problem solving involves trying to understand the other's point of view and negotiating the conflict effectively to find a compromise. Conflict engagement involves destructive behaviors like attacking the other verbally, being defensive, or losing self-control. Withdrawal involves avoiding the problem, avoiding talking, and becoming distant. Finally, compliance involves giving in to the other party without expressing one's viewpoint.

From a developmental perspective, adolescents are expected to use more mature ways of conflict management because cognitive maturation combined with a more egalitarian parent-adolescent

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relationship enables them to take on different perspectives (Sandy & Cochran, 2000). Longitudinal research has indeed demonstrated that problem solving increased from early to mid-adolescence, and conflict engagement and withdrawal decreased around mid-adolescence (Van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2011). However, a detailed understanding of how conflict frequency and different conflict management behaviors influence each other over time has not emerged fully. Establishing an understanding which conflict management behaviors might mitigate or aggravate conflict is important. Such knowledge could inform prevention and intervention efforts for improving parent-adolescent relationships. Even less is known about how different conflict management behaviors are related to each other over time. Conflict management behaviors are not used in isolation (Branje, Van Doorn, Van der Valk, & Meeus, 2009), and gaining insight in which conflict management behaviors reinforce or debilitate each other will advance our understanding of adolescent-parent conflict processes.

1. The present study

To address these gaps, the present study had two research objectives. Objective 1 was to examine how conflict management behaviors and frequency were interrelated over time. Inspired by Patterson's (1982) coercion theory, we expected to find evidence for a vicious circle wherein destructive conflict management (i.e., conflict engagement and withdrawal) and conflict frequency reinforce each other over time. The frequency of recent conflicts has indeed been found to predict negative conflict interactions for both mothers and adolescents one month later (Eisenberg et al., 2008). Also, negative conflict management behaviors have been found to co-occur with more conflicts (Branje et al., 2009). Alternatively, positive problem solving might play a more protective role by reducing conflict frequency over time (Rueter & Conger, 1995). Adolescents who use more positive problem solving might be more able to reduce conflicts with parents and develop toward a more egalitarian relationship than adolescents who use less problem solving (Collins, Laursen, Mortensen, Luebker, & Ferreira, 1997). The use of problem solving between adolescents and parents might be indicative of a positive family climate. Previous studies have indeed found a positive association between adequate parenting and constructive conflict management (Eisenberg et al., 2008; Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2003).

Relatedly, Objective 2 was to examine the longitudinal associations among the four conflict management behaviors. Van Doorn et al. (2011a) revealed that an increase in positive problem solving was followed by a decrease in negative parent-adolescent interactions. This may reflect that adolescents who use more problem solving are also more able to reduce engagement and withdrawal in conflicts with parents than adolescents which use less positive problem solving. Therefore, we expected positive problem solving to predict a reduced use of destructive conflict management behaviors (i.e., withdrawal and conflict engagement) over time. All these associations were examined for adolescents' conflict behaviors with both parents separately. Most studies on parent-adolescent conflicts exclusively focus on adolescents' relationship with mothers. Therefore, we do not forward differential hypotheses based on parents' gender.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample was from the CONAMORE study (Meeus et al., 2004), consisting of 1313 adolescents (51.5% girls): 923 early-to-middle ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.42$ years, $SD = 0.59$) and 390 middle-to-late adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.68$ years, $SD = 0.80$). In both cohorts, the majority of adolescents came from intact families (85.1% and 84.3%, respectively). The

majority of participants of the young cohort were Dutch (83.4%), and 16.6% of the adolescents belonged to ethnic minorities (e.g., Surinamese, Antillean, Moroccan, Turkish). In the older cohort, the figures were 87.4% and 12.6%, respectively. The sample was assessed five times over four years. Sample attrition across waves was minimal (1.2%): In Waves 1–5, the numbers of participants were 1313, 1313, 1293, 1292 and 1275, respectively. To deal with missing data, we used FIML in Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010).

Participants were recruited from twelve high schools in the province of Utrecht in The Netherlands. Before the study, both adolescents and parents received written information letters; parents provided passive consent for their child's participation and adolescents provided active consent. During the annual assessments, adolescents filled out paper-and-pencil questionnaires at school or at home.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Conflict frequency

The weekly number of conflicts was assessed with the Interpersonal Conflict Questionnaire (Laursen, 1993). Adolescents rated on a 5-point scale how often, ranging from *never* to *often*, they had an argument with mother and father the past week for 35 conflict topics, resulting in an average weekly conflict score. Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.93 to 0.95 for conflicts with mother and father for T1–5.

2.2.2. Conflict management behaviors

The four conflict management behaviors were assessed with the Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (Kurdek, 1994), adapted for the parent-child context (Branje et al., 2009). On a 5-point scale, ranging from *never* to *always*, adolescents rated how often they used particular conflict management strategies. Cronbach's alphas for conflict management behaviors with mother and father ranged between 0.75 and 0.95 for T1–5.

3. Results

Correlations among all variables at T1–5 are displayed in Table 1. Longitudinal associations among the conflict management behaviors and frequency were investigated with cross-lagged panel models. We tested all models for mother and father separately. In all models, all within-time associations at Times 1–5 and autoregressive paths were estimated. To improve model fit, all two-year autoregressive paths were added. All lagged effects among the conflict variables were estimated. Finally, gender and age were controlled for by estimating paths to all study variables at all time points. Path analyses proceeded in two steps. First, the cross-lagged paths were freely estimated. Second, cross-lagged paths were constrained as equal across all four time intervals. Invariance tests indicated that the more parsimonious invariant model fitted the data equally as the free model. Consequently, we retained the model with longitudinal constraints. Ancillary multi-group analyses were performed to examine whether the cross-lagged coefficients would differ between boys and girls and younger and older adolescents. Invariance tests indicated that no significant differences emerged for both gender and cohort in both mother and father models. Table 2 contains fit indices of all models. Fig. 1 displays all significant standardized cross-lagged paths among the conflict variables between adjacent waves.

Concerning the mother model, conflict frequency predicted more conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance, and less positive problem solving. Positive problem solving predicted fewer conflicts and destructive management behaviors over time. Conflict engagement predicted more withdrawal and less compliance over time. Withdrawal negatively predicted positive problem solving. Compliance predicted more conflicts and less conflict engagement over

Table 1

Correlations among the study variables at Times 1–5.

	Positive problem solving	Conflict engagement	Withdrawal	Compliance
Mother data				
Conflict frequency	–0.01*/–0.07**/–0.13*** –0.17***/–0.13***	0.42***/0.35***/0.34*** 0.38***/0.42***	0.38***/0.34***/0.33*** 0.39***/0.44***	0.17***/0.26***/0.24*** 0.28***/0.29***
Positive problem solving		–0.05/–0.08**/–0.11*** –0.15***/–0.12***	–0.18***/–0.20***/–0.21*** –0.22***/–0.23***	0.24***/0.18***/0.13*** 0.08**/0.11***
Conflict engagement			0.44***/0.46***/0.44*** 0.48***/0.46***	0.02/0.15***/0.18*** 0.18***/0.20***
Withdrawal				0.16***/0.25***/0.30*** 0.33***/0.35***
Father data				
Conflict frequency	0.04/0.01/–0.08** –0.07*/–0.11***	0.44***/0.37***/0.37*** 0.38***/0.38***	0.39***/0.37***/0.35*** 0.39***/0.38***	0.26***/0.31***/0.27*** 0.26***/0.30***
Positive problem solving		–0.01/–0.13***/–0.14*** –0.18***/–0.20***	–0.10***/–0.21***/–0.24*** –0.27***/–0.29***	0.23***/0.12***/0.05 0.04/0.01
Conflict engagement			0.47***/0.44***/0.44*** 0.43***/0.45***	0.16***/0.14***/0.17*** 0.17***/0.21***
Withdrawal				0.28***/0.32***/0.33*** 0.39***/0.41***

Note. The first coefficient is for Time 1; the second for Time 2; the third for Time 3, the fourth for Time 4; and the fifth for Time 5.

* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.01$.*** $p < 0.001$.**Table 2**

Fit indices of the different models tested.

	Main models		Multigroup models			
	Model free	Model fixed	Sex free	Sex fixed	Cohort free	Cohort fixed
Mother models						
χ^2	354.075***	432.372***	658.185***	679.471***	699.295***	731.217***
df	135	195	390	410	390	410
CFI	0.99	0.99	0.98	0.98	0.98	0.98
RMSEA	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.04
Father models						
χ^2	338.755***	415.899***	618.322***	636.652***	658.374***	694.379***
df	135	195	390	410	390	410
CFI	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.98	0.98
RMSEA	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03

*** $p < 0.001$.

time. The results obtained in the father model were identical to those obtained for mothers, except that the negative over-time association between conflict frequency and problem solving was not significant.

4. Discussion

The current study explored the longitudinal associations among adolescents' conflict management behaviors and conflict frequency with parents using cross-lagged panel models. Positive problem solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance toward mothers and fathers were assessed in a 5-wave study spanning four years, consisting of two adolescent cohorts (early-to-middle and middle-to-late adolescents). Important developmental associations among these constructs were uncovered which were found to be invariant for boys and girls and for early-to-middle and middle-to-late adolescents. Hence, the present study generated a detailed picture of longitudinal conflict mechanisms which functioned similarly in both sexes and in different age periods.

Bidirectional associations between conflict frequency and positive problem solving were obtained. Lower amounts of weekly conflicts were predictive of higher levels of problem solving one year later and

greater use of problem solving was related to fewer conflicts one year later. Positive problem solving was also associated with lower levels of destructive conflict behaviors (i.e., conflict engagement and withdrawal) over time. These findings underscore the protective role of such a constructive way of handling conflicts with parents against future conflicts and destructive conflict management behaviors. Rueter and Conger (1995) also found that effective resolution between parents and adolescents diminishes the likelihood of future conflicts. Positive problem solving during conflicts probably reflects effective and warm communication between parents and adolescents which might stem from a responsive parenting climate. Some scholars have indeed demonstrated that effective conflict management is more likely in the context of high quality parent-adolescent relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2008; Tucker et al., 2003). In recent longitudinal work by Missotten, Luyckx, Branje, and Van Petegem (2017), supportive parenting was indeed found to be associated with fewer conflicts and more positive problem solving between adolescents and their mothers over time.

Concerning the more destructive conflict management behaviors conflict engagement and withdrawal, we found that these behaviors were predicted by more conflicts, but not vice versa. This pattern of findings seems to indicate that adolescent growing up in a more conflictual climate are more at risk for using maladaptive conflict behaviors in future conflict interactions. This is partially in line with the findings of Reuter and Conger (1995), showing that a negative family climate, characterized by high levels of conflict and hostility, leads to more hostile conflict behaviors one year later.

The conflict behavior withdrawal was also negatively related to positive problem solving over time. This seems to suggest that adolescents who withdraw during conflicts and display an indifferent attitude undermine their potential to use positive conflict management tactics in the future. These adolescents disengage and their distant behaviors might also impact negatively on the quality of the relationship with their parents. Withdrawal in interparental conflicts has been shown to have a severe impact on the family climate and children's psychosocial functioning through the process of emotional unavailability (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006).

The fact that we did not find significant associations from withdrawal and conflict engagement to conflict frequency raises the question of potential differential mechanisms operating in certain subgroups of adolescents. For instance, it might be the case that for some individuals destructive conflict management is a way of expressing their autonomy

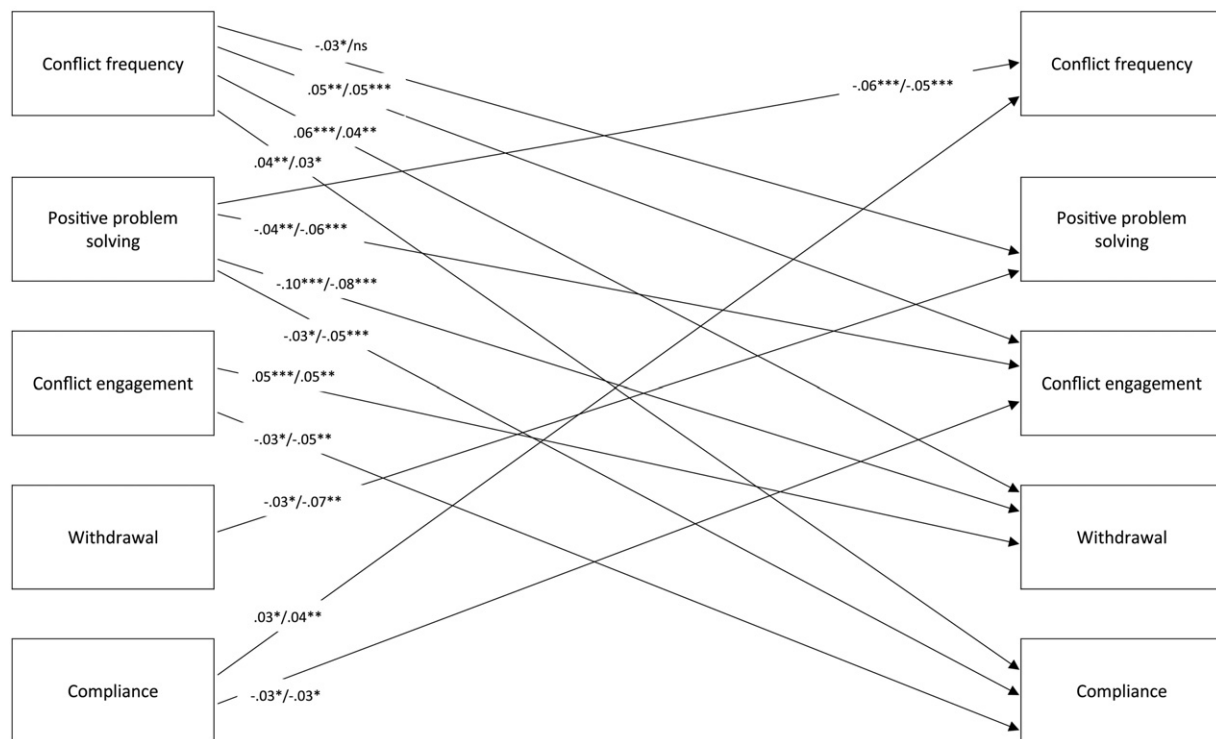


Fig. 1. All cross-lagged paths among the study variables between adjacent waves. The standardized coefficients before the slash represent the data about mothers and those after the slash represent the data about fathers. ns = non-significant. We computed the mean coefficient across the four time intervals. For the mother model, the standardized stability coefficients ranged between 0.45 and 0.49 (conflict frequency), 0.42 and 0.49 (problem solving), 0.46 and 0.51 (conflict engagement), 0.34 and 0.43 (withdrawal), and 0.39 and 0.43 (compliance). For the father model, the standardized stability coefficients ranged between 0.42 and 0.49 (conflict frequency), 0.41 and 0.51 (problem solving), 0.41 and 0.48 (conflict engagement), 0.34 and 0.43 (withdrawal), and 0.43 and 0.46 (compliance). All p 's < 0.001. * p < 0.05. ** p < 0.01. *** p < 0.001.

(Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell & O'Connor, 1994). When conflicts arise around autonomy-related issues which are important for adolescents, they might strongly defend their case which might eventually lead to fewer conflicts about these issues. For other adolescents these negative conflict behaviors might be indicative of a deteriorating parent-adolescent relationship and they might actually be accompanied by higher levels of conflicts (Branje et al., 2009; Missotten et al., 2017). So, there might be opposing processes at work here that could explain these insignificant findings. Future studies should adopt a person-centered approach to investigate whether differential profiles of conflict management exist and how these profiles are related to adolescents' relationship with parents.

Another interesting finding concerned the obtained associations with compliance. This conflict behavior was positively associated with conflict frequency over-time (and vice versa), but negatively with conflict engagement. So, this seems to suggest that giving in to parents probably leaves the conflict unresolved which could explain the positive link with future conflicts. Unresolved conflicts have been associated with more negative emotions in children (Cummings, Simpson, & Wilson, 1993). The negative link between compliance and conflict engagement might be indicative of more closed or restricted family climates with little room for self-expression where fighting and yelling is not a preferred or accepted strategy.

Despite the fact that the present study has several strengths, including a large longitudinal sample, several limitations have to be mentioned. First, conflict variables were assessed referring to conflict in general and were derived from self-report questionnaires, which entails the risk of shared method variance and a possibly biased view on the actual nature of the conflict. Diary and observation studies could provide a more realistic picture of conflict behaviors (Burk, Denissen, Van Doorn, Branje, & Laursen, 2009). Second, the cross-lagged coefficients obtained in this study were relatively small, but these coefficients were obtained while simultaneously controlling for all within-time associations and

autoregressive paths. Adachi and Willoughby (2015) also argued that effects in longitudinal studies are much smaller than those in cross-sectional studies due to the rigorous control paths. These effects might warrant more caution and replication, but cannot be automatically dismissed as trivial. Finally, conflicts are dyadic events which are embedded in an interpersonal context (Eisenberg et al., 2008). Therefore, future studies should investigate the role of parental conflict behaviors and the parenting climate in the development of adolescents' conflict management.

To conclude, the present study generated meaningful associations between conflict frequency and management behaviors. Our findings can serve as an important guide for practitioners working with troubled families. Positive problem solving seemed important in reducing conflict and the use of destructive conflict behaviors over time. This finding underscores the importance of teaching adolescents and parents how to deal with conflicts in a non-aggressive and respectful manner. Some families function very well and such a warm and constructive climate has a positive impact on adolescents' conflict behaviors. Some families are in special need for intervention because they seem to be caught in a vicious and reinforcing cycle of intense conflicts and maladaptive management of these conflicts over time. Trying to break such a negative cycle by providing effective conflict management tools might already be an important step for these families.

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