



## Marital conflict and fifth-graders' risk for injury<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Injuries are the leading cause of morbidity and mortality for American children. Marital conflict has been associated with a range of negative health outcomes, but little is known about how marital conflict may influence risk of injury among children. We hypothesized marital conflict would be related to increased youth injury risk after controlling for relevant demographic and parenting covariates. **Methods:** A community sample of 3218 fifth-graders recruited from three US locales was utilized. Ordinal logistic regression models were used to predict the frequency of unintentional injuries from marital conflict while adjusting for demographics, parenting factors (nurturance, communication, involvement with youth), and family cohesion.

**Results:** Higher levels of marital conflict were associated with higher rates of injury that required professional medical attention (OR = 1.20, 95% CI 1.06, 1.35 per standard deviation). The same association held after inclusion of all covariates in a multivariate ordinal logistic regression model.

**Conclusions:** Parental marital conflict is associated with higher rates of injuries requiring professional medical attention in preadolescent children.

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### 1. Introduction

Injuries are the leading cause of morbidity and mortality for American children. Annually, pediatric injuries lead to approximately 14,000 deaths and 8.6 million emergency room encounters in the United States (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control [NCIPC]). Additionally, it is estimated that each year the United States spends over \$8 billion on the medical treatment of pediatric injuries (Sattin and Corso, 2007).

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Identifying risk factors for pediatric injury is complex, as injuries are believed to be caused by a wide range of developmental, psychosocial and environmental factors (Schwebel and Gaines, 2007). Among the strongest behavioral correlates of pediatric injury risk is the role of parenting behavior (Schwebel and Gaines, 2007). High quality parental supervision and monitoring is particularly associated with lower pediatric injury risk among toddlers and preschoolers (Morrongiello, 2005; Morrongiello et al., 2004, 2006; Schwebel and Bounds, 2003), and even among children at elevated risk for injury due to temperamental or psychopathological traits (Schwebel et al., 2004).

Given the importance of parental supervision and monitoring in early childhood, one might suspect that high levels of parent marital conflict would be related to increased pediatric injury risk throughout development. This association might emerge via multiple causal pathways. Marital conflict is known to influence multiple aspects of individual and family health (Fincham, 2003; Karney and Bradbury, 1995). Parents occupied with frequent disputes are likely to be cognitively and/or physically distracted from parenting duties. They may become self-focused, irritable, and worried about their own personal relationships. These cognitions and distractions may result in inconsistent enforcement of safety-relevant rules, inadequate monitoring of children's behavior, poor modeling