

# The Role of Fathers in Child Development

## Evidence from Family Relationship Focused Research

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# Parental Influences on Children: A Synopsis

- Historical debate as to parental influences on children
  - Nature (genetic influences) vs., Nurture (rearing environment influences)
    - Nature (mothers AND fathers)
    - Nurture (rearing environment - parenting)
- Parenting research traditions
  - Attachment theory (Bowlby)
    - Nurturant caregiving (0-3 years) determines long-term development
    - Not as deterministic as once proposed
  - Parenting style (Maccoby)
    - Authoritarian, authoritative, permissive
  - Predominant maternal-child focus
    - Role of the father expressly absent from early developmental theories
    - Practice and policy applications as a result (default position that the mother-child relationship matters more for children than the father-child relationship e.g. judicial decision making)
- Contemporary research evidence
  - Fathers play a significant role in children's healthy emotional, behavioural, social and academic development

# Contextualising Paternal Influences on Children

- Where it all starts
  - Maternal influences on children (genetic, intrauterine, and postnatal)
  - Paternal influences (genetic, postnatal – although limited past research)
  - What does evidence tell us about the role of fathers?
- Early paternal influences
  - Quality of paternal parenting = reduces maternal stress, reduces child stress, promotes early development (e.g. sleep, brain development)
  - Quality of partner relationship = reduced prenatal stress for mother (and child); improved parenting/caregiving in early (and later) years for BOTH parents
- Are Father effects only indirect (i.e. via/linked to mother-child relationship)
  - No
  - Direct effects of father's parenting on children (positive – negative)
  - Balance of maternal and paternal factors seems important (co-parenting)
  - Effects vary by child age and child sex (fathers matter)
  - Sustained effects of paternal relationship with mother on children
  - Sustained effects of paternal parenting on children (infancy, childhood, adolescence)

# Parents, Children and Mental Health

- Depression

- Depression will be the leading cause of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY's) by 2020



- Conduct disorder

- Conduct disorder (5-15 years) accounts for 30% of all crime at a cost of £22 billion/year

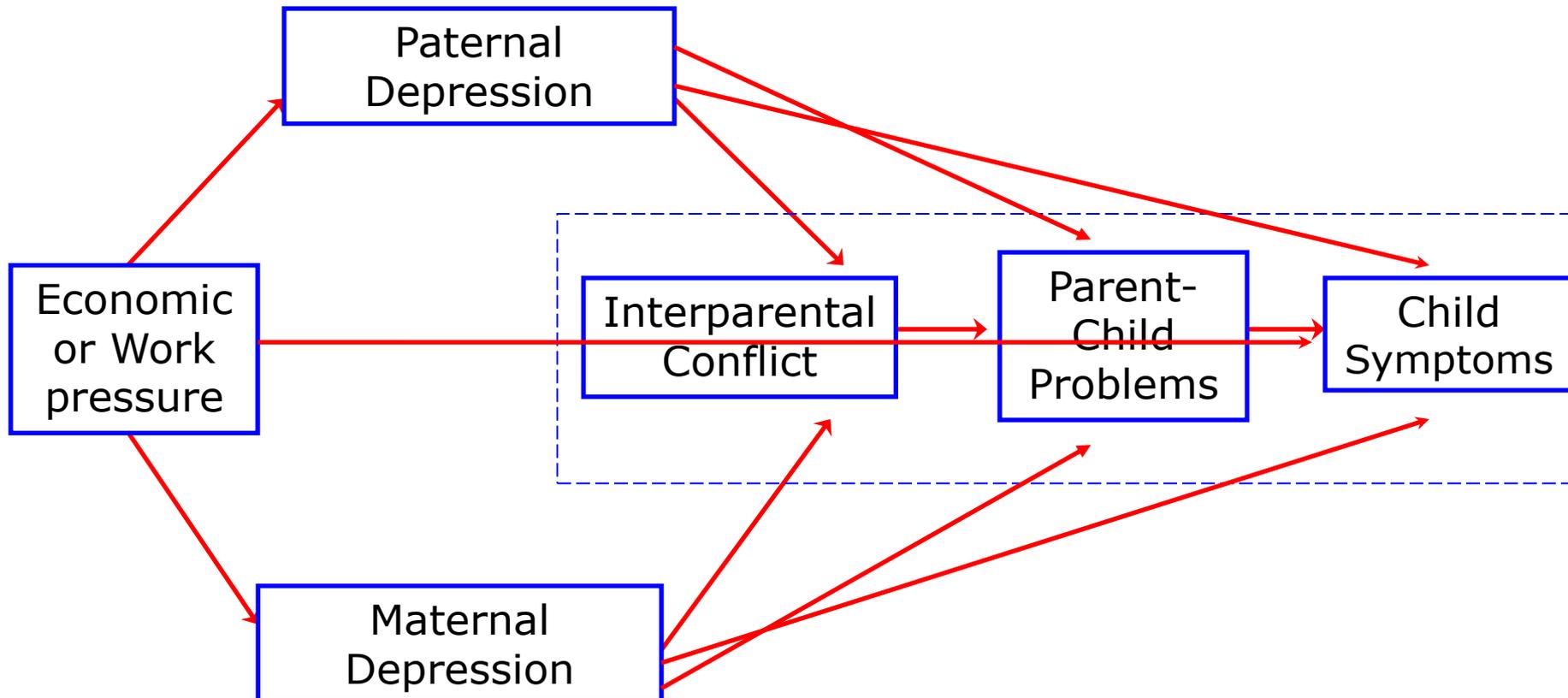


- Family Factors

- Economic pressure/poverty
- Parent mental health
- Parenting behaviour/practices
- Inter-parental conflict, domestic violence
- Parental separation-divorce



# A Process Model of Family Relationship Influences on Child Psychopathology



Conger and colleagues 1989-2007

# Caveats of Past Research

- Salience of the family environment ?
  - Predominantly conducted with biologically related parents and children
  - Limited examination of maternal versus paternal parenting influences on children
- What if it is all in the genes?
  - Associations between maternal and paternal behaviour (e.g. parenting) and child behaviour is BECAUSE children share genes with their parents??
- Disentangling genetic factors from rearing environment factors (e.g. parenting) separately for mothers and fathers
  - Unique research designs (Wales/UK)



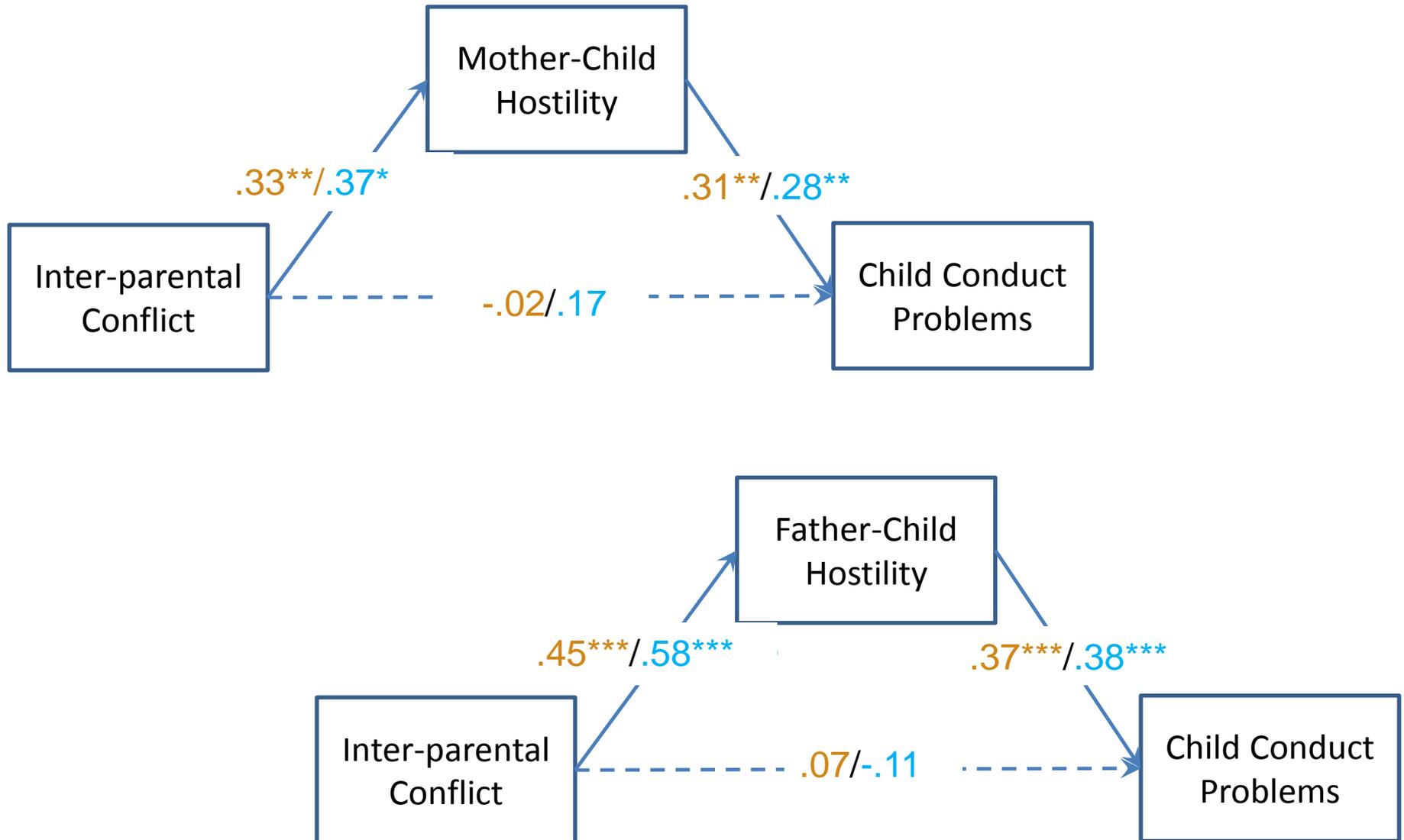
# Inter-Parental Conflict, Hostile Parenting and Children's Conduct Problems

Harold, G. T., Leve, L. D., Elam, K., Thapar, A., Neiderhiser, J., Natsuaki, M., Shaw, D., Reiss, D. (2013). The Nature of Nurture: Disentangling Passive Genotype-Environment Correlation from Family Relationship Influences on Children's Externalizing Problems. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 27(1), 12-21.

# Cardiff In Vitro Fertilization Study (An Adoption at Conception Design)

- Children born through *in-vitro* fertilisation (IVF)
  - 20 fertility centres within the UK (1 in US)
    - 1019 families
      - Homologous IVF N = 485
      - Sperm donation N = 255
      - Egg donation N = 220
      - Embryo donation N=36
      - Gestational surrogacy N=23
  - Families who had a live birth (1994 – 2002)
    - Children aged between 4 – 10 years (mean = 6.80 yrs, SD=1.23)
    - Demographics (family income, parent education, ethnicity)
    - Present sample included children aged 5-8 years old ( $m = 6.49$ ,  $sd = .85$ )
- Genetically related versus unrelated groups
  - Genetically Related
    - Mothers (N=546): Homologous, sperm donation, surrogacy
    - Fathers (N=531): Homologous, egg donation, surrogacy
  - Genetically Unrelated
    - Mothers (N=160): Egg and embryo donation
    - Fathers (N=173): Sperm and embryo donation

# Maternal versus Paternal Influences (Gen/Not Gen)



\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

# Summary and Considerations

- **Mother-child versus father-child influences on children**
  - Inter-parental conflict affects children's conduct problems through disrupted mother-child AND father-child parenting (genetically related or not!)
  - Inter-parental conflict as a context may have a STRONGER disruptive influence on father-child compared to mother-child parenting practices
    - Separation-divorce; remarriage; adoption; foster-care – PARENTING MATTERS!
- **Further supporting evidence**
  - Parenting/Intervention studies
    - Maternal focused parenting interventions show stronger effects on child behaviour WHEN fathers are part of intervention (W-Stratton; Incredible Years)
    - Couple focused programmes (“becoming a parent”; “starting school” ) > parenting focused programmes
  - Maternal depression
    - Effects of maternal depression on children (offspring) reduced when paternal supportive parenting (supportive partner behaviour) is high
- **Bottom Line**
  - The quality of the father-child relationship PROMOTES positive child development WHEN the relationship is positive (infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood)
  - Programmes that promote positive father-child relationships pay significant dividends in the long-term (child health, mental health, child education)
  - Evidence is robust; father-child relationship matters for child development
  - Implications for policy £££ - afford to ignore the evidence in promoting children's best interests?