



Children's Coping and Adjustment in High-Conflict Homes: The Reformulation of Emotional Security Theory

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ABSTRACT—*Repeated exposure to interparental conflict increases children's vulnerability to a range of psychological problems by undermining their emotional security in the relationship between parents. However, emotional security theory in its original form lacks the depth and precision to guide hypotheses regarding individual differences in the nature, precursors, and sequelae of children's emotional security. In this article, we summarize a reformulated version of the theory to address this gap. Specifically, we focus on the ways in which the reformulated theory can elucidate: (a) the nature and developmental implications of systematically characterizing the inner workings of emotional security as a goal system, (b) the relative potency of family characteristics as sources of individual differences in children's emotional security, and (c) processes associated with developmental cascades that account for how and why emotional insecurity is linked to a range of psychological problems.*

KEYWORDS—*interparental conflict; family relationships; child coping; child mental health*

Interparental conflict is a risk to children's mental health. Unresolved anger and verbal hostility between parents are common in many homes (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003). The magnitude of risk for children's psychopathology associated with frequent exposure to interparental hostility is nearly twice that

posed by divorce (Grych & Fincham, 2001). Children's vulnerability to interparental conflict takes many forms, including depression, anxiety, aggression, less than optimal relationships with peers, academic difficulties, and sleep problems (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Emotional security theory (EST) was developed to address how and why interparental conflict increases children's vulnerability to psychological problems. According to EST, repeated exposure to parental conflicts containing hostility, violence, and escalating anger undermines children's sense of emotional security in the interparental relationship (Cummings & Davies, 1996; Davies & Cummings, 1994). As a latent goal system, emotional insecurity is inferred from children's reactions of prolonged fear and distress, avoidance and involvement in interparental discord, and negative appraisals of the implications of interparental conflict for themselves and their family. Ultimately, children are thought to be vulnerable to psychological problems as a result of continued difficulties preserving security in the face of interparental conflict.

Research supports the value of emotional security in explaining why exposure to interparental conflict undermines children's functioning. Longitudinal studies have shown that insecurity mediates the path between destructive interparental conflict and children's psychological difficulties, even after considering alternative explanatory mechanisms (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006; Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002; Sturge-Apple, Davies, Winter, Cummings, & Schermerhorn, 2008). However, these studies have also revealed that the power of emotional security to explain associations between interparental conflict and psychological adjustment can differ widely across children. To explain the diversity of security pathways of children from high-conflict homes, researchers have increasingly embedded the study of interparental conflict within broader contexts. The resulting knowledge has advanced our understanding of the interplay among interparental conflict and family (e.g., childrearing practices, parent psychopathology) and community characteristics

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(e.g., political violence) in shaping pathways of emotional security and psychological adjustment over time (Cummings, Cheung, Koss, & Davies, 2014; Cummings et al., 2011), but gaps remain in understanding the nature and dynamics of emotional security itself. Therefore, in this article, we seek to demonstrate how characterizing the operation of the emotional security system more precisely can complement existing contextual approaches in understanding how children adapt to interparental conflict.

REFORMULATING EMOTIONAL SECURITY THEORY

To delineate the diverse pathways of coping and adjustment in contexts of interparental conflict more precisely, we developed an evolutionary reformulation of EST (EST-R; Davies & Martin, 2013; Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007). Central to this approach is the premise that children's behavior within emotionally evocative interpersonal contexts is guided by a few evolved behavioral systems, or integrated organizations of affective, physiological, and information-processing mechanisms that work together to fulfill specific adaptive functions. In particular, EST-R proposes that children's behavior in the context of interparental conflict is organized by the social defense system (SDS). Given the high costs of intragroup conflict throughout human history (e.g., caloric expenditure, risk of premature death, exile from the group), a fitness advantage was conferred to individuals who could efficiently identify social cues that could signal interpersonal aggression (e.g., yelling, dominant posturing) and respond by minimizing the costs of such threats (Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007). Consequently, the SDS evolved to defuse and defend against threats posed by hostile individuals in the social group.

Interparental conflict is likely to produce social defense behavior because it often contains cues (e.g., anger, hostility) that reliably lead to interpersonal aggression. In further highlighting its salience for children's SDS functioning, interparental conflict commonly signifies deeper interpersonal struggles between dominant adult caregivers who hold disproportionate power in shaping family dynamics and the stability and safety of the home environment. However, the saliency of the SDS for children's functioning is not limited to two-parent families. From an EST-R perspective, an array of relationships (e.g., married, cohabitating, divorced, reconstituted families) may be characterized by hostile, threatening, and aggressive interpersonal cues that signal to children the need to prioritize the goals and function of the SDS.

In the following sections, we summarize our research by illustrating how EST-R can address three main questions. First, can a deeper characterization of children's emotional insecurity in terms of how the SDS functions advance our understanding of why interparental conflict affects children? Second, does exposure to certain forms of parental conflict shape children's abilities to preserve security in the family? Third, why do difficulties preserving emotional security increase children's vulnerability

to psychological problems? As an organizing framework for the article, Table 1 outlines how EST-R approaches each of these questions relative to the traditional framework of EST.

TOWARD GREATER SPECIFICITY IN UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF EMOTIONAL SECURITY

With no clearly articulated goal beyond the colloquial term of *security*, the definition of insecurity within the original formulation of EST has remained underdeveloped. This imprecision has hindered progress in distinguishing emotional security from other security processes (i.e., attachment), clarifying the affective character of insecurity, and developing hypotheses regarding individual differences in children's responses to interparental conflict.

Distinguishing Between Social Defense and Attachment

The use of amorphous and variable definitions has led some investigators to erroneously equate emotional security with parent-child attachment (e.g., Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001). To address this issue, EST-R distinguishes more clearly between these two forms of security by drawing on the ethological assumption that they are organized by discrete behavioral control systems: attachment and social defense. As shown in Figure 1, each system is characterized by three primary features: (a) its adaptive function in promoting survival or reproduction, (b) its external or observed goal, and (c) a unique repertoire of action tendencies or behaviors that serve the goal and ultimately maximize the organism's evolutionary fitness. Although each system shares the broad adaptive function of protection from harm, differences exist. In the context of the parent-child relationship, the security children feel is thought to be managed primarily by the attachment system. The external goal of the attachment system is to maximize caregivers' sensitivity and protection in times of distress (Bowlby, 1969). When threatened, children draw on a repertoire of attachment behaviors (e.g., expressions of distress, bids for comfort, proximity seeking, increased monitoring of the attachment figure) designed to elicit parents' support and protection. In contrast, interparental conflict creates situations in which the attachment figures themselves are the source of threat. Therefore, preserving a sense of security in the interparental relationship is thought to involve a different repertoire of self-protective strategies organized by the SDS. Although behavioral systems organize some similar behaviors, social defense functioning comprises a distinctive, broader repertoire of reactions that include not only fear, distress, and vigilance but also fight behaviors (e.g., conflict mediation, siding with one parent, aggression), flight and camouflaging activities (e.g., avoidance, inhibiting overt emotions), social de-escalation strategies (e.g., comforting, pacifying parents), and heightened perceptual sensitivity to threatening stimuli.

Table 1*A Summary of Differences Between Emotional Security Theory (EST) and the Reformulation of EST (EST-R)*

Conceptual domain	EST	EST-R
Distinctions between emotional insecurity and attachment	Types of insecurity are not clearly distinguished based on their composition. The difference is in context: Emotional insecurity occurs in the interparental relationship and attachment insecurity occurs in the parent-child relationship.	Context (i.e., interparental, parent-child) is only one source of differentiation. Emotional security is organized by a completely different behavioral system (social defense), with a distinctive function (i.e., defusing interpersonal threat) and repertoire of behaviors.
Affective nature of emotional security system	General emotional distress is the central source of insecurity.	Fear is the central source of insecurity.
Conceptualization of individual differences in emotional insecurity	A variable-based approach is used to form single linear composites on a continuum of insecurity based on indicators of distress, involvement, aggression, and/or avoidance in interparental conflict settings.	Variable-based approaches are supplemented with a complementary pattern-based approach consisting of four qualitatively distinct profiles of responding that differ in the function of defusing threat posed by interparental conflict.
Family sources of emotional insecurity	Destructive (e.g., interparental hostility) and constructive (e.g., interparental cooperation) family processes are assigned equal potency as predictors of emotional insecurity.	Destructive family processes containing interpersonal threat cues (e.g., angry expressions, loud voices, aggression) assume primacy as predictors of emotional insecurity.
Delineation of cascading developmental sequelae	There is no systematic specification of how or why emotional insecurity increases children's vulnerability to psychopathology.	Insecurity is proposed to increase child vulnerability to mental health difficulties by: (a) increasing children's defensive ways of responding in other social settings, (b) altering stress-sensitive physiological systems, and (c) undermining the operation of other behavioral systems that organize approach behaviors (e.g., affiliation, exploratory, caregiving).

Research supports the distinction between social defense and attachment. Individual differences in security across interparental and parent-child relationships are related modestly to moderately. Across two studies, the maximum shared overlap between signs of insecurity in each relationship was 17% (Davies et al., 2002; Sturge-Apple et al., 2008). Moreover, empirical findings from both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs demonstrate that children's insecurity in the interparental relationship uniquely predicts adjustment problems, even after considering parent-child relationship insecurity (Bascoe, Davies, Sturge-Apple, & Cummings, 2009; Davies et al., 2002; Sturge-Apple et al., 2008).

The Affective Character of Emotional Security

Similar imprecision is evident in defining the affective composition of emotional security. Affective measures of insecurity have varied from broad indicators of distress to the degree to which negative (i.e., angry, scared, sad) emotional responses outweigh positive (i.e., happy) ones (e.g., Du Rocher Schudlich & Cummings, 2007; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold, & Shelton, 2003). Emotional insecurity has largely been defined by "general emotional distress . . . [and] the nature of the negative emotion is of no significance to the model" (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001, p. 140). In contrast, although difficulties preserving security may be manifested in different emotional

expressions (e.g., anger, general distress), EST-R clearly designates fear as the defining emotion underlying the functioning of the SDS (Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007). Supporting this hypothesis, children's fearful reactivity to conflict was the central explanatory mechanism in pathways between their history of exposure to interparental conflict and their psychological problems, even after considering temperament as well as angry and sad reactivity to conflict (Davies, Cicchetti, & Martin, 2012).

Distinct Patterns of Emotional Insecurity

EST-R may also be useful in generating additional points of empirical inquiry. Researchers should test hypotheses regarding individual differences in children's patterns of response to interparental conflict. EST-R posits four distinct patterns of defending against threat based on their functional utility in regulating children's exposure to contentious interparental and family characteristics (Davies & Martin, 2013; Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2007). As shown in Table 2, the four SDS patterns are theorized to result from different configurations of family and developmental conditions and, in turn, have unique implications for children's psychological functioning. For example, whereas the dominant profile is designed to directly defeat the threat accompanying interparental conflict through coerciveness and controlling behaviors, the demobilizing strategy serves to limit the chances of drawing attention from hostile

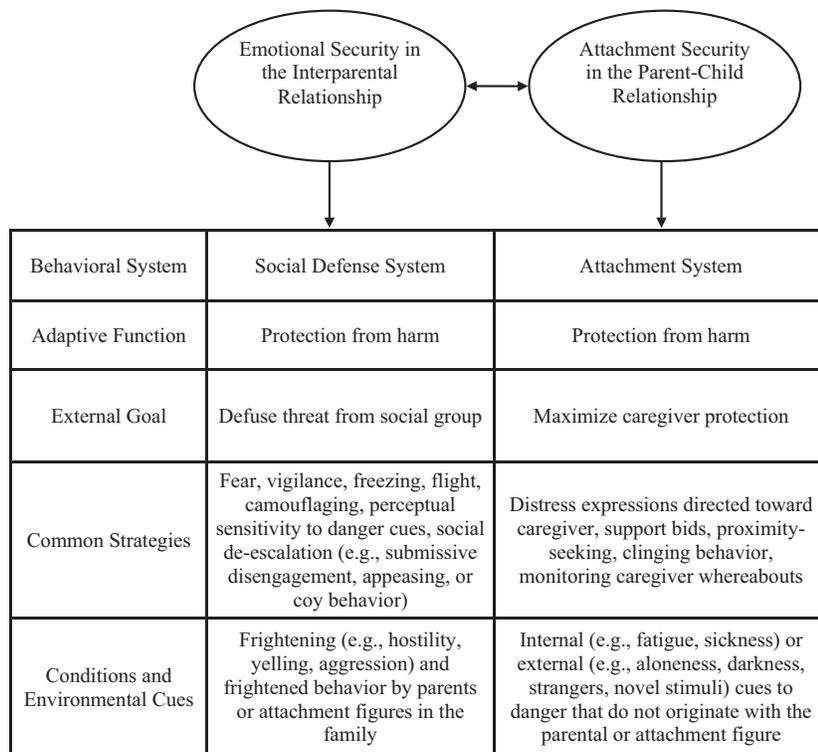


Figure 1. Comparison of the behavioral systems underlying security in the interparental and parent–child relationships and their underlying adaptive functions, external goals, and common strategies and environmental cues that increase their salience as organizers of behavior.

parents by camouflaging overt distress, disengaging submissively, or behaving in ways that are dysphoric, helpless, or downtrodden. The “lay low” strategy of demobilization is theorized to emerge in ecologies featuring frightening parental behaviors, family aggression, and power hierarchies regulated by intimidation. In contrast, the dominant strategy may be an adaptive solution to contending with parental vulnerability (e.g., depression), disengagement, and collapses in the power hierarchy. In reflecting the distinctive repercussions of each profile, the demobilizing strategy may not only increase the likelihood of anxiety, depression, and social problems but also confer certain benefits (e.g., courteousness). The proposed developmental trade-offs of the dominant profile are shown not only by risk for conduct problems and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder but also a boldness that may confer certain social advantages (e.g., leadership ability). In summary, EST-R provides novel and testable hypotheses to improve the specificity with which we can predict the developmental pathways of children exposed to interparental conflict.

INCREASING PRECISION IN IDENTIFYING FAMILY SOURCES OF CHILDREN’S EMOTIONAL INSECURITY

The original formulation of EST does not distinguish systematically between family processes based on their strength as predictors of children’s reactivity to interparental conflict

(Cummings & Davies, 1996; Davies & Cummings, 1994). Consequently, over the past two decades, the list has grown of family-level factors defined as either destructive processes that increase children’s insecurity (e.g., interparental hostility, disengagement, and aggression; parent–child relationship disturbances; parental psychopathology) or constructive processes that reduce children’s insecurity (e.g., interparental cooperation, support, and progress toward resolution; parental responsiveness; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Although searching for family correlates and precursors of emotional insecurity is important, it has not been balanced by the complementary goal of defining the relative potency of family characteristics as predictors in models of security. In contrast, EST-R notes that the SDS evolved specifically to contend with danger in the social network. Interpersonal threat cues (e.g., angry expressions, loud voices) assume the greatest primacy in organizing children’s distress responses in social contexts. By themselves, diminished displays of mutual happiness, support, and cohesiveness are less reliable signals of danger (Öhman & Mineka, 2001). Therefore, although EST-R acknowledges that constructive interparental interactions likely have important implications for children’s psychological adjustment through other processes, hostility, aggression, and antagonism between parents are expected to predict more saliently and consistently children’s SDS functioning and, as a result, their emotional insecurity.

Table 2
The Function, Form, Developmental Precursors, and Sequelae of Children's Reactivity Profiles

	Secure	Mobilizing	Dominant	Demobilizing
Function	Efficient SDS operation circumscribed to signs of clear, direct threat	High stakes in actively managing threat and social ties	Defeat threat through aggressive posturing	Lay low to reduce salience as a target of hostility
Form of behavior	Minimal or mild distress Empathic concern for parents Confidence and autonomy	Dramatic displays of vulnerability Submissive, appeasing, or overbright behavior Solicitation comfort, sympathy, alliances	Hypervigilance Suppression of vulnerable emotion Anger, hostility, and coerciveness (e.g., yelling, hitting, belittling)	Freezing and camouflaging (e.g., masks emotions) Submission (e.g., postural slumping) Demobilization (e.g., dysphoria, lethargy)
Interparental precursors	Minimal or mild anger Cooperation Problem solving	Anger escalation Child-related conflict Inconsistent resolution	Anger escalation Disengagement Worry, dysphoria No resolution	Anger escalation Violence and aggression Child-related content Coerciveness and volatility
Family precursors	Parent responsiveness Family cohesiveness Parent coaching of child emotions	Inconsistency in parent responsiveness Family enmeshment Guilt induction	"Frightened" parent behavior Inconsistent discipline Family disengagement Family chaos	Parent detachment Parent harshness "Frightening" parent behavior Parent intolerance of affect expression
Developmental sequelae	Cooperation Social competence Academic competence Gullibility, naivety	Social interest Anxiety, depression Risky health behaviors ADHD	Self-confident leaders Conduct problems ADHD Callousness	Courteous, polite Conscientious Anxiety Social problems Depression

Note. SDS = social defense system; ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Research that seems to support the contention that children witnessing interparental support, cooperation, and problem solving are less concerned about security (e.g., Cummings et al., 2003; Goetze-Morey, Cummings, & Papp, 2007; McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009) has isolated tactics of constructive and destructive conflict as predictors of children's adjustment in separate analytic models. This approach cannot address whether constructive and destructive forms of conflict have unique implications for children's emotional security. Although rare, empirical analyses of different classes of conflict as simultaneous predictors of insecurity instead support EST-R. For example, in a multistudy investigation, emotional insecurity mediated associations between destructive interparental conflict and children's psychological problems over and above constructive forms of conflict and an array of family, parenting, and child covariates (Davies, Martin, & Cicchetti, 2012).

DELINEATING CASCADING DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAYS OF EMOTIONAL INSECURITY

Continuing to document associations between emotional insecurity and various forms of child psychopathology is reaching a point of diminished returns. Making sense of these links hinges on delineating how insecurity produces a developmental cascade

of processes that ultimately develop into broader, trait-like patterns of psychological problems. EST-R provides some leads in identifying the mechanisms underlying this cascade. For the sake of illustration, we focus on three pathways through which children's insecurity may undermine their psychological adjustment: (a) hostile processing of subsequent interpersonal settings, (b) changing physiological components in the stress response system, and (c) the operation of behavioral systems organizing approach goals.

Defensive Processing of Interpersonal Settings

According to EST-R, prolonged exposure to interparental conflict calibrates the SDS toward prioritizing the processing of threat and recruiting resources to guard against its consequences. Drawing on these adverse experiences as templates in scanning new contexts for old dangers, children's reliance on self-protective strategies across many interpersonal contexts is thought to coalesce increasingly into mental health difficulties (Davies, Winter, & Cicchetti, 2006; Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009). For example, insecurity in family relationships increases children's vulnerability to internalizing symptoms by predisposing them to hypervigilance and submissiveness in social contexts outside the family (e.g., school, peers, friends; Granot & Mayseless, 2001; Luebbe, Bell, Allwood, Swenson, &

Early, 2010). Likewise, threat appraisals consisting of hostile attribution biases and the generation of aggressive solutions to provocative interpersonal situations mediate pathways between insecurity and children’s externalizing problems (Dodge, 2006; Granot & Maysless, 2011). In one study, hostile processing of peer transgressions mediated associations between children’s insecure representations of the interparental relationship and less optimal school adjustment over a year, even controlling for children’s representations of their parent–child relationships, their propensities to experience negative emotions, and socio-economic characteristics (Bascoe et al., 2009).

Physiological Stress Response

Insecurity is also thought to affect mental and physical health by restructuring adaptively the stress-response system and its evolved biological function of coordinating physiological responses to environmental challenges (Davies, Sturge-Apple, & Martin, 2013; Ellis, Jackson, & Boyce, 2006). For example, the hormone cortisol is a physiological product of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis that helps mobilize energy (e.g., glucose, oxygen) and modulate processing, encoding, and consolidating memories of emotional information in response to threatening events (Mendes, Blascovich, Hunter, Lickel, & Jost, 2007). However, it is still unclear how stress-sensitive neurobiological systems influence the pathogenic sequelae of emotional

insecurity. Sensitization models highlight the possibility that children’s concerns about security undermine their psychological adjustment by progressively amplifying cortisol and its resulting toxicity on the brain and body. Supporting this hypothesis, in one study, children’s rising cortisol levels in reaction to interparental conflict were associated with more frequent insecurity in children as well as greater internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Koss et al., 2013). Alternatively, attenuation of the cortisol response to stressful events has also been identified as a possible mediating mechanism in pathways between emotional insecurity and children’s psychopathology (Davies, Sturge-Apple, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 2007). Researchers need to identify more definitively the physiological pathways linking children’s insecurity with long-term changes in psychological and physical health.

Approach-Oriented Behavioral Systems

According to EST-R, the saliency of the SDS in contexts of persistent interpersonal threat also supersedes and undermines approach-oriented goals organized by other behavioral systems. Thus, insecurity in the interparental relationship may increase the likelihood of psychopathology by limiting the influence of the exploratory, affiliative, and caregiving systems (see Figure 2). For example, impairments in the exploratory system can reduce intrinsic motivation to approach, manipulate, and under-

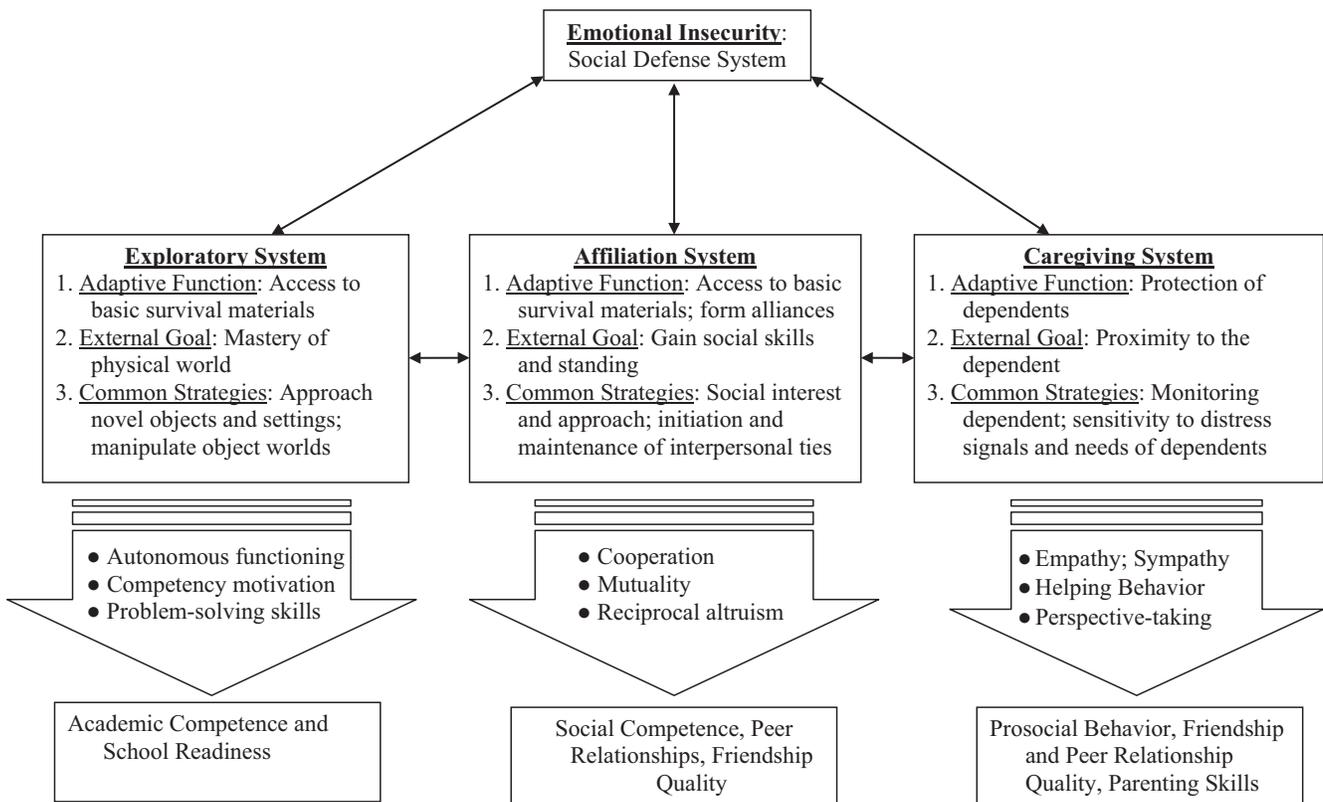


Figure 2. How the social defense system affects children’s competence in many domains by altering the operation of ethological systems that organize approach motives and behaviors. Adapted from Davies, Martin, and Sturge-Apple (in press).

stand the workings of the physical world. Accordingly, emotional insecurity may ultimately undermine children's intellectual and academic competence indirectly by compromising their autonomous functioning, capacities for resourceful and flexible problem solving (e.g., executive functions, attention), and perceived efficacy in intellectual contexts. Supporting these hypothesized pathways, insecurity in the interparental relationship increases children's subsequent vulnerability to psychological and academic problems through its association with impaired sustained attention and problem solving in cognitive tasks (Davies, Manning, & Cicchetti, 2013; Davies, Woitach, Winter, & Cummings, 2008). Reflecting complementary pathways, EST-R proposes that difficulties preserving security will be linked with impairments in distinctive domains of social functioning (e.g., social competence, prosocial behavior) by limiting opportunities to organize affiliative goals of gaining social skills and standing through social interest and approach efforts, and caregiving system goals that serve to increase proximity and care of dependents through the cultivation of empathy, sympathy, and helping behavior (Davies, Martin, & Sturge-Apple, in press).

CONCLUSIONS

Unfettered enlargement of the expansive substantive scope of research on EST runs the risk of generating excessively vague and dispersive models that reaffirm the established notion that every family characteristic, interpersonal circumstance, and child attribute is related to one another. EST-R is designed to guard against this tendency by offering conceptual checks and empirical balances for advancing a more decisive understanding of how and why interparental conflict increases children's vulnerability to psychopathology. Although still in its early stages, research has documented the utility of EST-R in three primary areas. First, the deeper and more fine-grained characterization of emotional security as a goal system designed to defend against threat provides a framework for developing empirical tests of the distinctiveness of emotional security relative to other developmental processes. Second, EST-R provides unique conceptual leverage in identifying the relative potency of family characteristics in shaping children's adjustment, with the premise that individual differences in children's emotional security hinge most heavily on their exposure to destructive forms of interparental conflict. Third, EST-R serves as a useful guidepost for identifying how and why emotional insecurity is associated with an array of outcomes through the consideration of mechanisms at many levels of analysis (e.g., social-cognitive, neurobiological, behavioral-approach systems).

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