

# CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTAL CONFLICT AS PREDICTORS OF ADOLESCENTS' SELF-EFFICACY

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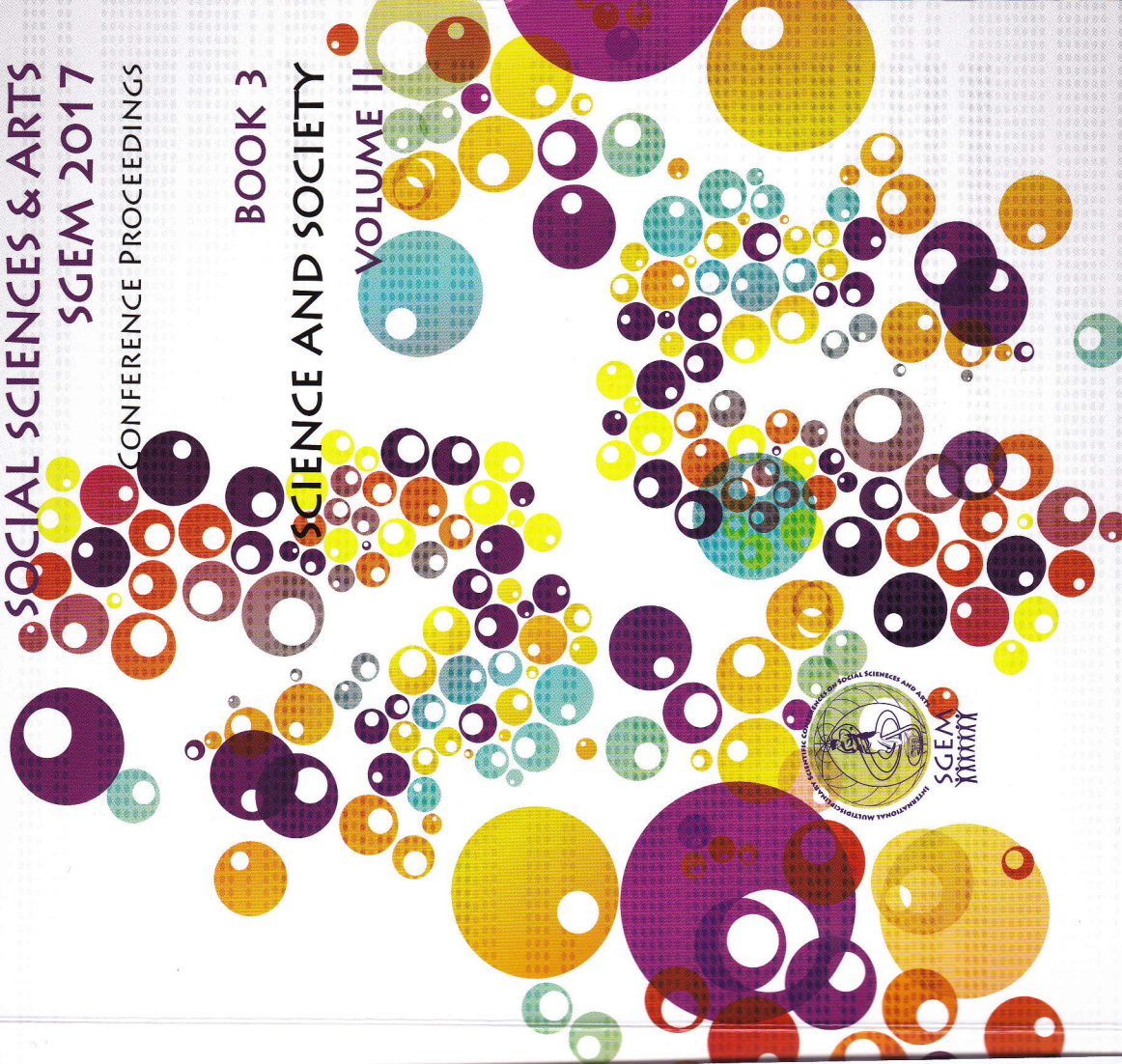
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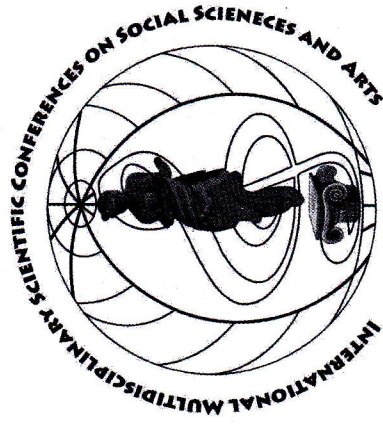


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## CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTAL CONFLICT AS PREDICTORS OF ADOLESCENTS' SELF-EFFICACY

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### ABSTRACT

The family has a key role in a child's development. Numerous studies have shown the negative impact of domestic violence and parental conflict on the child's functioning and adaptation and these negative impacts also have long-lasting consequences on adolescent self-efficacy.

The research goal was to examine the influence of students' perception of parental conflict on their social, emotional and academic self-efficacy. 448 secondary school adolescents participated in the study, 62% were boys and 38% were girls (the average age was  $M=15.84$ ,  $SD=0.69$ ). During regular class they filled out the Self-efficacy questionnaire (Vulić-Prtorić and Sorić, 2006), Children perception of parental conflict scale (Macuka, 2012) and gave some demographic data about themselves (age, gender, school grades).

The results of the regression analysis showed that for the prediction of social and emotional self-efficacy the significant predictor was only one dimension of adolescent perception of parental conflict, i.e. students' perception of threat caused by parental conflict. For the prediction of academic self-efficacy and academic achievement other two dimensions of parental conflict were significant, i.e. students' self-blame and conflict characteristics. In accordance with the research goal, academic self-efficacy was best explained by parental conflict predictors (12.7% variance explanation).

We can conclude that the perception of parental conflict has a bigger negative impact on the student's academic adaptation in comparison to social and emotional self-efficacy. The emergence of the problem regarding school adjustment of adolescents can serve as an indicator for the presence of domestic violence. Therefore it is desirable for secondary schools to include parents into the school prevention programs.

**Keywords:** parental conflict, adolescent self-efficacy, academic achievement, secondary school students

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a risky and turbulent period of life [1] in which adolescents experience changes in physical, emotional and cognitive aspects of life. The sense of self-efficacy is important in overcoming difficulties and gaining success during the period of adolescence.

Self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to learn or perform behaviors at designated level, and as a personal perceived capability to accomplish specific tasks or desired results [1]. It influences academic motivation, learning, and achievement. Self-efficacy is based on social cognitive theory upon which human achievement depends on the interaction between a person's behavior, personal factors and environmental conditions [1]. Depending on self-efficacy beliefs one will make task choices, take an effort, be persistent, resilient or desire achievement. Students who feel efficacious for learning or performing a task participate more readily, work harder, persist longer when they encounter difficulties, and achieve at a higher level compared to those who doubt their capabilities.

Adolescents have increased expectations from family and society. Further, the family is considered as a major source of adolescents' social self-efficacy, and family support is in direct correlation with adolescents' social self-efficacy [2]. Social self-efficacy beliefs predict one's ability to face social challenges [3]. There are significant mean differences in social self-efficacy between adolescents prone to fighting, avoiding school and victimized compared to those with higher social self-efficacy [4]. Adolescents with higher social self-efficacy are less likely to engage in risky behavior such as drinking, drug use and delinquency.

Emotional self-efficacy beliefs predict one's ability to survive with negative emotions [5]. It is an important factor in gaining and maintaining good mental health and resilience in coping with negative emotions during adolescence [5]. Individuals with a higher level of emotional self-efficacy have a lower level of depression and anxiety compared to those with a lower level of emotional self-efficacy. It has an indirect impact on the social behavior of the adolescents and one's failure in controlling emotions can lead to destructive social behavior [6].

Academic self-efficacy beliefs predict one's school engagement and levels of academic success. There is a strong positive correlation between students' grade and educational outcome expectation, and a moderate positive correlation with students' homework completion rates [7]. Also, there is a significant strong negative correlation between self-efficacy and behavior problems in school and a weak, positive correlation with increased school attendance [7].

Social surrounding, like the family, the school, and the peers, has a major influence on adolescents' self-efficacy [1]. According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory the family is the initial source of self-efficacy and adolescents' well-being. Warm, responsive and supportive parents are more likely to foster trust, competence and self-efficacy beliefs in adolescents [1]. Beliefs of competence are necessary for the development of adolescents' ability to cope with stressful life events. Self-efficacy can grow through observing others; parents, siblings, peers and with the principles of social learning theories. According to the Social learning theory [1], parents are models whose behavior and attitudes children learn. In that way, children learn dysfunctional patterns of behavior in situations when they have to deal with conflicts and manage problems.

Children want to be like their parents so they imitate their behavior outside their homes, for example at school. Contrary, parental conflict affects adolescents' self-efficacy for conflict resolution and controlling turbulent situations [8].

Researchers and clinicians have in the past decades put the efforts to discover the association between marital and child problems [9]. They have discovered how marital and parental problems co-occur with child problems. It is known that observing parental conflict is a significant stressor, and children usually exhibit distress when exposed to angry or aggressive interactions involving their parents [10]. The other empirical evidence also suggests that parental conflict is a risk factor for the development of maladjustment [9]. The level of anger, aggressiveness during a conflict and quality of its resolution are important for the determination of how stressful a conflict is for children [10]. The content of disagreement is important for the determination of how a conflict will be perceived by children [9]. Children are more threatened by and are more motivated to intervene in conflicts involving a child-related topic [9].

Numerous studies [11] have shown the existence of several mechanisms with which one can explain the connection between parental conflict and maladjustment in children, i.e. traumatic stress, physical and psychological symptoms, academic problems, social competence, internalization and externalization problems. Parental conflict is related to reduced parental physical and psychological availability, withdrawal and a negative response to adolescent needs [10].

The parental conflict has a negative effect on the family environment and adolescents' behavior [9]. Researches showed that it contributes to adolescent depression, low self-efficacy, and self-esteem [12] and may affect the parent-adolescent relationship by using harsh discipline and inadequate supervision. Parental conflict can influence children's and adolescents' behavior directly through modelling and indirectly through changes in the parent-child relationship [11].

Grych and Fincham [9] developed a cognitive – contextual framework for understanding the association between parental conflict and child adjustment. According to that framework intensity, content, duration, and resolution of parental conflict have an important effect on children's understanding and coping with such a conflict. In general, it can be said that the key findings of parental conflict on adolescents and children are: the degree of negative effect depends on the intensity of the conflict, the specific content of the conflict is important as it is related to the perception of being involved or/and blamed, as it is as well as to the duration of time children's exposure are exposed to the conflict, and parents' inability to constructively deal with conflicts. When conflicts are resolved successfully and constructively, parents transmit to their children effective models and skills for problem resolution, which may facilitate children in their relationships with others, allowing them to generalize these conflict-resolution styles to subsequent peer relationships.

Consequences of witnessing parental conflict manifest differently in children of different ages, that is they depend on their developmental stage and cognitive maturity. Depending on their developmental stage they will perceive interparental conflict, their attribution regarding the cause of the conflict, the threat they experience and how efficient they are in coping with it [11]. While younger children are more likely to

experience self-blaming for interparental conflict compared to older children [9], adolescents are more concerned about perceived threat of the conflict.

The main goal of the research was to examine the correlation between perceptions of parental conflicts and a social and emotional adaptation of adolescents, and especially their adaptation to school. The predictability of three dimensions of parental conflict (conflict characteristics, self-blame, threats) in relation to student self-efficacy (social, academic and emotional) and academic achievement was tested.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants in the research were 448 students (62% boys and 38% girls) of the first (N=239) and the second grade (N=207) vocational schools (Economic and business school N=278, Electrical Engineering and Traffic School N=170), with an average age of  $M=15.84$ ,  $SD=0.69$ .

### Instruments

Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale [13]

The Scale consists of 45 items which measure three separate dimensions of parental conflict: 1) conflict characteristics ( $k=23$ ) related to the intensity and frequency of parental conflict including a high level of aggression hostility, poorly resolved and stable conflict situations; 2) self-blame ( $k=8$ ) related to self-blame of children, whereas children considered themselves responsible and guilty for parental conflicts; and (3) the threats ( $k=14$ ) that relates to the children's perceived threat by parental conflict, their conflict involvement, and their disability to confront with the conflict. The students' task is to self-estimate the extent to which each particle is related to their parental conflict experience, whereby 1 = incorrect, 2 = partially true and 3 = correct. The internal reliability of the whole Scale ( $k=45$ ) is  $\alpha = 0.94$ , while reliability for the subscales are: conflict characteristics  $\alpha = 0.92$ , self-blame  $\alpha = 0.79$ , and threats  $\alpha = 0.84$ .

Self-efficacy Questionnaire for Children [14]

The Self-efficacy Questionnaire for Children (SEQ-C) is used to examine the children's perception of self-efficacy in three areas: social self-efficacy (9 items related to perceived ability for handling with peer relationships and assertiveness), academic self-efficacy (8 items related to perceived ability for learning and school curriculum, and also for fulfilling the school expectations) and emotional self-efficacy (7 items related to the perceived ability to cope with negative emotions). On a 5-point Likert scale whereby 1 = not true at all, 2 = mostly not true, 3 = not sure, 4 = mostly true, 5 = completely true, the students self-evaluate how much the described behavior relates to them. The internal reliability of the whole SEQ-C scale ( $k=24$ ) is  $\alpha = 0.87$ , while the reliability coefficients for the subscales are: academic self-efficacy  $\alpha = 0.79$ , emotional self-efficacy  $\alpha = 0.80$ , and social self-efficacy  $\alpha = 0.81$ .

### Demographic data

The participants also gave some basic sociodemographic data (age, gender) as well as grades from the previous school year and from the previous term in Croatian language (mother tongue), mathematics and the general success.

### Procedure

The research was conducted in the group during regular classes with prior permission from the school and the participants' informed consent. Before the beginning of the research, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants who were also informed of the voluntariness and anonymity of participation. The research was conducted by a school psychologist and lasted about 40 minutes. The participants were told that if they felt the need or had any questions, they could go to a school psychologist or psychologist at the counselling centres. The participants got leaflets with the counselling centres contacts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All the variables were obtained based on the arithmetic means of the above described items of questionnaires and scales. Missing data were replaced with the arithmetic mean of that students' group (i.e. arithmetic mean for that specific class). Outliers were replaced with arithmetic mean  $\pm 2$  standard deviations. Average values of the sum of the students' academic success from the previous year and from the previous term were used for the variable academic achievement. The achievement in mathematics and Croatian was chosen because in primary school students mostly have very good and excellent grades. Croatian and mathematics are usually considered to be the basic subjects in primary school; therefore the criteria are more severe in comparison to some other subjects and gave us a more objective insight.

The preconditions for carrying out a parametric statistical analysis were in place. Although tests of normality distribution showed that some distributions of the research variables deviate significantly from the normal distribution, indexes of asymmetry did not exceed values greater than  $\pm 2.00$  [15].

In data analysis, first the descriptive statistics for the variables included in the research were calculated. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic descriptive data for measured variables

	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
conflict characteristics	427	1.00	2.83	1.47	.363	1.103	.784
self-blame	427	1.00	3.00	1.34	.356	1.367	1.963
threats	427	1.00	2.86	1.33	.336	1.359	1.834
social self-efficacy	444	1.00	5.00	3.89	.662	-.893	1.369
academic self-efficacy	444	1.00	5.00	3.16	.746	.013	-.382
emotional self-efficacy	444	1.00	5.00	3.51	.768	-.456	.406
academic achievement	448	1.67	5.00	3.32	.657	.281	-.252

Further analysis was based on calculating the Pearson's correlations coefficients between the measured variables (Table 2).

Table 2. The correlation matrix for the measured variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(1) conflict characteristics	1	.355**	.658**	-.159**	-.259**	-.216**	-.146**
(2) self-blame		1	.424**	-.124*	-.320**	-.107*	-.242**
(3) threats			1	-.244**	-.224**	-.280**	-.088
(4) social self-efficacy				1	.374**	.529**	.128**
(5) academic self-efficacy					1	.390**	.557**
(6) emotional self-efficacy						1	.075
(7) academic achievement							1

\*\* p < .01; \* p < .05

The correlation analysis showed statistically significant correlations across all measures (r from -0.11 to -0.32), and a negative direction of correlation between parental conflict perception measures and self-efficacy measures. There was also a statistically significant negative correlation of academic achievement with perceptions of the intensity of conflict between parents (r = -0.15) and self-blame (r = -0.24). Adolescents' psychological development can be negatively influenced by exposure to parental conflict. The manner and the severity in which parents resolve conflicts has an impact on children's psychological maladjustment and exposure to average and high

levels of parental conflict will lead to higher levels of psychological maladjustment [16]. Brummert Lennings and Bussey [17], in their longitudinal study, report about the moderately positive correlation between parental conflict and internalising variables (emotional symptoms and peer problems), externalising variables (hyperactivity-inattention and conduct problems) and anxiety, and a negative correlation with prosocial behaviour. Another longitudinal research [18] found that parental conflict (measured with the short version of the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale) was associated with lower school grades, a lower self-esteem, and more internalising and externalising symptoms. Similar correlations between three factors of perceptions of interparental conflict in late adolescence were obtained in the Bickham and Fiese [19] study: conflict characteristics and threat,  $r=0.67, p<0.0001$ , conflict characteristics and self-blame,  $r=0.21, p<0.01$ , and threat and self-blame,  $r=0.27, p<0.001$ . Some similar findings were obtained in the Parsa, Yaacob, Redzuan, Parsa, and Esmaeili [20] study of Iranian adolescents, where they found that adolescents, who perceived high parental conflict, reported a lower self-efficacy, and may develop a lower self-confidence as well as reduce their security attachment to parents.

The main data were analyzed by means of the regression analysis for which the preconditions were met (the predictor and criterion variables are quantitative and on an interval level, the predictor variances are not null, there is no perfect multicollinearity, i.e. the predictors are not too highly correlated with each other, the predictors are not connected to the "external variables", i.e. there is no third variable in a moderating sense which could affect the correlation with the predictors, the homogeneity of variance is also satisfied, the Watson Durbin test showed error independence, i.e. the residuals are in null correlations, error distribution does not differ statistically significantly from normal distribution, the correlation of variables is linear and they are measured independently).

Table 3. Regression analysis of student adaptation (social, academic and emotional self-efficacy and academic achievement) on conflict characteristics, self-blame and threats

Criterion	Social self-efficacy		Academic self-efficacy		Emotional self-efficacy		Academic achievement	
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Conflict characteristics	.006		-.163**		-.059		-.123*	
Self-blame	-.026		-.259**		.020		-.238**	
Threats	-.237**		-.007		-.250**		.093	
Regression model	R=0.245; R <sup>2</sup> = 0.060; CI=0.017-0.102	R=0.356; R <sup>2</sup> = 0.127; CI=0.069-0.184	R=0.284; R <sup>2</sup> = 0.081; CI=0.032-0.129	R=0.260; R <sup>2</sup> = 0.067; CI=0.022-0.111				
	R <sup>2</sup> <sub>kor</sub> = 0.053 F <sub>(3,440)</sub> = 8.89; p < .001	R <sup>2</sup> <sub>kor</sub> = 0.120 F <sub>(3,440)</sub> = 20.23; p < .001	R <sup>2</sup> <sub>kor</sub> = 0.074 F <sub>(3,440)</sub> = 12.25; p < .001	R <sup>2</sup> <sub>kor</sub> = 0.061 F <sub>(3,440)</sub> = 10.19; p < .001				

\*\* p < .01; \* p < .05



The results of the regression analysis (Table 3) showed that for predicting the social and emotional self-efficacy only the predictor of students' perception of parental threat was statistically significant. For predicting academic self-efficacy and school success, the other two dimensions of parental conflict, self-blame and conflict characteristics proved to be statistically significant predictors. In accordance with the research goal, academic self-efficacy of students was best explained (12.7% explanation of variance) by the students' perception of parental conflicts.

The given results are in accordance with the previous finding that indicates that adolescents may feel insecure and threatened by parental conflict [21]. Therefore, negative emotionality and insecurity increases in adolescents [22]. The way in which children and adolescents perceive parental conflict depends on emotional and cognitive developmental changes, and therefore younger children blame themselves more [9], while older adolescents perceive threat as more relevant [11, 19]. This pattern is explained by different appraisals, the first refers to a primarily affective response, and the second refers to understanding why the conflict is occurring and deciding how to respond [9]. Respondents in conducted research are in middle to late adolescence, and obtain findings are within these explanations regarding perceiving threat as an important influence which significantly decreases adolescents' social and emotional self-efficacy.

Adolescents who perceived greater parental conflict and feel greater self-blame tend to have a lower academic achievement and academic self-efficacy. Bickham and Fiese [19] found that the parental conflict characteristics were negatively related to competence, wherein competence was defined as a belief to perform tasks competently and quickly learn new skills. We confirmed the hypothesis that parental conflict would be related to lower academic achievement because of less cohesion in the family, and consequently related to less involvement in adolescent school activities, which is also confirmed in the Unger, McLeod, Brown, and Tressell [23] research.

Although the results are in accordance with previous studies, the conducted research had some limitations that need to be addressed in future studies. All schools in the conducted research were from one county of Croatia and the survey was conducted only with secondary school students in lower grades, which could limit the generalization of given results. Furthermore, only self-evaluation measures were used, which could produce socially desirable answers. Also, only the most frequently investigated variables of parental conflict situations were included in the study. Finally, the study was transversal in design. Future researches should include a larger age range of the sample from different parts of Croatia and they should be longitudinal in design. It also desirable for future studies to examine other family characteristics, such as parental divorce, and also relations to peers because they are very important social agents for adolescents

## CONCLUSION

The conducted research has contributed to the understanding of self-efficacy in the context of parental conflict and has given insight into the relation of students' perception of parental conflict and their social, emotional and academic self-efficacy. The results have shown that the perception of parental conflict has a more negative

impact on students' academic adaptation in comparison to social and emotional self-efficacy.

These results have important implications for increasing self-efficacy, especially the academic one, in adolescents who live in the context of parental conflict. Therefore, these outcomes, which may arise from parental conflict, should be taken into account in order to effectively plan activities for adolescents. Based on these results more convenient ways for children to deal with parental conflict could be planned, which could consequently affect their psychological outcomes. Also, coping strategies can be promoted and adolescents' beliefs and ability to cope can be strengthened in a timely manner. Considering these findings, activities to raise awareness among parents about the negative impact of marital conflict on their children could also be planned and conducted.

The obtained results highlight the need for further researches on various aspects of parental conflict in order for a better understanding of its link with different aspects of self-efficacy during all stages of adolescence.

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