

Parent Conflict Resolution

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Conflict is omnipresent in all family relationships, and some conflict with parents can be regarded as a normal part of family relations during adolescence. Adolescents tend to have disagreements with their mothers most frequently, followed by siblings, friends, romantic partners, and fathers. Angry disagreements occur more frequently with family members than with close peers (see PEER CONFLICT RESOLUTION; Laursen & Collins, 2009). Most parent–adolescent disagreements concern mundane topics or so-called daily hassles, and these conflicts are thought to be related to adolescents' development of autonomy and individuation. However, too many conflicts are risky for adolescents' psychosocial adjustment and well-being. Adolescents who have more conflicts with their parents have more externalizing and internalizing problems; lower levels of self-esteem, well-being, and adjustment to school; and more frequent substance use. This may reflect bidirectional processes: Adolescents' conflicts with parents may lead to lower psychosocial adjustment, and their adjustment problems may in turn trigger more conflict with parents.

How parents and children handle their conflicts is important for parents' and children's relationship satisfaction and well-being. Conflicts are an inevitable part of relationships, and some conflict between parents and children can thus be regarded as a normal part of family relations. Although too many conflicts may be a risk for children's and parents' psychosocial adjustment and well-being, conflicts with parents also have a clear function in child development. In conflicts, children learn to express their opinion and to take the perspective of others. When parents teach their children to resolve conflicts positively and to find compromises or solutions that are acceptable to all parties, children may acquire the necessary conflict resolution skills to satisfactorily resolve disagreements in relationships with others later in life, such as friends, partners, and colleagues. The way in which children handle and resolve their conflicts with parents is therefore important to take into account when considering the role of conflict in relationships.

Four types of conflict resolution styles can be distinguished which differ in the level of concern for oneself compared to concern for others (Chang, D'Zurilla, & Sanna, 2004) and in the extent to which they are constructive. *Positive problem solving* is the most constructive style and involves trying to understand the other's point of view, negotiating, and using constructive reasoning to work out compromises. Positive problem solving

reflects a high concern for the self as well as for others, which results in collaboration. *Conflict engagement* involves destructive behaviors such as being verbally abusive, angry, defensive or attacking, and losing self-control. Conflict engagement reflects controlling behavior and expresses high concern for the self and low concern for the other. *Withdrawal* is a nonconfrontational strategy that involves avoiding the problem, avoiding talking, and becoming distant. Individuals who use withdrawal reduce the importance of the conflict and attempt to suppress thinking about it. Withdrawal reflects low concern for the self and for the other. *Compliance* involves giving in to the other party without expressing one's point of view. This style reflects low concern for the self and high concern for the other, which results in accommodation to the other's point of view. Positive problem solving and conflict engagement represent more active ways of dealing with a conflict, whereas withdrawal and compliance reflect more passive conflict styles.

Parent–adolescent dyads are most likely to resolve their conflicts using a combination of power assertion, neutral or angry affect, and win–lose outcomes. Reflecting the asymmetry in power, the majority of disagreements between parents and adolescents end in compromise or win–lose resolutions. The conflict resolution styles parents and children use have implications for their well-being and psychosocial adjustment. Conflict frequency is less strongly related to adjustment problems when adolescents use a positive conflict resolution style (Branje, van Doorn, van der Valk, & Meeus, 2009). When they are addressed using positive conflict resolution styles, parent–adolescent conflicts can provide adolescents with an opportunity to learn to negotiate and to assert their own opinion but also to take into account the other's opinion and to come to a compromise. Parent–child conflict resolution shows normative developmental changes but also depends on several individual and relational characteristics.

1 Developmental Changes in Parent–Child Conflict Resolution

The frequency of conflict with parents tends to peak in early adolescence, followed by a decline from early to late adolescence. The affective intensity of conflicts tends to peak during midadolescence (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Anger in parent–adolescent conflicts increases from early adolescence to midadolescence, and longitudinal studies suggest an inverted-U-shaped development of conflict intensity (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009). Age-related changes in the goals of conflicts have been found as well, whereby older adolescents report more dominance and emotional support goals and fewer instrumental goals than younger adolescents. These changes are thought to be a result of the rapid biological and cognitive changes that take place during adolescence.

These biological and cognitive changes have a salient impact on conflict resolution as well. As children mature, they show increasingly sophisticated conflict resolution strategies. Cognitive developments in adolescents' abstract reasoning lead to an increase in perspective taking (see *EMPATHY AND PERSPECTIVE TAKING*), which helps adolescents to consider both their own and their parents' perspectives simultaneously during conflicts. This increased understanding of others' feelings and intentions is expected to enable adolescents to use more mature styles of conflict resolution and to try to find compromises that take into account both one's own and the other's perspective (Sandy & Cochran, 2000). The advances in adolescent abstract reasoning

and metacognitive skills (see METACOGNITION) also foster an increasingly reciprocal and egalitarian view of parent–child relationships. Cognitive advances may also prompt adolescents to perceive as personal decisions issues that were previously considered to be under parental jurisdiction (Smetana, Daddis, & Chuang, 2003). Changes in adolescents' empathic skills and their striving for autonomy are expected to affect conflict resolution in the parent–adolescent relationship.

According to the expectancy violation realignment model (Collins, Laursen, Mortensen, Luebker, & Ferreira, 1997), adolescents strive for autonomy and less parental control more rapidly than parents think is appropriate. These differences in the expectations of parents and adolescents regarding the timing of transitions in authority, autonomy, and responsibilities tend to result in a temporary increase in conflict. Indeed, the intensity of conflicts tends to increase during early adolescence and to decrease toward late adolescence (De Goede et al., 2009). However, these conflicts are very well suited to renegotiate parental authority and adolescents' increasing needs for autonomy (Laursen & Collins, 2009). They are thought to help adolescents become more autonomous, and to realign the parent–adolescent relationship toward more horizontality and reciprocity, with greater equality in exchanges, power, and decision making. Once expectations about the relationship are renegotiated in a mutually satisfactory way, conflict usually diminishes and parents and adolescents may reestablish closeness. These changes in conflicts with parents may result in a temporary increase in negative conflict resolution but eventually help parents and adolescents to develop mutual understanding and allow them to resolve conflicts more constructively. Thus, changes in perspective taking and autonomy are thought to lead to more mature conflict resolution as adolescents age, and to be characterized by more compromise and perspective taking and less hostile conflict resolution (e.g., Sandy & Cochran, 2000). This increase in mature conflict resolution may be preceded by a temporary increase in negative conflict resolution.

Indeed, several studies found that aggressive conflict resolution is more likely in middle adolescence than in early adolescence, and to decline again toward late adolescence (e.g., De Goede et al., 2009; Laursen et al., 1998). Moreover, whereas conflict resolution by adolescent submission to parental authority is more likely for younger adolescents, conflict resolution by disengagement is more likely for older adolescents (Smetana et al., 2003). The results of a longitudinal study (van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2011) suggest that these developments are in part gender specific. Adolescents reported that they used more positive problem solving in their relationship with mothers as they get older but not in their relationship with fathers. Fathers reported that they used more positive conflict resolution over time, whereas mothers reported high and stable levels of constructive conflict resolution. Both mothers and fathers reported a decrease over time in their conflict engagement with adolescents. Adolescents' use of conflict engagement was found to temporarily increase with mothers, after which it declined. Conflict engagement with fathers was lower than with mothers and showed no change over time. Both adolescents and fathers reported the increasing use of withdrawal as adolescents get older. Mothers reported stable low levels of withdrawal and adolescents reported a temporary increase of withdrawal with mothers followed by a decline.

Thus, both adolescents and their parents adjust their use of conflict resolution behaviors in order to meet the changing needs of adolescents and to allow the relationship to become more egalitarian and horizontal. Generally, adolescents' use of positive

conflict resolution tends to increase and their use of negative conflict resolution tends to decrease with age. Conflict resolution with mothers seems to become less adaptive temporarily while the relationship with fathers becomes somewhat more disengaged, characterized by more withdrawal. Parents use less negative conflict management over time, and fathers increasingly use positive problem solving and withdrawal.

2 Socialization of Parent–Child Conflict Resolution

The main context for children and adolescents to learn and practice effective conflict resolution skills is the family (see *FAMILY CONTEXT*). In particular, the marital and parent–adolescent relationships are thought to be important for the development of conflict resolution skills.

Children may learn how to manage conflicts by observing how their parents manage conflicts in the marital relationship. That is, adolescents might observe the way in which their parents manage conflicts in the marital relationship and subsequently imitate those behaviors in their own conflicts. Observing how parents handle conflicts with each other is likely to affect children’s internal working models of relationships. Indeed, several studies reported positive correlations between the conflict management styles that parents use in the marital relationship and the conflict resolution styles used by adolescents in the parent–child relationship (e.g., Reese-Weber & Kahn, 2005). However, longitudinal evidence for intergenerational transmission of conflict management styles from parents to children is limited, as only two studies have used a longitudinal design. One of these found transmission over time of both hostile and constructive conflict management behaviors from the marital relationship to the adolescent–parent relationship (van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2007). The other study only found initial correlations between the conflict resolution behaviors parents use in their marital relationship and the conflict resolution behaviors adolescents use in relation with their parents for withdrawal, positive conflict resolution, and hostile conflict resolution, but failed to find effects over time (Staats, van der Valk, Meeus, & Branje, 2018). Differences in results between these two studies were attributed to age differences in the study samples: As the influence of parents on adolescents declines with age, the transmission of conflict resolution may be stronger in childhood and early adolescence than in late adolescence.

Children and adolescents may also learn how to manage conflicts in their interactions with parents directly. Parenting behaviors can be observed and imitated but will also affect children’s emotion regulation processes during conflicts. According to the social problem-solving model (Chang et al., 2004), parents with greater problem-solving abilities will help their children to solve problems more effectively. Also, according to coercion theory, children learn from their parents to use coercive behavior in family interactions. In early adolescence, the extent to which adolescents use hostile conflict resolution and withdrawal was found to be significantly but moderately correlated with the extent to which both fathers and mothers use hostile conflict resolution and withdrawal, respectively. However, no significant correlations were found for positive conflict resolution. This suggests that children’s use of the less effective conflict resolution styles is especially related to their parents’ use of these styles within the parent–child relationship.

Thus, parents' conflict management behaviors in the marital relationship, as well as in the parent–child relationship, are important for adolescents' development of conflict resolution skills. The importance of the family context as a learning ground for conflict resolution is further illustrated by the finding that the way in which adolescents manage conflicts with their parents tends to transfer to conflict resolution with their relational partners, such as friends and romantic partners (see *ROMANTIC INTERACTIONS*).

3 The Role of Individual and Family Characteristics in Parent–Child Conflict Resolution

Parent–child conflict resolution behavior depends not only on interactions in the family context but also on the individual characteristics of both children and parents, such as gender and personality (see *PERSONALITY–ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION*). Conflict tends to be more frequent, and negative affect during conflicts tends to be higher, in mother–daughter relationships than in other parent–child relationships (Laursen & Collins, 2009). A meta-analysis revealed that conflict rates decline more across adolescence in mother–child relationships than in father–child relationships (Laursen et al., 1998), but gender does not moderate developmental trends in conflict affect. Conflict resolution also varies as a function of parent and adolescent gender. Compromise is more common with mothers than with fathers, and withdrawal and compliance are more typical of conflict with sons than of conflict with daughters (Smetana et al., 2003). Again, there is no reliable evidence that gender moderates patterns of developmental change.

Personality

Children's conflict resolution has been related to two of the Big Five personality characteristics in particular, that is, Agreeableness and Extraversion. These two factors are both crucial for interpersonal functioning. Agreeableness is important for maintaining close relationships with significant others (Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams, & Malcolm, 2003). Indeed, more agreeable children and adolescents report higher levels of constructive conflict resolution and lower levels of hostile conflict resolution (Missotten, Luyckx, Van Leeuwen, Klimstra, & Branje, 2016). Extraversion is associated with higher energy levels, positive emotions, and assertiveness, but also with more impulsivity. In line with this, extraverted children and adolescents are more likely to use both positive and negative active resolution styles: They report higher levels of both constructive and hostile problem solving and lower levels of the more passive styles, withdrawal and compliance (Missotten et al., 2016). Their impulsivity may evoke impulsive reactions during conflicts, resulting in higher hostile conflict resolution.

A third personality factor that has been found to be important in conflict resolution is Conscientiousness (e.g., Jensen-Campbell, Knack, Waldrip, & Campbell, 2007). Conscientiousness is essential for maintaining satisfying interpersonal relationships because conscientious individuals are better able to stick to agreements and to inhibit aggressive responses during interpersonal conflict (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2007). Conscientious people score higher on self-regulation, which may explain why they are less inclined to engage in destructive conflict behaviors. Conscientiousness was found to be associated

with more compliance. Conscientious adolescents may be more likely to comply with parents as a strategy to prevent possible escalation of the conflict.

Empathy

Adolescents' empathy is also important for their conflict behavior toward parents because empathy tends to decrease aggression and to increase prosocial behavior. Empathy involves an affective and a cognitive dimension (see *EMPATHY AND PERSPECTIVE TAKING*). Empathic concern involves a vicarious emotional reaction based on apprehension of another's internal state and involves feelings of concern for the other. Cognitive perspective taking involves a tendency to imagine the other's situation and to consider different sides of a dilemma. Moreover, the developmental changes in empathy during adolescence seem to mirror the developmental changes in conflict resolution behavior. On average, empathic concern and perspective taking increase throughout adolescence (Van der Graaff et al., 2014), and is mirrored by an increase in adolescents' constructive conflict behavior toward their parents (van Doorn et al., 2011).

Empathic concern and perspective taking have both common and unique associations with specific conflict resolution behaviors. Both empathic concern and perspective taking were associated with reduced hostile conflict resolution with mothers, and with increased constructive problem solving with both mothers and fathers (Van Lissa, Hawk, Branje, Koot, & Meeus, 2016). These associations were consistently stronger for perspective taking than for empathic concern. Furthermore, higher levels of compliance with mothers in early adolescence were associated with increasing empathic concern over time but not with perspective taking. Perspective taking, but not empathic concern, was associated with less withdrawal from conflicts. Thus, empathic concern, which arouses a desire to reduce others' distress, may increase adolescents' willingness to reduce parents' negative emotions by trying to resolve conflicts constructively and to find a solution that works for both partners, or by complying with their parents' demands, even if it means that they will lose ground in an argument. Perspective taking, in contrast, may allow adolescents to create some emotional distance from the heat of a conflict, in order to consider both sides of the argument and to engage in more constructive and mutually beneficial conflict behaviors (Sandy & Cochran, 2000).

Family Characteristics

Conflict behavior may also be moderated by characteristics of the family. Although on average parent–child conflicts may be more frequent in adolescence than in other periods of life, only a small proportion of parent–adolescent dyads have frequent and angry disagreements (Branje et al., 2009) and the most conflictual parent–adolescent dyads had more problematic relationships in childhood as well. Most conflicts between parents and children do not have a long-term negative impact on the relationship, but chronic fighting with negative conflict management strategies has been linked to adolescent maladjustment (Branje et al., 2009). In fact, for most families, conflict during adolescence may provide the parent–child relationship with a much-needed vehicle to revise expectations regarding authority and autonomy and to allow them to renegotiate a more egalitarian relationship (Laursen & Collins, 2009). The impact of conflict indeed varies across parent–adolescent relationships. High levels of conflict

predicted poor outcomes regardless of relationship quality, but moderate amounts of conflict may be beneficial for those whose relationships are good (Adams & Laursen, 2007). When adolescents reporting no conflicts with their mothers and fathers are compared to those reporting an average number of conflicts, the latter had higher school grades if they were in better- but not poorer-quality relationships and reported more withdrawal if they were in poorer- but not better-quality relationships. Thus, most parent–child dyads successfully navigate their way through the developmental challenges of autonomy (see DEVELOPMENT OF AUTONOMY) and the changes in parent–child relationships (see PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIPS) that accompany it by using adaptive conflict resolution skills, yet dyads that have a difficult relationship history tend to fail to constructively address these autonomy-related conflicts.

4 Emotional Variability in Parent–Child Conflict Interactions

Next to considering the global conflict resolution style during parent–child conflicts, it is also informative to consider the moment-to-moment interaction patterns of parents and children during conflicts. An important aspect of conflict interactions is the extent to which parents and adolescents display different emotions and switch flexibly between these emotions during conflicts (Van der Giessen et al., 2015). This flexibility to express different emotions, or emotional variability, tends to be related to better relationship quality and better psychosocial adjustment of both adolescent and parent (see EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE).

Emotional variability is positively related to the quality of parent–child relationships during adolescence. Mother–adolescent dyads with greater emotional variability during conflict interactions reported more optimal relationship quality over the course of adolescence than dyads with less emotional variability (Van der Giessen, Branje, Frijns, & Meeus, 2013). Mothers and adolescents from dyads with greater variability reported more maternal support for autonomy, and adolescents (but not mothers) in these dyads reported less frequent conflict than adolescents in dyads with less variability. These results suggest that dyads with greater variability adapt more efficiently to adolescents' increasing needs for autonomy than dyads with less variability, and develop more egalitarian relationships during adolescence. When power in the parent–child dyad is divided more equally, conflicts may not be needed to express conflicting expectations, ideas, and wishes.

Emotional variability during conflicted interactions in early adolescence is also related to developmental changes in parents' control and adolescents' disclosure. As adolescents get older, parents and adolescents have to find a balance between adolescents' autonomy and privacy on the one hand and parents' control and access to information on the other. In mother–adolescent dyads that revealed greater emotional flexibility in conflicted interactions during early adolescence, mothers reported that adolescents disclosed more about their friends, activities, and whereabouts in early adolescence. Greater emotional variability in early adolescence also predicted a stronger decrease in perceived maternal control in late adolescence, when parents need to accommodate adolescents' increasing need for autonomy and to allow them to make decisions without informing their parents. These findings support the idea that, when mothers and adolescents can switch flexibly between positive and negative emotions and freely express

thoughts, feelings, and emotions during conflicted interactions, they are engaging in more open communication patterns and creating a context in which both positive and negative emotions are accepted and understood. Emotional flexibility creates a relational context in which adolescents' sharing of information is supported without threatening their increasing need for autonomy (Van der Giessen et al., 2015). Also, parental release of control when youth increasingly see topics that were previously under parental jurisdiction as part of the personal domain seems to be enhanced when parents and adolescents express different positive and negative emotions toward each other more openly and flexibly and accept these positive and negative emotions.

Moreover, less dyadic emotional variability in early adolescence predicted a relative increase in mothers' internalizing problems, adolescents' depressive symptoms, and adolescents' anxiety symptoms from early to late adolescence (Van der Giessen et al., 2015). More emotionally rigid mother–adolescent dyads may be less able to handle positive and negative emotions during conflict interactions successfully and may therefore be less equipped to deal with the various emotional challenges and relational changes that take place during adolescence (Adams & Laursen 2007); the adolescent may experience less optimal autonomy and relational development and have less open communications patterns, which could be unsatisfactory for both adolescent and mother and result in relative increases in internalizing problems over time.

Thus, emotional variability enables parent–adolescent dyads to explore new patterns of interaction, which is crucial in adolescence. When parents and children can express both negative and positive emotions during conflicts, they are more likely than dyads with less emotional variability to find alternative interaction patterns and to be able to renegotiate their relationship toward an egalitarian and reciprocal relationship. For example, when parents and children can express their anger and irritation toward each other during a disagreement, but also show affection to each other, express an interest in each other's opinions, and laugh about the conflict, conflicts may help them to find new ways to relate to each other. Parents and children who get stuck in anger or other negative emotions, or who express only positive emotions toward each other and are afraid to express anger, may have more problems renegotiating their relationship. Mother–adolescent dyads with more emotional rigidity do not experience a supportive and safe context in which they can discuss diverging views and opposing emotions, and are therefore less equipped to handle different emotional challenges with flexibility. In general, these results suggest that conflict interactions between parents and adolescents are adaptive for relational development when these interactions are embedded in a context that is supportive of a broad range of positive and negative emotions and in which parent and adolescent can switch flexibly between emotions.

5 Conclusion

In sum, parent–adolescent conflict is normative, and fosters communication that is necessary for realigning roles and responsibilities within the parent–adolescent relationship. Whether and how conflicts are resolved seem to be more important than the actual occurrence of conflicts. Parents and adolescents are more likely to realign their relationship toward greater egalitarianism and reciprocity when conflicts occur within the context of a warm and positive parent–child relationship and parents and adolescents

are able to constructively manage their conflicts. Constructive management of conflicts does not mean that displays of negativity during conflict interactions should be avoided. Rather, constructive conflict management takes place in a relationship where there is mutual trust and where expressing negative emotions does not threaten the relationship. Parents should learn to guide adolescents to express, share, and regulate a range of positive and negative emotions.

SEE ALSO: Development of Autonomy; Emotional Competence; Empathy and Perspective Taking; Family Context; Metacognition; Parent–Child Relationships; Peer Conflict Resolution; Personality–Environment Interaction; Romantic Interactions

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Further Reading

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