

## **The Correlates of Conflict and Behavioural Difficulties on the Negative Affect in At-Risk Youth in Malaysia**

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Parent-youth conflict and behavioural difficulties are common issues in the field of developmental psychology. This study examines the correlations of conflict and behavioural difficulties, to see if these factors predicted a negative affect on a sample of at-risk youth. A sample of 335 at-risk youth aged 13-24 years old from Public Housing Projects in Kuala Lumpur was selected. Conflict with the father was significantly associated with negative affect. Further analysis showed that three factors were required to produce negative affect. The results support claims that father conflict, emotional problems and conduct problems are an integral part of the close relationships of at-risk youth, and discourage positive youth development among at-risk youth.

*Keywords:* parental conflict, behaviour problems, negative affect, adolescents, Malaysia

Conflict between youth and their parents is a common issue and is discussed in most adolescent research. Although parent-youth conflict can be regarded as a normal family relationship, too many conflicts may be a risk factor for maladjustment (Moed et al., 2015; Weymouth et al., 2016), depressive symptoms (Hunt et al., 2015), and peer rejection (Steege & Gondoli, 2013). Recent studies on parent-youth conflict, for instance, considered family functioning to be the most significant contributing factor to parent-youth conflict and thereby impacting the well-being of adolescents. Chaplin and colleagues (2012) suggested that a lack of parenting skills and support predicted hypertension among youth.

Conflict that is long or highly negative is more likely to be detrimental to the

positive development of youth. Moed et al. (2014) further explained that a high proportion of conflicts with their parents was related to longer conflicts, which, in turn, predicted unresolved and behavioural problems. Zhao et al. (2015) investigated parent-youth conflict in terms of frequency and coping strategy and examined the moderating effects of the type of coping strategy on the relationship between conflict frequency and family satisfaction, between conflict frequency and adolescent self-satisfaction. The results revealed that conflict frequency was negatively related to family satisfaction regardless of the coping strategy. In contrast, conflict frequency was negatively related to self-satisfaction when coping strategy was applied.

Other issues related to parent-youth conflict include family type, behavioural

problems and negative emotions. Skinner and McHale (2016) examined parent-youth conflicts among 187 African American families. The study revealed that youth in younger sibling high conflict families reported more depressive symptoms and were more prone to high-risk behaviours than those in low conflict families. Lauren et al. (2016) conducted a study to see if the relationship damage due to mother-youth severe disagreements was a product of negative affect and failure to compromise. Reports suggested that failure to compromise and negative affect were moderately correlated when mother-adolescent conflicts were included as predictors of adverse relationship consequences due to severe conflict.

One study examined the family system concepts of triangulation and wholism to investigate how interparental conflicts may affect the psychological adjustment of adolescents (Grych et al., 2004). A diverse sample of 14-18 year olds completed measures of interparental conflict, family relationships, internalizing problems, and externalizing problems. The study found that triangulation into parental disagreements mediated the association between parental conflict and both internalizing and externalizing problems. Adolescents exposed to more frequent, intense, and poorly resolved conflicts were more likely to feel triangulated, however, this association was moderated by the nature of the alliances they had with their parents. The results showed that at low levels of interparental conflict, adolescents who had substantially stronger alliances with one parent than the other reported greater triangulation than those with more balanced alliances. At high levels of conflict, the groups reported similar degrees of triangulation. In supportive parent-child relationships, adolescents' appraisals of threat and self-blame for interparental conflict were reduced while more empathic relationships with siblings increased these appraisals. The results also showed that close relationships

with fathers acted as a protective factor that reduced the symptoms of maladjustment.

Another study tested the extent to which family conflict exacerbates depressed mood during adolescence, independent of changes in depressed mood over time, academic performance, bullying victimization, negative cognitive style, and gender (Kelly et al., 2016). A sample of 961 students at 13 years of age was invited to participate in that study. The results showed that parent-adolescent conflict partially predicted changes in depressed mood over time. There was also evidence that parent conflicts and adolescent depressed mood were reciprocally related over time. The study successfully identified potential points of intervention to prevent the onset of depressed mood in early to middle adolescence.

Adams and Laursen (2007) reported that conflict was linked to adverse youth socio-developmental outcomes in at least five areas: (a) aggression, (b) depression, (c) delinquency and deviancy, (d) school grades, and (e) withdrawal and peer difficulties. Thus, conflict has been tied to behavioural difficulties and emotional problems as well as academic problems among youth. They examined whether concurrent associations between adolescent outcomes and disagreements with mothers, fathers, and best friends vary as a function of perceived relationship quality. Participants included 469 youth aged 11-18 years old from a culturally diverse community. The results showed that the negative qualities of parent-adolescent and friend relationships were associated with adjustment problems (aggression, anxiety and depression, delinquent behaviour, and withdrawal), while the positive qualities of parent-adolescent relationships were associated with school grades and adjustment problems. The results also revealed that parent-adolescent conflict was associated with higher school grades for youth to do better but not with poorer quality

relationships and greater delinquent behaviour, and withdrawal in poorer quality relationships. That study also revealed that as conflict increased from medium to high levels, delinquent behaviour increased, school grades either worsened or stopped improving, and withdrawal either increased or stopped declining. Although previous studies have examined the association of parent-youth conflict, most studies focused on European American families, and few studies have been conducted on parent-youth conflict and negative affect experiences in a Malaysian context.

Parental styles and physical discipline were also related to conduct problems among children and youth (Evans, Simons, & Simons, 2012; Gunnoe, 2013; Pagani et al., 2004). One study used cross-lagged modelling to examine reciprocal relations between parental harsh verbal discipline and conduct problems on depressive symptoms among youth (Wang & Kenny, 2014). Data were obtained from a sample of 976 two-parent families and their children. The results showed that both mothers' and fathers' harsh verbal discipline at age 13 years old predicted conduct problems and depressive symptoms between ages 13 and 14 years old. Another study reported that early attachment organization of parents was significantly associated with future behaviour problems (Kochanska & Kim, 2013). They found that parents' attachment insecurity influenced their children's behavioural problems. That study also revealed that high resistance towards parents might confer a dual risk of internalizing behaviour.

Given the critical importance of the still-debated role of both father and mother conflict and behavioural problems on mental health, studies that make progress towards filling the remaining gaps are valuable. Our objective was to examine parent-youth conflict in relation to affect. To our knowledge, few, if any, studies have

examined the youth conflict with both parents and behavioural problems, or assessed using the negative affect measure as a gold standard to predict negative affect in a Malaysian context. We report data on the conflict with parents and youth behaviour problems obtained from the youth themselves.

## Method

### Participants

Questionnaires were distributed among 400 participants residing in the Public Housing Projects (PPR) of Pantai Ria and Seri Pantai, Kuala Lumpur, of which a total of 335 participants had completed and returned them to the enumerators. The inclusion criteria for this study were that the participants must be between 13 and 24 years of age during the period of data collection and lives within the PPR of Pantai Ria and Seri Pantai, Kuala Lumpur. The participants comprised of 57.3% (n=181) boys and 42.7% (n=135) girls, and the mean age of the participants was 16.09 years (SD 1.20). Approximately 96% (n=304) of the respondents were Malays and 4% Indians (n=12). In terms of education, 40% (n=126) of the participants were in Form 3, 29% (n=93) in Form 5, 27% (n=85) in Form 2, 3% (n=9) in Form 6, and 1% (n=3) did not state their level of education. Most of the parents were employed (92.4%, n=292) with the income ranging between RM1,001.00 and RM1,500.00 (21.5%, n=68), followed by RM500.00 to 1,000.00 (19%, n=60), and RM1,501.00 to RM2,000.00 (14.6%, n=46). In terms of education, 77.8% (n=246) of the fathers had completed secondary education, and the rest had completed primary school only; 77.2% (n=244) of the mothers had completed secondary education, and the rest had studied up to the primary school level only. Most of the participants had more than four siblings (75.3%; n=238).

### Measures

The questionnaires assessed the demographic factors, interpersonal conflicts, positive affect, and negative affect. These standardized questionnaires were translated into the Malay language and translated back to the original version (English) before use to ensure the accuracy of the meaning. A bilingual translator who is familiar with the source and target languages was appointed to do the translation. This translator did not have access to the original version of the questionnaires. Discrepancies were discussed with the first author and the research team members and the wording changed to avoid ambiguous items, and back translated until a satisfactory version was achieved.

The Interpersonal Conflict Questionnaire (Laursen, 1993) was used to measure daily disagreements. From a list of 10 conflict topics, participants were asked to identify the number of disagreements over each topic that arose during the previous weekday with mothers and fathers. The instructions, in part, read:

*Disagreements are common events in everyone's life. Disagreements include the following: You objected to something someone said or did, or someone objected to something you said or did; or you and someone had a quarrel or an argument. Disagreements do not necessarily involve pleasant or unpleasant emotions. This questionnaire concerns disagreements between you and one other person. Do not describe disagreements that involved you and a group of two or more people, and do not describe imaginary disagreements.*

The instructions emphasized that overt disagreement required the presence of behavioural opposition. From the following list of issues, the participants indicated the disagreements that took place the previous day, from the time they got up to the time they went to bed. For each issue, the participants were asked to identify the

number of disagreements that arose in each relationship. The conflict topics were annoying behaviour, car/telephone/TV/computer, criticism/teasing, differences of opinion, money/possessions, personal freedom, peer relationships, responsibilities, school/work, and standards of behaviour.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997, 1999; Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998) was used to measure emotional and behavioural difficulties among youth. The SDQ consists of 25 items describing the positive and negative attributes of youth that can be allocated to five subscales of five items each: emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and prosocial behaviour. Each item is scored on a 3-point scale with 0="not true," 1="somewhat true," and 2="certainly true." All the scores on the scale can be computed by summing the scores of the relevant items (range=0-10). The higher scores on the prosocial behaviour scale reflect strengths, whereas the higher scores on the other four scales reflect difficulties. A total difficulties score is calculated by summing the scores for the emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems (range = 0-40). Examples of emotional problems include: "I get a lot of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness," "I worry a lot," and "I am often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful." Examples of conduct problems include: "I get very angry and often lose my temper," "I usually do as I am told," and "I fight a lot." Examples of hyperactivity include: "I am restless," "I cannot stay still for long," "I am constantly fidgeting or squirming," and "I am easily distracted." Examples of peer problems include: "I am usually on my own," "I have one good friend or more," and "Other people my age generally like me." Examples of prosocial behaviour include: "I try to be nice to other people," "I usually share with others," and "I am helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill."

In the current study, the internal consistency coefficients for the SDQ subscales were acceptable for three subscales (Cronbach's alphas for emotional problems was 0.60, conduct problem 0.45, and prosocial behaviour 0.52). The Cronbach's alpha for hyperactivity (0.38) and peer problems (0.38) was notably low. The internal consistency coefficient of the SDQ total of 0.75 was acceptable. The SDQ has previously been validated in the Malaysian context (for details see Stokes, Mellor, Yeow & Hapidzal, 2014).

The Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson & Clark, 1988) was used to measure positive affect and negative affect. The PANAS consists of two mood scales that measure positive affect and the other measures negative affect. The participants were asked to respond to 20 items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from not at all (1 point) to extremely (5 point). The reliability and validity of the PANAS reported by Watson and Clark (1988) were moderately good. The Cronbach's alpha for Positive Affect was 0.86 to 0.96, and for Negative Affect it was 0.84 to 0.87. The reports showed that the PANAS has modest to good validity with other self-report measures, such as general distress and dysfunction, depression and anxiety.

## Procedures

This cross-sectional questionnaire study was conducted in low-income apartments in the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur, the capital city. We selected the PPRs of Kuala Lumpur as our catchment area for three reasons. First, the majority of apartment dwellers were once squatters before they were relocated to the apartments as part of the government redevelopment programme (Rahim, Abdul Kadir, Wan Mahmud, Mohamed & Kee, 2011). Second, the parents' economic hardship was shown to be significantly related to the developmental assets

(Abdul Kadir et al., 2012). Third, the resources provided for the adolescents were limited (Abdul Kadir et al., 2012, 2014). Using a convenience sampling technique of data collection, the door-to-door approach was used to collect data from March to June 2012. In each household, only one male or female was selected to participate in the study. The research team informed the participants about the study procedure. They were given an information sheet with detailed information about the study, voluntary participation conditions, and confidentiality of their responses. In addition, the participants' parents received a consent form to agree that their daughter or son was allowed to participate. All youth with parental consent agreed to participate. Each participant was provided with a questionnaire pack and told that all the information collected would be coded and only accessible to the research team. The participants were asked to complete a set of questions on their own using the self-report measures. The researchers and research assistants assisted participants in case of questions for comprehension and ensured that all the questions were answered individually. The completion of all the study questionnaires took approximately 45 minutes. Permission to conduct the study in the PPRs was granted by the executive director of Kuala Lumpur City Hall.

## Results

### Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 displays that more than half of the participants (184 or 54.9%) had a disagreement with their biological mother, followed by their biological father (107 or 31.9%), and that only 4.5% of the participants disagreed with their stepfather and stepmother (14 or 4.2%). Only 15 (4.5%) participants did not state that they had had a disagreement with their parents.

Table 1

*Disagreement between youth and their parents*

Response	n (%)
Not stated	15 (4.5)
Biological mother	184 (54.9)
Biological father	107 (31.9)
Stepmother	14 (4.2)
Stepfather	15 (4.5)
Total	335 (100)

Further descriptive analysis was used to examine the type of disagreement the youth had with their parents. Table 2 shows that most of the disagreements were about

responsibilities, peer relationships, and standards of behaviour, and that most of the disagreements were with their mothers rather than with their fathers.

Table 2

*Types of disagreement with parents*

Response	n (%)
Annoying behaviour (mother)	264 (78.8)
Annoying behaviour (father)	228 (68.0)
Car/telephone/TV/computer (mother)	266 (79.4)
Car/telephone/TV/computer (father)	232 (69.3)
Criticism/teasing (mother)	294 (87.8)
Criticism/teasing (father)	252 (75.2)
Differences of opinion/idea (mother)	289 (86.3)
Differences of opinion/idea (father)	249 (74.3)
Money/possessions (mother)	273 (81.5)
Money/possessions (father)	245 (73.1)
Personal freedom (mother)	295 (88.1)
Personal freedom (father)	257 (76.7)
Responsibilities (mother)	306 (91.3)
Responsibilities (father)	276 (82.4)
Peer relationships (mother)	302 (90.1)
Peer relationships (father)	264 (78.8)
School/work (mother)	297 (88.7)
School/work (father)	266 (79.4)
Standards of behaviour (mother)	315 (94.0)
Standards of behaviour (father)	283 (84.5)

Further descriptive analysis was taken to see how the parent-youth disagreement was resolved. Most of the youth reported that they gave in to their parents (178 or 53.1%), followed by compromised (100 or 29.9%), and the parents gave in to them (22 or 6.6%).

The majority of the participants reported that they stayed together and continued talking with their parents after the disagreement (179 or 53.4%), followed by they stayed together but stopped talking (113 or 33.7%), and both parents and adolescent were not together (31 or 9.3%).

Table 3

*Frequency of the disagreement resolution*

Response	n (%)
Not stated	12 (3.6)
Compromised	100 (29.9)
Gave in to the other person	178 (53.1)
Other person gave in to me	22 (6.6)
No resolution	15 (4.5)
Someone else revolved it	8 (2.4)
Total	335 (100)

Table 4

*Frequency of what happened after the disagreement*

Response	n (%)
Not stated	12 (3.6)
We stayed together and continued talking	179 (53.4)
We stayed together but stopped talking	113 (33.7)
We were not together	31 (9.3)
Total	335 (100)

**Correlation Analyses**

The inter-correlations are presented in Table 5. As predicted, both father and mother conflicts, difficulties and prosocial behaviour were significantly

correlated with negative affect. Emotional problems significantly correlated to mother conflict. Other difficulties and prosocial behaviour were not significant.

Table 5

*Correlations of the variables studied*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Mother conflict	-						
2. Father conflict	0.70**	-					
3. Negative affect	0.23**	0.22**	-				
4. Emotional problems	0.13*	0.08	0.46**	-			
5. Conduct problems	0.08	0.09	0.39**	0.55**	-		
6. Peer problems	-0.01	-0.01	0.18**	0.43**	0.40**	-	
7. Hyperactivity	0.06	0.06	0.26**	0.55**	0.40**	0.41**	-
11. Prosocial behaviour	-0.01	-0.03	-0.11*	0.02	-0.02	0.27**	0.11*

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Further analysis was carried out to see if conflict and behavioural difficulties predicted negative affect. The results showed that three factors were required to produce negative affect. When negative affect was regressed onto behavioural difficulties and conflict, the full model consisting of three predictors was significant

$F(4, 331) = 27.083, p < 0.001$ , and emotional problems ( $\beta = 0.29, p < 0.001$ ), father disagreement ( $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$ ), and conduct problems ( $\beta = 0.13, p < 0.001$ ) made a unique and significant contribution to negative affect. All risk factors together explained 19% of the variance in depression (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.19$ ).

Table 6

<i>Predictors of negative affect</i>			
Predictor variables	$\beta$	$t$	Sig.
Emotional problems	0.29	5.026	0.000
Father conflict	0.22	4.381	0.000
Conduct problems	0.13	2.351	0.019

## Discussion

In this cross-sectional questionnaire study of 335 at-risk youth, the results support that their disagreements with both their father and mother were a significant factor in relating to negative affect. Our findings were also consistent with earlier studies that reported a significant relationship between parent-youth conflict and negative affect (e.g. Moed et al., 2015; Laursen et al., 2016). We suggest that the nature of parent-youth conflict among Malaysian families differs from that experienced by families in the United States, Europe and around the world because of the strains related to their beliefs, values, and attitudes. For example, young adults in Malay families may be more likely to be in conflict with their parents over issues relating to religious beliefs, values, and attitudes. Thus, we also suggest that in Asian culture, the parent-youth conflict originates as much from fundamental differences in the beliefs, values, and attitudes (Krauss et al., 2014) as it does from everyday family tasks.

Responsibilities, peer relationships, and standards of behaviour were identified as

the higher scores for youth disagreements with their mothers than that of their fathers. This can be explained in terms of the maternal role as a primary caregiver and autonomy-relevant parenting for their children. This study suggests that when mothers spend more time with their children, engage more in school activities, and have greater knowledge of their children's whereabouts, friends, and activities, it increases the number of disagreements between them. In Asian culture, children at the age of 14 years old are considered to be a young adult. Therefore, they are expected to be responsible for themselves and their young siblings, as well as obedient and respectful to their parents. They are prohibited from questioning their parents' judgment and decisions due to status hierarchies that are assumed to be present in all relationships. Similar findings were found in many studies, which suggests that parent-youth conflict is common in many societies, such as in China (Leung & Shek, 2014; Li et al., 2014), the United States (Skinner & McHale, 2016; Weymouth & Buehler, 2016), and Australia (Habib et al., 2014; Kelly et al., 2016). This study concludes that responsibilities, school performance, and standards of behaviour are still the

most significant and relevant topics related to parent-youth conflict.

The findings suggested that three risk factors were required to produce negative affect. Emotional problems, conflict with father, and conduct problems significantly predicted negative affect. As expected, emotional problems are the strongest predictors of negative affect meanwhile conflict with father and conduct problems added into the regression model. This finding indicates that emotional problems, conflict with father, and conduct problems can be classified as destructive conflict style, as these risk factors influence negative emotion. In line with Geoke-Morey et al. (2003), these risk factors could lead to reduced self-regulation and to poor judgements. On top of that, destructive conflict styles could lead to poor coping skills and conduct behaviour (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

The interpersonal conflict questionnaire performed well in identifying youth with conflict experiences among at-risk youth living in a disadvantaged community. This is the first study in Malaysia to use the Interpersonal Conflict Questionnaire to firmly reveal that parent-youth conflicts with either the father or the mother could be a potent risk factor for later emotional distress. Higher scores on disagreement were significantly related to the negative affect scores. These findings may suggest that those growing up with a mother and father who have a strong feeling of disagreement concerning youth responsibilities, school performance, and standards of behaviour would be more likely to experience a more negative affect than those who do not experience such behaviour.

The findings of this study suggest that for youth, it may be important to resolve conflicts with parents in order to maintain the rewards from the parent-youth

relationship. Compromised and gave in to their parents are seen to be the most effective way of avoiding a subsequent loss of rewards (e.g. loss of resources, attention, privileges). One of the effective ways of dealing with conflict with their parents is staying together and continuing to talk. This strategy helps them to maintain their relationship with their parents and thus produces a more positive affect whilst other youth may stay with their parents but stop talking. Although this strategy is also seen as an effective way of dealing with conflict with their parents, it may damage their social interaction, and, in turn, produce a negative affect. Therefore, youth are more likely to search for an effective conflict resolution with their parents that may minimize the negative impact on their emotions.

This study has several limitations. The first limitation is the use of a cross-sectional design data collection. Due to this cross-sectional design, this study is unable to determine the degree to which parent-youth conflict is a risk factor for negative affect. Therefore, a longitudinal study is needed to establish the relationship of parent-youth conflict with the negative affect. Second, due to the small sample size, generalization is not permissible to the youth population.

## **Conclusion**

This report describes a study of at-risk youth using self-report ratings in communities of the urban poor who were identified as demonstrating a pervasive conflict with their parents. Both mother and father conflicts are significantly related to negative affect. These findings suggest that a developmental pathway through conflict raises the likelihood of a negative affect. The findings presented here also contribute to a growing evidence base that considers that youth conflicts with their parents are

significantly related to the negative affect. This study suggests that social workers, counsellors, and other mental health professionals should conduct more in-depth research into parent-youth conflict to help establish an evidence base, for a better understanding of the needs of the referred youth and to help design effective interventions to prevent mental health problems in the future.

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the Department of Prime Minister, Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) for funding this research project (Code project UKM-PERKASA-5-2011), and particularly grateful to the adolescents who participated in this study.

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