

Parent-Adolescent Conflict and Attributions: Views of Adolescents with and without ADHD

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Background

- Limited parent-adolescent conflict is adaptive as it reflects adolescents' desire for independence from parents (Conger et al., 2002). However, intense conflicts are associated with adolescent maladjustment, including oppositional defiant disorder (Conger et al, 1994) depression (Forehand et al., 1988), anxiety and low self-esteem (Slater & Haber, 1984).
- Studies in non-clinical samples found an association between parent-adolescent conflict and adolescents holding blaming and global attributions about the parent's behaviour (e.g., Grace, Kelley, & McCain, 1993). However, the association between parent-adolescent conflict and attributions has not been investigated in adolescents with ADHD. This study examined this relationship.
- Children with ADHD often have difficulties with social problem solving (Matthys, Cuperus, & Van Engeland, 1999), experience negative emotion (Hinshaw & Melnick, 1995), and have poor self-regulation skills (Anastopoulos, DuPaul, & Barkley, 1991).
- Given that 50 to 80 % of children with ADHD maintain significant symptoms of ADHD in adolescence, and that adolescence brings new domains of potential impairment (e.g., dating, driving, drug use; Barkley, 2006), all these factors may combine to result in adolescents with attentional difficulties reporting more conflict and making negative (external, global, stable, intentional, selfishly motivated, and blameworthy) attributions about parental behaviour more frequently than their comparison peers.

Method

Participants

Fifty 13 to 19-year-old adolescents ($M = 15.56$, $SD = 1.59$) were recruited from schools and community sources.

	ADHD	Control	Total
Female	12	10	22
Male	16	12	28
Total	28	22	50

Measures

- Issues Checklist (IC;** Robin, 1975) adolescent version is a 44-item list of issues that might lead to arguments between parents and adolescents that have been identified in the literature. It measures issues discussed in the last 4 weeks and the level of associated anger experienced. An issue was considered a *conflict* when the adolescent felt at least a little angry during the discussion (2 and above). A 45th item "Internet/Computer use" was added to reflect changes in adolescents' habits.

Example of an item taken from the IC.

	How did you feel when you discussed this topic?
Have you discussed?	Calm A little angry Very angry
Telephone Calls yes/no	1 2 3 4 5

- The **Parent-Adolescent Attribution Questionnaire (PAAQ)** developed by the author of the present study was used to assess adolescents' beliefs about the causes of the identified conflicts, reflecting seven attribution dimensions: external and internal (locus), stability and globality of the cause of the behaviour, and whether the behaviour was perceived as intentional, selfishly motivated, and blameworthy. This measure also assesses the respondent's perception of the frequency at which they experience the conflict situation.

Results

Conflict

- Do adolescents with ADHD differ in the conflict with their parents in respect to comparison adolescents?

A 2 X 2 (gender X ADHD status) univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

As Figure 1 shows, there was a main effect for ADHD status ($F(1, 49) = 5.67$, $p = .022$, partial $\eta^2 = .112$). Adolescents with ADHD reported experiencing more conflict with their parents ($M = 10.22$, $SD = 6.91$) than adolescents without ADHD ($M = 6.14$, $SD = 5.81$). No significant adolescent gender differences were found within the ADHD or the comparison group.

- Within each group, do adolescents differ in the conflict they report with their mothers and fathers?

Two Paired-Samples t -tests showed that adolescents with ADHD did not differ in the number of conflicts with their mothers and fathers. Interestingly, within the control group, adolescents reported more conflict with their mothers ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 5.74$) than with their fathers ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 4.58$), $t(1, 21) = 2.86$, $p = .009$.

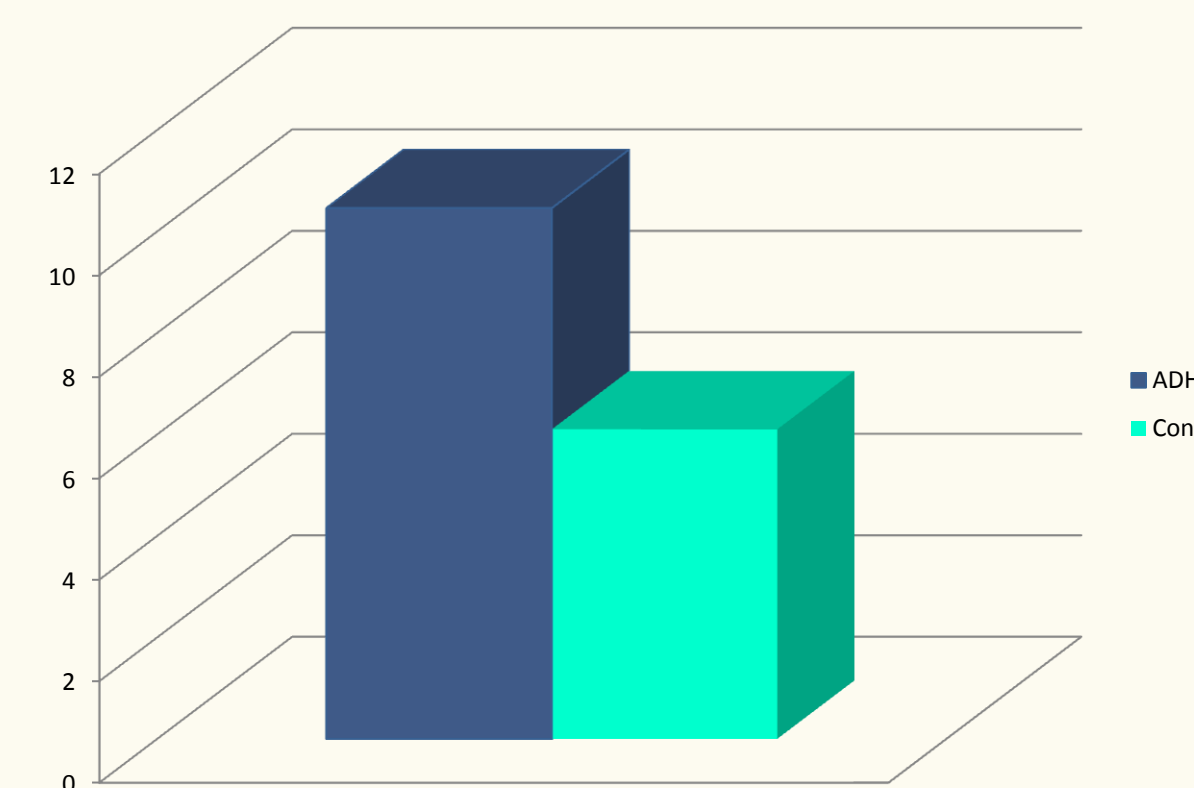


Figure 1. Adolescent Views of Parent-Youth Conflict in Youth With and Without ADHD.

Attributions

- Do adolescents with and without ADHD differ in their attributions for the conflicts they have with their mothers and fathers?

Two Independent Samples t -tests showed no differences in adolescent attributions for their parents between groups and Paired Sample t -tests showed that neither within the ADHD group nor within the comparison group youth differ in the attributions for their mothers and fathers.

- Are adolescents' attributions for conflicts with their mothers and fathers associated with the number of conflicts reported with their mothers and fathers, respectively?

Table 1. Significant Correlations between Mother-adolescent and Father-adolescent Conflict and Adolescent Attributions for Conflict.

Attributions	Mother-youth conflict (all sample)	Father-youth conflict (by group)
Sable	---	-.50*
Global	.34	.65**
Intentional	---	.66**
Selfishly Motivated	.43	---
Blameworthy	.37	---

All $p < .05$

* ADHD Group

** Control Group

Results Cont.

- What portion of the variance in adolescents' views of number of conflicts they have with their mothers is predicted by youth inattentive and hyperactive-impulsive symptoms and adolescents' attributions for that conflict?

Two Hierarchical Regression analyses with the total sample were conducted to predict adolescents' perceptions of mother-youth conflict.

- Step 1: Global, selfishly motivated, and blameworthy attributions
- Step 2: ADHD (hyperactive-impulsive and Inattentive) symptoms
- The attributions predicted 31% of the variance in number of issues that youth and mothers had conflict ($R^2 = .31$, $F(5, 41) = 3.22$, $p = .017$). ADHD symptoms were not a significant predictor of adolescent conflict with mother. When the steps of this analyses were reversed, we obtained the same results.

- What portion of the variance in adolescents' views of number of conflicts they have with their fathers is predicted by adolescents' attributions for that conflict?

A Stepwise Regression analysis was conducted per group.

- Control group: Composite of global and intentional attributions (inter-correlations $.80$, $p < .01$) predicted 47% of the variance in number of issues that youth and fathers had conflict ($R^2 = .47$, $F(1, 13) = 10.94$, $p = .006$).
- ADHD group: Stable attributions were the only predictor of adolescent reported conflict with father ($R^2 = .25$, $F(1, 21) = 6.56$, $p = .019$).

Discussion

- In line with our predictions, adolescents with ADHD experience more conflict with their parents than their comparison peers.
- Interestingly, within the control group, adolescents experience more conflict with mothers than fathers. A potential explanation for this is that adolescents may spend more time with their mothers than fathers; hence, increasing the chances for discussions that might turn into conflict.
- Contrary to our expectations, adolescents with ADHD do not seem to differ from comparison adolescents in their attributions for their parents.
- As previous research indicates, adolescents' global, selfishly motivated and blameworthy attributions predict mother-adolescent conflict. Similarly, adolescents' global and intentional attributions predict father-adolescent conflict in adolescent without ADHD.
- However, we are unsure of how to interpret the finding that adolescents with ADHD's stable attributions predict father-adolescent conflict. Given that this finding is contrary to previous findings with mother-adolescent conflict, we are left only with speculation. Perhaps adolescents with ADHD who report more conflict with their fathers think that they will not continue to have this conflict for a long time? Or is it that adolescents with ADHD who report fewer conflicts with fathers believe that they will continue to experience these for a long time? In any case, it is unclear why this is happening and we will continue to explore this further.

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