

Effect of inter-parental conflict on adolescents' behavior in Zagazig City

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Abstract:

Background: The family plays an essential role in fostering the development of children. The present study aim was to highlight inter parental conflict and its effect on adolescents' behavior. **Subjects and methods;** a cross-sectional descriptive design was utilized with a **sample** of 508 adolescents randomly selected by using a multi-stage cluster sample from three preparatory and two secondary schools in Zagazig city. **Tools:** Data were collected by a questionnaire sheet consisted of three parts; socio-demographic data, Children's Perception of Inter parental Conflict Scale, and Youth Self-Report Scale. **The study results** revealed that the majority of the adolescents (93.7%) reported low perception of inter parental conflict, with perceived threat being the most prominent of its components. They also mostly have normal youth self-report, with more internalizing than externalizing behaviors. The Children's Perception of Inter parental Conflict and Youth Self-Report scores were positively correlated reflecting a negative impact of parental conflict perception on normal behavior. The perception of inter parental conflict is lower among girls, living with parents, with educated mothers, good social relations, more available home media and lower income. The Youth Self-Report tend to be more normal among girls, those with lower perception of parental conflict, and lower number of home media. **The study concluded** that parental conflict has a deleterious effect on adolescents' psychological wellbeing as measured by self-reporting. Therefore, **it is recommended** to improve community awareness through mass media about effects of parental conflict on adolescents as well as training school teachers to identify the behavioral problems among the adolescents.

Key words: Adolescents, Inter-parental conflict, and Behavior problems.

Introduction:

One fifth of the world's populations, a total of 1.2 billion people, are adolescents and 85% of them are in the developing world. ⁽¹⁾ This life stage is characterized by increased insight into the family environment, responsibilities inside and outside the home, burgeoning capabilities to influence the family environment, and legal/social consequences due to misbehavior. ⁽²⁾ The family is the child's principal resource of meeting the needs for protection, emotional support, education, and socialization. ⁽³⁾ Parents provide their children with the values,

beliefs, rituals, and behaviors learned and transmitted across family generations. ⁽⁴⁾ Risky families are characterized by conflict and aggression and by relationships that are cold, unsupportive, and neglectful. ⁽⁵⁾

Inter-parental conflict (IPC) is a ubiquitous feature of family life. ⁽⁶⁾ It involves multiple dimensions: frequency, intensity, content, and resolution. ^(7,8) Children's perceptions and interpretations of the conflict significantly influence their functioning ⁽⁹⁾, through both direct and indirect pathways. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Adolescents are at risk for developing internalizing and

externalizing behaviors because they are aware of the implications of the inter-parental conflict.⁽²⁾

Adolescents in Egypt form around 25% of the country's population, and represent even greater proportion of the country's human potential.⁽¹¹⁾ Before the age of 18 years more than 20% of the children have experienced parental divorce. It is also estimated that at least 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence annually. While both divorce and domestic violence represent a great result and form of inter-parental conflict.⁽¹²⁾

The community health nurse can help the adolescents to explore their feelings about conflict and conflict resolution, listen to adolescents and their families, encourage them to explore issues and options, and enable them to manage their personal situations.⁽¹³⁾ On the other hand, the nurse plays a vital role for prevention, early identification and management of behavioral disorders in adolescents.^(13,14)

Owing to few studies that had been conducted in this field, this study conducted to high light adolescents' perception of inter parental and the effect of this conflict on their behavior.

Aim of the study:

The aim of this study was to assess the prevalence of inter-parental conflict as perceived by adolescents, and to identify the effects of inter parental conflict on adolescents' behavior.

Research Questions:

The current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How do adolescents perceive inter parental conflict?
- What are the effects of inter parental conflict on the behavior of adolescents?

Subjects and methods

Research design and setting:

A descriptive cross-sectional research design was used in this study which was conducted at three preparatory and two secondary schools in Zagazig city. The preparatory schools were Sheba for girls, Ahmed Abdel-wahab El Gohary, and El-Shohadaa schools. The two secondary schools were El-sadat for girls and Zagazig Hotellery schools.

Subjects:

The sample consisted of 508 adolescents (12 to 18 years old) enrolled in the schools in the study setting. The sample size is calculated to demonstrate a correlation coefficient of 0.25 or higher with 90% power and at a 95% level of confidence between the scores of inter-parental conflict and adolescent's behavior, using the sample size equation for correlation⁽¹⁵⁾, with a design effect of 2.5 for the cluster sampling and a dropout rate of about 20%. A multistage cluster sampling technique was used in the recruitment of subjects.

Tools for data collection:

The researcher prepared a questionnaire sheet for data collection composed of three parts: socio-demographic data, children's perception of inter-parental conflict (CPIC) scale, and youth self-report scale (YSR). The CPIC scale was developed for assessing marital conflict from the child's perspective.⁽¹⁶⁾ It consists of 49 statements assessing conflict properties (frequency, intensity, and resolution), perceived self-blame, perceived threat, triangulation, and stability. The statements have three possible responses: "True", "Sort of True", or "False." Each response is assigned a score between 0 and 2, with higher scores indicating more negative conflict or appraisal. Item scores are summed for each subscale. The scoring

was done following the instructions provided.⁽⁷⁾

The YSR scale consists of a 112 statements that enable measurement of the perception of children or teenagers in terms of their behavior and social skills.⁽¹⁷⁾ The items are categorized into internalization, externalization, social problems, thought problems, attention problems, and other problems subscale. The responses are on a 3-point scale: not true, somewhat or sometimes true, and very true or often true. The scoring was done according to the instruction manual with calculation of raw scores, T scores, and percentiles. It has cutoff points based on subject's gender for determining whether problems were within the normal range or exceeded the clinical threshold.⁽¹⁷⁾

The first part of the tool was revised by a panel of experts in community health nursing, community medicine, family medicine, and psychiatric medicine who conducted face and content validity of all the items of this part. All recommended modifications were performed. The Children's perception of Inter-Parental Conflict Scale (CIPC) and Youth-Self Report (YSR) scales were translated into Arabic using the translate-back-translate technique to ensure their original validity.⁽¹⁸⁾

Pilot study:

A pilot study was carried out on a sample of 50 adolescents to test the clarity of the instructions, the format, comprehension of the items, and to estimate the exact time required for filling the questionnaire sheet. The necessary modifications were done based on the analysis of the pilot study to develop the final format. The participants involved in the pilot study were not included in the main study sample.

Fieldwork:

Once permission was granted to proceed with the study, the researcher met with the directors of the selected five schools, explained to them the study aim and procedures, as well as the data collection forms. They were asked to seek the permission of the parents of the students in the selected classes to participate in the study. Once parents' oral consents were secured, the researcher went to schools, introduced herself to students in classrooms, and explained to them the purpose and nature of the study and the data collection forms. They were asked to fill in the questionnaire sheets under guidance of the researcher who stayed in the classroom to answer any queries. It took the student about 30 to 50 minutes to complete answering the questions. The fieldwork extended from the beginning of November 2011 to the end of March 2012.

Limitations of the study:

The researcher was forced to depend mainly on governmental schools due to refusal of private schools' administration to conduct this study in their premises. Additionally, the scarcity of studies in the national literature made the researcher depend mainly on international studies for discussion of the results.

Administrative and ethical considerations:

Official permissions were obtained from the pertinent authorities. The study protocol was approved by the research committee at the Faculty of Nursing, Zagazig University. Informed consents were obtained from the parents through the directors of the selected schools. These included the aim and objectives of the study, as well as its procedures. It also clarified the rights to refuse or withdraw, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of the collected information. Also participants were assured that any

obtained information will be used for the research purpose only.

Statistical analysis:

Data entry and statistical analysis were done using SPSS 16.0 statistical software package. Spearman rank correlation analysis was used for assessment of the inter-relationships among quantitative variables and ranked ones. In order to identify the independent predictors of CIPC and YSR scores, multiple linear regression analysis was used after testing for normal distribution, homoscedasticity, and analysis of variance for the full regression models were done. Statistical significance was considered at p-value <0.05.

Results:

The socio-demographic characteristics of the children in the study sample revealed that their age ranged between 11 and 18 years, with mean 14.7 ± 1.8 years (**Table 1**). The majority were females (80.7%). They were almost equally distributed according to school grades and urban/rural residence. The number of siblings ranged between 0 and 8, with median 3. Slightly less than four-fifth of the children (79.1%) were having good social relations.

Table (2): Shows that fathers' mean age was 47 years, with slightly less than half of them (44.1%) having basic or intermediate education. As for their job, it was mostly clerical (67.3%). Mothers' mean age ranged was 40.5 years. About two-fifth of them (38%) were illiterate or could just read and write, and most of them were housewives (63.8%). The great majority of the children were living with both parents (90.4%). For more than half of the families, the income was sufficient (56.5%). The majority of the families (90.7%) were having two or more home media such as TV, dish, and computers.

Table (3): Describes the results of the scale of Perception of Inter-Parental Conflict (CIPC) among present study children. It indicates that the highest perception of conflict was that related to threat (27.4%), followed by triangulation (14.2%), and coping efficacy (12%). On the other hand, the lowest perceptions were those of resolution (3.5%), self-blame (5.1%), and stability (5.1%). It is noticed that the majority of the children were having low Perception of Inter-Parental Conflict (93.7%).

As regards the Youth Self-Report (YSR) scale findings, **Table (4):** Shows that more than one-third of the children were having internalization feelings (37.4%), while only 11.6% of them had externalizing ones. The feelings of thought and social problems were high, while those of attention and other problems were low. In total, slightly less than three-fourth (73.2%) of the children were having normal Youth Self-Report (YSR) scale findings.

Figure (1): Demonstrates a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between children's total CIPC and YSR scores ($r=0.52$).

Table (5): Shows that children's CIPC scores had statistically significant weak negative correlations with father's ($r=-0.213$) and mother's ($r=-0.237$) education, number of home media ($r=-0.236$), and a positive correlation with family income ($r=0.229$). On the other hand, the YSR score had only a positive correlation with family income ($r=0.195$).

Table (6): Indicates that the multivariate analysis identified that family income is the only statistically significant independent positive predictor of CIPC score. Conversely, child's female gender, living with parents, mother education, social relations score, and number of home media are negative predictors. The

regression analysis for the YSR score shows that the statistically significant independent positive predictors of a higher score (more abnormal) are the school grade, number of home media, and the CPIC score. On the other hand, the female gender is a negative predictor of a high score.

Discussion:

The study findings demonstrate that the majority of the participating adolescents in preparatory and secondary schools have low perception of inter-parental conflict (CPIC), and mostly have normal youth self-report (YSR). They are more internalizing than externalizing their feelings. Both scores are positively correlated reflecting a negative impact of parental conflict perception on normal self-report.

According to the present study findings, the children's perception of inter-parental conflict was mostly low. This might be attributed to the generally acceptable socio-demographic conditions of their families, reflecting healthy family functioning. The finding is of considerable importance since children's cognitive appraisals of inter-parental conflict shape their behavioral and emotional responses to conflict. (19;20)

The highest perception of inter-parental conflict in the current study was that related to perceived threat. This might be due to that, when children grow older, they have more problem-focused responses to parental conflict due to their greater ability to understand threats associated with such conflict. In congruence with this, Moura et al.,⁽⁷⁾ mentioned that the perceived threat of conflict seems to be more relevant than conflict properties in terms of the adjustment of late adolescents.

At the other extreme, the current study results found that only a small minority of the studied adolescents blame themselves for their parental conflict. This might be explained by the fact that during adolescence there are advances in abstract thinking, perspective-taking and coping skills. These enable adolescents to understand better that they are not to blame for parents' conflict. In accordance with this, Albow et al. ⁽⁹⁾ mentioned that older children are more likely to understand that they may not be the center of marital conflict and therefore can have more accurate cognitive appraisals instead of blaming themselves.

The present study results showed that less than one-fifth of adolescents felt that they were triangulated in their parent conflict. This low percentage may be attributed to adolescents' fear to be involved in parents' conflict because this may obligate them to take side of one parent against the other. Nonetheless, those adolescents who were triangulating may have perceived this because of their feeling of having grown-up and being able participate in solving family problems. In agreement with this, Schulz et al ⁽²¹⁾ mentioned that adolescents are more cognitively developed than younger children, which may contribute to their having an increased likelihood of involvement in the inter-parental conflict. Furthermore, triangulation may make the adolescent feel insecure about the future stability of the family unit because he/she is in the center of the family turmoil ⁽²²⁾. Meanwhile, parents may be unaware of triangulation within the family or of the potential negative effect on adolescents. ^(2, 23)

Concerning the factors affecting adolescents' perception of interparental conflict, the present study multivariate analysis identified that family income was associated with a higher CPIC

score, while female gender, living with parents, mother education, social relations score, and number of home media were associated with lower score, i.e. were protective in perceiving such conflict. The findings are quite plausible since most of these factors reflect a functional family. In congruence with this, Buehler and Welsh⁽²⁴⁾ and Fortin et al.,⁽²⁵⁾ clarified that the individual characteristics of adolescents and of the family environment buffered the deleterious impact of perception of inter-parental conflict. Similar findings were reported regarding the positive effect of mothers' education.^(26,27) However, the effect of female gender is incongruent with previous studies.^(28,29) The discrepancy may be attributed to cultural differences among communities regarding gender roles.

The association between high family income and high CPIC score in the current study may be explained by the possibility of spoiling children through trials of materialistic compensation to overlook the inter-parental problems. However, in contradiction with this finding, some reports have shown that greater income and financial resources are positively associated with marital stability.⁽³⁰⁻³²⁾ The discrepancy might be attributed to differences in the definitions of the economic levels of the family and of the poor and wealthy in developed and developing countries.

Concerning adolescents' behavior problems, the results of the present study found that slightly less than three-fourth of the adolescents were in the normal range of the YSR scale. High percentages of normal behavior were noticed regarding the internalizing domain of the scale covering depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints, and the externalizing domain involving delinquent behavior and aggressive

behavior, in addition to the other behavioral problems. The assessment of these various dimensions of the adolescent behaviors rather than specific dichotomous diagnoses is important.⁽²⁾ The findings are close to the results of a study carried to identify the prevalence of behavioral problems among early adolescents in Dharwad city, India, which reported that 81.5% of the adolescents were having normal behavior.⁽³³⁾

In multivariate analysis, the present study identified living with both parents as a protective factor of considerable importance in adolescent's behavior. The finding is in congruence with Moura et al.,⁽⁷⁾ who emphasized that the availability of the parent when the adolescent needs him or her is vital to healthy adolescent adjustment. Meanwhile, the protective effect of female gender may be explained by the differential reaction to interparental conflict between boys and girls, and the differences in the coping strategies used by each of them. In line with this, Pastor et al.,⁽³⁴⁾ showed a higher percentage of male children with emotional and behavioral problems than female children. As regards the protective effect of the preparatory school grade compared with the secondary grade, it might be explained by the fact that younger adolescents, although less mature than older ones, may be less exposed to inter-parental conflicts, and also are less likely to be involved. A similar explanation has been proposed by Rhoades.⁽³⁵⁾

Concerning the relation between adolescents' perception of interparental conflict and their behaviors, the present study findings demonstrated a significant moderate positive correlation indicating that a higher CPIC score (more perception) is associated with a higher YSR score (more behavior problem). The finding

was further confirmed by multivariate analysis. This result is in agreement with the study of Turner and Kopiec⁽³⁶⁾ which showed that college students who were exposed to high levels of inter-parental conflict had twice or more the risk of developing an episode of major depressive disorder, and experiencing dependence problems.

Additionally, perceived marital conflict was strongly related to adolescent internalizing and externalizing behaviors⁽³⁷⁾ and had detrimental effects on adolescent adjustment.⁽²⁴⁾ On the other hand, Esfandyari et al.,⁽³⁸⁾ found a significant relationship between positive family relations and the decrease of externalizing behavior problems, such as social aggression and internalizing behavior problems, such as depression and self-esteem.

Conclusion and recommendations:

The study results lead to the conclusion that adolescent preparatory and secondary schoolchildren in Zagazig city mostly have low perception of inter-parental conflict (CPIC), and normal youth self-report (YSR). The CPIC and YSR scores are positively correlated reflecting a negative impact of parental conflict perception on normal self-report. Hence, parental conflict has a deleterious effect on children's psychological wellbeing as measured by self-reporting.

The study recommends that there should be more emphasis to the mental health and psychological wellbeing of adolescent schoolchildren through giving educational programs covering healthy relationships and conflict resolution, and intervention programs for them and their parents that enable them to be more adaptive. Increasing community awareness is needed through educational messages in mass

media. Further research is needed in order to identify the relationship between parental conflict and each behavior problem separately.

Table (1): Personal characteristics of the adolescents in the study sample (n=508)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Age(years):		
▪ < 16	314	61.8
▪ 16+	194	38.2
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▪ Range		12.0 – 18.0
▪ Mean ± SD		14.7±1.8
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Gender:		
▪ Male	98	19.3
▪ Female	410	80.7
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Grade:		
▪ Preparatory	256	50.4
▪ Secondary	252	49.6
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Residence:		
▪ Rural	263	51.8
▪ Urban	245	48.2
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No. of siblings:		
▪ Range		0-8
▪ Median		3
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Perceive having good social relations with parents/siblings/peers	402	79.1

Table (2): Personal characteristics of parents of the adolescents in the study sample (n=508)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Father age (years)		
▪ Range	32.0-71.0	
▪ Mean±SD	47.0±6.5	
Father education:		
▪ Illiterate/read-write	113	22.2
▪ Basic/intermediate	224	44.1
▪ University	171	33.7
Father job:		
▪ Clerical	342	67.3
▪ Manual work	166	32.7
Mother age(years):		
▪ Range	27.0-64.0	
▪ Mean±SD	40.5±5.9	
Mother education:		
▪ Illiterate/read-write	193	38.0
▪ Basic/intermediate	190	37.4
▪ University	125	24.6
Mother job:		
▪ Housewife	324	63.8
▪ Working	184	36.2
Live with both parents	459	90.4
Family income:		
▪ Saving	287	56.5
▪ Just sufficient	188	37.0
▪ Insufficient	33	6.5
Home media:		
▪ 0-1	47	9.3
▪ 2+	461	90.7

Table (3): Children's Perception of Inter-parental Conflict (CPIC) among the adolescents in the study sample (n=508)

CPIC (abnormally high)	Frequency	Percent
Conflict properties:		
▪ Frequency	47	9.3
▪ Intensity	36	7.1
▪ Resolution	18	3.5
Self-blame:		
▪ Content	54	10.6
▪ Self-blame	26	5.1
Threat:		
▪ Threat	139	27.4
▪ Coping efficacy	61	12.0
Triangulation	72	14.2
Stability	26	5.1
Total CPIC:		
▪ <i>High</i>	32	6.3
▪ <i>Low</i>	476	93.7

Table (4): Youth Self-Report (YSR) Scale among the adolescents in the study sample (n=508)

YSR (abnormally high)	Frequency	Percent
Internalization:		
▪ Anxious /depressed	161	31.7
▪ Withdrawn /depressed	115	22.6
▪ Somatic complaints	105	20.7
Total internal	190	37.4
Externalization		
▪ Rule breaking	30	5.9
▪ Aggressive behavior	47	9.3
Total external	59	11.6
Social problems	102	20.1
Thought problems	122	24.0
Attention problems	24	4.7
Other problems	15	3.0
Total YSR:		
▪ <i>Normal</i>	372	73.2
▪ <i>abnormal</i>	136	26.8

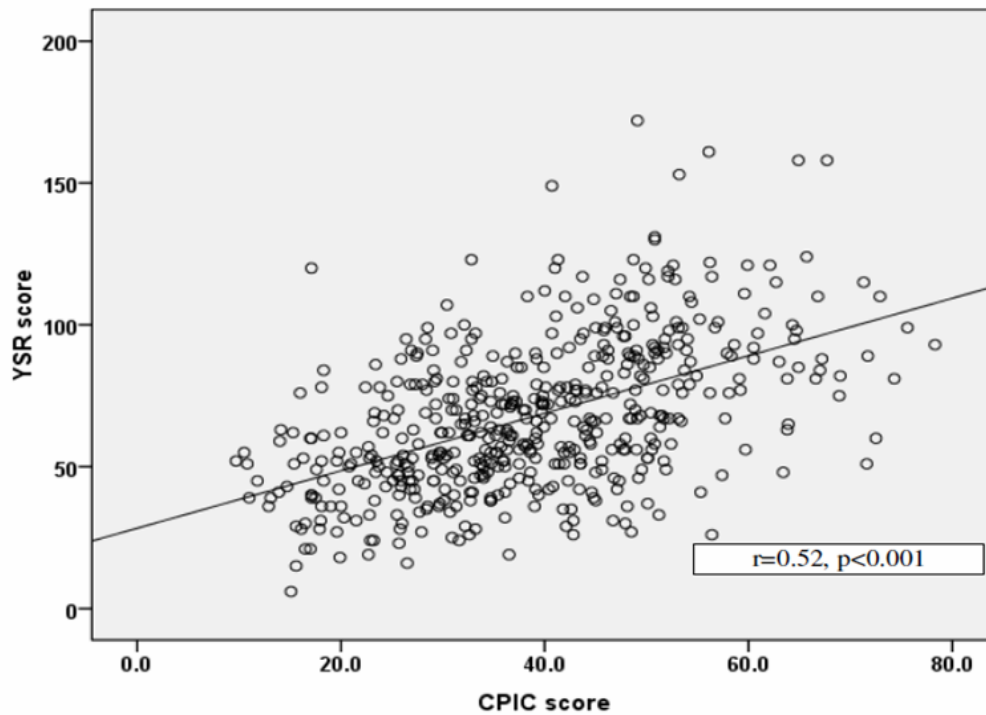


Figure (1): Correlation between CPIC and YSR scores (n=508)

Table (5): Correlation between CPIC and YSR scores and adolescents' socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic characteristics	Pearson correlation coefficients	
	CPIC	YSR
▪ Age	.012	.066
▪ No. of siblings	.008	.017
▪ Father age	-.008	.047
▪ Father education	-.213**	-.041
▪ Mother age	-.006	.042
▪ Mother education	-.237**	-.081
▪ Family income	.229**	.195**
▪ No. of home media	-.236**	-.038

(**) Statistically significant at $p < 0.01$

Table (6): Best fitting linear regression model for CPIC and YSR scores

Predictors	Un standardized		Standardized	t-test	p-value
	Coefficients				
	B	Std. Error	Coefficients		
Constant	48.738	3.446		14.143	.000
Sex(reference male)	-3.307	1.425	-.098	-2.322	.021
Live with parents	-.297	.085	-.145	3.510	.000
Mother education (reference: illiterate)	-1.592	.573	-.123	-2.777	.006
Family income (reference: insufficient)	4.270	.917	.198	4.658	.000
Relations score	-3.650	1.369	-.111	-2.667	.008
No. of home media	-1.178	.465	-.114	-2.533	.012
r-square=0.16					
Model ANOVA: F=16.40, p<0.001					
Variables entered and excluded (not significant): child age, education level, birth order, mother/father age/job, father education, crowding index, No. of siblings, residence, working, sporting, hobbies					
YSR score					
Constant	29.948	7.017		4.268	.000
Sex(reference male)	-9.029	2.564	-.135	-3.521	.000
School grade	5.259	1.975	.100	2.662	.008
No. of home media	2.003	.794	.098	2.522	.012
CPIC score	1.009	.077	.511	13.111	.000
r-square =0.30					
Model ANOVA: F=492.63, p<0.001					
Variables entered and excluded (not significant): child age, education level, birth order, mother/father age/job/education, crowding index, No. of siblings, friends, residence, sporting, hobbies, living with parents, social relations.					

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