



The Differential Impact of Parent-Child Conflict On Adolescent Adjustment

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INTRODUCTION

❖ **The Development of Parent-Adolescent Conflict:** Previous research on the family has followed the commonly held assumption that increased parent-child conflict occurs as a benchmark of adolescence. However, more recent findings suggest the rate of conflict actually becomes less frequent with adolescent age but more intense in affect (Laursen, Coy & Collins, 1998). Few studies have made this distinction between conflict frequency and intensity or investigated how it may increase our understanding of the parent-adolescent relationship. While some conflict with parents appears to be normal during this transitional period, it's important to identify the type of conflict associated with negative consequences for adolescents (Montemayor, 1983).

❖ **Impact of Parent-Child Conflict on Adolescent Adjustment:** Parent-child conflict has been shown to influence psychological distress symptoms such as hopelessness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem, and positive coping skills (Shek, 1998). Additionally, greater parent-child conflict in adolescence has been shown to predict more problem behavior and delinquency over time (Barber & Delfabbro, 2000). However, siblings within the same family do not have identical relationships with their parents, and these unique experiences are associated with differential psychological adjustment in adolescence (Richmond & Stocker, 2009).

❖ **Influences of Birth Order and Gender:** Parent-child conflict in adolescence develops differently according to birth order (Shanahan, 2007). For example, families may develop resolution strategies during conflict with first-borns, resulting in less conflict with and more knowledge of daily activities for later-borns (Whiteman et. al., 2003; Shanahan, 2007). Gender, too, plays a role in differentiating the parent-child conflict relationship. For instance, Girls have been shown to display more negative conflict resolution strategies, which are associated with higher levels of aggression, anxiety, and depression, whereas boys experienced a stronger relation between conflicts and externalizing behavior (Branje et al., 2009).

❖ **The Present Study:** The present study aimed to move beyond generalizing all family relationships to reveal within-family differences between siblings. Knowing that adolescent characteristics play a role in the complexity of the family system, we included the role of birth order and gender in our examination.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: Parent-adolescent conflict with greater frequency and intensity will be associated with increased internalizing and externalizing problems in later adolescence.

Hypothesis 2: The association between parent-adolescent conflict and later adolescent adjustment will be stronger for first-born siblings.

Hypothesis 3: The association between parent-adolescent conflict and later adolescent adjustment will be stronger for boys in terms of externalizing problems, and stronger for girls in terms of internalizing problems

METHODS

Participants	145 families	
Sibling Age	Younger (M=12.20, SD=1.90)	Older (M=14.97, SD=1.69)
Race/Ethnicity	EA: 91.7% AA: 5.6 % Other: 2.8%	
Marital Status	Married: 74.8%	
Median Household Income	\$70,000-\$84,000	
Parent Education	College degree: 72.3%	

PROCEDURES

The sample was recruited by mailing letters to 3,030 families of eighth-, tenth-, and twelfth-grade students at three junior high and three high schools in a small Midwestern city district. Families with one biological/adoptive parent, an adolescent in 8th, 10th, or 12th grade, and a sibling 5 years or less younger visited the lab at Time 1, where they completed questionnaires, participated in one-on-one interviews with an investigator, and engaged in family interaction tasks. One year later at Time 2, those families were contacted again to complete online questionnaires.

MEASURES

Parent-Adolescent Conflict

Parent-child conflict was measured using an adapted version of the Issues Checklist (Robin & Foster, 1989). Parents and adolescents rated their conflict in terms of frequency on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very often*) and intensity on a scale of 1 (*calm*) to 5 (*angry*). ($\alpha=.77-.82$ for conflict frequency and $\alpha=.70-.84$ for conflict intensity).

Adolescent Adjustment

- **Depressed Mood:** The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), a 20-item report was used to measure depressed mood. ($\alpha=.83-.89$ for older siblings and $\alpha=.83-.88$ for younger siblings).
- **Anxiety:** The Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (Reynolds & Richmond, 1978), a 28-item report was used to measure anxiety. ($\alpha=.94-.95$ for older siblings and $\alpha=.93$ for younger siblings).
- **Self-Esteem:** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989), a 10-item report was used to measure self-esteem. ($\alpha=.86-.92$ for older siblings and $\alpha=.84-.90$ for younger siblings).
- **Problem Behavior:** The Problem Behavior Survey (PBS; Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, & Hiraga, 1996), a 19-item report was used to measure problem behavior in adolescents. ($\alpha=.83-.91$ for older and younger siblings).

ANALYTICAL PLAN

Path analyses were used to examine associations between parent-adolescent conflict and adolescent adjustment one year later, and the potential moderating roles of birth order and gender. Two separate models were designed to distinguish between conflict frequency and conflict intensity.

RESULTS

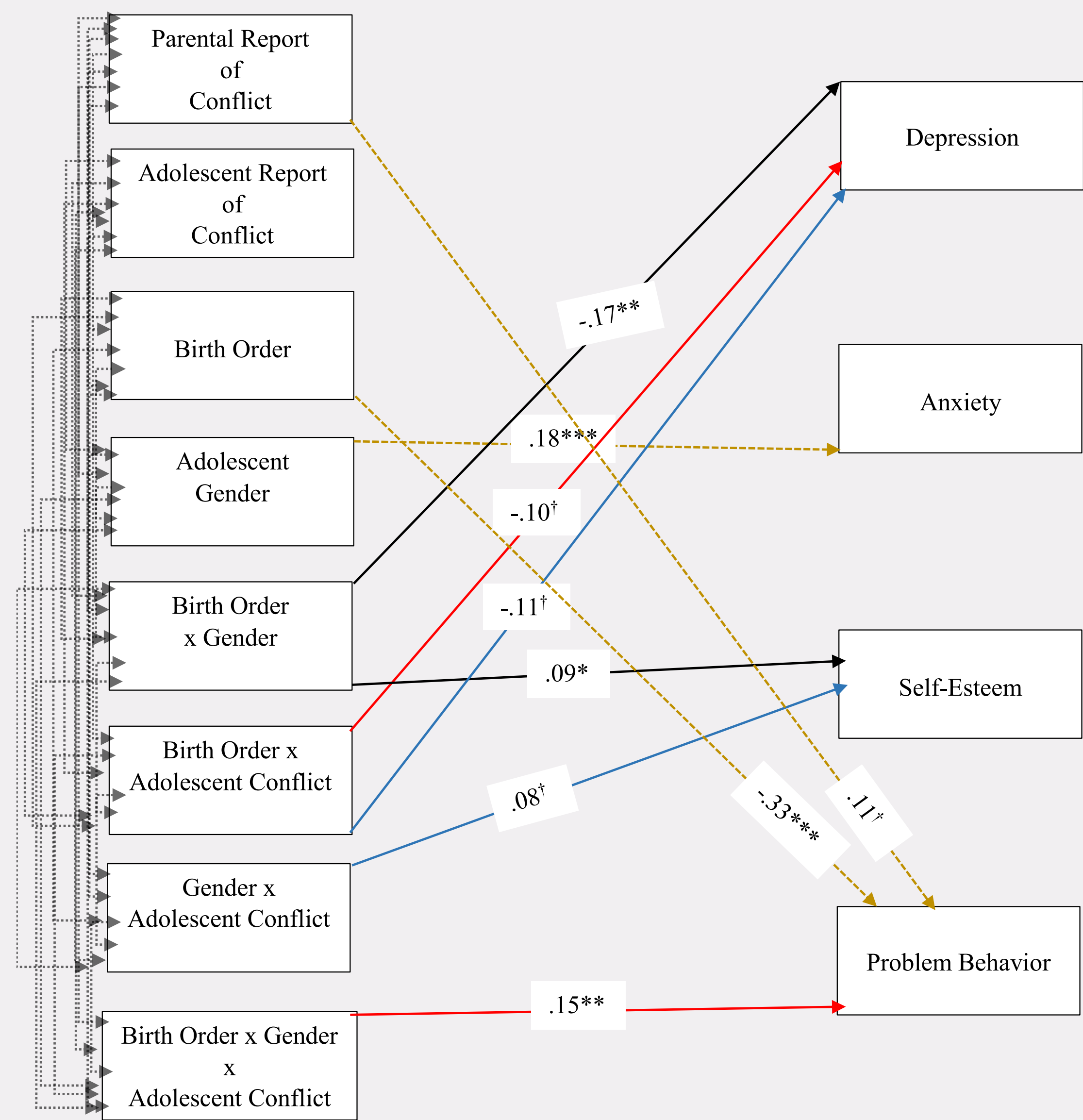


Figure 1. Path model with standardized parameter estimates for both conflict frequency (blue lines), conflict intensity (red lines), and moderator (black lines) interactions. Adolescent gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female); Birth Order (1 = First-Born, 2 = Second-Born). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Covariances (grey) and main effects (gold) are represented by dashed lines. All associations and interaction effects were tested, but non-significant paths are not shown.

DISCUSSION

❖ **Hypothesis 1: Partially Supported** – More intense conflicts were associated with increased depression and problem behavior. More frequent conflicts were also associated with increased problem behavior.

❖ **Hypothesis 2: Partially Supported** – More frequent conflicts were associated with increased depression for first-born adolescents, but not second-borns. The same was true for conflict intensity.

❖ **Hypothesis 3: Partially Supported** – Less frequent conflicts were associated with higher self-esteem for boys, but not girls.

Conclusions

- Some, but not all, parent-child conflict is associated with increased internalizing and externalizing problems in later adolescence.
- The impact of parent-child conflict on adjustment can be influenced by adolescent birth order and gender.

Implications

- Findings can be used by family therapists and parents to better understand how/when conflict may impact adolescent adjustment.

Limitations/Future Directions

- Sample was made up of predominantly White, middle-class families
- Future studies should prioritize diversity in order to be more representative of all family backgrounds.

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