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Preadolescents' Coping Goals and Strategies in Response to Postdivorce Interparental Conflict

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Abstract

Researchers have focused on preadolescents' appraisals, coping, and adjustment in the context of postdivorce interparental conflict, but have yet to assess their goals in these events. Fifty 9- to 12-year-old (52% female) preadolescents were interviewed to assess their goals for the coping strategies that they reported using in response to interparental conflict at home. The patterns observed were consistent with goal-oriented research in the peer conflict literature. Preadolescents reported goal orientations that matched (i.e., were functionally similar to) their respective behaviorally-based coping strategies, multiple goals for the same type of coping strategy, and multiple coping strategies for the same goal orientation. Relative to other coping strategies, preadolescents were more likely to choose a matching coping strategy to obtain social support, maintain self-boundary, and distraction goals. Relative to other goals, preadolescents' matching goal-strategy pairs occurred more frequently than nonmatching pairs, but these pairings accounted for about only one-third of the goals reported for a given strategy. Emotional regulation goal orientations more often than any other goal, which highlighted their importance in preadolescents coping with parental conflict. Finally, preadolescents' coping efforts were chosen for objectives beyond traditional category systems of coping, such as the personal characteristics of family members and others, helping others, and threats to self and others. Thus, the assessment of preadolescents' goals may improve our understanding of the motivations underlying their appraisals and coping strategies as they seek to adapt to interparental conflict environments.

Keywords

preadolescence; goals; coping; interparental conflict; qualitative methods

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Divorce represents a major social problem in the U.S. (Braver, Shapiro, & Goodman, 2006). The probability of divorce over a 20-year period is approximately 50% (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). This rate has remained essentially unchanged since the 1990s. It is estimated that divorce affects the lives of one million children and adolescents yearly (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998, Table 160; Shiono & Quinn, 1994).

Not only is divorce itself a stressor for children, but it also can result in a cascade of additional stressors. These stressors include changes in financial status, schools, peer relationships, living arrangements, parental warmth and effectiveness, custodial orders, and visitation schedules. It is these stressors that often become the focal point of parental conflict. Although divorced and non-divorced families have been found to be similar in their rates of conflict, divorced families report higher intensity, hostility, and parental avoidance behaviors (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). Researchers have reported that these conflict characteristics increase the negative impact of interparental conflict on children's postdivorce adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Rhoades, 2008). In fact, children of divorce have been shown to be more at-risk for adjustment difficulties than children from non-divorced families over both the short- and the long-term (Amato, 2006; Cummings & Davies, 2002). These risks include internalizing and externalizing symptoms, problems in achievement, self-esteem, attitudes toward marriage, and relationship quality (Lansford, 2009).

In addition to the risks associated with divorce, the 9- to 12-year-old age period marks a transition from childhood into adolescence (Skinner & Edge, 2007). Developmental changes are occurring on biological, cognitive, and social levels. These changes influence family and peer relationships at home and in school environments (Hill, Bromell, Tyson, & Flint, 2007). In particular, cognitive changes during this period enable preadolescents to increasingly think more abstractly, process more complex information, and understand their own and others' perspectives (Eccles, 1999). These developmental advances lead to greater self-awareness and a better understanding of internal psychological characteristics such that they can reflect on their goals in social contexts (Chung & Asher, 1996).

Preadolescents also apply these skills when they are appraising the significance of parental conflict events to their well-being. These appraisals then set the stage for their choosing goals and behavioral strategies to cope with the conflict. Although preadolescents exhibit a variety of coping choices in response to parental conflict events, researchers have yet to examine their reasons or goals underlying their strategy choices (Shelton & Harold, 2008).

Drawing from research and theory (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), coping generally refers to individuals' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional strategies for self-regulating internal or external demands that are perceived as exceeding their resources or capacities. In reviews of research on children's and adolescents' coping with interparental conflict, strategies involving informational or emotional support, support seeking and problem solving, cognitive redefinition, and emotional self-regulation led to better adjustment (Nicolotti, El-Sheikh, & Whitson, 2003; O'Brien, Margolin, & John, 1995; Radovanovic, 1993). Conversely, children and adolescents experienced more adjustment difficulties when they attempted to intervene

directly in the conflict or chose strategies that involved venting and avoidance (Jenkins, Smith, & Graham, 1989; Nicolotti et al., 2003; Shelton & Harold, 2007, 2008).

In their review of the interparental conflict research, Cummings and Davies (2002) proposed that the effect of either direct intervention or avoidance tactics on preadolescents' adjustment likely depended upon the characteristics of the conflict and the types of coping strategies that they employed. Similarly, O'Brien, Bahadur, Gee, Balto, and Erber (1997) proposed that it was important to understand the cognitions that were associated with preadolescents' coping behaviors rather than examining their coping behaviors in isolation. Power (2004) has further emphasized that the processes underlying preadolescents' coping strategy decision making were not well understood. To that end, we briefly mention two research approaches relevant to preadolescents' coping with interparental conflict, parenting practices, and cognitive appraisals (Grych & Fincham, 1993; Skinner & Edge, 2002).

In studies of parenting practices generally, parental warmth and acceptance, support, and consistency in discipline were associated with children's and adolescents' problem-solving and support seeking coping, whereas authoritarian practices increased avoidant coping strategies (Kliewer, Fearnow, & Miller, 1996; Power, 2004; Wolfradt, Hempel, & Miles, 2003; Zimmer-Gembeck & Locke, 2007). In coping socialization research specific to families in conflict, mothers' encouragement increased their sons' reports of support seeking coping (Brown, Kerig, Fedorowicz, & Warren, 1996) and mothers' frequent suggestion of coping strategies facilitated preadolescents' later recall and use of them (Miller, Kliewer, & Partch, 2012). In community violence contexts, Kliewer et al. (2006) reported that parental encouragement was linked to preadolescents' self-reported proactive and aggressive coping. Thus, one mechanism by which preadolescents' select coping strategies appears to be based upon general parenting styles and practices specific to conflict environments.

In their cognitive-contextual model, Grych and Fincham (1993) focused on the role of internal mechanisms in children's and adolescents' coping choices. Specifically, preadolescents' cognitive appraisals of threat or self-blame in response to parental conflict led to variations in coping strategy choices that increased their internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Fosco & Grych, 2008; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000; Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003). For example, Shelton and Harold (2008) reported that preadolescents' threat appraisals led to avoidance coping whereas self-blame appraisals led to over-involvement strategies (i.e., taking sides, arguing with parents), and both of these coping strategies were associated with internalizing symptoms.

Shelton and Harold (2008) also advanced the idea that there were mechanisms other than preadolescents' appraisals that influenced their decisions to use different coping strategies in response to their parents' conflicts. They pointed out that there was a limited understanding of the motivations underlying preadolescents' strategy choices. Specifically, they proposed that preadolescents could have different motives or goals for becoming involved in the conflict. These goals could involve restoring family harmony, preserving one's emotional security, or distracting a parent; any of which could affect their coping strategy choices. Creasey, Ottlinger, DeVico, Murray, Harvey, and Hesson-McInnis (1997) illustrated the potential importance of motives or goals underlying children's strategy choices when coping

with parental conflict. In their study, interparental conflict vignettes were read to first and second grade children. Children who interpreted parental distress as something about which there was little they could do frequently chose strategies to avoid the situation. Moreover, they chose these strategies in order “to make themselves feel better” (p. 49). That is, they used an avoidance strategy to serve an emotional regulation goal when they perceived the conflict as uncontrollable.

In like manner, preadolescents’ beliefs about the meaning of a stressful event to their well-being (i.e., an appraisal) could affect the outcomes or goals that they hope to achieve in that context. Their goals then provide an organizing framework within which they then generate, ultimately select, and then enact (one or more) behavioral strategies to achieve them (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Crockenberg and Forgays (1996) proposed some time ago that children’s goals were an essential component of their reactions to marital conflict, but since then not much headway appears to have been made. Preadolescents’ goals and strategies, however, have been extensively studied in the context of peer conflict and friendship dilemmas (Murphy & Eisenberg, 2002; Ojanen, Aunola, & Salmivalli, 2007; Rose & Asher, 1999).

The underlying framework for this research is derived from Crick and Dodge’s (1994) social-information processing model. In their model, they define goals as “focused arousal states that function as orientations toward producing (or wanting to produce) particular outcomes” (p. 76). Individuals’ goals in these social situations motivate their behavioral (e.g., coping) choices, and these choices represent a key component of their peer relationship competence or difficulties in social situations. Chung and Asher (1996), for example, found that children who focused on relationship goals in peer encounters were more likely to report prosocial as well as passive strategies whereas children with avoidance goals reported passive, prosocial, and adult-seeking strategies. Similarly, Rose and Asher (1999) reported that children who endorsed a relationship maintenance goal were more likely to use accommodation-compromise strategies and were less likely to use self-interest assertion strategies. Children who chose a revenge or instrumental control goal were less likely to use accommodation-compromise and more likely to use self-interest assertion and hostile strategies. Researchers, in fact, have found that children and adolescents used a variety of coping strategies in conjunction with their goal-oriented responding to peer stressors, including seeking help from friends and family, cognitive distancing, withdrawal, aggression, ignoring, acting nonchalant, problem solving, and self-reflection (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Rose & Asher, 1999; Troop-Gordon & Asher, 2005).

Another important feature of the information processing model is that goal and strategy formulations have dynamic system characteristics (Crick & Dodge, 1994). That is, they can be altered or new ones can be formed as children encounter and interpret (i.e., appraise) social information that newly arises in the ongoing interaction with a peer. Thus, children could generate either multiple goals or strategies for the same social situation. For example, Delveaux and Daniels (2000) found that 4th and 6th graders who expressed prosocial goals were more likely to report using prosocial strategies versus aggressive strategies. They also found that children used the same strategy to achieve multiple goals. Specifically, children reported using aggressive strategies to achieve self-interest, control, and revenge goals and

prosocial strategies to avoid trouble, maintain equality, and maintain relationships. These authors found, further, that children reported using seemingly unrelated (e.g., relationally aggressive and prosocial) strategies to achieve identical goals, such as to avoid trouble and to maintain relationships.

Of particular relevance to the present study, Leadbeater, Ohan, and Hoglund (2006) studied 6–9 year-old children's goals and strategies when responding to a peer provocation. The children were encouraged to freely generate goal and strategy responses (as opposed to selecting responses from predetermined lists) when describing what they considered the "best" strategy for handling a provocation. A qualitative analysis of the interview protocols indicated that children's justifications or reasons generally were consistent with their strategy choices (e.g., one goal of an aggressive strategy was retaliation). The children also associated their strategies with multiple goals (e.g., help seeking was justified in terms of avoiding trouble and generalized rules for behavior). Moreover, different strategies were linked with the same goal or justification (e.g., help seeking and ignoring were justified in terms of avoiding trouble). Thus, when given the opportunity to freely respond, children reported a variety of justifications and goals for their behavioral strategy choices, consistent with an information processing approach (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000).

Furthermore, preadolescents' goals and coping strategy choices in peer conflict events have been found to affect their social efficacy, competence, and overall social adjustment (Delveaux & Daniels, 2000; Erdley & Asher, 1996; Leadbeater et al., 2006; Yeates, Shultz, & Selman, 1991). Similarly, preadolescents' coping strategies in response to postdivorce, interparental conflict have been shown to affect their adjustment (Amato, 2006; Lansford, 2009). They also may face similar risks in their social development and adjustment depending upon their goal choices when responding to their parents' conflicts.

Finally, gender and age variations in preadolescents' goals (e.g., males report more agentic and females more communal goals) and strategy choices (e.g., older children generate more elaborate justifications) have been reported in the peer conflict literature, but not consistently (Leadbeater et al., 2006; Ojanen et al., 2007). The research on age and gender differences in preadolescents' coping yields a pattern of complex and mixed results. Age or gender effects have varied considerably depending upon factors such as: (a) the type of coping (e.g., distraction versus social support); (b) subtypes of the same strategy (e.g., distraction defined as avoidance or as emotion management); and, (c) relative changes in emphasis over time (e.g., from direct to strategic intervention in problem-solving coping; Losoya, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Williams & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1999). And, as far as we are aware, preadolescents' goals in parent conflict events have not been studied to date.

The present qualitative study was conducted to document preadolescents' self-reported goals for the coping strategies that they reported in response to postdivorce, interparental conflict events. Consistent with the peer conflict literature, we first anticipated that preadolescents' narratives would show consistency or matching between like goals and coping strategies. That is, a goal to stop the conflict (i.e., problem-solving) would be related to an intervention

strategy to stop it (i.e., active coping). Second, we anticipated that preadolescents' strategy choices (e.g., active coping) would be associated with more than one goal, such as problem-solving (i.e., to stop the fight) or to reduce their own emotional distress (i.e., emotion regulation). Third, we expected that preadolescents would employ different types of coping strategies for the same goal. For example, a preadolescent could engage in an active strategy (e.g., direct intervention) or an avoidance strategy (e.g., walking out of the house) in an attempt to stop the parents' conflict (i.e., a problem-solving goal). Finally, given the aforementioned issues, we made no directional hypotheses for either age or gender differences in coping or goals.

Method

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Participant selection criteria were drawn from research programs involving divorced families (e.g., Sandler & Wolchik, 1997). Mothers and their preadolescents were recruited from 1,200 divorce records for the prior two years on public file in the local municipal court of a major Southwestern city. The target age of preadolescents was 9- to 12-years-old. Five hundred and five families were identified as eligible. Requests-for-participation letters were mailed out to all 505 families (52 letters were returned for incorrect address or could not be forwarded). Approximately two weeks after the initial mailing, follow-up phone calls were made to the remaining 453 families. Of these calls, 142 families were unreachable (e.g., they changed phone number/address or made no response to repeated calls), 58 declined, and 203 families did not meet selection criteria for ongoing postdivorce interparental conflict. Conflict criteria involved any of the following: raised voices in verbal disagreement, shouting, screaming, swearing, hitting, or shoving that was *witnessed* by the child at least once a month. Each family received \$30.00 for participating in the study.

The final sample consisted of 50, 9- to 12-year-old preadolescents (52% female) and their mothers (age range: 29–49 years-old), of which 81% were Euro-American, 11% Mexican-American, and 2% other. Mothers' education levels ranged from high school to graduate school with the largest percentage having some college education (35.8%). Eighty-seven percent of the mothers were employed, either full-time (52.8%) or part-time. Family income ranged from \$5,000 to \$90,000, with the largest percentage (20.8%) in the \$30–35,000 range. All mothers had at least partial, if not full, custody of the target child. Decisions for the child were made by mothers alone (18%), with input from the father (70%), or equally with him (12%). Mothers reported that fathers had regularly scheduled visitation (62%), another 24% had unrestricted visitation, and 14% of fathers visited occasionally.

Procedure

Mothers and their preadolescents were provided a general description of the procedure when they arrived at the university research lab. Consent and assent forms, respectively, were reviewed and signed. Data were collected in one session as part of a larger study of maternal coping socialization processes in the context of interparental conflict. The interviewer familiarized the preadolescent with the interview process by practicing response cards for several questionnaires unrelated to coping or goals. After completing the questionnaires and

a short break, preadolescents were interviewed regarding their goals and coping strategy choices in response to interparental conflict in their own homes.

Interview for preadolescents' coping with interparental conflict at home—The interview process was consistent with interviewing methodology (Banister, Burnam, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 2001) and recent qualitative approaches in working with children (Leadbeater et al., 2006). Open-ended questions were used to elicit preadolescents' spontaneous reports of their coping strategies and goals (versus choosing them from a list of options) in response to interparental conflict at home. This approach avoided the potential confounding effect of providing preadolescents information about strategies and goals that they might not otherwise have considered. The interview questions and follow-up probes (see below) were used to encourage preadolescents to describe their everyday experience of actual interparental conflict at home. The objective of this approach was to document preadolescents' understanding of their coping strategies when their parents were in a conflict.

Preadolescents were first asked to report on the strategies that they would use in response to the conflict. This method was used because prior research has indicated that having strategies in mind facilitated preadolescents' thinking about goals (Leadbetter et al., 2006). Moreover, the relation between goals and behavioral choices appeared to be unaffected when children reported on their goals before or after their behavior (Chung & Asher, 1996).

The interviewer introduced the topic by generally indicating that all preadolescents sometimes see their parents argue. Each preadolescent was then asked, "When your parents argue, are there things you say to yourself or do to try to handle the situation?" and, separately, "When your parents argue, are there things you say to yourself or do to handle your feelings?" Open-ended prompts and probes were used to clarify preadolescents' comments and to encourage their responding (e.g., "Can you tell me a little more what you mean about that?" "Anything else you might do?").

After preadolescents described their strategies for coping, they were then asked in a non-challenging and inquisitive tone to explain their reason or goal for each strategy that they had mentioned. For example, "Why did you use that particular coping strategy?" Or, a two-question sequence like, "Would you use that (coping strategy behavior) again?" and then, "You would use that (coping strategy) again because...?" As before, probes were used to facilitate the preadolescents' thinking in terms of reasons or goals. For example, if a preadolescent indicated that the strategy made the situation better, the interviewer might follow with a question like, "OK--how did that (strategy) make the situation better?" Or, "It (i.e., the strategy) made the situation better because...?" All taped interviews were transcribed for later coding.

Coding of coping strategies and goal orientations—A critical problem in understanding preadolescents' coping in stressful events is distinguishing between a given coping behavior and the multiple functions or goals it could serve (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). According to Lazarus, Maggi, and McFadden (1996) a coping strategy

or behavior is a type of action, and these action types can have more than one function. Thus, coping strategies were defined (see below) in terms of behaviorally specific actions.

The functions of these actions were then conceptualized as goal orientations. That is, as “attempts to produce desired (or prevent undesired) outcomes” (Skinner et al., 2003, p. 229). For example, preadolescents might indicate that they enacted a behavioral action or coping strategy (e.g., went to visit a friend) in response to their parents’ conflict. When asked their reason for doing so, they might say that they did the action because they wanted to get away from the conflict or forget their thoughts or feelings about the conflict (i.e., an avoidance goal orientation) or because they wanted to talk about their feelings about it (i.e., a social support goal orientation).

We chose coping strategies consistent with the most commonly used categories in the assessment of coping (Skinner et al., 2003) and in the interparental conflict research (e.g., Nicolotti et al., 2003; Rhodes, 2008). They included: active, seeking assistance, distracting action, and avoidance coping. We also chose two less common coping strategies because of their theoretical and empirical relevance to children’s coping with parental conflict. The first strategy, relationship security, reflected Davis and Cummings’ (2002) emphasis on preadolescents’ emotional security when coping with interparental conflict. The second strategy, rational detachment, addressed preadolescents’ appraisals of self-blame in response to their parents’ conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1993; Shelton & Harold, 2008).

The six coping strategies were defined as follows: *Active coping*, behaviors that refer to becoming directly involved in the conflict (e.g., disrupting or stopping it), planning what to do, thinking about the conflict, or thinking about its potentially positive outcomes. *Avoidance coping*, behaviors that refer to avoiding conflict physically (e.g., physically leaving the conflict situation) or cognitively (e.g., by suppressing one’s thoughts and feelings about it or expressing one’s wish that the conflict was not happening). *Seeking assistance coping*, behaviors related to discussing and expressing thoughts, feelings and concerns with parents, relatives, siblings, or friends. *Distracting action coping*, engaging in behaviors by oneself or with others in response to the conflict that involve active physical (e.g., exercise or bike riding) or mental (e.g., games, reading, hobbies, or media) activities. *Relationship security coping*, affirming the continuity and commitment in the relationships among parents, the preadolescent, and other family members. *Rational detachment coping*, verbal statements that the parents are responsible (or at fault or to blame) for the conflict and not oneself. (Examples of goal-strategy pairings are described in the results for the second hypothesis.)

Two, two-person teams were trained to identify strategies associated with each type of coping. Initial training of coping used transcripts of interviews of preadolescents’ coping with stressful events from a previous research study. The two teams coded multiple tapes together and separately for training and another five tapes (10% of the sample) to reach criterion. Midway through the coding of the tapes, the two teams jointly coded three tapes to maintain cross-team consistency in coding criteria. Interrater reliability (percent agreement) for the coping categories were: active, .90; avoidance, .78; seeking assistance, .79; distracting action, .88; relationship security, .68; and rational detachment, .72.

Coding of preadolescents' coping goal orientations—The coding categories for the preadolescents' goal orientations were developed in a two-step process. First, six goal orientations were chosen because they represented the “adaptive function” (Skinner et al., 2003, p. 217) of the six coping strategies. For example, the goal orientation for active coping strategies was problem-solving (see definitions below). Next, the lead author and an experienced coping coder (but who was not a coder on this task) identified four additional goals from the preadolescents' narratives. Of these, preadolescents sometimes offered justifications for their coping strategy choices that did not formally fit the definition of goals as “desired outcomes.” For the purposes of this paper, however, we used the terms goals, justifications, and reasons interchangeably.

The 10 goal orientations were defined as: *Problem-solving*; to seek to resolve or minimize, understand, or reframe the meaning of the conflict). *Disengagement*; to avoid experiencing a parent conflict event or suppress one's memory or knowledge of it. *Social support*; to seek the emotional and instrumental support of others (e.g., parents, relatives, siblings, or peers) regarding one's feelings or concerns. *Distraction*; to occupy one's focus of attention emotionally and cognitively on to other activities and away from the conflict. *Maintain self-boundary*; to maintain the belief that the conflict was the responsibility of the parents and not oneself. *Relationship continuity*; to affirm the belief that the parents and family members were committed to continuing their relationships with the preadolescent and one another. *Emotion regulation*; to seek to decrease negative or increase positive feelings or mood in reaction to the conflict (versus simply seeking support of others). *Personal characteristics of others*; to choose strategies based upon the positive or negative personal characteristics of others (i.e., parents, relatives, siblings, or peers). *Helping others*; to engage in an activity for the welfare of others. *Threat to self or others*; to use a coping strategy due to a perceived physical or psychological threats to one's self or others. *Noncodeable*; responses that could not be coded as reasons even after multiple interviewer probes (e.g., “I don't know” or “just because”). We included noncodable responses so that preadolescents' codable goal orientations were represented within the full range of their responses. (Examples of goal orientations are listed in the results for the first and third hypotheses.)

The definitions and exemplar list then were used to train coders in identifying the preadolescents' goal orientations for their coping strategy choices. The two coders on this task had coded the above-mentioned coping strategies. The coders, however, only saw the preadolescents' reasons when coding them. This was done to insure independence in coding goal orientations separately from coping strategies. The two coders initially went through five transcripts using the definitions of goal orientations and associated examples. Coders and the lead author then reviewed their ratings for each protocol. Revisions and clarifications in definitions and examples were made. Adjustments in the coding process were made to insure the coders were following the same procedure when coding. They then separately coded all protocols. The interrater reliabilities (percent agreement) for the categories were: problem-solving, .82; disengagement, .79; distraction, .87; social support, .74; maintain self-boundary, .81; relationship continuity, .72; emotion regulation, .87; personal characteristics of others, .81; helping others, .74; threat to self or others, .91; and noncodeable, .88.

Results

Analysis of the distributions by gender indicated that the 9- to 12-year-old female and male preadolescents were of the same mean age ($M_s = 10.42$ and 10.54 years-old). There was no significant relation of gender with age and participants were distributed evenly across each year of age. There were no significant gender differences for either coping strategies or goal orientations, with the exception of a marginal effect in which girls reported more avoidance strategies than boys, $F(1, 49) = 3.03, p = .089$. Similarly, age of the preadolescents was not significantly related to coping strategies or goal orientations. Older preadolescents were marginally more likely to report more seeking assistance coping strategies, $r(50) = .26, p = .06$, and social support goals, $r(50) = .27, p = .058$.

Overall, the coders identified 299 responses from preadolescents' narratives (see Table 1). For each row x column cell in Table 1, the row percentage represents the cell frequency (e.g., active coping, $n = 14$) as a percentage of the total number of strategies associated with the goal orientation in that row (e.g., problem-solving, $n = 36$; $14/36$ or 39%). The column percentage for that cell represents the same coping variable (i.e., active coping, $n = 14$) divided by the total number of goal orientations mentioned for the coping strategy in that column (i.e., the goal-strategy total for active coping, $n = 44$, $14/44$ or 32%). Within each of the three hypotheses, we describe preadolescents' goal orientation-coping strategy patterns and illustrate them with examples from their narratives. On a few occasions, these patterns were contextualized by referring to results across hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Matching goal orientation and coping strategies

We first hypothesized that the preadolescents would describe goal orientations that matched the function or purpose of their respective coping strategy. For example, preadolescents could report that they would use an active coping strategy in response to their parents' arguing (e.g., "Yelling stop"). In response to the interviewer's probes about their reason for doing so, they might then say that they did it "because they wanted them to stop fighting" (i.e., a problem-solving goal). These matches included the six goal-strategy pairs: problem-solving goal orientation and active coping strategies, disengagement and avoidance, distraction and distracting action, social support and seeking assistance, relationship continuity and relationship security, and maintain self-boundary and rational detachment coping (see Table 1, column and row percentages in the first six diagonal cells).

Preadolescents' problem-solving goal orientations matched their active coping strategy choices about one-third of the time; both in comparison to all of the coping strategies mentioned for this goal (i.e., row total, $n = 36$, or 39%) and to all the goal orientations mentioned for this strategy (i.e., column total, $n = 44$, or 39%). Goal examples: "To make them stop fighting"; "Sometimes we get stuff resolved"; and "When I'm confused about something or I don't understand."

Similarly, preadolescents' disengagement goal orientations matched their avoidance strategy choices ($n = 17$, or 44% of the time) relative to all the strategies associated with this goal and 33% of the total number of goals mentioned with this strategy. Goal examples: "...because I

get away from it”; “...hoping they would quit”; “...because it goes out of your head”; and “...because if I’m around people it (i.e., conflict) might happen again.”

Unlike problem-solving and disengagement goal orientations, when the goal was distraction, preadolescents were much more likely to mention using distracting action coping (67%) than any of the other strategies. Preadolescents’ distraction goals, however, were associated with distracting action coping much less frequently (18%) when viewed as a percentage of the total number of goals mentioned with this strategy. That is, preadolescents appeared to be using distracting action coping much more often to achieve goals other than distraction (see hypothesis 2). Distraction goal examples: “It helps me to get my mind off it”; “I like focusing on the T.V. instead of them”; “...because it feels like I’m putting my energy into riding my bike, and my mind just clears away”; and “...to go work off some energy.”

Similar to distraction action coping, when the goal was social support, preadolescents’ were much more likely to report using its matching coping strategy (i.e., seeking assistance, 73%) than other coping strategies. As with problem-solving and disengagement goals, however, preadolescents linked social support goals with seeking-assistance coping about one third of the time (35%) relative to all goals associated with this strategy. This pattern is notable in that the largest number of goals were associated with seeking assistance coping (see hypothesis 3). Thus, similar to distracting action coping, preadolescents appeared to have been using seeking assistance strategies more frequently to achieve goals other than social support. Goal examples: “It’s just a way of getting my feelings out so it’s not all kept inside”; “To have someone to talk to”; “...because expressing feelings really helps you”; and “They help me with everything.”

Unlike the four previous goal orientations, preadolescent’s relationship continuity goals occurred much less often with its matching strategy (relationship security, 14%) than with other strategies. That is, the nonmatching coping strategies were mentioned more often as a means to achieve this goal (see hypothesis 2). Even though this goal-strategy pairing occurred less frequently, it represented 38% of all the goals associated with this coping strategy. Goal examples: “I know that they love me”; and “Yeah because I know that it’s just not my mom and dad and they always fight and I still have other family that loves each other.”

Finally, among the six matching goal-strategy pairs, preadolescents were least likely to mention maintain self-boundary as a goal orientation. When they did, however, its matching strategy (rational detachment coping) was linked predominantly (69%) with it versus other strategies. Moreover, relationship continuity goals constituted 35% of all the goals associated with relationship security strategies. Goal examples: “...and I won’t have to wonder if it was like cause of me or stuff like that”; and “...because you are not just thinking that it was your fault.”

Hypothesis 2: Multiple coping strategies linked with the same goal

In this section, the ten goal orientations are listed by order of frequency. Goal orientations were associated with at least three, and typically four or more, coping strategies; but only the

more predominate strategies are described and illustrated with examples (see Table 1, row totals and percentages).

Emotion regulation goal orientation—Preadolescents' most frequent goal when coping with parental conflict was to increase positive or minimize negative affective states ($n = 62, 62/299$ or 21%). All six coping strategies were associated with this goal. It was reported most often as the reason for using distracting action strategies (39%), seeking assistance (27%), avoidance (13%), and less so for active and rational detachment coping (each 10%). Goal-strategy examples: "And I just read what God wrote and it calms me" (distracting action); "...because it (i.e., being with a friend) makes me feel better" (seeking assistance); "...because when I think about it, it makes me feel bad" (avoidance); "...because I'm not worried anymore" (active); and "...to feel less guilt" (rational detachment).

Social support goal orientation—Preadolescents' second most frequent goal when coping with parental conflict (at 15%) was to discuss feelings and obtain emotional or instrumental assistance from others (e.g., parents, siblings, peers, or relatives). Although they reported using all six strategies to seek this goal, they typically used its matching strategy, seeking assistance (73%), as noted earlier. Otherwise, they most often used active (9%) and distracting action (7%) strategies to obtain support from others. Goal-strategy examples: "So when I'm confused about something or I don't understand" (active); and "...because after (i.e., a distracting action) my mom and I talked about it."

Disengagement goal orientation—Preadolescents also used all six strategies to avoid experiencing the conflict or thoughts and feelings about it. This goal was mentioned nearly as often (13%) as social support but, unlike social support, preadolescents used strategies other than avoidance coping (its matching strategy) much more frequently. After avoidance coping, distracting action strategies were used most often (33%) followed by seeking assistance from others, typically from someone outside of the family (10%). Goal-strategy examples: "It's kind of quiet because there's not a lot of people upstairs. So I can read most of the time" (distracting action); and "I think it (i.e., being with a friend) kind of does because I won't be there" (seeking assistance).

Problem solving goal orientation—At 12% of all goals, problem-solving was reported nearly as often as disengagement goals. Preadolescents used five strategies (i.e., excluding relationship security coping) to stop, resolve, minimize, or to understand the conflict better. After active coping, they most often mentioned seeking assistance (28%), avoidance (17%), and distracting action (8%) strategies in conjunction with this goal. Of note, the distracting action strategy example below was construed by the preadolescent as a way to prompt the father to think about his behavior and stop acting in ways that caused the conflict. Goal-strategy examples: "...because it just helps you know that it is going to be better" (seeking assistance); "They stop it after I do that (i.e., leave)--so it wouldn't get that bad" (avoidance); and "...made them think, especially my dad—that he acted childish and thought that he should have done something better with his time instead of causing a fight" (distracting action).

Relationship continuity goal orientation—The matching coping strategy for this goal (i.e., relationship security) was mentioned the least among the six goal-strategy pairs (7%), yet all six coping strategies were reported with this goal orientation. The strategies that preadolescents used most often to assure the continuity of their relationships within the family included active, distracting action, and seeking assistance strategies (each at 23%). Goal-strategy examples: "... (in order) to understand that they do love each other anymore" (active); "...because I feel closer to her" (seeking assistance); and "So we would feel more together" (distracting action).

Others' personal characteristics goal orientation—Preadolescents also made reference to the positive or negative characteristics of others (e.g., family members or friends) as their reason for using a coping strategy (7%). As might be expected, they most frequently cited these characteristics when seeking assistance from others (45%), followed by avoidance (23%), and then distracting action strategies (18%). Goal-strategy examples; "...Cause she's helpful and listens" (seeking assistance); "They really get mad" (avoidance); and "Yes, cause he makes me laugh so I don't think about it" (distracting action).

Distraction goal orientation—As noted previously, preadolescents were apt to use distracting action coping to achieve a distraction goal (67%). Thereafter, they described avoidance and seeking assistance strategies (each 14%) when attempting to occupy their attention away from the conflict and onto other activities. Goal-strategy examples: "I just go (i.e., leave the conflict; avoidance); and "It (i.e., others' assistance) helps me" (seeking assistance).

Maintain self-boundary goal orientation—Among the six matching goal-strategy pairs, preadolescents were least likely to indicate that they used a strategy to deflect responsibility for the conflict away from themselves and on to their parents (4%). Other than its matching strategy (rational detachment, 69%), there were just a few instances of active (15%) and seeking assistance and relationship security strategies (each 8%). Goal-strategy examples: "To make them stop fighting" (active); "...because they said sorry that they fought" (seeking assistance); and "...doesn't mean they don't love us—because they will always love us" (relationship security).

Threat to oneself or others goal orientation—This goal represented preadolescents' use of a coping strategy to due to a perceived psychological (e.g., criticism, negative evaluation) or physical (e.g., harm or injury) threat to one's self or others (4%). They reported active (33%), avoidance and seeking assistance (each 25%), and rational detachment (17%) strategies to these threats. Goal-strategy examples: "...because (otherwise) you might get a stomach ache" (active); "When they argue I get a really bad headache, worse than I usually would" (avoidance); "...because I don't want anyone to get hurt or arrested for fighting" (seeking assistance); and "... (because) I'm not in trouble" (rational detachment).

Helping others goal orientation—We also observed preadolescents occasionally explaining their coping strategy choice in terms of improving the welfare of others. Although it was the least frequent goal ($n = 10$, or 3%), it illustrated that preadolescents, at

times, were oriented toward their parents' or siblings' needs during the course of interparental conflict. A distracting action was used most often (60%), followed by seeking assistance and avoidance strategies (each 20%). Goal-strategy examples: "Yes, that way (doing a distracting activity) I see my mom get happy" (distracting action); "Because she (i.e., mom) wants to talk to somebody" (i.e., the preadolescent). It doesn't make me feel better, but it makes her feel better" (seeking assistance); and "I would change the subject for her" (avoidance).

Noncodeable—Even though the interview allowed for multiple probes to support and encourage preadolescents' thinking about their goals, there were times when they were not able to or appeared less interested in doing so (6%). These responses were distributed proportionally across the six strategies. Generally, these responses were incomplete, not understandable, expressed a lack of knowledge, or expressed that there was no reason. Examples: "Yeah, and it is like important"; "just because"; "They don't because... I don't know"; and "No particular reason."

Hypothesis 3: Using the same coping strategy for multiple goals

These results describe the patterns of the goal orientations within each of the six coping strategies (see Table 1, column totals and percentages). As before, only the more prominent goals and associated examples within each strategy are described.

Seeking assistance coping—Preadolescents mentioned goals associated with this coping strategy most often ($n = 94$, 94/299 or 31%) and it was associated with all nine goal orientations.

Preadolescents sought others' (i.e., parents, relatives, siblings, or peers) assistance most often for three goals other than social support: regulating their affective states (18%), problem-solving (11%), and because of the personal characteristics of others (11%). The remaining goals were nominally mentioned (1 – 6%). Goal examples: "...and he can help me not be afraid" (emotion regulation); "So I would get (their) attention and (thereby) stop them arguing" (problem-solving); and "...because it seems she knows what I'm going through. One of my friends, her parents really fight a lot, so she, we have that in common" (personal characteristics of others).

Distracting action coping—Preadolescents mentioned the second highest number of goals with this strategy (25%) and it was linked with seven goal orientations. Unlike the other five strategies, however, distracting action coping was linked far more often with nonmatching goals (82%) than its matching goal orientation (distraction, 18%). Preadolescents linked their use of distracting action coping most often to managing their feeling states (emotion regulation, 32%), avoiding experiencing the conflict or thoughts and feelings about it (disengagement, 17%), benefitting others (8%), and sustaining their belief in the continuity of their relationships with parents and family (relationship continuity, 7%). Goal examples: "Yes, that way I didn't get mad" (emotion regulation); "...because I get away from it" (disengagement); "...because I hardly play with my sister, and she needs more

playing because there's not that many kids her age" (helping others); and "So we would feel more together" (relationship continuity).

Avoidance coping—Avoidance coping was associated with 51 goals (17%) and, of these, 67% were related to nine goal orientations other than disengagement. Preadolescents most often linked their mention of avoidance strategies with emotion regulation goals (16%). Although counterintuitive at first, they also reported this strategy with problem-solving goals (12%); that is, as a means of resolving the conflict or understanding it better. More in-line with expectations, they used avoidance strategies because of others' (negative) personal characteristics (11%). Goal examples: "Yeah, it helps me because I don't really listen (to them) and when I do listen it sort of makes me upset" (emotion regulation); "...because I could be alone and think about things" (problem-solving); and "That's one reason I didn't like being around (him) because I felt he didn't give a crap like when I was there" (personal characteristics of others).

Active coping—Preadolescents linked 15% of all goals with active coping strategies and it was mentioned with nine of the 10 goal orientations. Aside from problem solving, the remaining (68%) of the reasons preadolescents gave were oriented to regulating their affective states (14%); maintaining their beliefs in the continuity of relationships within the family (11%); obtaining social support from parents, peers, and others (9%); and reducing perceived threats to self or others (9%). Goal examples: "...because it (i.e., the conflict) was scaring me" (emotion regulation); "... that we love you" (relationship continuity); "... (in order) to be able to ask her any questions I have" (social support); and "...because it was getting a little nasty" (threat to self or others).

Rational detachment coping—Although there were somewhat fewer goals overall with this strategy (9%), preadolescents mentioned seven goals (65%) other than its matching strategy (i.e., to maintain one's self-boundary). When responding to their parents' conflicts, they affirmed the belief that their parents were responsible (versus themselves) for the conflict as a way to feel better or worry less about it (emotional regulation, 23%), gain a better understanding or resolve the conflict (problem-solving, 12%), and equally (8%) to reduce threats to one's self or others, obtain others' social support, and to disengage from the conflict physically or mentally. Goal examples: "It makes me not worry about it so much" (emotion regulation); "...to have some understanding why it happened" (problem-solving); "...because you just think it will happen again" (threat to self or others); "Well, because (if I don't) maybe sometimes it keeps me from expressing my feelings" (social support); and "Then I don't have to listen to them" (disengagement).

Relationship continuity coping—Relationship security coping was associated with the smallest number of goals overall (3%) and the least number of nonmatching goals ($n = 5$). Other than its matching strategy (relationship security, 38%), preadolescents affirmed their belief in the continuity of their relationships within the family evenly ($ns = 1$, 13%) with emotion regulation, disengagement, social support, and maintain self-boundary goals. Affirming these relationships was linked with, "I do feel better as a friend in a family better" (emotion regulation); "...and let them cool off for a while" (disengagement); "I know that

they love me” (seeking assistance); and “...doesn’t mean it’s our fault” (maintain self-boundary).

Discussion

Preadolescents reported using matching coping goals and strategies, multiple goals for the same coping strategy, and multiple strategies for the same goal when dealing with postdivorce interparental conflict. These findings are consistent with goal-oriented research in the peer conflict literature (e.g., Leadbeater et al., 2006; Ojanen et al., 2007). The mix of children’s goals and coping strategy choices that we observed supports theorists’ conceptualization of coping strategies as types of actions or behaviors that serve more than one function or purpose (Lazarus, 1996; Skinner et al., 2003). Within any stressor context, Skinner et al. (2003) argue that children’s coping strategies must be understood in terms of their functions. That is, coping represents an “organizational construct” (p. 217) within which many different actions may be employed in response to the stressor. Accordingly, coping strategies can be organized in terms of goal orientations, making it is possible to better understand preadolescents’ underlying motivation or purpose for using them. In the following, we discuss the variations in the relations between preadolescents’ coping strategies and their purpose or motivation for using them when responding to their parents’ conflicts.

Hypothesis 1: Matching coping goal orientations and strategies

We first examined whether preadolescents would report a function or goal similar to the behaviorally-based coping strategies they chose (e.g., a disengagement goal with an avoidance strategy) when responding to interparental conflict. We found that preadolescents’ coping strategy choices matched their respective goal orientations more often than any other coping strategy, except for relationship security (see row results). The frequency of these matching goal-strategy pairs, however, occurred only about one-third of the time regardless of the total number of goals associated with each strategy (except for the distraction goal orientation).

The match between coping strategy and its corresponding goal was evident especially for social support, distraction, and maintain self-boundary goal orientations. When these goals were mentioned, preadolescents principally used a matching strategy (i.e., seeking assistance, distraction action, and rational detachment, respectively) to achieve them rather than any of the other coping strategies. On the other hand, preadolescents used nonmatching much more often than matching coping strategies for problem-solving, disengagement, and relationship continuity goal orientations.

Consistent with notions advanced by Skinner et al. (2003), traditional category systems of coding and assessing coping strategies appear to have constrained their meaning and use in preadolescents’ adaptive efforts in parental conflict events. As explored in the second and third hypotheses, preadolescents’ were employing their strategy choices in a broader goal environment than behaviorally-based definitions of coping normally convey.

Hypotheses 2 and 3: Nonmatching coping goals and strategies

In the following section, goal orientations are used as headings to eliminate overlapping cell information when discussing the ways that preadolescents sought the same goal using nonmatching strategies (see hypothesis 2) or used the same strategy to seek different goals (see hypothesis 3). The four goal orientations (i.e., emotion regulation, personal characteristics of others, helping others, and threat to self or others) that do not have a matching coping strategy are discussed concurrently.

Emotion regulation goal orientation—Preadolescents chose emotion regulation (i.e., to reduce or minimize a negative or enhance a positive emotional state) as their reason for using a coping strategy more often than any other goal. Moreover, emotion regulation was second in frequency (after their matching goals) for five coping strategies, and it was the most frequent goal of distracting action coping. Among the six coping strategies, preadolescents most often used distracting action and seeking assistance coping to regulate their emotional states.

Theorists have suggested that regulating the experience of emotion is one of the central tasks of coping (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997, and all may be used to regulate the experience of emotion in response to stressful events (Lazarus, 1996). These findings are consistent with a meta-analysis of affect regulation strategies conducted by Augustine and Hemenover (2009). They found that distraction (and reappraisal) were among the most effective “affect repair strategies” (p. 1207). In recent research, Zalewski, Lengua, Wilson, Trancik, and Bazinet (2011) showed that preadolescents’ appraisals and coping strategies varied as a function of their perceived emotion regulation capacity in the context of interparental conflict. That is, higher perceived capacity was related to positive appraisals and active coping, whereas less capacity led to higher threat appraisals and avoidance coping. Thus, as seen by their own reports, preadolescents’ regulation of their affective states may be one of the key adaptive challenges that they face in postdivorce, parental conflict events.

Social support goal orientation and seeking assistance strategies—Obtaining social support was the second-most frequent goal of preadolescents’ coping efforts. This goal was mentioned most often as the reason for using active, distracting action, and avoidance coping strategies. These findings are consistent with the notion that the effect of social support from family members on children’s adjustment appears to be mediated by children’s use of multiple coping strategies (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). O’Brien et al. (1995), for example, found that coping strategies that created social support in response to interparental conflict predicted less maladjustment. In turn, supportive parent-child relationships enhanced the efficacy of children and adolescents’ coping strategies (Medina, 2003; O’Brien et al., 1997) and reduced negative appraisals that were associated with adjustment problems (Rogers & Holmbeck, 1997; Shelton & Harold, 2008).

In terms of seeking assistance coping strategies, preadolescents used this strategy to achieve all nine nonmatching goals. It was mentioned most often in conjunction with three goals: emotion regulation, problem-solving, and personal characteristics of others. This finding is

inline with observations that perceived peer availability (i.e., a personal characteristic) and overall social support play an important role in buffering the negative effects of parental conflict on adjustment (Rogers & Holmbeck, 1997). Moreover, we observed the use of seeking assistance in a strategic manner regarding a problem-solving goal. One preadolescent explained that seeking parental assistance was done, “So, I would get their attention and stop them arguing.” A seeking assistance tactic is more subtle and less intrusive than direct intervention strategies (e.g., yelling at parents to stop or directly inserting oneself into the conflict)—which have been associated with adjustment problems (Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2006; Kerig, 2001). Thus, seeking assistance coping appeared to be one of the more common and versatile strategies preadolescents employed to achieve a variety of objectives in the context of interparental conflict.

Disengagement and distraction goal orientations and their respective coping strategies—Disengagement and distraction goal orientations, and their corresponding coping strategies (avoidance and distracting action, respectively), revealed a four cell cluster relevant to their conceptualization and assessment. When the goal was to disengage (i.e., escape the experience of, or suppress thoughts and feelings about, the conflict), preadolescents frequently reported using a (nonmatching) distracting action strategy (e.g., riding one’s bike or reading a book in one’s room) as well as avoidance, its matching strategy (e.g., to forget about it). When distraction was the goal, however, preadolescents predominately used its matching strategy, distracting action, but seldom reported avoidance strategies.

In terms of coping, distracting action was the second most frequent strategy that preadolescents reported. It was linked to eight nonmatching goals, the most frequent of which were emotion regulation and disengagement. Avoidance coping, in turn, was the third most frequent strategy and it too was linked to eight nonmatching goals, most often with emotion regulation and problem-solving, but less so with distraction goals.

In coping research, the use of behavioral criteria for assessing avoidance and distracting action coping has proven problematic (Skinner et al., 2003). Although these two strategies often refer to behavioral actions that appear to be similar, psychometric analyses have indicated that they are distinct (Ayers et al., 1996; Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen, & Saltzman, 2000). As mentioned above, Skinner et al. (2003) have proposed that any meaningful system of understanding coping strategies in specific contexts must be understood in terms of their functions. Accordingly, the assessment of the functions (i.e., goals) that preadolescents associate with their avoidance and distracting action strategies may help to clarify their meaning and intended use in parent conflict events.

Problem-solving goal orientation and active strategies—When the goal orientation was problem-solving, preadolescents used seeking assistance and avoidance strategies after its matching strategy (i.e., active coping). For example, preadolescents reported seeking assistance from parents, siblings, friends, or relatives as way to increase their understanding or discuss concerns about the conflict. Although it may seem counterintuitive to think that a preadolescents’ leaving a situation would somehow stop the parents’ conflict, yet avoidance strategies were used just for that reason. As one preadolescent said, “They stop it after I do

that” (i.e., leave). This incident illustrates the importance of knowing preadolescents’ intended use of a strategy in order to understand its meaning to them within the overall family context. That is, in this particular family, the preadolescent understood that leaving the situation conveyed a meaning to the parents that would influence their behavior (Fosco & Grych, 2010). Thus, assessing preadolescents’ goals may help to explicate the ways that they use (or attempt to use) coping strategies strategically in stressful contexts (Williams & McGillicuddy-De-Lisi, 1999).

In terms of coping, active strategies were associated with nonmatching goals of emotion regulation, relationship continuity, and social support. According to Davies and Cummings’ (1994) emotional security hypothesis, children and preadolescents’ negative emotional reactivity to parental conflict is a measure of their insecurity in that event. They may attempt to regain their sense of security in their parental relationships by avoiding the conflict or initiating behaviors to reduce or resolve it, and may even gain a sense of agency in enacting these strategies (Davies & Martin, 2014; Shermerhorn, Cummings, & Davies, 2005). Children and preadolescents have been found to assume that they have more control over parental conflict events than they do (Rossman, 1992). These expectations lead them to involve themselves in parental conflicts (El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1992), especially when the conflicts are child-related (Shelton Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006; Sheldon & Harold, 2008). Thus, one could imagine a scenario in which a distressed preadolescent might use an active coping strategy to reduce, resolve, or better understand a conflict event by eliciting their parents’ social support that, in turn, enables them to regulate their negative emotional state and thereby regain their sense of security in their relationships with their parents (Davies & Martin, 2014).

Personal characteristics of others goal orientation—One of the less obvious reasons that preadolescents gave for choosing a coping strategy reflected their increasing awareness of the interpersonal characteristics of others. Typically, research on the use of coping strategies from childhood through adolescence has focused on parental childrearing practices or coping styles (Power, 2004; Skinner & Edge, 2002) but not their personal characteristics. We observed, however, that preadolescents gave just such a reason for using seeking assistance and avoidance strategies (e.g., “She knows what I’m going through”; “They argue too much”). Their responses may reflect the fact that the 9- to 12-year-old period is a time of transition in preadolescents’ awareness of interpersonal relationships (Eccles, 1999; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). In peer research, for example, Ojanen et al. (2007) proposed that preadolescents’ construct schemas of the bi-directional nature of these relationships (i.e., peer-relational schemas). They found that these schemas influenced preadolescents’ goal and behavior choices in social interactions with peers. In like manner, preadolescents’ awareness of the interpersonal characteristics of parents or others (see Eisenberg & Valiente, 2004) could broaden our understanding of contextual factors affecting their goal and coping formulations in parental conflict events.

Relationship continuity goal orientation and relationship security coping—In terms of preadolescents’ behavior in their relationships with their parents, we observed that they reported relationship continuity goals relatively frequently. Its matching strategy (i.e.,

relationship security), however, was seldom used to achieve it or any other goal. Although maintaining emotional security is vital to them (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Davies & Martin, 2014), preadolescents appeared to seek this affirmation through behavioral actions rather than the strategy we coded (i.e., verbally affirming a belief in the commitment of one's parents to their relationship with them). For example, preadolescents employed active strategies to resolve or better understand the nature of the conflict (e.g., "When I am confused about something"), engaged the parent directly through a distracting activity (e.g., "We talk at dinner"), or sought assistance from a parent or other family member to express their feelings or concerns (e.g., "To have somebody to talk to").

On the face of it, a self-affirmation strategy would not carry the same weight as strategies that directly generate emotional connectedness with a parent (and thereby reduce emotional insecurity). Cummings and Wilson (1999), for example, found that maternal explanations of resolutions after the conflict appeared to affirm children's beliefs about continuity in family relationships. Given the threat that parental conflict poses to emotional security and adjustment from childhood through adolescence (Cummings, E.M., Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, S., 2006), one of the more important intervention foci in conflicted families may be to enhance preadolescents' and parents' skills in achieving this goal (Wolchik, Tein, Sandler, & Doyle, 2002).

Maintain Self-boundary Goal Orientation—One of the least mentioned goals was preadolescents' statements to maintain their self-boundary, i.e., affirming one's belief that the parents' were responsible or at-fault for the conflict versus one's self. A possible reason may be because the higher frequencies of social support goals and seeking assistance strategies indexed relatively supportive relationships between the preadolescents and their parents in this sample. Parental supportiveness in past research has been shown to reduce children's tendencies to blame themselves for the conflict and reduce the likelihood of adjustment difficulties (DeBoard-Lucas, Fosco, Raynor, & Grych, 2010; Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004). Although self-boundary goals were infrequent, its corresponding strategy (rational detachment coping) was mentioned in association with five goals (i.e., problem solving, disengagement, social support, emotional regulation, and threat to oneself or others). Thus, preadolescents' attribution of responsibility for the conflict to their parents appeared to be relevant to achieving a wide range of goals when living in the context of parental conflict.

Helping others and reducing threat to self and others goal orientations—Although both goals were lower in frequency, preadolescents reported helping others and reducing physical and psychological threat to one's self or others as reasons for their strategy choices. Coping theorists and researchers have emphasized the bi-directional influences of family context variables (e.g., parental characteristics or functioning) on preadolescents' coping strategy choices and developmental outcomes (Eisenberg & Valiente, 2004; Lazarus, 2000). The presence of these goals suggests that preadolescents' coping decisions may well be moderated by others' needs, within the overall coping demands of parental conflict events. For example, preadolescents reported leaving the conflict at their mother's request because it helped her to stay calm or that they enacted an active, avoidant,

or seeking assistance strategy because of their concern that someone might be harmed (e.g., “I’m scared something might happen”). A prosocial orientation to goal and strategy selection in parental conflict events may signal preadolescents’ social competence and capacity for self-regulation as has been found in the peer conflict literature (Harper & Lemerise, 2010; Ojanen et al., 2006).

Study limitations

There were several limitations in the study that are important to mention. Foremost, the small sample size and frequency counts in some cells require that caution be exercised when interpreting their significance. A future study with a larger sample would be necessary to validate the patterns that we observed. In addition, a larger sample would increase the power to determine whether there are age- or gender-dependent patterns in preadolescents’ goals and strategy choices when coping with parental conflict.

Also, goal orientations were conceptualized with respect to four of the most common types of coping strategies (Skinner et al., 2003) and two other strategies (relationship security and rational detachment) that attempted to capture specific adaptations to interparental conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1993). Although our open-ended interview format allowed preadolescents to freely describe their goals and strategies (versus their responding to lists), our use of a priori coping strategy categories could have excluded other types of coping or goal orientations. No doubt, as exemplified by the extensive theoretical review of coping category systems of Skinner et al. (2003), there likely are many other strategies and goals that could occur in response to interparental conflict.

By way of an example, we observed only a few reports of nonconstructive goals (e.g., to cause trouble for someone), or to vent their anger (e.g., “because they made me mad”). In the peer conflict research, these types of goals have been associated with lower social competence and poorer quality peer relationships (Harper, Lemerise & Calvary, 2010; Ojanen et al., 2007). In parent conflict events, interactions that are hostile and intense have been shown to heighten preadolescents’ emotional distress and self-blame (Shelton et al., 2006). In such conflicts, preadolescents also may formulate aggressive goals (e.g., getting even or retaliation) and strategies known to increase adjustment problems, such as directly intervening, venting negative emotion, or challenging the offending parent (Davies & Martin, 2014; Grych & Fincham, 1993; Shelton & Harold, 2007). As one preadolescent said, “...because my mom made me so mad, I broke it.” Aggressive goal and strategy choices of this kind could index lower self-regulatory capacity, which has been increasingly identified as a factor in children’s adjustment problems (Lengua & Long, 2002).

In addition to the future research directions mentioned above, analogue and micro analytic (e.g., daily diary) designs have been recommended to test proposed pathways among individuals’ appraisals, coping strategies, and adjustment (Lazarus, 2000; Zimmer-Gembeck, Lees, Bradley, & Skinner, 2009). For example, Valiente, Fabes, Eisenberg, and Spinrad (2004), using a daily diary methodology, found that children’s coping varied as a function of parental differences in emotional expressivity and social support. Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2009) used an analogue design to identify different profiles among children’s emotions and appraisals in response to parental conflict and other peer-related

stressors. Thus, by integrating preadolescents' goals into these pathways, we may better understand the ways that they conceptualize, attempt to manage, and adapt to the stresses associated with their parents' conflicts.

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Table 1

Goal Orientations Associated with Coping Strategies

Coping Goal Orientation	Coping Strategies							Row Totals
	Active	Avoidance	Distraction Action	Seeking Assistance	Relationship Security	Rational Detachment	Row Totals	
Problem-solving	14	6	3	10	0	3	36	
Row %	0.39	0.17	0.08	0.28	0.00	0.08	(0.12) ¹	
Column %	0.32	0.12	0.04	0.11	0.00	0.12		
Disengagement	2	17	13	4	1	2	39	
Row %	0.05	0.44	0.33	0.10	0.03	0.05	(0.13)	
Column %	0.05	0.33	0.17	0.04	0.13	0.08		
Distraction	1	3	14	3	0	0	21	
Row %	0.05	0.14	0.67	0.14	0.00	0.00	(0.07)	
Column %	0.02	0.06	0.18	0.03	0.00	0.00		
Social Support	4	2	3	33	1	2	45	
Row %	0.09	0.04	0.07	0.73	0.02	0.04	(0.15)	
Column %	0.09	0.04	0.04	0.35	0.13	0.08		
Relationship Continuity	5	3	5	5	3	1	22	
Row %	0.23	0.14	0.23	0.23	0.14	0.05	(0.07)	
Column %	0.11	0.06	0.07	0.05	0.38	0.04		
Maintain Self-boundary	2	0	0	1	1	9	13	
Row %	0.15	0.00	0.00	0.08	0.08	0.69	(0.04)	
Column %	0.05	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.13	0.35		
Emotion Regulation	6	8	24	17	1	6	62	
Row %	0.10	0.13	0.39	0.27	0.02	0.10	(0.21)	
Column %	0.14	0.16	0.32	0.18	0.13	0.23		
Helping Others	0	2	6	2	0	0	10	
Row %	0.00	0.20	0.60	0.20	0.00	0.00	(0.03)	
Column %	0.00	0.04	0.08	0.02	0.00	0.00		
Threat to Self or	4	3	0	3	0	2	12	

Coping Goal Orientation	Coping Strategies						Row Totals
	Active	Avoidance	Distracting Action	Seeking Assistance	Relationship Security	Rational Detachment	
Others							
Row %	0.33	0.25	0.00	0.25	0.00	0.17	(0.04)
Column %	0.09	0.06	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.08	
Others' Personal Characteristics	2	5	4	10	0	1	22
Row %	0.09	0.23	0.18	0.45	0.00	0.05	(0.04)
Column %	0.05	0.10	0.05	0.11	0.00	0.04	
Noncodable	4	2	4	6	1	0	17
Row %	0.24	0.12	0.24	0.35	0.06	0.00	(0.06)
Column %	0.09	0.04	0.05	0.06	0.13	0.00	
Goal-Strategy	44.00	51.00	76.00	94.00	8.00	26.00	299
Total							
% of Total	0.15	0.17	0.25	0.31	0.03	0.09	

Note. The frequency of each goal orientation across the six coping strategies is shown in the Row Total (and, in parentheses, as a percentage of all goals). The frequency of goal orientations within each coping strategy is shown in the Goal-Strategy Total (and as a percentage of all goals below it).