

Family Systems Perspectives on Child Development

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Fourth Annual Symposium on the Child and Family

Strong Families: Fostering Healthy Parent-Child Relationships and Child Development

January 28, 2017

What is a family?



Family not
only need to
consist of
merely those
whom we share
blood, but also
for those whom
we'd give blood.
Charles Dickens

- sayinggoodbye.org



How do families influence child development?

- Family dynamics and family climate are important predictors of children's adjustment
- Emotion communication between parents and children (e.g., Main, Paxton, & Dale, 2016, Newton et al., 2016)
- Quality of attachment with caregivers (e.g., Baumrind, 1966)
- Emotional climate of family (e.g., Raikes & Thompson, 2006)

Family Systems Theory

- Origin in family therapy
 - Problems with parent-child relationship often associated with marital distress
- Identified need to go beyond parent-child relationship and understand the family as a **system**
- Each member and each relationship within a family influences other members and relationships within that family

“In order to understand children’s development, one must gain a broad perspective on the whole family” (Cox & Paley, 2003, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*)

Couple relationships

- What are the characteristics of healthy marriages?
- Success or failure of marriage depends not on whether there is conflict, but how conflict is *handled*
 - Whether marriage ends in divorce
 - Marital satisfaction



John Gottman
University of Washington,
Gottman Institute

Four horsemen

1. Contempt
2. Criticism
3. Defensiveness
4. Stonewalling

Negative reciprocity: when one spouse responds to partner's negativity with negativity = most damaging to marriages



Apartment studies

- Couples lived in studio apartment for 24 hours
- Instructed to interact with each other as they would at home
- Researchers videotaped interactions
- Coded “bids” by one spouse and how partner responded
 - Turning “away” vs. turning “toward”
- Happy couples rarely ignore bids
 - Response can be subtle, but reflects eagerness to interact

Couple relationships and child development

- These couple interaction patterns predict children's psychological wellbeing and behavioral problems
- How?

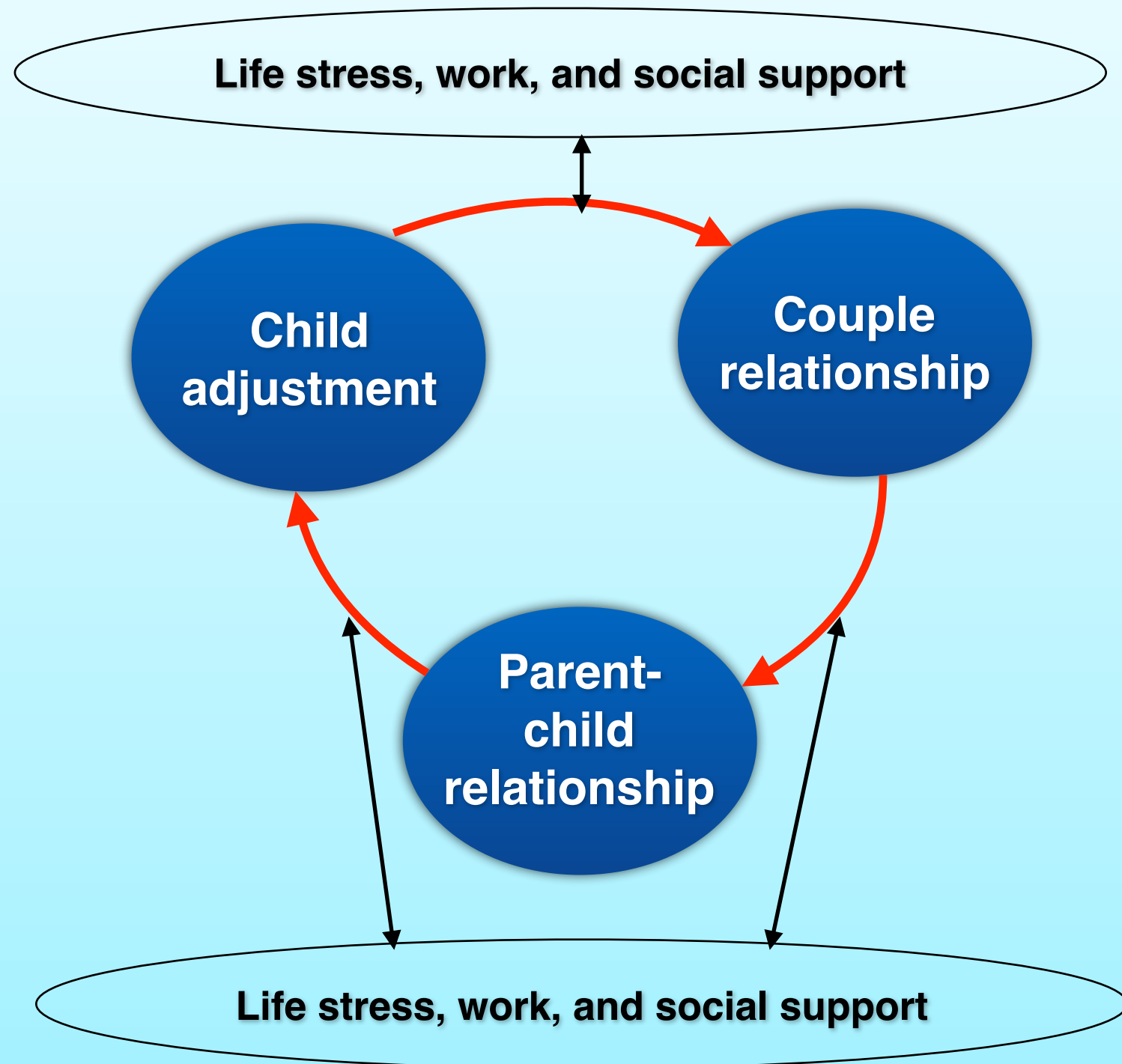


Emotional security hypothesis

- How child **appraises** security of inter-parental relationship
- Will parents be *available*?
- Is there *predictability* regarding future interactions between parents?
- Do family disputes *threaten* child's physical/psychological wellbeing?
- Affects children's ability to **cope with stress**



Interventions targeting the couple relationship



Schoolchildren and their Families study

- 100 families
- 10-year longitudinal study (kindergarten - 9th grade)
- When child was in kindergarten, couples assigned to:
 - Couple intervention
 - Parenting intervention
 - No intervention



Phil and Carolyn Cowan,
UC Berkeley

Schoolchildren and their Families study

- The parenting intervention improved the quality of parenting
- Both parenting AND couple relationship improve in couple intervention



How to measure processes at the whole family level?

- How do parents behave toward child when they are together vs. one-on-one?
- Co-parenting
- How parents interact with child when they are together affects children's adjustment, even when taking into account:
 - Parents' psychological wellbeing
 - Quality of couple relationship
 - Quality of parent-child relationship

Current Research

- How do joint parental responses to their children's emotions impact child depression?
- Coding child emotions and parental responses moment to moment
- Family Circle Task & Conflict Discussion



Schoolchildren and their Families study

Multiple generations

- Many different kinds of family structures
 - Usually multiple generations considered part of family
- Life events that are “off time” can create challenges for families
 - E.g., becoming a teenage parent



Studying teen parenting from a multi-generational perspective

- Teen pregnancy and parenting = costly public health issue (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2006)
- San Joaquin Valley has highest teen birth rates in CA (California Department of Public Health)
- Associated with negative outcomes for families and children (Furstenburg & Crawford, 1978; Buckingham-Howes et al., 2011)
- Children of teen parents more likely to have cognitive and language delays (Baldwin & Cain, 1980; Borowski et al., 2002)

Studying teen parenting from a family systems perspective

- What is the role of grandparents?
- Many teen parents' own parents are highly involved in caregiving (Sadler et al., 2011), BUT
- Dynamics of “child becomes parent” can create unique challenges for families
 - Stress & conflict
 - Role negotiations

Valley Teens as Parents

How do teen parents' relationships with their own parents/caregivers influence their infants' cognitive and language development?





Valley Teens as Parents

Phase 1: Surveys administered to teen parents in the Merced Union High School District

- Demographics
- Mental health (depression, anxiety)
- Social support
- Cultural values
- Literacy
- Child motor and language development



Valley Teens as Parents

Phase 2: Observational study

- Dyadic interactions between:
 - Grandparent and child
 - Teen and child
 - Grandparent and teen
- Triadic interactions
- Assessments of children's language processing



Thank you!

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