Associations between Adult-Child Relationships in Multiple Contexts and Prosocial Behaviors

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BACKGROUND

- Developmental systems theory posits that relationships, not isolated actions, among systems and their components drive development (Lerner & Castellino, 2002). Adult-child relationships, in particular, are key proximal processes that promote the development of child character.
- Together with family and school, after-school activities have become a main developmental context for children in the U.S., and is considered an important setting to promote prosocial behaviors in children.
- Research finds that conflict and closeness are two aspects of adult-child relationships, and that both aspects are uniquely associated with development of prosocial behaviors (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).
- Theories suggest multiple approaches can be used to examine how adult-child relationships across settings coalesce to predict child outcomes:
  a. examine the unique effect of relationships quality in each context;
  b. assess the combined influence across multiple settings;
  c. examine family and non-family settings as unique microsystems, and
  d. examine patterns of adult-child relationships quality across multiple developmental contexts

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Research goal: To examine the extent to which adult-child relationships quality across contexts predict prosocial behaviors using multiple analytical approaches

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METHOD

- Data: Longitudinal data from Grade 3 to Grade 4 on a subsample of 233 children in the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (52% Female; 23% ethnic minority; 39% mothers had college degree and above).
- Grade 3 adult-child relationships: Mother, teacher, and activity leader reported adult-child relationships (Waters & Deane, 1985). There were 7 items on Closeness (alpha=.68-.85; e.g., "*Child spontaneously shares personal information*"; Mean=4.14-4.67, SD=.34-.67, Min=1.88-3, Max=5) and 8 items on Conflict (alpha=.87-.91; e.g., "*Child and I always struggling with each other*"; Mean=1.70-2.30, SD=.87-.92, Min=1, Max=4.29-4.86; 1="*Definitely does not apply*", 5= "*Definitely applies*").
- Grade 4 prosocial behaviors: Teacher answered 9 items on child's socially acceptable behaviors with peers (9 items; alpha=.84; e.g., "*Child help/comfort when other children upset*"; Mean=1.45, SD=.47, Min=0, Max=2; 0= "*Not true*", 2="*Often true*").
- Analysis: Four different analysis approaches were used. Regression models were run for the first three approaches. Cluster analysis was run to explore patterns of relationships across settings.

RESULTS

Table 1. *Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting 4th Grade Students' Prosocial Behaviors*

Grade 3 Predictors	Prosocial Behaviors in Grade 4
Model 1: overall closeness and conflict across contexts	
Overall closeness	0.07 (.09)
Overall conflict	**-0.18 (.05)***
Model 2: family and non-family contexts	
Mother-child closeness	-0.03 (.10)
Mother-child conflict	-0.04 (.04)
Nonfamily-based closeness	0.12 (.07)
Nonfamily-based conflict	**-0.17 (.06)***
Model 3: relationships variables across three settings examined simultaneously	
Mother-child closeness	-0.04 (.10)
Mother-child conflict	-0.06 (.04)
Teacher-child closeness	0.06 (.06)
Teacher-child conflict	**-0.22 (.05)****
Leader-child closeness	0.09 (.05)
Leader-child conflict	-0.02 (.04)

Notes. All models controlled for child gender and prosocial behaviors from Grade 3.
* p<.05, ** p<.01

Clusters of Adult-Child Relationships
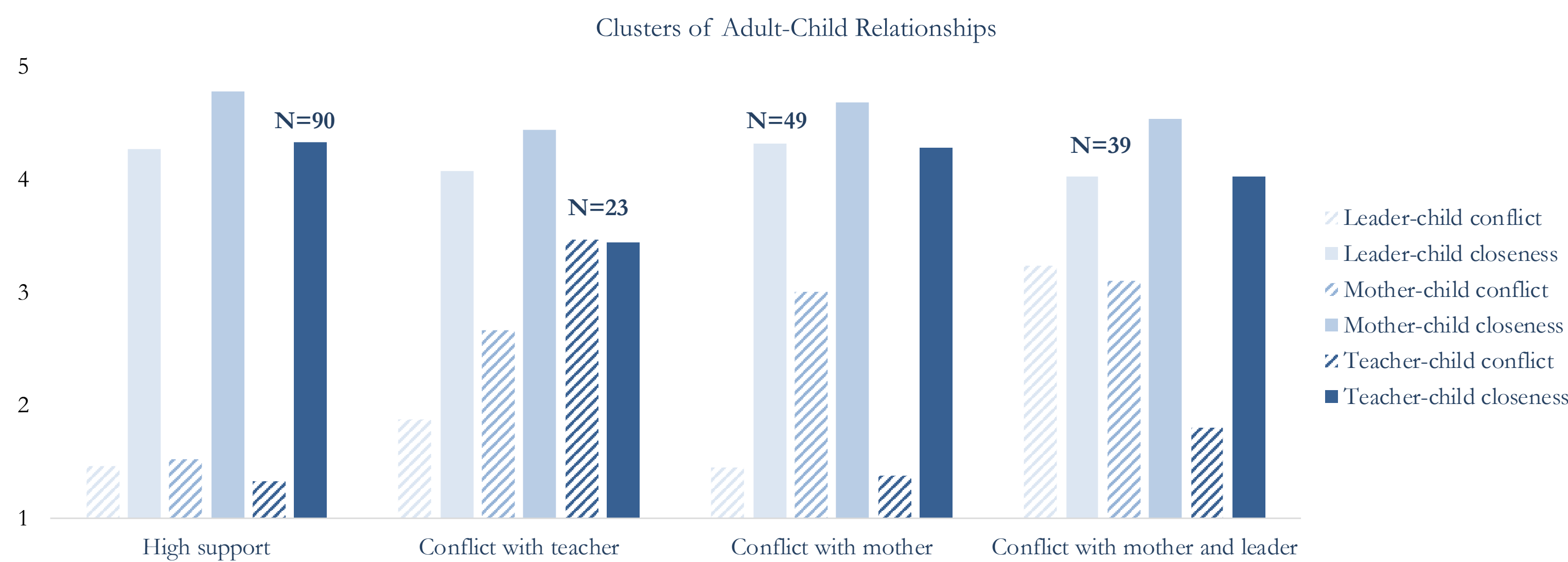
Clusters	High support[a]	Conflict with teacher[b]	Conflict with mother[ab]	Conflict with mother and leader[ab]
Prosocial behaviors	1.55	1.00	1.54	1.33

Figure 1. Final 4-cluster solution of adult-child relationships across family, school, and after-school activities. Clusters sharing the same letter are not significantly different on Grade 4 prosocial behaviors at the 5% level

FINDINGS

- In the current sample, adult report of relationship closeness were relatively high on a 1-5 scale (Mean=4.14-4.67), whereas all adults reported low relationship conflict (Mean=1.70-2.30) with children.
- Though overall adult-child conflict (ß= -.18, SE=.05 , p<.05) and adult-child conflict in non-family settings (ß=-.17, SE=.06, p<.05) were negatively associated with 4th grade prosocial behaviors, results from Model 3 suggests that teacher-child conflict (ß=-.22, SE=.05, p<.01) may drive this negative association, whereas adult-child relationships in family and after-school settings did not uniquely predict 4th grade prosocial behaviors.
- Four clusters of adult-child relationships emerged from the current sample, with clusters varying in the level and pattern of adult-child closeness and conflict across developmental settings.
- The only significant difference on Grade 4 prosocial behaviors from the cluster approach was between *High Support* group and *Conflict with Teacher* group, with *High Support* group having higher score (*M*=1.55 vs. 1.00, *t*=2.69, *p*=.047).

DISCUSSION & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Adult-child conflict instead of closeness predicted 4th grade prosocial behavior in the first three models. The lack of variance in reported adult-child closeness in the current sample may explain why closeness did not predict children's 4th grade prosocial behaviors across different developmental settings.
- Consistent with previous research on adult-child relationships, conflict between adult care givers and children could have negative implications for children's development of prosocial behaviors (Contreras et al., 2000). Adult socializers could influence children's development of prosocial behaviors in both direct and indirect ways, and more research is needed to explore the mechanisms linking adult-child conflict to child prosocial behaviors.
- Considering the little variation in adult report of closeness and conflict in the current sample, a more diverse sample is needed to examine the variant experiences children have with multiple adult care-givers and how they are associated with child prosocial behaviors.