



**HAL**  
open science

# Children's Physical Proximity to Interparental Conflict: Resilient Process and Retrospective Perceptions of Parent-Child Relationships

Evelyne Bouteyre, Pauline Duval, Mariel Pietri

► **To cite this version:**

Evelyne Bouteyre, Pauline Duval, Mariel Pietri. Children's Physical Proximity to Interparental Conflict: Resilient Process and Retrospective Perceptions of Parent-Child Relationships. *Violence Against Women*, 2023, 10.1177/10778012231155175 . hal-04476370

**HAL Id: hal-04476370**

**<https://amu.hal.science/hal-04476370v1>**

Submitted on 24 Feb 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Children's Physical Proximity to Interparental Conflict: Resilient Process and Retrospective  
Perceptions of Parent-Child Relationships

Bouteyre, E., Duval, P., & Piétri, M. (2023). Children's Physical Proximity to Interparental Conflict: Resilient Process and Retrospective Perceptions of Parent–Child Relationships. *Violence against women*, 10778012231155175.

Evelyne Bouteyre, LPCPP, Aix-Marseille Univ.

Pauline Duval, LPCPP, Aix-Marseille Univ.

Mariel Piétri, LPCPP, Aix-Marseille Univ.

**Abstract**

This retrospective study sought to determine 1) whether physical proximity to interparental conflict in childhood moderates the link between frequency of exposure to interparental conflict and subsequent levels of resilience in adulthood, and 2) whether retrospective perceptions of parent child relations and insecurity mediate the link between interparental conflict and resilient development. A total of 963 French students aged 18-25 years were assessed. Our study showed that the children's physical proximity to interparental conflict is a major long-term risk factor for their subsequent development and their retrospective perceptions of parent child relations.

*Keywords:* Insecurity, direct exposure, young adults, positive adjustment, child witness

Children's Physical Proximity to Interparental Conflict: Resilient Process and Retrospective Perceptions of Parent-Child Relationships

Interparental conflict is common within families. However, whereas it can sometimes be constructive and lead to a positive outcome, at other times it can be destructive, especially when it degenerates into verbal and even physical violence (Johnson, 2011; Warmuth, Cummings, Mark, Davies, & Patrick, 2020). While physical violence is usually accompanied by verbal and psychological abuse, the reverse is not always true. However, the literature rarely dissociates these two types of violence when their deleterious consequences on children are listed. As van Eldik, de Haan, Parry, Davies, Luijk, Arends, & Prinzie (2020) point out, various dimensions of a difficult inter-parental relationship are often grouped together under the term marital discord. According to these authors, in order to be more precise, it is more appropriate to consider 1) the frequency of conflicts or disagreements that are not aimed at resolving a conflict or changing a behaviour, 2) the degree of hostility that characterises parental conflict, in particular an often significant anger that is expressed by attitudes, verbally or even by physical aggression, 3) disengaged behaviour that is recognised by detachment, withdrawal or dysphoria during parental conflicts, and 4) conflicts related to children. Regarding this last dimension, a national French survey found that issues surrounding childrearing were the most frequent cause of interparental conflict, thus putting children center stage in conflictual and even violent intimate partner dynamics (Brown & Jaspard, 2004). Children may therefore witness conflict scenes firsthand. They may find themselves being drawn into the conflict, sometimes unwillingly, be forced to take sides, and even become victims themselves (Holden, 2003). Margolin, Olivier & Medina (2001) emphasise the complexity of the modalities of marital conflict and how children may respond to it. These authors recommend that attention should also be paid to children who show psychological resilience, particularly in the long term. It should be remembered

that this form of resilience is the subject of numerous definitions which unfold in successive waves, each marking the evolution of the concept (Ionescu, 2016). In the context of children who are witnesses to, or victims of, parental conflict, the following definition appears appropriate: resilience refers to successful adaptation despite being confronted with traumatic life events or a life marked by chronic adversity (Ionescu, 2011).

Although research has established that children do not need to be directly exposed to interparental conflict to be affected by it, the impact of their actual physical presence has seldom been considered in studies of the short-, medium- or long-term effects of this exposure (Fantuzzo & Fusco, 2007; Latzman, Vivolo-Kantor, Clinton-Sherrod, Casanueva, & Carr, 2017; Ovaere, Sardo-Infirri, Touahria-Gaillard, & Lévy, 2007).

### **Effects of Interparental Conflict on Children**

Authors investigating the short- and medium-term effects of destructive interparental conflict have clearly demonstrated social maladjustment in children and adolescents (Fosco, DeBoard, & Grych, 2007), characterized by a high frequency of internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Bradford, Vaughn, & Barber, 2008; Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006; Krishnakumar, Buehler, & Barber, 2003). However, rather than explore its long-term effects, authors have tended to focus on how this conflict may be replicated in children's subsequent romantic relationships (Suzuki, Geffner, & Bucky, 2008). Research has nonetheless shown that young adults who were exposed to scenes of interparental conflict as children may experience severe anxiety and even psychological distress, depression, low self-esteem, and sometimes substance dependence problems (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Cater, Miller, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2015; Davies, DiLillo, & Martinez, 2004; Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Turner & Kopiec, 2006). Despite being exposed to a conflictual and even violent family climate as children, some young people and adults become resilient and do not display any symptoms (Neighbors, Forehand, & Bau, 1997; Suzuki, Geffner, & Bucky, 2008).

This can be attributed to several protective factors that have been identified retrospectively. For example, some young adults report that safe relationships with adults on whom they could rely, a safe haven away from the interparental conflict, and out-of-school activities helped to mitigate the harmful effects of this conflict (Gonzales, Chronister, Linville, & Knoble, 2012; Krishnakumar, Buehler, & Barber, 2003; Suzuki, Geffner, & Bucky, 2008).

### **Effect of Interparental Conflict on Parent-Child Relations**

Taking the spillover hypothesis as their explanatory model, whereby disruptions in one relationship (e.g., marital) can spill over into another (e.g., parent-child), many authors have highlighted a negative influence of destructive interparental conflict on parenting and parent-child relationships (Erel & Burman, 1995; Warmuth, Cummings, Mark, Davies, & Patrick, 2020). When interparental conflict becomes verbally and/or physically violent, parents may feel emotionally insecure within the couple. They may then find it hard to remain mentally available to their children and sensitive to their needs (Coln, Jordan, & Mercer, 2013; Davies, Sturge-Apple, Woitach, & Cummings, 2009; Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006). Parents subjected to stressful interparental conflict have been found to adopt stricter and more negative parenting behaviors (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Cui & Conger, 2008; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Krishnakumar, Buehler, & Barber, 2003). Several young adults have also reported having conflictual relationships with their parents as children (Miller-Graff, Cater, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2016; Turner & Kopiec, 2006).

### **Links Between Interparental Conflict, Parent-Child Relations, and Symptoms Displayed by Young Adults**

To better understand the impact of destructive interparental conflict on children, research has focused on the role of parenting behaviors and, more broadly, parent-child relations. The quality of these relations has been shown to affect the adjustment of children and adolescents in a context of

destructive interparental conflict. The more negative or conflictual their relations with their parents, the more disorders these young people display, and vice versa (Bradford, Vaughn, & Barber, 2008; Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Cui & Conger, 2008; Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004; Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006; Krishnakumar, Buehler, & Barber, 2003; Warmuth, Cummings, Mark, Davies, & Patrick, 2020). By contrast, the long-term effects of parent-child relations on young adults who witnessed destructive interparental conflict as children have received far less attention from authors. And yet young adults' negative perceptions of the relationship they had with their parents as children can have harmful repercussions on their mental health (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Turner & Kopiec, 2006). The impact of perceived maternal rejection on internalizing and/or externalizing problems among young adults was recently highlighted by Duval, Pietri, and Bouteyre (2019), while positive parent-child relations have been found to play a long-term protective role in the resilient functioning of young adults who were exposed to interparental conflict in childhood (Miller-Graff, Cater, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2016).

### **The Present Study**

Previous studies of children's experience of interparental conflict have failed to explore their degree of involvement in conflict scenes (Kimber, Adham, Gill, McTavish, & MacMillan, 2018; Knutson, Lawrence, Taber, Bank, & DeGarmo, 2009). And yet it is important to consider the precise nature of this conflict and of children's exposure to it if we wish to understand its subsequent impact (Knutson, Lawrence, Taber, Bank, & DeGarmo, 2009; Latzman, Vivolo-Kantor, Clinton-Sherrod, Casanueva, & Carr, 2017). In Fantuzzo and Fusco (2007)'s investigation into domestic violence, children reported being present in half of all episodes. More than half of them stated that they had seen and heard violent scenes between their parents. When children witness this violence first hand, it is an overwhelming sensory experience that threatens their emotional security (Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Papp, 2007). This insecurity may be exacerbated if their parents, who themselves are

experiencing insecurity within the couple, are less emotionally available to them (Adeyemi, 2016; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Erel & Burman, 1995; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Papp, 2007; Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004). Paradoxically, in an attempt to recover a feeling of security, children may display negative behavioral and emotional reactions (aggressive or disruptive behaviors, crying, etc.). These reactions may in turn have repercussions on their parents' marital relations and/or their own relations with their parents (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Erel & Burman, 1995; Schermerhorn, Cho, & Cummings, 2010). If this vicious circle persists, its negative impact on wellbeing may last into young adulthood (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Young, Lennie, & Minnis, 2011). Studies of long-term effects mostly report negative trajectories, that is, the reproduction of violence and adjustment problems. Rather fewer retrospective studies have explored positive adjustment over the long term, which can mainly be attributed to protective factors in childhood. Several of these have emphasized the importance of good parent-child relations for subsequent resilience in young adulthood (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Miller-Graff, Cater, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2016). To our knowledge, however, there has yet to be a retrospective study of the effects of direct exposure to destructive interparental conflict on parent-child relations and thence on the resilience of young adults.

Our research aims to investigate specifically the effects of the frequency of direct exposure (i.e., being physically close to destructive interparental conflict) on subsequent levels of resilience and perceptions of parent-child relationships. We are not seeking to find out whether some of the participants may have been abused or neglected during childhood or adolescence. From this general objective derive 3 sub-objectives:

- 1) Based on the recollections of the adult participants in the study, our first objective is to determine whether the frequency of direct exposure to interparental conflict in childhood influences subsequent perceptions of the quality of child-parent relationships.

We tested the following operational hypothesis:



- Individuals who were often close to interparental conflict scenes in their childhood have more negative perceptions of their past relationships with their parents than individuals who have never been close;

2) Our second objective is to assess whether this physical proximity has a long-term impact on resilience.

We tested the following operational hypothesis:

- - Individuals who were often / always close to interparental conflict scenes in their childhood were more often exposed to IPV, and therefore felt a stronger feeling of insecurity than individuals who were never / rarely close;

- The proximity frequency of interparental conflict scenes moderates the relationship between psychological and / or physical violence perpetrated during these scenes and the level of resilience;

3) Our third objective aims to determine whether the memories of young adults of their relationships with their parents in their childhood can explain the links between the frequency of exposure to interparental conflict, the degree of physical proximity to the scenes of conflict and the development resilient in young adults.

We tested the following operational hypothesis:

- Retrospective perceptions of parent-child relationships and the feeling of insecurity mediate the link between psychological and / or physical violence perpetrated during interparental conflicts and the level of resilience.

## **Method**

### **Participants, Procedure and Ethics**

The study was conducted in France between 2018 and 2019. An online study was posted on social networks (Facebook, Instagram and email) and sent to students at Aix-Marseille University. To comply with research ethics, participants, all aged between 18 and 25, read an information note explaining the research protocol before electronically signing a free and informed consent to participate. It was clearly stated that their responses were strictly anonymous. An email address was provided to answer any questions they might have about the procedure or if they needed to express themselves in case of emotional distress as a result of the questions. As the researchers were all clinical psychologists, support or counselling could be provided. At the end of the research, no such requests were identified.

The form was sent to students without distinction regarding a specific history of abuse. As a preamble we recalled that family life is often full of ups and downs, and that difficult times can be marked by more or less severe and frequent parental disputes. They were specified that our interest was specifically "in understanding what they experienced as a child (or adolescent) when they witnessed parental disputes and how they reacted".

### **Measures**

To assess our variables, we first constructed an entry questionnaire that collected information about their age, sex, and level of study. We included the following two items, to determine the frequency of participants' physical proximity to interparental conflict and their feeling of insecurity in childhood: "When arguments broke out, you were usually [in the same room/near your parents]"

and “Generally speaking, how often did you feel unsafe at home?” Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (*Never*), 2 (*Rarely*), 3 (*Sometimes*), 4 (*Often*), and 5 (*Always*).

Second, we built a protocol from three tools. First, we took six items from the Conflict Tactics Scale 2 (Straus, 1999) to assess our participants' memories of the frequency of interparental conflict when they were children. Three items were taken from the psychological and verbal violence subscale, and one from each of the following subscales: physical violence, sexual violence, and injury. These items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). We were able to replace the words *My partner* in the original version with *My father/mother* for the purposes of our study, as the original scale can be applied very broadly, and in the past its items have been adapted to measured relations between all the different family roles, including husband-wife and parent-child (Straus, 1999). The scale has good psychometric qualities, with a Cronbach's alpha of .79-.95 (Straus et al., 1996).

We also used Wagnild and Young (1993)'s resilience scale, translated into French for France and Quebec by Ionescu, Masse, Jourdan-Ionescu, and Favro (2009). Each of its 25 items is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Totally disagree*) to 7 (*Totally agree*), with a maximum total score of 175. A score below 121 indicates a low level of resilience, a score of 121-145 a moderate level, and a score equal to or above 146 a high level (Wagnild, 2009). The original version has good psychometric qualities. The American version has good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas of .84-.94 (Wagnild, 2009).

The Invalidating Childhood Environments Scale (ICES; Mountford et al., 2007) is a two-part questionnaire that retrospectively assesses the experience of living with one's parents and within a family. The first part assesses emotional experiences with each parent, via items (e.g., “When I was anxious, [my mother] ignored this” / “When I was anxious, [my father] ignored this”) rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). The higher the score, the stronger the

perception of an invalidating family environment. The second part assesses respondents' overall perceptions of their family style via three types (*typical*, *perfect*, and *chaotic*) of invalidating family environments and one validating environment (Linehan, 1993). In a *typical* family, children are supposed to control their emotions, seek success, and act like adults. In the *perfect* family, although everything is superficially perfect, the parents cannot stand their children expressing annoyance, anger, or fear. The priority is to hide one's emotions and make do. In the *chaotic* family, the parents are often physically and/or emotionally unavailable. They may engage in substance use, have mental health problems, or be in financial difficulty. Lastly, a *validating* family responds appropriately to children's emotions (Mountford et al., 2007). The items corresponding to these four family types are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all like my family*) to 5 (*Like my family all of the time*). The respondent's family may correspond to different types to varying degrees. According to Campagnone and Lo Monaco (2015), the French version has good psychometric qualities, as borne out by the internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ).

### **Data Analysis**

The data were submitted to statistical processing with SPSS.24 software. As the distribution of our variables was normal, we ran parametric tests. First, we conducted descriptive analyses (means/*SDs*;  $\chi^2$ ). Second, we undertook means comparisons (Student's *t*) to highlight differences between the groups. Third and last, we tested a stepwise hierarchical multiple regression model for the resilience criterion. This allowed us to analyze the moderating effect of the *physical proximity to interparental conflict* variable, and the mediating effects of the *perception of an invalidating family environment* and *feeling of insecurity* variables on the relations between exposure to psychological and/or physical intimate partner violence and resilience.

## Results

### Sample

We recruited 963 participants with a mean age of 21.07 years ( $SD = 2.11$ ). This sample comprised 847 women ( $M_{age} = 21.04$  years,  $SD = 2.08$ ) and 116 men ( $M_{age} = 21.27$  years,  $SD = 2.32$ ), 624 of whom no longer lived in the parental home. Participants' responses to the statement "When arguments broke out, you were usually [in the same room / near to your parents]" allowed us to divide them into three groups:

- Group 1 comprised 407 participants who replied "rarely or never" (52 men and 355 women;  $M_{age} = 20.96$  years,  $SD = 2.08$ );
- Group 2 comprised 272 participants who replied "sometimes" (29 men and 243 women;  $M_{age} = 21.1$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ );
- Group 3 comprised 284 participants who had replied "often and always" (35 men and 249 women;  $M_{age} = 21.2$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ).

Table 1 sets out the characteristics of our sample. It shows that the prevalence of exposure to psychological violence (at least once) in Group 3 (often/always close) during interparental conflict was 99%, compared with 95% for Group 2 (sometimes close) and 70% for Group 1 (never/rarely close) ( $p < .0001$ ). As for physical and/or sexual violence, 48% of participants in Group 1 reported being exposed at least once, compared with 26.5% for Group 2, and 17% for Group 3 ( $p < .0001$ ). Analyses failed to reveal any sex-related differences.

*Insert Table 1 about here*

### Intergroup Comparison: Analyses of Variance

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) allowed us to test our first and second hypotheses whereby individuals who were more frequently close to interparental conflict as children (Group 1) have a stronger perception of an invalidating family environment and recall a greater feeling of insecurity than those in the other groups, and were more exposed to intimate partner violence.

We observed that the closer participants had physically been to interparental conflict as children, the stronger their perception of an invalidating family environment and the greater their feeling of insecurity and exposure to violence. Individuals who reported being often/always close scored higher on the ICES than those in the other groups ( $M_{\text{Group1}} = 64.57$ ,  $SD = 18.54$  /  $M_{\text{Group2}} = 69.99$ ,  $SD = 18.01$  /  $M_{\text{Group3}} = 77.84$ ,  $SD = 19.83$ ;  $p < .0001$ ). Chaotic, typical and perfect (i.e., invalidating) family types were more common among participants who were often/always close ( $p < .0001$ ), whereas the validating family type was more common among participants who were never/rarely close ( $F = 32.51$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Participants who were often/always close reported a significantly higher level of exposure to interparental conflict than those who were sometimes or rarely/never close ( $M_{\text{Group1}} = 15.73$ ,  $SD = 4.06$  /  $M_{\text{Group2}} = 16.82$ ,  $SD = 3.52$  /  $M_{\text{Group3}} = 18.52$ ,  $SD = 3.97$ ;  $p < .0001$ ), especially when the violence was psychological ( $M_{\text{Group1}} = 10.65$ ,  $SD = 3.46$  /  $M_{\text{Group2}} = 11.91$ ,  $SD = 3.14$  /  $M_{\text{Group3}} = 13.33$ ,  $SD = 3.43$ ;  $p < .0001$ ). The feeling of insecurity during interparental conflict was far greater in Group 1 ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ;  $p < .0001$ ) than in Groups 2 ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = .96$ ;  $p < .0001$ ) or 3 ( $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = .82$ ;  $p < .0001$ ).

*Insert Table 2 about here*

### **Moderating Effect**

We tested a third hypothesis whereby the frequency of physical proximity to interparental conflict has a moderating effect on the link between exposure to intimate partner violence and the subsequent resilience of the exposed child.

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), to measure a moderating effect, a new variable representing the product of the two predictors must be constructed, in order to carry out a stepwise hierarchical multiple regression. We expected our significant interaction variable (Violence x Frequency of proximity) to demonstrate a moderating effect of proximity on the link between violence and resilience. However, our results failed to reveal an interaction effect, indicating that frequency of proximity did not play the expected role of moderating variable.

By contrast, Table 3, which summarizes the regression analyses, shows a moderating effect of frequency of proximity to interparental conflict on the perception of an invalidating family environment. The latter was significantly and positively influenced by proximity ( $\beta = .106, p < .001$ ), such that the closer participants were to interparental conflict as children, the stronger their perception of an invalidating family environment.

Another method that can be used to highlight the moderating effect of a variable involves comparing predictor-criterion correlations between groups with a high or low score on the moderator (Racle & Irachabal, 2001). We therefore carried out a regression on the three proximity groups.

*Insert Table 3 about here*

Results indicated an increase in  $R^2$ , indicating that greater exposure to violence had a more negative effect on resilience in Group 1 ( $R^2 = .049, p < .0001$ ) than in Group 2 ( $R^2 = .011, p < .03$ ).

## Mediating Effect

Table 4 summarizes the regression analyses that allowed us to test our final hypothesis on the mediating effects of perception of an invalidating family environment and feeling of insecurity on the link between the predictors (exposure to violence and frequency of proximity) and resilience.

We observed a mediating effect of the perception of an invalidating family environment variable, but no significant mediating effect of feeling of insecurity. These analyses met the required conditions to detect a mediation effect. Results highlighted a significant increase in  $R^2$  when the model included perception of an invalidating family environment ( $R^2 = .010$  and  $R^2 = .060$ ;  $p < .0001$ ), with a reduction in the predictive power of the exposure to violence variable from  $\beta = -.112$  to  $\beta = -.06$  ( $p < .02$ ), and a significant increase in  $R^2$  when we entered the proximity variable. The two predictive variables significantly and positively influenced perception of an invalidating family environment ( $R^2 = .234$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, exposure to violence ( $\beta = .427$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) seemed a more discriminating variable than frequency of proximity ( $\beta = .108$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Exposure to violence had a greater influence on perception of an invalidating family environment than proximity did. In summary, our data revealed that violence and proximity negatively influenced perception of an invalidating family environment, thereby making young adults less resilient.

*Insert Table 4 about here*

## Discussion

Our main research objective was to retrospectively ascertain whether young adults' memories of their relations with their parents as children can explain the links between the frequency of exposure to interparental conflict, physical proximity to conflict scenes, and resilient development.

In line with previous retrospective studies, our sample of young adults had been exposed to destructive interparental conflict in their childhood and/or adolescence. This conflict was mostly



characterized by verbal or psychological violence (Cater, Miller, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2015; Fergusson & Horwood, 1998). Virtually all (99%) had been exposed at least once to psychological violence, and nearly half (48%) to physical/sexual violence. Our data showed that the risk of witnessing physical violence was higher among young adults who had often/always been close to scenes of conflict (Group 1) than among those who had more often remained at a distance. This observation echoed the study by Papp, Cummings, and Goeke-Morey (2002), who showed that interparental conflict is more destructive when a child is present, as the parents are less liable to engage in constructive conflict tactics. In all probability, their emotional distress is exacerbated by the child's presence and possibly even by his or her reactions.

Only young adults who had sometimes been close to interparental conflict had a low level of resilience, when we applied Wagnild (2009)'s cut-off score. However, when we compared our results with those of Jourdan-Ionescu et al. (2015), we found that our entire sample had a lower overall level of resilience. This result is in line with other studies showing that young adults exposed to destructive interparental conflict in childhood may develop psychological and even psychiatric disorders (Cater, Miller, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2015; Turner & Kopiec, 2006). Jourdan-Ionescu and colleagues (2015) administered Wagnild and Young's Resilience Scale to 162 students to measure its internal consistency. Female respondents had a mean score of 133.88, and male respondents a mean score of 140.41. As for our sample, mean scores on this same scale were 124.75 for Group 1, 120.75 for Group 2, and 122.25 for Group 3. According to the cut-offs established by the scale's authors, the mean scores of Groups 1 and 3 were within the mean for resilience scores, whereas the mean score of participants in Group 2 indicated a low level of resilience. Overall, the participants in our sample had a lower level of resilience than those in the Quebec study (Jourdan-Ionescu et al., 2015).

We also found, based on the study by Campagnone and Lo Monaco (2015), that the young adults in our sample had a strong perception of an invalidating family environment, especially those

who had frequently been close to interparental conflict as children. In the study validating the French-language version of the ICES (Campagnone & Lo Monaco, 2015), authors administered the questionnaire to 585 students. With reference to this study, we found that participants who were exposed to occasional psychological and/or physical intimate partner violence and those who were physically close to scenes of interparental conflict had stronger perceptions of an invalidating family environment. Participants who had never been exposed or who had never been close to such conflict had scores within the mean.

In this sense, our analyses validated our first hypothesis, whereby individuals who found themselves in close proximity to interparental conflict as children have more negative retrospective perceptions of their child-parent relations than those who rarely if ever witnessed destructive interparental conflict. Our results are in line with those of other retrospective studies among young people and adults who were exposed to interparental conflict as children (O'Brien, Cohen, Pooley, & Taylor, 2013; Turner & Kopiec, 2006). The young adults in our study had memories of negative parenting, in the sense that they did not recall their parents responding to their emotional needs in an appropriate manner when they were children and/or adolescents. Davies, Sturge-Apple, Woitach, and Cummings (2009) observed that destructive interparental conflict at Time 1 in their longitudinal study was predictive of a reduction in the parents' emotional availability 12 months later. Owing to the emotional distress they experience as a result of this conflict, parents may adopt poor childrearing practices reflecting an inability to be receptive to their children's needs and emotions (Campagnone & Lo Monaco, 2015).

Results validated our second hypothesis, whereby individuals who are often physically close to interparental conflict as children are also more exposed to violence, and therefore experience a greater feeling of insecurity. We found that the closer our participants had been to interparental conflict, the greater their exposure to violence at the time, and the greater their feeling of insecurity.

There are two possible interpretations of this finding. First, a child's physical proximity to interparental conflict tends to exacerbate it. This interpretation is supported by the conclusions of a national French statistical survey (Brown & Jaspard, 2004), which emphasized that having children heightens the risk of tension within a couple, as there are more sources of potential conflict, such as childrearing. In particular, when children are present, there are more arguments about them. Parents therefore experience greater emotional distress than they would do in the absence of children, thus exacerbating the conflict (Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2002). Second, when interparental conflict becomes more violent and more frequent, children are more likely to be close, and thus to feel unsafe. Mothers report that the more longstanding the intimate partner violence, the more their children witness it (Brown & Jaspard, 2004). Grych, Raynor, and Fosco (2004) also showed that the more arguments parents have, the greater their children's voluntary or involuntary involvement, attesting to their presence during these events. Frequent violent interparental conflict is the reflection of a dysfunctional couple, and is often the sign of a dysfunctional family. We can assume that children are then at greater risk of being set upon by one or other parent during a conflict. In an attempt to regain their emotional security, children may also intervene in violent scenes between their parents (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Analyses conducted according to Baron and Kenny (1986)'s statistical method also allowed us to validate our third hypothesis, but only partially so, as frequency of proximity did not moderate the link between destructive interparental conflict and resilience. We nevertheless observed a moderating effect of frequency of proximity on the link between intimate partner violence and perception of an invalidating family environment. In addition, the more often our young adults had been close to interparental conflict as children, the more negative their retrospective perception of parent-child relations. These moderating effects of frequency of proximity can be explained by the consequences of children being present during interparental conflict. Frequent physical proximity suggests that the young adults were very much involved in violent scenes when they were children

and/or adolescents. They may have chosen to be present out of a desire to understand what was happening, to stop the conflict or at least calm the two sides down, intervene if necessary, take the side of one of the parents, or protect a parent or sibling. Then again, they may have been unwittingly drawn into the conflict quite simply because of the cramped living space. Fosco and Grych (2010) showed that the more the presence of children or adolescents is an issue for parents, the more negative parent-child relations are likely to be. They also found that if the boundary between the various family subsystems is breached, the feelings of trust and security that children/adolescents have toward their parents are likely to be negatively affected (Fosco & Grych, 2010), as they no longer perceive their parents to be sources of support.

Results only partially validated our fourth and final hypothesis, for contrary to the descriptions in the literature, we failed to observe a mediating effect of feeling of security on the link between destructive interparental conflict and resilience. Even if the young adults in our sample had felt unsafe as children or adolescents during scenes of interparental conflict, this experience did not massively lower their resilience, as levels remained around the mean for most of them. Our results were not, therefore, in line with research suggesting that a high level of threat/insecurity can harm the psychological health of children and adolescents, notably by hindering their resilient development (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Fosco, DeBoard, & Grych, 2007). Our results indicate that even when there is frequent exposure to destructive interparental conflict, the harmful effects of the resulting insecurity recede and may even disappear completely over time. They can probably be explained by the fact that two thirds ( $n = 624$ ) of the young adults in our sample were no longer living under their parents' roof and were therefore no longer (or less) exposed to destructive interparental conflict. El-Sheikh, Shimizu, Erath, Philbrook, and Hinnant (2019) showed that young people exposed to low and diminishing levels of destructive interparental conflict have fewer symptoms than those experiencing greater exposure. Moreover, by the time they reach adulthood, young people are more psychologically mature, and can therefore give a meaning to what they experienced in childhood, and

distance themselves from it. Protective factors (individual, family and friends, community), such as the ability to project oneself into a pleasant future, good cognitive skills, and a good social support network, may also reduce the feeling of insecurity over time.

As the destructive interparental conflict involved only minor, occasional violence, we can further assume that the feeling of insecurity experienced during scenes of conflict was purely intermittent, and not sufficiently intense to trigger the resilience process. In order to withstand adversity, we first have to be exposed to it. This notion is illustrated by two studies where Wagnild and Young (1993)'s scale was used to measure students' resilience. Jourdan-Ionescu et al. (2015) found that the two students in their sample ( $N = 162$ ) with the highest resilience scores had a history of child abuse, while in their study of resilience among students in France and three African countries, Ionescu et al. (2018) found that Algerian students, characterized by moderately high risk factors, had the highest mean resilience scores. By contrast, French students, who benefitted from protective factors in the form of social support and few risk factors, had the lowest resilience scores.

Lastly, perception of an invalidating family environment mediated the link between frequency of proximity to conflict, exposure to destructive interparental conflict, and resilience. This was consistent with longitudinal and retrospective studies showing that the effects of interparental conflict on young adults' psychopathological symptoms are mediated by parenting behaviors or parent-child relations (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Cui & Conger, 2008; Miller-Graff, Cater, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2016). In contrast to previous studies, however, our results highlighted the effect of physical proximity. They also showed that intensity of conflict influences the negative retrospective perception of parent-child relationships more than the frequency of proximity. In other words, frequent physical proximity to scenes of destructive interparental conflict has a negative impact on young adults' perceptions of these relations. These negative perceptions, reflecting the experience of emotional neglect, can affect young adults' resilient development. This means that perceived

emotional support from parents during childhood is a long-term protective factor against the harmful effects of physical proximity to violent interparental conflict.

Several methodological limitations arising from our choice of tools and the way we recruited our sample nevertheless restrict how far our results can be generalized. First, our sample of young adults was entirely made up of students-mainly women-, thus limiting the scope of our conclusions. Analyses based on an unselected sample are therefore needed to confirm and complete our results. Second, the questionnaire we used to measure exposure to interparental conflict did not allow us to assess the potentially chronic nature of the violence. We do not know exactly how old our participants were when they witnessed scenes of destructive interparental conflict. Nor do we know whether they considered this exposure to be in the distant past, more recent, or recurrent. Third, it is possible that some of the participants have experienced sexual abuse, which may impact level of resilience, sense of security and perceptions of relationships with parents. This aspect will need to be investigated in a future study. Fourth the responses to the questionnaire on the childhood family environment may have been influenced by the status of respondents' current relations with their parents. Tensions in parent-child relations resulting from interparental conflict may either persist (Turner & Kopiec, 2006) or subside over time. Fifth, given that ours was a retrospective study, it would also be unwise to establish any causal links between our variables.

However, our study could shed light on professional practice on the issue of prevention with families and parental guidance towards positive parenting. Our findings encourage reflection on the importance of protecting children from inter-parental conflict. They promote awareness of the negative effects of interparental conflicts on young adults. The challenge of supporting them is important because most of them will become parents and risk reproducing the same conflictual attitudes.

## Conclusion

There has been scant research on the physical proximity of children to scenes of interparental conflict, as reported retrospectively by young adults. Most of the available data on children's absence or presence during arguments come from the accounts of parents, mainly mothers. In this regard, our study provides a new perspective on the topic of children who witness interparental conflict, some of it violent. Our approach yielded two main results. First, the frequency of this proximity is a major long-term risk factor in terms of perceived parent-child relations and child development. Second, the perception of supportive parent-child relations can be a long-term protective factor against the effects of destructive interparental conflict on resilience. These two results should inform the debate about how best to support families characterized by violent transactions, at all levels of prevention. Our approach also opens up new avenues for research, notably the retrospective assessment of children's degree of involvement in interparental conflict, focusing on their affective and behavioral reactions. There are many issues arising from the presence of children during interparental conflict, both for the children themselves and for their parents. This research would therefore be worthwhile for three reasons. First, it would provide a means of studying the effects of children's presence, depending on whether it is voluntary or involuntary. Second, it would help us to understand what prompts children to intervene (or refrain from intervening) in interparental violence. Third, it would enable us to assess the long-term effects of these reactions on children's resilience.

## References

- Adeyemi, A. (2016). Inter-parental conflict, parent-child relationship on emotional security of school-going adolescents in Ibadan South-West Local Government Area. *KIU Journal of Education*, 11, 39-74.

- Amato, P. R., & Sobolewski, J. M. (2001). The effects of divorce and marital discord on adult children's psychological well-being. *American Sociological Review*, 900-921.  
doi:10.2307/3088878
- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 1173-1182.
- Bradford, K., Vaughn, L. B., & Barber, B. K. (2008). When there is conflict: Interparental conflict, parent-child conflict, and youth problem behaviors. *Journal of Family Issues*, 29(6), 780-805. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07308043>
- Brown, E., & Jaspard, M. (2004). La place de l'enfant dans les conflits et les violences conjugales. *Revue des Politiques Sociales et Familiales*, 78(1), 5-19.
- Buehler, C., & Gerard, J. M. (2002). Marital conflict, ineffective parenting, and children's and adolescents' maladjustment. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64(1), 78-92.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2002.00078.x>
- Cater, Å. K., Miller, L. E., Howell, K. H., & Graham-Bermann, S. A. (2015). Childhood exposure to intimate partner violence and adult mental health problems: Relationships with gender and age of exposure. *Journal of Family Violence*, 30(7), 875-886. doi:10.1007/s10896-015-9703-0
- Coln, K. L., Jordan, S. S., & Mercer, S. H. (2013). A unified model exploring parenting practices as mediators of marital conflict and children's adjustment. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 44(3), 419-429. doi:10.1007/s10578-012-0336-8



- Compagnone, P. D., & Lo Monaco, G. (2015). Validation française du questionnaire d'évaluation de l'environnement invalidant durant l'enfance: The Invalidating Childhood Environments Scale (ICES). *European Review of Applied Psychology, 65*(1), 43-52.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.erap.2014.11.001>
- Cui, M., & Conger, R. D. (2008). Parenting behavior as mediator and moderator of the association between marital problems and adolescent maladjustment. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 18*(2), 261-284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2008.00560.x>
- Davies, C. A., DiLillo, D., & Martinez, I. G. (2004). Isolating adult psychological correlates of witnessing parental violence: Findings from a predominantly Latina sample. *Journal of Family Violence, 19*(6), 369-377.
- Davies, P. T., & Cummings, E. M. (1994). Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin, 116*(3), 387-411.
- Davies, P. T., Sturge-Apple, M. L., Woitach, M. J., & Cummings, E. M. (2009). A process analysis of the transmission of distress from interparental conflict to parenting: Adult relationship security as an explanatory mechanism. *Developmental Psychology, 45*(6), 1761-1773.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016426>
- Duval, P., Pietri, M., & Bouteyre, E. (2019). Effect of perceived parent child relations on adjustment of young women exposed to mutual intimate partner violence during childhood. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 47*, 274-281.
- El-Sheikh, M., Shimizu, M., Erath, S. A., Philbrook, L. E., & Hinnant, J. B. (2019). Dynamic patterns of marital conflict: Relations to trajectories of adolescent adjustment. *Developmental Psychology, 55*(8), 1720-1732.

- Erel, O., & Burman, B. (1995). Interrelatedness of marital relations and parent-child relations: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *118*(1), 108-132.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.118.1.108>
- Fantuzzo, J. W., & Fusco, R. A. (2007). Children's direct exposure to types of domestic violence crime: A population-based investigation. *Journal of Family Violence*, *22*(7), 543-552.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-007-9105-z>
- Fergusson, D. M., & Horwood, L. J. (1998). Exposure to interparental violence in childhood and psychosocial adjustment in young adulthood. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *22*(5), 339-357.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(98\)00004-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(98)00004-0)
- Fosco, G. M., DeBoard, R. L., & Grych, J. H. (2007). Making sense of family violence: Implications of children's appraisals of interparental aggression for their short- and long-term functioning. *European Psychologist*, *12*(1), 6-16.
- Fosco, G. M., & Grych, J. H. (2010). Adolescent triangulation into parental conflicts: Longitudinal implications for appraisals and adolescent-parent relations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *72*(2), 254-266.
- Goeke-Morey, M. C., Cummings, E. M., & Papp, L. M. (2007). Children and marital conflict resolution: Implications for emotional security and adjustment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *21*(4), 744-753. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.21.4.744>
- Gonzales, G., Chronister, K. M., Linville, D., & Knoble, N. B. (2012). Experiencing parental violence: A qualitative examination of adult men's resilience. *Psychology of Violence*, *2*(1), 90-103. doi:10.1037/a0026372

- Greene, C. A., Chan, G., McCarthy, K. J., Wakschlag, L. S., & Briggs-Gowan, M. J. (2018). Psychological and physical intimate partner violence and young children's mental health: The role of maternal posttraumatic stress symptoms and parenting behaviors. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 77, 168-179. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.01.012>
- Grych, J. H., Raynor, S. R., & Fosco, G. M. (2004). Family processes that shape the impact of interparental conflict on adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology*, 16(3), 649-665. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579404004717>
- Holden, G. W. (2003). Children exposed to domestic violence and child abuse: Terminology and taxonomy. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 6(3), 151-160.
- Ionescu, S., Jourdan-Ionescu, C., Boutheyre, E., Nini, M. N., Rutembesa, E., Kalina, K., Aguerre, C., & Kimessoukié-Omolomo, E. (2018). Socio-political context, risk factors and scores on Resilience scale. In C. Jourdan-Ionescu, S. Ionescu, E. Kimessoukié-Omolomo, & F. Julien-Gauthier (Eds.), *Résilience et culture, culture de la résilience* (pp. 152-160). Retrieved from <http://lel.crires.ulaval.ca/oeuvre/resilience-et-culture-culture-de-la-resilience>
- Ionescu, S., Masse, L., Jourdan-Ionescu, C., et Favro, P. (2009). *Version française de l'Échelle de résilience de Wagnild et Young (1993)*. Manuscrit non publié. Paris : Université Paris 8.
- Ionescu, S. (2011). *Traité de résilience assistée*. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Ionescu, S. (2016). *Résiliances. Ressemblances dans la diversité*. Odile Jacob.
- Jaspard, M. (2007). Au nom de l'amour: Les violences dans le couple. *Informations Sociales*, 8, 34-44.
- Johnson, M. P. (2011). Gender and types of intimate partner violence: A response to an anti-feminist literature review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 16(1), 289-296.

- Kaczynski, K. J., Lindahl, K. M., Malik, N. M., & Laurenceau, J. P. (2006). Marital conflict, maternal and paternal parenting, and child adjustment: A test of mediation and moderation. *Journal of Family Psychology, 20*(2), 199-208. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.20.2.199>
- Kimber, M., Adham, S., Gill, S., McTavish, J., & MacMillan, H. L. (2018). The association between child exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) and perpetration of IPV in adulthood—A systematic review. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 76*, 273-286. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.11.007>
- Knutson, J. F., Lawrence, E., Taber, S. M., Bank, L., & DeGarmo, D. S. (2009). Assessing children's exposure to intimate partner violence. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 12*(2), 157--173. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-009-0048-1>
- Krishnakumar, A., & Buehler, C. (2000). Interparental conflict and parenting behaviors: A meta-analytic review. *Family Relations, 49*(1), 25-44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2000.00025.x>
- Krishnakumar, A., Buehler, C., & Barber, B. K. (2003). Youth perceptions of interparental conflict, ineffective parenting, and youth problem behaviors in European-American and African-American families. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 20*(2), 239-260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075030202007>
- Latzman, N. E., Vivolo-Kantor, A. M., Clinton-Sherrod, A. M., Casanueva, C., & Carr, C. (2017). Children's exposure to intimate partner violence: A systematic review of measurement strategies. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 37*, 220-235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.10.009>
- Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Cognitive-behavioral treatment of borderline personality disorders*. New York: Guilford.

- Margolin, G., Olivier, P., & Medina, A. (2001). Conceptual Issues in Understanding the Relation between Interparental Conflict and Child Adjustment: Integrating Developmental Psychopathology and Risk/Resilience Perspectives. In J. Grych & F. Fincham (Eds.), *Interparental Conflict and Child Development: Theory, Research and Applications* (pp. 9-38). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511527838.003
- Miller-Graff, L. E., Cater, Å. K., Howell, K. H., & Graham-Bermann, S. A. (2016). Parent-child warmth as a potential mediator of childhood exposure to intimate partner violence and positive adulthood functioning. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping, 29*(3), 259-273.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2015.1028030>
- Mountford, V., Corstorphine, E., Tomlinson, S., & Waller, G. (2007). Development of a measure to assessing validating childhood environments in the eating disorders. *Eating Behavior, 8*, 48-58.
- Neighbors, B. D., Forehand, R., & Bau, J. J. (1997). Interparental conflict and relations with parents as predictors of young adult functioning. *Development and Psychopathology, 9*(1), 169-187.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579497001120>
- O'Brien, K. L., Cohen, L., Pooley, J. A., & Taylor, M. F. (2013). Lifting the domestic violence cloak of silence: Resilient Australian women's reflected memories of their childhood experiences of witnessing domestic violence. *Journal of Family Violence, 28*(1), 95-108.
- Ovaere, F., Sardo-Infirri, S., Touahria-Gaillard, A., & Lévy, J. M. (2007). *L'impact de la violence conjugale sur les enfants. Revue critique de littérature*. Paris: ONED.
- Papp, L. M., Cummings, E. M., & Goeke-Morey, M. C. (2002). Marital conflicts in the home when children are present versus absent. *Developmental Psychology, 38*(5), 774-783.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.38.5.774>

- Rascle, N., & Irachabal, S. (2001). Médiateurs et modérateurs: Implications théoriques et méthodologiques dans le domaine du stress et de la psychologie de la santé. *Le Travail Humain*, 64(2), 97-118. doi:10.3917/th.642.0097
- Schermerhorn, A. C., Chow, S.-M., & Cummings, E. M. (2010). Developmental family processes and interparental conflict: Patterns of microlevel influences. *Developmental Psychology*, 46(4), 869–885. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019662>
- Straus, M. A. (1999). *Child-report, adult-recall, and sibling versions of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale*. Durham, NC: Family Research Laboratory.
- Straus, M., Hamby, S., Boney-McCoy, S., & Sugarman, D. (1996). The revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2). *Journal of Family Issues*, 17(3), 283-316.
- Suzuki, S. L., Geffner, R., & Bucky, S. F. (2008). The experiences of adults exposed to intimate partner violence as children: An exploratory qualitative study of resilience and protective factors. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 8(1-2), 103-121.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10926790801984523>
- Turner, H. A., & Kopiec, K. (2006). Exposure to interparental conflict and psychological disorder among young adults. *Journal of Family Issues*, 27(2), 131-158.  
doi:10.1177/0192513X05280991
- van Eldik, W. M., de Haan, A. D., Parry, L. Q., Davies, P. T., Luijk, M. P. C. M., Arends, L. R., & Prinzie, P. (2020, May 21). The Interparental Relationship: Meta-Analytic Associations With Children's Maladjustment and Responses to Interparental Conflict. *Psychological Bulletin*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bul0000233>

- Vu, N. L., Jouriles, E. N., McDonald, R., & Rosenfield, D. (2016). Children's exposure to intimate partner violence: A meta-analysis of longitudinal associations with child adjustment problems. *Clinical Psychology Review, 46*, 25-33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2016.04.003>
- Wagnild, G. M., & Young, H. M. (1993). Development and psychometric evaluation of the resilience scale. *Journal of Nursing Measurement, 1*, 165-178.
- Wagnild, G. M. (2009). *The resilience scale user's guide*. Worden, MT: Resilience Center.
- Warmuth, K. A., Cummings, E. M., & Davies, P. T. (2020). Constructive and destructive interparental conflict, problematic parenting practices, and children's symptoms of psychopathology. *Journal of Family Psychology, 34*(3), 301–311.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000599>
- Young, R., Lennie, S., & Minnis, H. (2011). Children's perceptions of parental emotional neglect and control and psychopathology. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 52*(8), 889-897.