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Editor

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Associate Editors: Radosveta Dimitrova, PhD
Dana Basnight-Brown, PhD

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(Dis)harmony in the Home: Parental Child-rearing Disagreement and Early-Childhood Adjustment in Turkey

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Abstract

Sociocultural changes in Turkey have led to significant reconfigurations in marital and parental dynamics over the last decade (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005). Accordingly, general marital conflict and parental disagreement have become prevalent causes of family dissolution and children's adjustment problems (Ulu & Fıçıloğlu, 2002). The current study examined the effect of parental child-rearing disagreement (PCD) of married coparents in Turkey on preschool ($N = 57$, $M_{age} = 4.33$, 50.8% girls) and elementary school-aged ($N = 41$, $M_{age} = 8.15$, 51% boys) children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. After controlling for marital satisfaction, hierarchical regression analyses revealed that PCD predicted more parent-reported adjustment problems. Moreover, the effect of PCD was moderated by school level such that the strongest association was for preschoolers' externalizing behavior problems. Our findings highlight PCD's unique influence on younger children's externalizing behaviors above and beyond marital satisfaction. Further, our findings highlight the importance of focusing on child-related topics as the specific content of general marital conflict during the preschool years*

Keywords: child-rearing disagreement, marital conflict, early childhood, internalizing & externalizing behaviors, Turkey.

Sociocultural changes over the last three decades prompted by urbanization and increased exposure to Western norms have significantly affected family life in Turkey (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005). Bridging Europe and Central Asia, there is a constant influx of diverse cultural features and norms in Turkey. In particular, the convergence between traditional and modern worldviews have brought about visible reconfigurations in marital dynamics along with parenting practices and child-rearing beliefs (Özdemir & Cheah, 2015; Sunar & Fişek, 2005). Coparenting research in the U.S. and Europe has shown that the degree of differences and disagreement about child-rearing between coparents were significantly linked to children's adjustment (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Accordingly, it is important for parents to be

on the same page regarding family values, parenting practices and goals to provide a secure and safe place for children (McHale, Lauretti, Talbot, & Pouquette, 2002; Mchale & Lindahl, 2011). However, a rapid and ongoing transition process in Turkey has led to an increase in disagreements about child-related matters as a sub-topic of general marital conflict and thus a contributing cause of family dissolution (TAYA, 2011; 2013).

Previous Turkish literature has consistently shown the detrimental effects of general marital conflict on children's adjustment (Kızıldağ & Şendil, 2006; Peksaygılı & Güre, 2008; Ulu & Fıçıloğlu, 2002). Some of the existing studies have highlighted children's appraisals of general marital conflict and showed a significant link between children's

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self-blame and threat appraisals due to general marital conflict and parent-reported internalizing behavior problems (Peksaygılı & Güre, 2008; Ulu & Fıfşiloğlu, 2002). However, less attention has been given to topics of general marital conflict that concern coparenting of children. Issues related to child-rearing were reported as one of the top ten sources for couples' disagreement both in the U.S. (Divorce Statistics, 2012) and in Turkey (TAYA, 2011; 2013). Given that Turkish children who blamed themselves and felt threatened experienced higher internalizing behavior problems (Ulu & Fıfşiloğlu, 2002), parental conflict about child-rearing might increase children's self-blame and thus might be more proximally linked to children's adjustment problems than is general marital conflict. Therefore, it is important to explore parental child-rearing disagreement (PCD) as a specific child-related topic of general marital conflict in relation to children's adjustment problems in Turkey.

Parental Child-rearing Disagreements (PCD)

Parental child-rearing disagreement (PCD) refers to the conflict between coparents which results from divergent beliefs, values and expectations about child-rearing, parenting and child development (see Jouriles, Murphy, et al., 1991; Mahoney, Jouriles & Scavone, 1997; O'Leary & Vidair, 2005). As a significant predictor for the quality of both marital relationship and coparenting, PCD is also closely linked to marital satisfaction. In addition to being a source of marital conflict, research in the U.S. has highlighted PCD as a mediator between marital satisfaction and child outcomes (Sturges-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006). Therefore, it is important to understand the distinction between coparental dynamics and the marital relationship (McHale et al., 2002) and the influence of PCD on child outcomes, above and beyond marital satisfaction.

Research conducted in the U.S., Canada, and Europe has indicated that PCD has unique implications for children's adjustment (see Chen & Johnston, 2012). Studies showed that children whose parents often disagree and argue about child-related matters tend to experience more internalizing (Jouriles et al., 1991) and externalizing (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004) behavior problems, both cross-sectionally and longitudinally (Jenkins, Simpson et al., 2005). In a recent investigation of families in Canada, Chen

and Johnson (2012) examined perceived PCD along with the dissimilarity in parenting goals and behaviors for 160 couples with 2-5-year-old children. Results revealed that PCD, but not parent dissimilarity, predicted children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems beyond parenting effectiveness and marital satisfaction (Chen & Johnston, 2012). Overall, their results provided evidence for the unique effect of PCD on children's adjustment problems and highlighted the need for future exploration in other cultural contexts.

Previous studies on general marital conflict in Turkey indicated that children's perception of general marital conflict is another important marker for their adjustment (Peksaygılı & Güre, 2008; Ulu & Fıfşiloğlu, 2002). Ulu and Fıfşiloğlu (2002) investigated children's self-blame and threat appraisals due to general marital conflict with a sample of 232, 9- to 12-year-old children from two-parent married families in Turkey. Results showed that children who perceived themselves as the primary cause of conflict, also experienced higher levels of internalizing behavior problems. This finding suggests that conflicts around children (i.e., PCD) might be especially detrimental for children's adjustment. Accordingly, in the current study, we investigated the direct association between PCD and children's adjustment in Turkey.

Modernization of Family Life and Parenting in Turkey

Modernization of social and cultural values have added to the effects of urbanization, increased cultural heterogeneity (Nauck & Klaus, 2008), and have reshaped modern family life in Turkey (Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005; Sunar, 2002). Currently, there is an influx of modern and diverse sociocultural norms in Turkey via "vehicles" of globalization (e.g., media, music, food and consumer goods, Kanbolat, 2008; UNESCO, 2016). Increasing demand and consumption of Western media, music and fashion brands transport modern values into many Turkish homes. For instance, the popularity of U.S. media initiated local adaptations of TV series (e.g., *The O.C.*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*) depicting American family values and lifestyle. Furthermore, through technological innovations, children can easily access and listen to foreign music and thus be exposed to diverse values and norms surrounding interpersonal

relationships and family life. Accordingly, these remote influences have led to shifts in family values (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007); parenting behaviors (Özdemir & Cheah, 2015); child-rearing beliefs (Sunar, 2002), and gender roles among parents (Kavaş & Gündüz-Hoşgör, 2010).

The rapid and ongoing modernization process in many Turkish homes has led couples to experience difficulties in coordinating and navigating child-related decision-making and thus experience higher parental conflict (TAYA, 2011). Recently, a nation-wide survey on the ‘Family Structure in Turkey’ was conducted by a collaboration between the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) and the Department of Research and Policies (TAYA, 2011; 2013). One-third (33.6%) of parents from various regions of Turkey reported that, ‘not being on the same page regarding child-related matters’, was one of the most common reasons for marriages to dissolve (TAYA, 2011; 2013). Prior studies in the U.S. and Europe have presented child-rearing agreement as an important dimension of optimal coparenting relationships (see Feinberg, 2003; McHale & Lindahl, 2011) and showed its unique effect on children’s adjustment (Jouriles et al., 1991; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). However, the link between PCD and children’s adjustment remains unexplored in Turkey. In conclusion, PCD is a unique topic of general marital conflict that is influenced by society-level changes on family life and parenting. Therefore, guided by extant literature and national survey data confirming the transition within Turkish society and family life, PCD and its effects on early childhood adjustment should be investigated.

Current Study

To date, previous studies in the Turkish literature have examined the effects of general marital conflict and marital satisfaction on children’s adjustment by highlighting children’s appraisals (Peksaygılı & Güre, 2008; Ulu & Fışıloğlu, 2002). Although PCD is an important topic among married couples; to our knowledge, no study in Turkey has yet investigated it directly. Therefore, the first aim of this study is to expand current Turkish literature regarding general marital conflict by examining PCD and its effects on children’s adjustment. Second, prior Turkish studies on general marital conflict have focused on adolescents (9+ years of age, Erbek et al., 2005; Peksaygılı & Güre, 2008;

Ulu & Fışıloğlu, 2002). Accordingly, little is known about early childhood behavioral and social-emotional development in the context of inter-parental conflict. In addition to age, previous literature has presented inconsistent findings regarding child gender differences. Earlier findings in Turkey and the U.S. showed higher levels of externalizing behaviors for boys and internalizing behaviors for girls (O’Leary & Vidair, 2005; Ulu & Fışıloğlu, 2002) whereas some studies did not report any significant effects of gender (Kızıldağ & Şendil, 2006). Therefore, this study also explores child’s age and gender as potential moderators for the link between PCD and adjustment problems in Turkey.

Method

Participants

A total of 98 mothers and 78 teachers from five preschools and three elementary schools in Ankara, Turkey, completed questionnaires pertaining to 98 children. Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) data from five parents were excluded due to >20% missing data, reducing the total sample to 93 parent- ($M_{mother_age} = 34.86$, $range_{age} = 24 - 47$, $SD_{age} = 5.582$; $M_{father_age} = 38.68$, $range_{age} = 27 - 51$, $SD_{age} = 5.063$) and 78-teacher reports for children attending preschool ($N = 57$, $M_{age} = 4.33$, $range_{age} = 2 - 6$, $SD_{age} = 1.024$, 50.8% girls) and elementary school ($N = 41$, $M_{age} = 8.15$, $range_{age} = 6 - 10$, $SD_{age} = 1.038$, 51% boys). Mothers reported a mean education level of 4.47 for themselves (“4 = high school or 5 = college degree”, $SD = 1.31$) and 4.38 for fathers (“4 = high school or 5 = college degree”, $SD = 1.39$) on 7-point scale ranging from “no education” to “graduate/professional degree”.

Procedure

The Parent Problem Checklist (Dads & Powell, 1991) was translated and back-translated into Turkish to ensure cross-language equivalence (Brislin, 1986). Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was piloted with five mothers to ensure appropriate formatting for Turkish context and clarity of wording (i.e., brief cognitive questionnaire testing: see Alaimo, Olsin, & Frangillo, 1999). Recruitment began by contacting preschools, elementary schools, and local educational authorities to ensure their participation. Recruitment proceeded with five preschool and three elementary schools in Ankara, Turkey who agreed to participate in the study. Two distinct consent forms and two

study packages (labeled as Mother and Teacher) including questionnaires, demographic form, guidelines, and a thank you note were prepared for mothers and teachers.

The distribution and collection processes were mediated by the guidance counselors. In each school, all mothers received Mother consent forms. Then, mothers who agreed to participate received study questionnaires. After mothers returned completed questionnaires to the guidance counselors in each school, teachers of children whose mothers returned the completed questionnaires, received Teacher consent forms and the same process followed for the teachers.

Measures

Parental child-rearing disagreement. An adapted version of the 16-item Parent Problem Checklist (Dadds and Powell, 1991) was used to assess disagreement on child-related topics between parents (e.g., “Disagreement over who should discipline the children”). Mothers were asked to indicate whether a given issue has been a problem, and to rate the frequency of selected item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*). The Turkish version of the Parent Problem Checklist demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$).

Marital satisfaction. Overall satisfaction with the marital relationship was measured with a 7-item questionnaire that was designed by the authors of the current study. Mothers rated their agreement for the level and quality of marital communication (e.g., “Our communication level is strong”), time spent together (e.g., I spent enough time with my partner), and their satisfaction (e.g., “I am content with my marital relationship”, “I believe I made a right decision by marrying with my partner”) on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (*Do not agree*) to 4 (*Completely agree*). A mean score was calculated. The Marital Satisfaction Scale demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$).

Children’s internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Mothers and teachers completed the preschool and standard versions of the Turkish Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and Teacher’s Report Form (TRF; Achenbach, 1991; Erol, Arslan et al., 1995), respectively. Participants reported each item on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not right*) to 2 (*Always*), and subscale means were calculated with higher scores indicating higher levels of behavior problems. The Turkish version of

the CBCL and the TRF demonstrated strong reliability with same internal consistency coefficients for internalizing (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$) and externalizing (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$) behavior problems.

Plan of Analysis

First, a bivariate correlation analysis was conducted among study variables (see Table 1) to examine which predictors to include in regression analysis. Two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted for two child outcome variables (internalizing and externalizing behavior problems) to examine the effects of PCD on CBCL scores. In each analysis, marital satisfaction was entered in Step 1, followed by child’s gender, school level, and PCD in Step 2. In Step 3 two interaction terms (PCD x School Level & PCD X Gender) were entered.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M (SD)
1. PCD	1	.097	-.0251*	-.379**	.417**	.342**	.259*	.141	2.18 (1.05)
2. Gender		1	-.021	-.063	.203	.056	.108	-.178	n/a
3. School Level			1	.138	-.337**	-.401**	-.370**	-.434**	n/a
4. Marital Satisfaction				1	-.217*	-.254*	-.104	-.070	20.92 (5.175)
5. PR- Internalizing					1	.657**	.327**	.032	10.43 (7.21)
6. PR- Externalizing						1	.237*	.412**	7.75 (6.25)
7. TR- Internalizing							1	.319**	5.86 (6.60)
8. TR- Externalizing								1	4.05 (5.00)

Note. PCD: Parental Child-rearing Disagreement; PR: Parent Reports; TR: Teacher Reports
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Given that some target students were in the same classroom, the same teachers completed CBCL more than once. Therefore, there were different numbers of parent-versus teacher- reported data. Little’s MCAR test ($\chi^2 (15) = 11.209$, $p = .738$) revealed non-significant results which indicated that the missing data was random. Missing values analysis showed that 6.1% of values were missing in the data set. Therefore, data imputation was not performed.

Unique effect of PCD beyond marital satisfaction

PCD was found to be positively correlated with parent-reported externalizing ($r = .417$, $p < 0.001$) and internalizing ($r = .342$, $p < 0.001$, See Table 1) behavior problems. After

controlling for marital satisfaction, regression analyses indicated that a main effect of PCD was significant for parent-reported externalizing ($\beta = .324$, $F(4, 88) = 8.271$, $p < 0.001$) and internalizing ($\beta = .207$, $F(4, 88) = 6.652$, $p < 0.001$) behavior problems (see Table 2).

Table 2				
Summary of Regression Analyses for Parent-Reported Adjustment Problems				
Predictors		Outcome Variables		
	β	SE _b	β	SE _b
Externalizing Behaviors		Internalizing Behaviors		
Step 1: $R^2 = .047$		$R^2 = .077$		
Marital Satisfaction	-.217*	.122	-.278**	.138
Step 2: $R^2 = .273$, $R^2\Delta = .226$		$R^2 = .232$, $R^2\Delta = .155$		
Marital Satisfaction	-.047	.117	-.149	.139
School Level	-.318**	1.179	-.261**	1.399
Gender	.005	1.138	.159	1.350
PCD	.324**	.618	.207*	.733
Step 3: $R^2 = .339$, $R^2\Delta = .066$		$R^2 = .245$, $R^2\Delta = .013$		
Marital Satisfaction	-.049	.113	-.150	.140
School Level	-.359**	1.151	-.279**	1.420
Gender	.015	1.099	.163	1.355
PCD	.286	1.021	.181	1.259
PCD X School Level	-.246*	1.260	-.106	1.555
PCD X Gender	.208	1.126	.101	1.388

Note: PCD: Parental child-rearing Disagreement, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Moderating role of school level

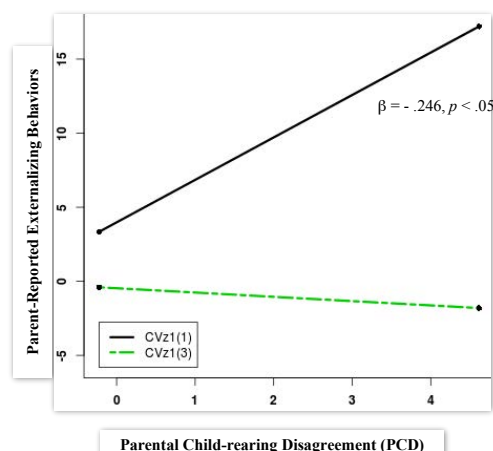
School level was negatively correlated with PCD and with all parent and teacher reports of adjustment problems (see Table 1). Regression analyses indicated that school level was independently and negatively associated with parent- and teacher-reported externalizing ($\beta = -.318$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = -.412$, $p < 0.001$) and internalizing ($\beta = -.261$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = -.324$, $p < 0.001$) behavior problems, respectively (see Table 2). The interaction between school level and PCD was significant for parent-reported externalizing behavior problems ($\beta = -.246$, $p < 0.05$), such that there were larger effects of PCD on preschoolers' externalizing behavior problems compared to those for elementary school (see Figure 1).

Moderating role of gender

There were no significant main effects or interactions for children's gender (see Table 2).



Figure 1. Effect of Parental Child-rearing Disagreement (PCD) on Parent-Reported Externalizing Behaviors Moderated by School Level



Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate the direct effects of parental child-rearing disagreement (PCD) on early childhood adjustment problems among families in Turkey. Results showed that PCD has a unique effect on early childhood externalizing and internalizing behavior problems beyond marital satisfaction. In addition, further investigation of the moderating role of school level showed that PCD is particularly important for preschoolers' parent-reported externalizing behavior problems.

Our findings replicated results from prior international literature and extended research on the link between a subtopic of general marital conflict and children's adjustment with a Turkish sample. Consistent with prior studies conducted in the U.S. and Europe (see Chen & Johnston, 2012), PCD stands out as a sensitive predictor for parent-reported internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Although parental expectations and values have undergone a modernization process in the context of rapid sociocultural change in Turkey, some parents still emphasize traditional family values and the psychological interdependence of children (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007; 2013). Accordingly, the coexistence of individualistic (i.e., modern) and collectivistic (i.e., traditional) values and goals might lead parents to have discrepant ideas and expectations about optimal parenting and child-rearing practices. That is, if one parent endorsed modern family values and child-rearing beliefs than the other

parent, this might interfere with the maintenance of harmony in the home. Accordingly, a marital conflict that revolves around child-related topics might be especially detrimental for children in a society where modern and western features coexist with the traditional (Sunar & Fisek, 2005). Therefore, it is of particular importance to identify protective factors for early childhood adjustment problems in relation to PCD during this transition period for Turkish families.

Expanding on previous Turkish literature regarding general marital conflict, this study helped to clarify the association between marital conflict and children's adjustment. In a previous study, Ulu & Fırsıloğlu (2002) found that children's appraisals of general marital conflict predicted parent-reported internalizing behavior problems. In that study, children were asked to report on the degree to which marital conflict was about them and the degree to which they blamed themselves for the conflict (Ulu & Fırsıloğlu, 2002, p.376). Although children's appraisals are significant predictors of adjustment problems (Grych, Fincham et al., 2000), they may not objectively reflect the topic of marital conflict. Thus, it is plausible to say that our study provided additional support with direct assessment of PCD via parents' self-reports with a checklist including various child-related topics.

The second highlight of this study was examination of two school levels in the context of PCD. As expected, school level independently predicted parent and teacher reports of children's adjustment. Further, school level moderated the effects of PCD on preschoolers' parent-reported externalizing behaviors. These results provided support for the significant role of developmental differences in understanding the impact of marital conflict on children (Mahoney et al., 1997). Comparing preschool and elementary school age-groups revealed that younger children in Turkey are at-risk of experiencing higher adjustment problems in the context of parental disharmony. This finding is compatible with the earlier results indicating negative effects for younger children (Ulu & Fırsıloğlu, 2002). Given that preschoolers spend much more time with their parents, they are more likely to witness conflict and experience higher externalizing behavior problems (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004), especially if that marital conflict topic is about them.

The interaction between PCD and school level only existed for parent-reported externalizing behavior problems. The lack of an effect for internalizing problems may be due to general developmental factors that limit the ability of preschoolers to express depression and anxiety symptoms. Accordingly, parents might have difficulty recognizing these symptoms, leading them to report more externalizing behavior problems compared to internalizing behavior problems (Burt et al., 2008). Therefore, the absence of significant results for internalizing behavior problems should be taken cautiously when the focus is on early childhood.

Finally, this study explored both the independent and moderating roles of child's gender. On the one hand, the absence of significant results regarding child's gender aligns with the inconsistent findings from prior literature (see Chen & Johnston, 2012). On the other hand, previous Turkish literature on general marital conflict often reported higher levels of externalizing behavior problems for boys versus higher internalizing behavior problems for girls (Ulu & Fırsıloğlu, 2002). However, it is important to note that our study's focus is on early childhood and PCD as a unique topic of marital conflict. Thus, the topics of child-rearing disagreement discussed by parents might be similar for boys and girls in early-childhood.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study contributes to our understanding and knowledge of the internal dynamics of families in Turkey, but several limitations should be pointed out. First, the cross-sectional design of our study does not allow for causal interpretations among variables. Second, PCD was only reported by mothers and thus results reflect mother's perceptions of PCD. Furthermore, the direction of the effect of PCD might not always be from parent to child. Given that the topic of marital conflict involves children, children's effects on marital functioning and on PCD are also possible. Accordingly, future research could include children's perspective regarding PCD to examine directionality of the parent-child relationship. Moreover, adding father reports along with other methods (i.e., observational and experimental) will also be important to examine whether similar results patterns will be found.

Finally, interpretations of the results should be limited to early childhood. As children move through developmental

stages, they also experience various social and contextual transitions. Parent and peer relationships for a preschooler are very different from elementary school-aged children. Accordingly, the level and the frequency of PCD as well as the content of child-related topics change across children's age. Considering the dynamic nature of PCD, the generalizability of results to children of different ages and other developmental periods is not known. Future studies can replicate and expand the current study with other samples.

Children's appraisal of marital conflict has also received significant attention in international literature (Grych et al., 2000; 2002). Similarly, studies in Turkey have demonstrated the relationship between children's appraisals of general marital conflict, self-blame, and internalizing behavior problems (Ulu & Fışıloğlu, 2002). Therefore, a future study that will incorporate children's appraisals of PCD would be instrumental in understanding the possible mechanisms that may explain the relationship between PCD and children's adjustment.

Finally, sociocultural transitions in Turkey have redefined traditional family structure as well as impacted divorce rates over the past decades (Demirkan, Ersoz et al., 2009). However, there is a dearth of research investigating Turkish children's adjustment in divorced families. Prior research examining families in Europe and the U.S. has identified low levels of post-divorce conflict on child-related issues as an important barometer for maintaining a positive co-parental relationship after divorce (Ahrons, 2006; Beckmeyer, Coleman & Ganong, 2014). Therefore, it is also important to extend current investigation to divorced families in Turkey. In conclusion, this study extended prior research to families in Turkey by providing evidence for the unique effects of parental child-rearing disagreement (PCD) on children's adjustment, as an important aspect of general marital conflict. Moreover, our findings highlighted the need to expand Turkish literature on marital conflict and early childhood adjustment, especially regarding the interplay between parental disharmony and children's adjustment.

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