

Interparental Conflict, Emotional Insecurity, and Parent–Adolescent Communication

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Abigail L. Mills¹ , Gabriela A. Aquino², Sarah Hoegler¹, and E. Mark Cummings¹

Abstract

Destructive conflict within the marital relationship has been shown to negatively impact the family system. Exposure to destructive interparental conflict may be particularly detrimental to adolescent development. Destructive interparental conflict is associated with decreased quality of parent–adolescent communication. One potential explanatory mechanism for this relationship is adolescents' emotional insecurity in the interparental relationship. Exposure to destructive interparental conflict may decrease adolescents' sense of emotional security. Therefore, this study examined whether emotional insecurity mediated the relationship between destructive interparental conflict and parent–adolescent communication, based on a longitudinal study on family communication ($N = 225$). Path analysis revealed that the relationship between destructive interparental conflict and father–adolescent communication, as well as mother–adolescent communication, was mediated by emotional insecurity. The results provide insight into the consequences that destructive interparental conflict may have for aspects of the parent–adolescent relationship, as well as practical implications for the development of future intervention programs.

¹University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA

²University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:

Abigail L. Mills, Department of Psychology, University of Notre Dame, E343 Corbett Family Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA.

Email: adowney4@nd.edu

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emotional security, parent–adolescent communication, interparental conflict

Conflict is a common and unavoidable occurrence within the marital relationship, with various aspects of marriage and family dynamics as potential sources of disagreements (Cummings & Davies, 2002). According to Goeke-Morey et al. (2003), the effect that destructive interparental conflict has on adolescent development depends on what type of conflict occurs. Specifically, when interparental conflict is handled in a constructive manner, such as by using calm discussion, emotional support, affection, and problem-solving, this can improve the quality of the marital relationship from the adolescents' perspective (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003). Conversely, destructive conflict behaviors such as withdrawal, verbal aggression, and hostility within the marital relationship can also “spillover” into the parents' relationship with their adolescent, leading to negative parenting behaviors and maladaptive parent–child interactions (Cheung et al., 2016; Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Martin et al., 2017). Exposure to destructive interparental conflict undermines the adolescents' sense of safety and security in the interparental relationship and ultimately hinders the parent–child relationship by elevating the child's risk of developing emotional problems (Cummings & Davies, 2002).

Destructive communication strategies from the interparental relationship may negatively impact the parent–adolescent relationship and quality of communication therein (Cheung et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2017; Van Doorn et al., 2007). This is an important consideration, as studies have shown that open communication between parents and adolescents is associated with improved psychological adjustment (Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993; Xiao, Li, & Stanton, 2011), while a lack of communication has been shown to heighten adolescents' risk of maladjustment (Fanti et al., 2008; Kapetanovic et al., 2019).

Given that conflict in the interparental relationship appears to play a role in the quality of communication within the parent–adolescent relationship, and that the relationship between parents and adolescents has implications for subsequent adolescent development, it is important to understand the mechanisms through which destructive interparental conflict influences communication within the parent–adolescent relationship. Achieving a better understanding of how destructive interparental conflict impacts parent–adolescent communication allows for these mechanisms to be targeted in preventive intervention programs to promote optimal development.

Parent–Adolescent Communication

Adolescence is a period of multiple transformations in relationships and communication (Laursen & Collins, 2004), especially regarding parent–adolescent relationships (Rueter & Koerner, 2008). Although it is typical for younger children to have a high degree of disclosure with their parents, it becomes normative for adolescents to begin to reduce the intensity and frequency of communication with their parents during the transition into adolescence (Keijsers & Poulin, 2013). These normative separation tendencies allow for the development of healthy independence, emotional adjustment, and increased reliance on peers and romantic partners (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014).

Despite their decreased frequency of disclosure to parents, open communication with parents is still an important factor in adolescent development (Rueter & Koerner, 2008). Maintaining developmentally appropriate types of open communication with parents plays a critical role in promoting individuation during adolescence (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Keijsers & Poulin, 2013). For instance, adolescents who perceived their parents as having higher levels of perceived support and availability (Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993) and openness to communication (Xiao et al., 2011) displayed more positive adjustment outcomes. Furthermore, open communication creates an environment that enables adolescents to learn constructive conflict strategies, which then can subsequently benefit their relationships with peers and romantic partners (Steinberg et al., 2006).

While adolescents who perceive higher levels of open communication with their parents tend to have better psychological adjustment (Xiao et al., 2011), adolescents' decreased levels of communication with and disclosure to their parents is related to both increased delinquent behavior (Kapetanovic et al., 2019) and substance use (Goldberg-Looney et al., 2015). Concerningly, other researchers have also found that a lack of parent–adolescent communication is tied to increased anxious and depressive symptoms (Ioffe et al., 2020). Given the important role that communication plays in adolescent well-being, it is vital that researchers understand the constructs that contribute to diminished quality of communication between parents and adolescents.

Studies have indicated that destructive interparental conflict can have a negative effect on parenting behaviors and the parent–adolescent relationship (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), which can consequently pose risks to the quality of communication between adolescents and parents (Branje, 2018; Steinberg et al., 2006). These consequences, in turn, may have detrimental effects on the development of their ability to cope and

emotionally regulate during conflicts, given that their ability to use their parents as a source of security and a context in which to develop coping skills is compromised (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014). Furthermore, when parents tend to engage in destructive conflict, this shapes adolescents' perceptions of and sense of security in the interparental relationship (Goeke-Morey et al., 2013). In other words, adolescents' *emotional security in the interparental relationship* may contribute to the explanation for the effect of destructive interparental conflict on parent-adolescent communication (Cummings et al., 2015; Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Emotional Security in the Interparental Relationship

Emotional security theory (EST; Davies & Cummings, 1994) posits that children possess a need for safety and security within the interparental relationship; thus, exposure to destructive marital conflict is one of the primary contributors to children's emotional insecurity in the marital relationship (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Emotional security in the interparental system has cascading effects across various developmental contexts (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Children of all ages tend to become emotionally distressed and dysregulated in response to destructive conflicts between parents (Cummings & Davies, 1996; Goeke-Morey et al., 2013). However, adolescents' emotional security appears to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of destructive interparental conflict. According to Davies et al. (2019), this may be a function of adolescents' increased exposure to and involvement in their parents' conflicts. Over time, adolescents become sensitized, as opposed to desensitized, to the effects of exposure to marital conflict over time (Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Davies et al., 2015; Goeke-Morey et al., 2013). Additionally, adolescents may be more vulnerable to effects of destructive interparental conflict because of adolescents' enhanced awareness of the sources of conflicts within their parents' relationship, given their increased maturity and understanding of more complex issues (Davies et al., 2019).

Emotional security in the interparental relationship enhances adolescents' abilities to cope effectively and competently with daily problems that threaten that security; emotional insecurity in the interparental system, on the other hand, can lead to emotional dysregulation and maladjustment in the face of stress or conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Numerous studies have demonstrated that emotional security can serve a mediating role in the relationship between exposure to destructive interparental conflict and internalizing and externalizing symptoms (e.g., Cummings et al., 2012; Davies et al., 2016). Research has documented that different conflict behaviors may

have distinct effects on aspects of family functioning (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). In particular, research suggests that interparental hostility is especially detrimental to parent-child relationships (Conger et al., 1992; Cox et al., 1999), thus we sought to examine the relations between interparental hostility and parent-child communication in the present study.

Current Study

Although the relationship between emotional insecurity and parent-adolescent communication quality has not been examined, studies suggest that emotional insecurity can influence the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship (in which parent-adolescent communication is subsumed). In particular, conflict in the interparental relationship can influence both adolescents' emotional insecurity and the type of conflict in which parents and adolescents engage, as well as vice versa (Cheung et al., 2016; Davies et al. 2016). For instance, Cheung et al. (2016) identified transactional and bidirectional influences over time between adolescents' emotional security, interparental conflict, and parent-adolescent conflict approaches over time. Given these findings, it may be that the effect of destructive interparental conflict on communication between parents and adolescents is explained through adolescents' emotional security in the interparental relationship. By examining the effect of destructive interparental conflict on parent-adolescent communication via adolescents' emotional insecurity, we will be contributing importantly to the existing literature by expanding our knowledge of emotional insecurity as a mechanism to better understand the various ways destructive interparental conflict influences family functioning.

Hypothesized Model. The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the indirect relationship between destructive interparental conflict and quality of parent-adolescent communication via emotional insecurity. The hypothesized model can be found in Figure 1. As suggested by the hypothesized model diagram, it is expected that when adolescents are exposed to increased destructive interparental conflict, this will lead to increased emotional insecurity in the interparental system; in turn, this heightened emotional insecurity in the relationship between parents may subsequently contribute to decreases in the quality of communication between the adolescent and each parent. Thus, it was expected that adolescents' emotional insecurity in the interparental relationship would mediate the relationship between increased destructive interparental conflict and decreased quality of adolescents' communication with each parent (tested in separate models). The indirect effect

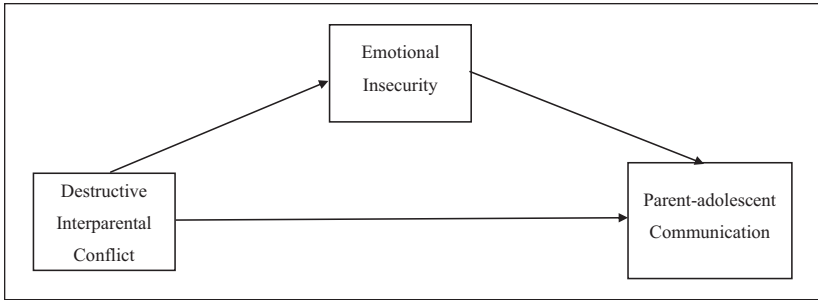


Figure 1. Hypothesized model examining the indirect effect of interparental conflict and parent–adolescent communication via adolescent’s emotional insecurity.

of destructive conflict via emotional insecurity was tested separately for mother–adolescent and father–adolescent communication. While prior literature has not yet provided impetus for any particular predictions on whether this proposed indirect effect will differ between the mother–adolescent and father–adolescent models, the current study explored these two models separately in order to identify potential differences between the models. In keeping with the approaches adopted in several other studies pertaining to EST (e.g., Cummings et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2019; Davies et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2009), this study utilized multiple reporters in each mediation model. Specifically, in keeping with prior research, parent reports of interparental conflict and adolescent reports of emotional insecurity and communication were included in each model.

Method

Participants

Data on community families ($N = 225$ family triads) were drawn from a larger intervention program, that is, the Family Communication Project (FCP), intended to improve communication and family relationships which took place in a mid-size Midwestern city. For the purposes of the present investigation, time 1 pre-test data only was included in analyses. Although families were randomly assigned to one of four conditions for the intervention study, no comparisons were made between groups, because baseline data was the focus for the present investigation; the full sample was included in analyses. To be eligible for participation in the FCP study, parents were

required to be married or cohabitating for at least 3 years and have a child between the ages of 11 and 17 years.

For the present study, the average age of the adolescents was 13.2 years ($SD = 1.7$). The parents' ages ranged from 27 to 62 years with a mean of 41.64 ($SD = 6.38$) and 43.72 ($SD = 6.97$) for mothers and fathers, respectively. The adolescents' ethnicities varied, with 6.7% being Hispanic or Latino, 0.9% being American Indian or Alaska Native, 2.2% being Asian, 9.8% being Black or African American, and 83.6% being White. The reported family income varied from \$6,000 or less to \$125,000 or more. In this study, 52.6% of participants reported earning between \$6,000 and \$74,999, and 45.1% reported earning \$75,000 or more. Of the families included in this sample, 94.2% were married and 3.1% were cohabitating. Regarding the adolescents who participated, exactly 50% were male.

The recruitment strategies for participants included distributing flyers with specific information about the program throughout community and public centers (i.e., grocery stores, libraries), participating in community events and setting up informational booths, referrals from other participants, among others. All recruitment means indicated that participants were needed for a research study examining family communication and relationships and that compensation for their time would be provided. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Notre Dame approved the project and concluded that the treatment of participants was in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association.

Procedure

For the present study, consent was obtained from mothers and fathers, and assent was obtained from adolescents. Participating parents completed family demographics questionnaires reporting on age, gender, education, income, and marital status. In addition, parents completed a self-report measure of destructive interparental conflict. Participating adolescents completed self-report measures of their own emotional security and their perceptions of communication quality with each parent.

Measures

Emotional Insecurity. The Security in the Interparental Subsystem (SIS) scale (Davies et al., 2002) assesses adolescents' emotional security in the presence of parental conflict. This adolescent self-report measure consists of 50 items scored on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "not at all true of me" (1) to

“very true of me” (4). The measure consists of three major subscales relating to emotional reactivity, regulation of exposure to parent affect, and internal representations of the interparental relationship. The total scores of the scale range from 50 to 200, with high scores indicating greater emotional *in*security. The majority of the items display negative statements about security in the subsystem. Therefore, items phrased as positive statements were reverse coded, which allowed for a final cumulative score of emotional insecurity. The alpha coefficient for the present sample was 0.92.

Parent-Adolescent Communication. The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS; Barnes & Olson, 2003) assesses adolescents' perspectives of their verbal exchanges with each parent. The measure consists of 20 items scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The measure is composed of two major subscales related to the extent of openness regarding communication (i.e., Open Family Communication scale) and problems in communication (i.e., Problems in Family Communication). The total scores of the scale range from 20 to 100, with high scores indicating good communication quality. The items pertaining to problems in communication were reverse coded, allowing for an additive value measuring the overall quality of communication. Barnes and Olson (2003) used Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the PACS. According to prior research, the alpha coefficient was 0.87 for the Open Family Communication subscale, 0.78 for the Problems in Family Communication subscale, and 0.88 for the total scale—the additive value of both subscales (Barnes & Olson, 2003). Alpha coefficients for the full scale were excellent for the present sample, with values of 0.85 for mother-adolescent communication and 0.85 for father-adolescent communication.

Destructive Interparental Conflict. Mothers and fathers each completed the O'Leary-Porter Scale (OPS; Porter & O'Leary, 1980) to assess the frequency of overt destructive interparental conflict, as defined by interparental hostility, taking place in the presence of the adolescent. This self-report measure (completed by parents, but not adolescents) consists of 10 items scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “never” (0) to “very often” (4). The measure contains items asking how often certain forms of interparental conflict are observed by the adolescent. The total scores of the scale range from 0 to 40, with high scores indicating more destructive interparental conflict. Given that most of the items mention hostile behaviors, the last item—stating a positive behavior—was reverse coded for a summative value of overall overt destructive interparental conflict. In the present sample, alpha coefficients for the OPS were 0.83 for mothers, 0.84 for fathers, and 0.85 for

the parental composite. The parental composite was used in subsequent analyses.

Analytic Plan

The indirect effect of destructive interparental conflict on parent–adolescent communication via adolescent’s emotional insecurity was examined using a path model using path analysis in *Mplus* (*Mplus* version 8, Muthén & Muthén, 2015), which utilizes the full information maximum likelihood approach to missing data. Bootstrap resampling (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) was used to obtain the parameter estimates of the indirect effect of destructive interparental conflict on parent–adolescent communication. Following the recommendations of Hayes and Scharkow (2013), 1,000 bootstrap resamples were used to obtain bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals around the parameter estimates of the indirect effects of destructive interparental conflict on parent–adolescent communication through adolescent’s emotional insecurity. Additionally, we assessed and verified that the assumptions of the analysis employed were satisfied. For example, all primary study variables (i.e., interparental conflict, emotional insecurity, mother–adolescent communication, and father–adolescent communication) were checked for skewness using SPSS. All skewness statistics for the present study fell between -0.33 and $+0.57$; thus, the distributions of the study variables were normal.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides means, standard deviations, ranges, and the bivariate correlations for all study variables. Destructive Interparental conflict was significantly correlated with emotional insecurity, mother–adolescent communication, and father–adolescent communication. A small number of adolescents did not provide complete responses for emotional insecurity ($n = 8$) or communication ($n = 2$), and $n = 5$ parents did not provide complete responses for hostility. However, by utilizing FIML estimation, the current study was able to include the complete sample, including cases with missing data. There were no gender differences between males and females on adolescent-reported emotional insecurity $F(1, 215) = 0.13, p > .05$ or on destructive interparental conflict $F(1, 218) = 0.90, p > .05$. There were also no gender differences between males and females on mother–adolescent communication $F(1, 221) = 1.60, p > .05$, or father–adolescent communication $F(1, 221) = 0.07, p > .05$.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges, and Bivariate Correlations of All Study Variables.

	Mean (SD)	Range	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Interparental Conflict	21.59 (5.29)	0–40	1.00			
2. Emotional Insecurity	62.44 (17.48)	50–200	0.20**	1.00		
3. Father–adolescent Communication	67.33 (15.46)	20–100	-0.26**	-0.43**	1.00	
4. Mother–adolescent Communication	71.83 (14.22)	20–100	-0.19**	-0.37**	0.92**	1.00

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Analysis of Hypothesis

Two path analyses using the structural equation modeling (SEM) framework were fit to investigate whether there was an indirect effect via adolescent's emotional insecurity between destructive interparental conflict and father–adolescent and mother–adolescent communication.

Model 1. The first analysis examined the indirect effect of destructive interparental conflict and father–adolescent communication via adolescent's emotional insecurity. Model fit indices and standardized parameter estimates are reported in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. Note that the current models were saturated; thus, fit indices are reported as per convention, but are not readily interpretable (see Schreiber, 2017 for further commentary on standards of interpretation of model fit indices). Unstandardized parameter estimates are presented in text. Model results are also depicted in a path diagram; see Figure 2 (father–adolescent communication $R^2 = 0.22$). Destructive interparental conflict was associated with father–adolescent communication ($b = -0.51$, $s.e. = 0.19$, $p = .008$) and with emotional insecurity about the interparental relationship ($b = 0.68$, $s.e. = 0.23$, $p = .003$). Emotional insecurity, in turn, was associated with father–adolescent communication ($b = -0.35$, $s.e. = 0.06$, $p < .001$).

The indirect effect of destructive interparental conflict on father–adolescent communication was significantly different from zero (95% CI [-0.42, -0.06]) and the direct relationship between destructive interparental conflict and father–adolescent communication, with the inclusion of the mediator (emotional insecurity) was also significantly different from zero

Table 2. Model Fit Indices for All Models.

Model	χ^2	df	p	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1	61.62	3	< 0.001	1.00	0.00
Model 2	45.98	3	< 0.001	1.00	0.00

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; df = degrees of freedom; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

Table 3. Parameter Estimates for Study Models.

	Standardized Estimates	Standard Error	Unstandardized 95% CI
Model 1 Parameters			
Interparental Conflict → Emotional Insecurity	0.21**	0.07	0.24, 1.12
Interparental Conflict → Father–Adolescent Communication	-0.17**	0.06	-0.88, -0.13
Emotional Insecurity → Father–Adolescent Communication	-0.40***	0.06	-0.47, -0.23
Model 2 Parameters			
Interparental Conflict → Emotional Insecurity	0.21**	0.07	0.24, 1.13
Interparental Conflict → Mother–Adolescent Communication	-0.12 [†]	0.06	-0.67, 0.04
Emotional Insecurity → Mother–Adolescent Communication	-0.35***	0.06	-0.39, -0.18

[†]p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

(95% CI [-0.88, -0.13]). Thus, consistent with our hypotheses, there was a significant indirect effect between destructive interparental conflict and father–adolescent communication. Destructive interparental conflict was associated with greater emotional insecurity, which in turn led to poorer father–adolescent communication.

Model 2. The second analysis examined the indirect effect of destructive interparental conflict and mother–adolescent communication via adolescent’s emotional insecurity. As before, model fit indices and standardized

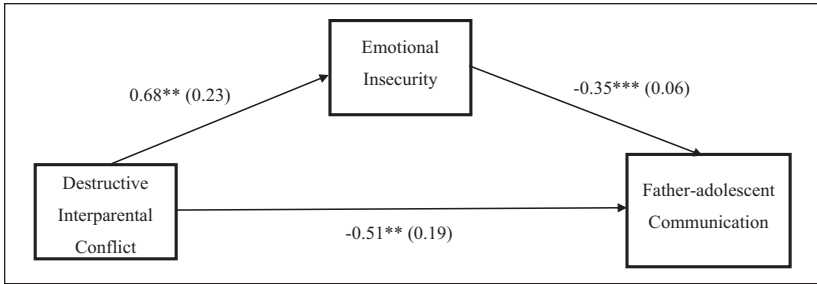


Figure 2. Results for Model 1 examining the indirect effect of interparental conflict and father–adolescent communication via adolescent’s emotional insecurity. Figure depicts unstandardized regression coefficients and corresponding standard errors. Unstandardized parameter estimate of the indirect effect: $b = -0.24$, $s.e. = 0.09$, $p = 0.01$. Unstandardized 95% CI of the indirect effect: $-0.42, -0.06$. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

parameter estimates are reported in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. Unstandardized parameter estimates are presented in text. Model results are also depicted in a path diagram; see Figure 3 (mother–adolescent communication $R^2 = 0.16$). Destructive interparental conflict was not associated with mother–adolescent communication ($b = -0.32$, $s.e. = 0.18$, $p = 0.08$) but was associated with emotional insecurity about the interparental relationship ($b = 0.68$, $s.e. = 0.23$, $p = 0.003$). Emotional insecurity, in turn, was associated with mother–adolescent communication ($b = -0.29$, $s.e. = 0.05$, $p < .001$).

The indirect effect of destructive interparental conflict on mother–adolescent communication was significantly different from zero (95% CI $[-0.35, -0.05]$), but the direct relationship between destructive interparental conflict and mother–adolescent communication, with the inclusion of the mediator (emotional insecurity), was not significantly different from zero (95% CI $[-0.67, 0.04]$). Destructive interparental conflict was associated with greater emotional insecurity, which in turn led to poorer mother–adolescent communication.

Discussion

This study was designed to test the explanatory role that emotional insecurity may play in the effect of destructive interparental conflict on communication between parents and adolescents. The results showed that there was a significant indirect effect between destructive interparental conflict and the quality

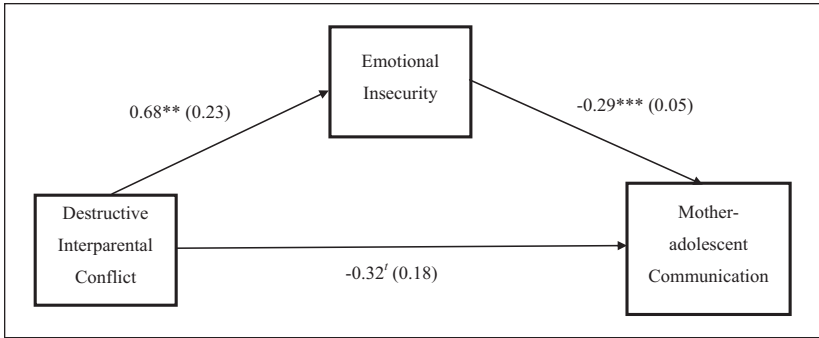


Figure 3. Results for Model 2 examining the indirect effect of interparental conflict and mother–adolescent communication via adolescent’s emotional insecurity. Figure 3 depicts unstandardized regression coefficients and corresponding standard errors. Unstandardized parameter estimate of the indirect effect: $b = -0.20$, $s.e. = 0.08$, $p = .01$. Unstandardized 95% CI of the indirect effect: $-0.35, -0.05$. † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

of communication between parents and adolescents via adolescent’s emotional insecurity in each of the two models tested. Adolescents’ emotional insecurity partially mediated the effect of destructive interparental conflict on adolescent reports of communication with their fathers, and the effect of destructive interparental conflict on adolescent reports of communication with their mothers was fully mediated by adolescents’ emotional insecurity.

Although adolescence marks a period of increasing individuation and autonomy, parent–adolescent communication still plays a critical role in healthy adjustment in adolescents, as well as in adolescents’ ability to maintain healthy roles and relationships within the family system (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Laursen & Collins, 2004). When parental interactions are characterized by destructive conflict patterns, however, adolescents’ communication with each parent often become impaired. This, in turn, increases risks to adolescents’ adjustment (Branje, 2018). Through identifying emotional insecurity as an explanatory mechanism for the relationship between interparental destructiveness and parent–adolescent communication, this study provided an important contribution to the understanding of threats to the quality of communication between parents and adolescents.

Given that open communication with parents could provide a protective role in guarding adolescents from an increased risk of maladjustment, these findings may prove helpful in determining how to promote healthy communication. Decreasing destructive conflict between parents may decrease emotional insecurity, and, in turn, improve communication between parents and

adolescents. Emotional insecurity has been shown to play a major role in several aspects of adolescent adjustment. For instance, studies have repeatedly demonstrated that emotional insecurity is related to increased internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Davies et al., 2016), increased destructive conflict behaviors in adolescents (Cheung et al., 2016), and decreased prosocial behavior (McCoy et al., 2009). This study, therefore, adds to the growing body of literature underscoring the variety of risks that emotional insecurity in the context of destructive interparental conflict poses to adolescents and their families.

The results of both the mother and father models were similar in that emotional insecurity played a significant role in explaining the effect of destructive interparental conflict on communication. However, the models differed slightly in that emotional insecurity partially mediated the effect of destructive interparental conflict on communication with fathers, while emotional insecurity fully mediated the effect on communication with mothers. This indicates that destructive interparental conflict may have both a direct and indirect effect on communication with fathers, while emotional insecurity fully explains the effect of conflict on communication with mothers. This nuanced difference between the mother and father models ought to be replicated in a longitudinal context before emphasizing any implications of these particular findings. However, if replicated, this distinction between the mother and father models may suggest that interventions that target adolescents' emotional insecurity may have a stronger effect on mother communication than on father communication.

While emotional insecurity played an important role in explaining why destructive interparental conflict disrupts father–adolescent communication, the finding that destructive interparental conflict was also a significant direct predictor of father–adolescent communication is noteworthy in light of prior literature regarding the Fathering Vulnerability Hypothesis (Cummings et al., 2004). According to this hypothesis, interparental conflict may have more detrimental effects on children's relationships with their fathers than their mothers (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Schacht et al., 2009). Therefore, this may be one reason why emotional insecurity may not fully mediate the effect of interparental conflict on father communication. Thus, in order to support communication between fathers and adolescents, it may be especially important for interventions to place a direct emphasis on reducing conflict in the interparental relationship.

The current study focused on the relationship between interparental conflict and emotional insecurity in the interparental relationship, as these relate to adolescents' communication with each of their parents. Although beyond the scope of the present study, future research might consider how destructive

conflict might affect other contexts of security; for instance, the effect of destructive interparental or parent–adolescent conflict on attachment security (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014). These types of research questions might help shed further light on the mechanisms that contribute to the quality of parent–adolescent communication.

Limitations and Future Studies

It is important to consider the results and implications of this study in light of several limitations. First, this study was cross-sectional. Although emotional insecurity was shown to play a mediating role in the relationship between destructive interparental conflict and parent–adolescent communication, these path models should also be replicated using longitudinal data to explore this potential causal process. Moreover, the direction of effects cannot be determined with certainty based on cross-sectional data. The generalizability of these findings is also limited by the demographic characteristics of the sample. The sample was predominantly white but nonetheless representative of a community sample of families from a mid-size Midwestern city. Whether these findings would apply to a more ethnically or socioeconomically diverse population has yet to be established. This study also relied on self-report data. Although self-report data is commonly used in most psychological research, observational reports of destructive interparental conflict and parent–adolescent communication might also be considered. These alternative measures may have better ecological validity and as such may provide a more accurate representation of the relationships between these constructs. Future research could juxtapose the use of self-report and observational data in analyzing these relationships.

This study also focused primarily on interparental hostility, which is an example of overt destructive conflict. It may be informative to expand the types of destructive behavior considered in this model, namely those that are more covert. This would help to identify whether the current findings are particular to overt forms of hostility or if these results could generalize to other covert forms of destructiveness. As mentioned earlier, these results suggest that decreasing destructive conflict may lead to decreases in emotional insecurity, which may subsequently lead to improved quality of parent–adolescent communication. Additionally, research has repeatedly shown that increasing constructive conflict between parents, such as support, problem solving, and verbal and physical affection, can actually increase emotional security (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003). Constructiveness enhances emotional security by providing adolescents with assurance that interparental challenges will be handled effectively and healthfully, without threatening the

intactness of the family unit (McCoy et al., 2009). Furthermore, studies have also suggested that when parents handle conflict with constructive approaches, this may not only improve emotional security but may also promote adolescents' own cultivation of problem-solving, conflict resolution, and coping skills (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Van Doorn et al., 2007). Thus, future studies might also consider the role of constructive conflict in parent–adolescent communication.

Implications for Intervention Design and Evaluation

This study provided several implications for designing interventions for community families. First, when it comes to designing future interventions for families that aim to promote adolescent well-being, programs should seek to reduce destructive conflict between parents and instead provide them with constructive strategies for conflict resolution. This may include providing education to both parents and adolescents about the importance of engaging in constructive communication. Decreases in destructiveness are likely to lead to decreases in insecurity, which, in turn will help adolescents feel that their parents provide a safe and supportive enough environment for them to engage in open communication. In this way, interventions can help facilitate the type of supportive and non-threatening family environment that allows for healthy parent–adolescent communication.

These results may also provide a springboard for the evaluation of completed intervention studies. For instance, recall that the current study utilized data from the pretest wave of the FCP. The FCP was a 4-week intervention program designed (a) to increase adolescents' emotional security in the interparental relationship by promoting constructive (as opposed to destructive) responses to conflict and (b) to provide adolescents and their parents with the tools to engage in healthy and open communication (Cummings & Schatz, 2012). Emotional insecurity was predicted to be an integral mechanism underlying the effect that the FCP may have had on key adolescent outcomes, namely communication, conflict behavior, parent–adolescent relationships, and adolescent adjustment. Thus, future evaluations of this project could employ a longitudinal design to test whether the effect of the intervention on communication is sequentially mediated by destructive interparental conflict and emotional insecurity.

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ORCID iD

Abigail L. Mills  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9440-2689>

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