Family Systems Theory

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# Theories of parent-child relations

Overview for today

- Cox, M. J., & Paley, B. (2003). Understanding families as systems. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *12*, 193-196.

1. Lecture
2. Discussions

Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

- To understand parent-child relations in family systems
  1. Family as a whole
     - Each relationship within a particular family influences the family as a whole.
       - Only looking at parent-child relationships does not give you a good understanding of parent-child relationships
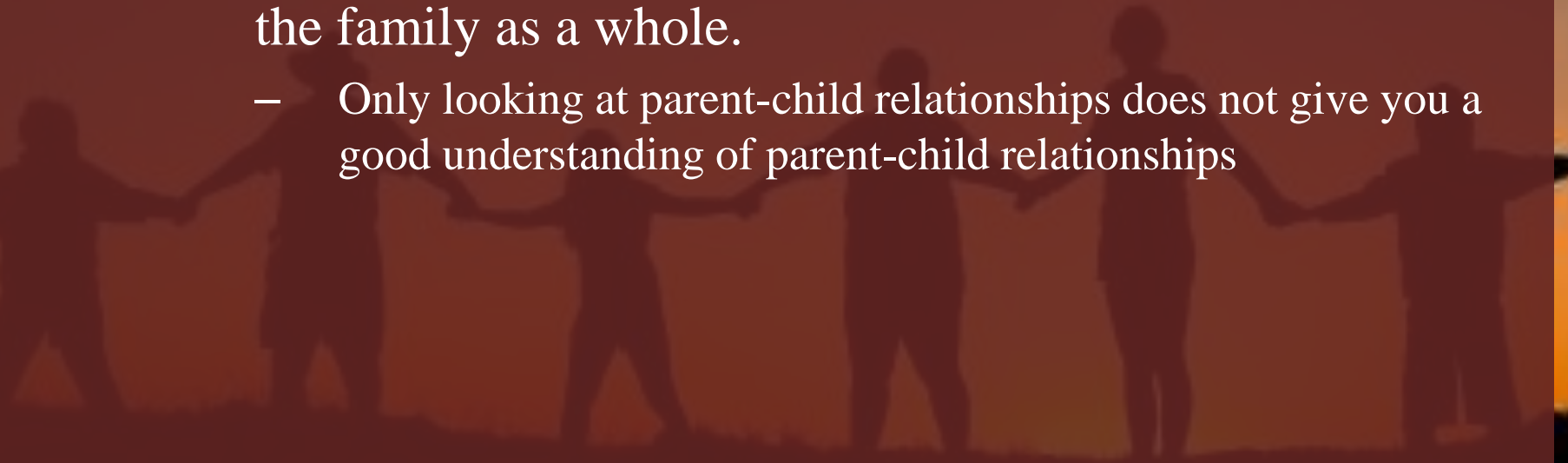
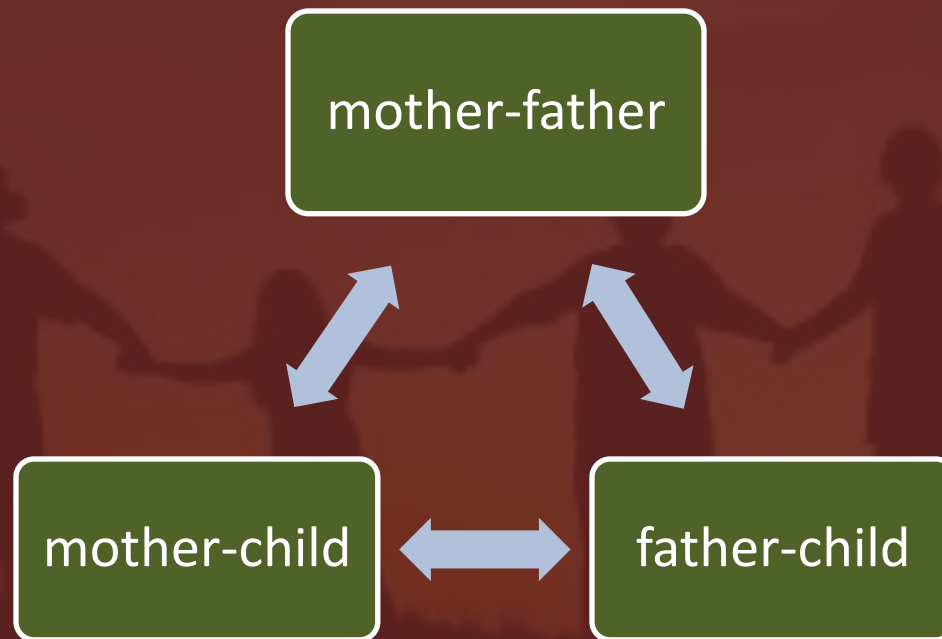# Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

2. Mutual influences among family subsystem
   – Mother-child, father-child, mother-father, etc.
   – E.g., mother-father -> mother-child
   – E.g., mother-child -> mother-father
     • Marital distress -> parent-child relationship
     • so problem of marriage should first addressed

Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

mother-father

mother-child ⟷ father-child
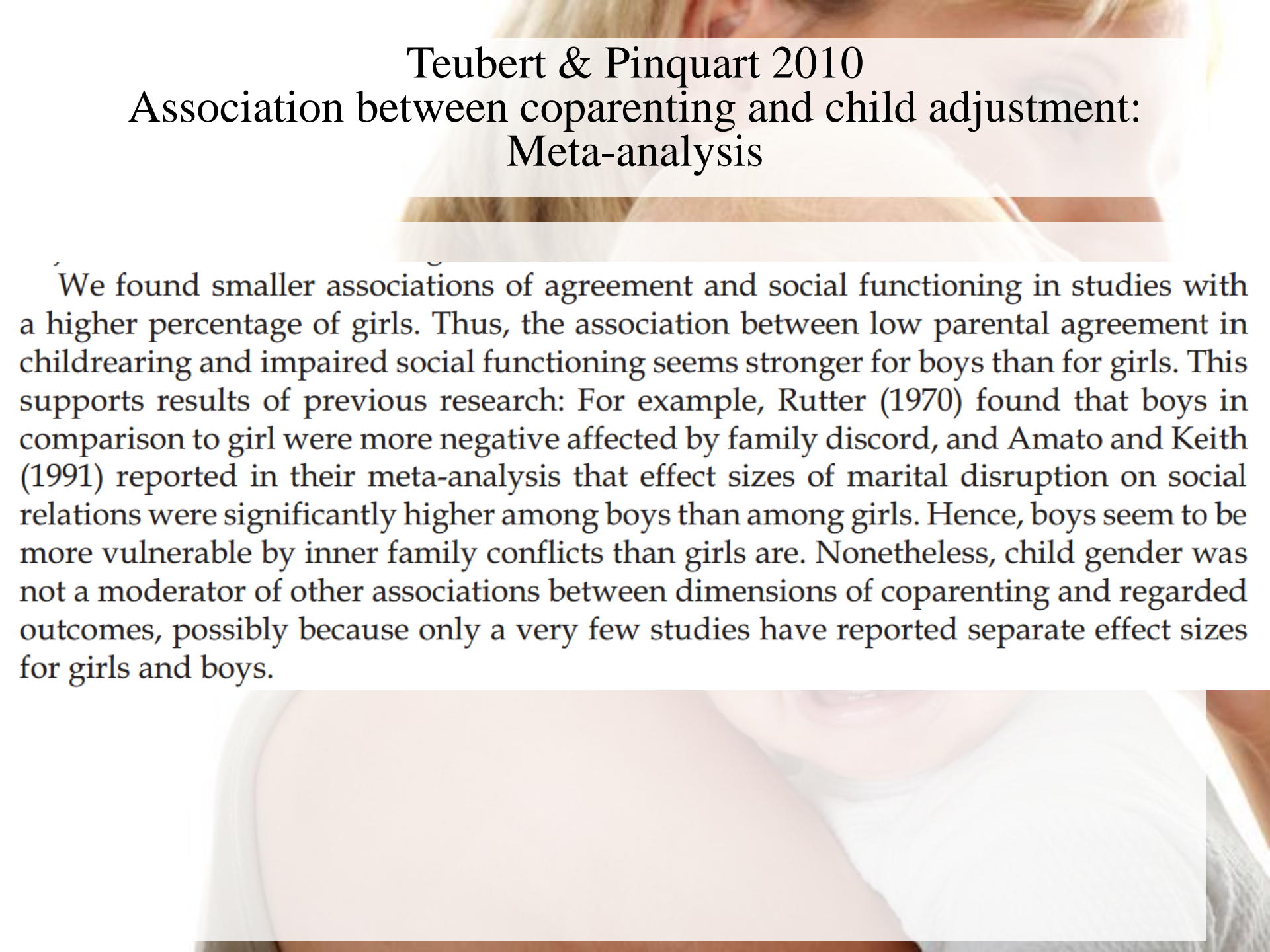
Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

- Empirical findings: parents behave differently when the whole family was together than when they were interacting one-on-one with child
  - E.g., couples were less hostile toward each other when child is present.
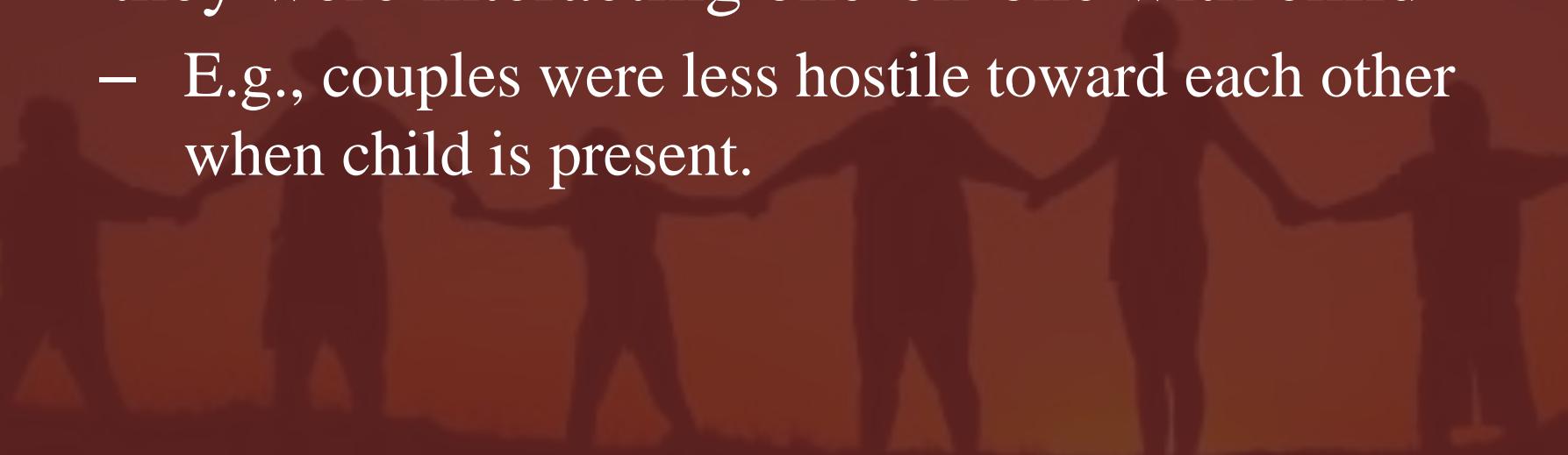
Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

- Coparenting: how parents interact together to take care of their children

  - Supportive (cooperative): help each other

  - Undermining (competitive): blame on the partner's caregiving behaviors

    - E.g., father calling mother "pig" influences child calling mother "pig."

  - Triangulating: include the child into the fight

  - Gender differences: more coparenting disagreement -> more problems in boys (than in girls).

Teubert & Pinquart 2010
Association between coparenting and child adjustment: Meta-analysis

We found smaller associations of agreement and social functioning in studies with a higher percentage of girls. Thus, the association between low parental agreement in childrearing and impaired social functioning seems stronger for boys than for girls. This supports results of previous research: For example, Rutter (1970) found that boys in comparison to girl were more negative affected by family discord, and Amato and Keith (1991) reported in their meta-analysis that effect sizes of marital disruption on social relations were significantly higher among boys than among girls. Hence, boys seem to be more vulnerable by inner family conflicts than girls are. Nonetheless, child gender was not a moderator of other associations between dimensions of coparenting and regarded outcomes, possibly because only a very few studies have reported separate effect sizes for girls and boys.

Cox and Paley, 2003 Understanding families as systems

- Emotional-security theory (Cummings and Davies)
  - Marital conflict between parents threatens child's sense of security in the family.
  - Attachment theory: dyadic level
    - Children seek comfort to their mother. If mother does not comfort the child, the child does not feel safety.
  - Outcomes:
    - Regulation and organization of emotion
    - Positive relationships with others
    - Ability to explore their environment

Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

3. Families need to adjust to disequilibrium (or challenges).
   - Normative transitions
     - Birth of a child, child entering school, etc.
       - New parents are at increased risk for depression
   - Nonnormative transitions
     - Departure of spouse, entrance of new spouse, death of family member
   - So that families can continue to function in the new circumstances.

Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

Sameroff (1983)

- Adaptively reorganized systems:
  - Sometimes more stable
  - Sometimes more unstable
  - deal with only the forces that elicited the process of reorganization
  - not resistant to all destabilizing factors.
  - thus, new vulnerabilities.

Transactional model
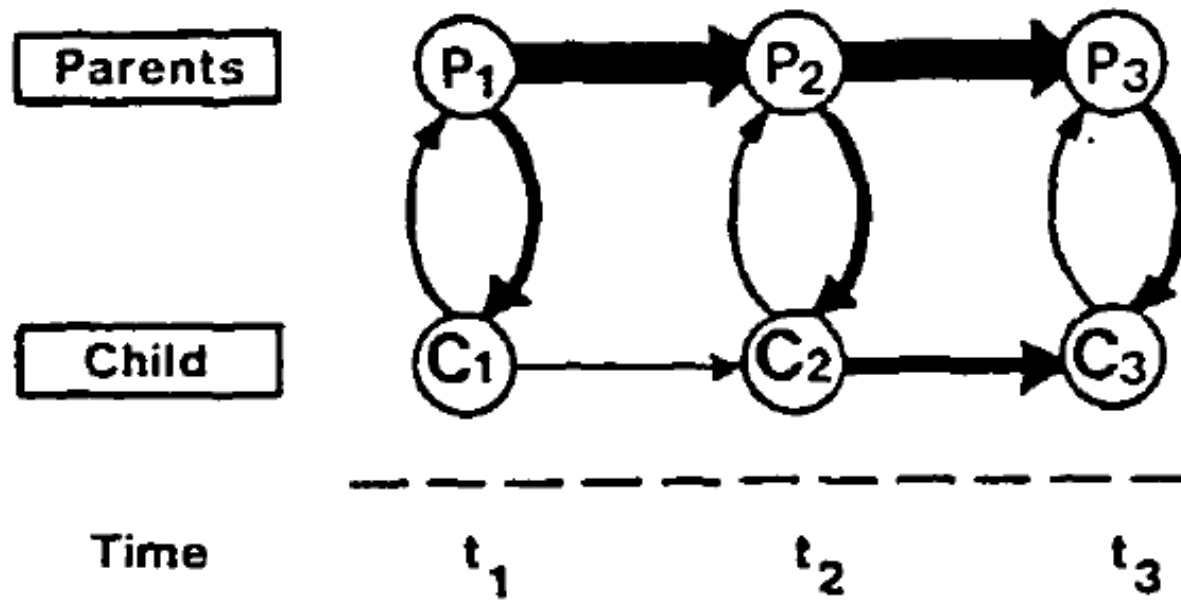# (Fiese Sameroff 1989)

Fig. 1. Social regulatory model of development.

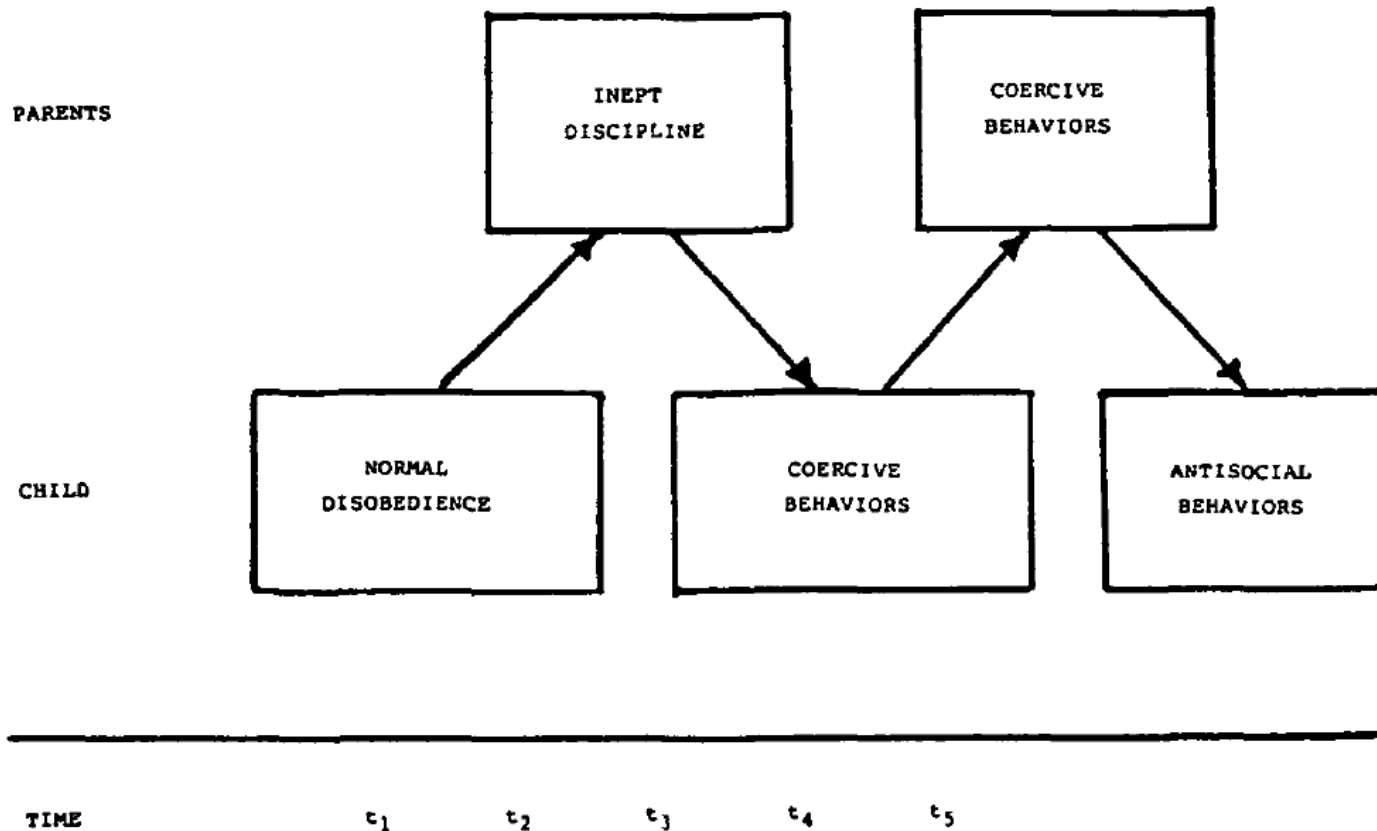# Transactional model
(Fiese Sameroff 1989)

Fig. 2. Transactions leading to antisocial behavior. (Adapted from Patterson, 1986.)
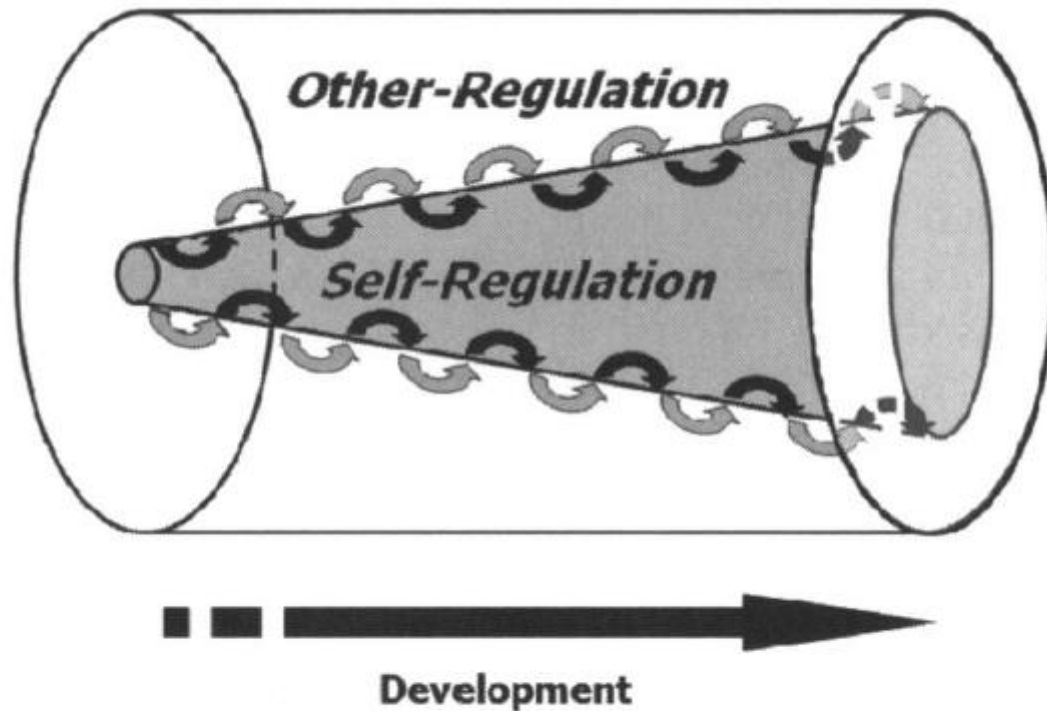
Transactional model (Sameroff 2010)

Figure 5. Transactional relations between self-regulation and other-regulation.

Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

- Empirical findings:

- The birth of a child -> the need for the couple to adapt to their new caregiving role.

- New parents are likely to suffer from psychosis, depression, and the "blues" (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Cowan, Cowan, Herring, & Miller, 1991).

- After the first child's birth:
  – Marital conflict increases
  – Marital satisfaction decreases.

Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

- Empirical findings: child temperament -> parent caregiving -> child development
- Belsky, Hsieh, & Crnic (1998):
  1. Child irritability
  2. Mothers' negative affect and intrusive behavior (i.e., inserting their "own goals and agendas upon the child without apparent regard or concern for what the child was doing or feeling," p. 309)
  3. Toddler's behavior problems

Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

- Empirical findings: child temperament -> parent caregiving -> child development
- Kochanska (e.g., 1995).
    1. Toddler's Fear
    2. Gentle reassurance from mothers
    3. Less internalizing behavior (e.g., sadness or anxiety) problems.

Cox and Paley, 2003
Understanding families as systems

1. Family as a whole

2. Mutual influences among family subsystem

3. Families need to adjust to disequilibrium (or changes).
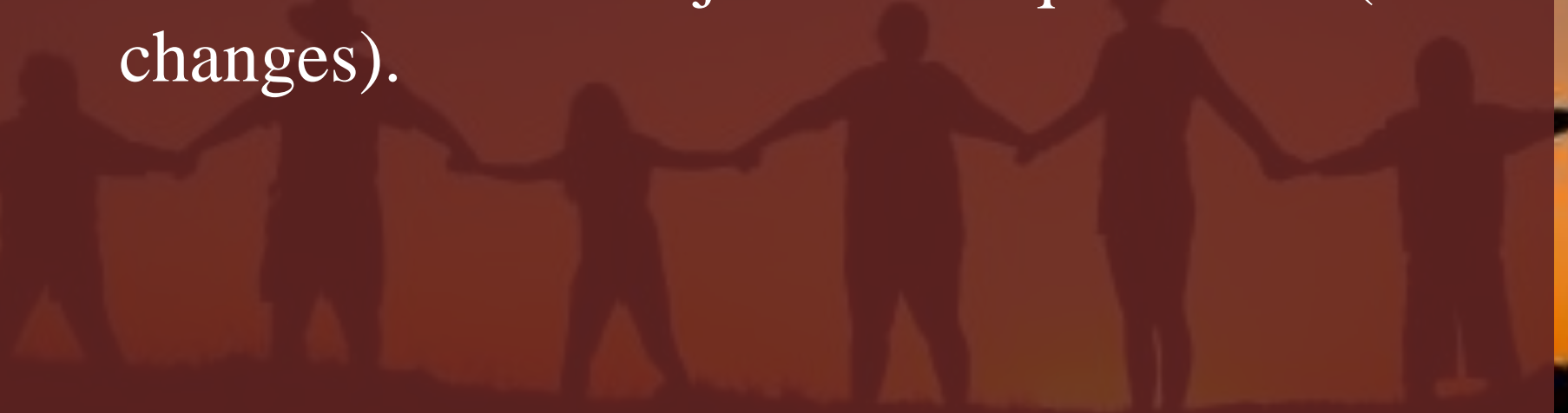
Thought Questions

- many studies suggest that in the first few months of child's life the attachment and interactions with the primary caregiver (usually mother) is more important than anything else. Also newborns and infants might not be able to notice a marital conflict and may not feel insecure as long as the relationship with the primary caregiver is safe. So is the whole family/systematic approach valid even at the earliest stages of development?

Thought Questions

- Acording to Belsky, Hsieh, and Crnic (1998) research, toddlers whose mothers responded to their irritability in negative way were more likely to have behaviour problems than other children with mothers, who responded in less negative way. But do fathers' response have the same impact on their childrens' behaviour problems?
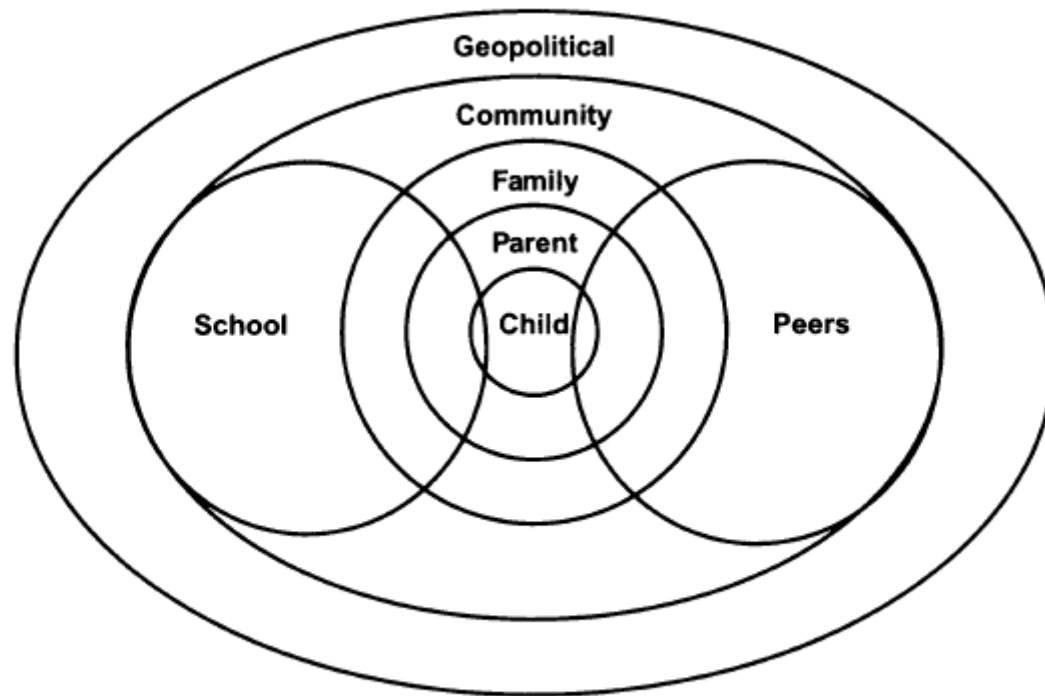
Thought Questions

- **Are the sociological/cultural influences included in an analyses of a family system due to the general systems theory as well?**
I liked the first premise of the general systems theory, that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and cannot be understood simply from the combined characteristics of each part". It says (as I understand it), that a human being can´t be well understood regardless his family environment. I had a similar thought about family: it is probably not an isolated system, but it exists in a broader social (cultural, national, economical) context.

Ecological Model
(e.g., Bronfenbrenner)

Figure 4. Social-ecological model of context.

Thought Questions

- What does Cox and Paley (2003) mean with quality of the adaptation in the marital subsystem, which is thought to influence the development of the parent-child relationship and the quality of the infant's development. I concluded from the text, that the adaptation due to the changes of roles or situations affects the couple individually as well as their interaction, which affects the whole family system. I can imagine what quality of adaptation of one member of the system is, but I don't understand what does quality of the adaptation in the marital subsystem mean or what should it adapt to.

Thought Questions

- The article mentions Sameroff's findings on reorganization of family systems in a reaction to external forces. I do understand that in some cases the family system has to change somehow. But the word reorganization feels to me like a complex alternation of the system. What or how exactly does the family system reorganize?
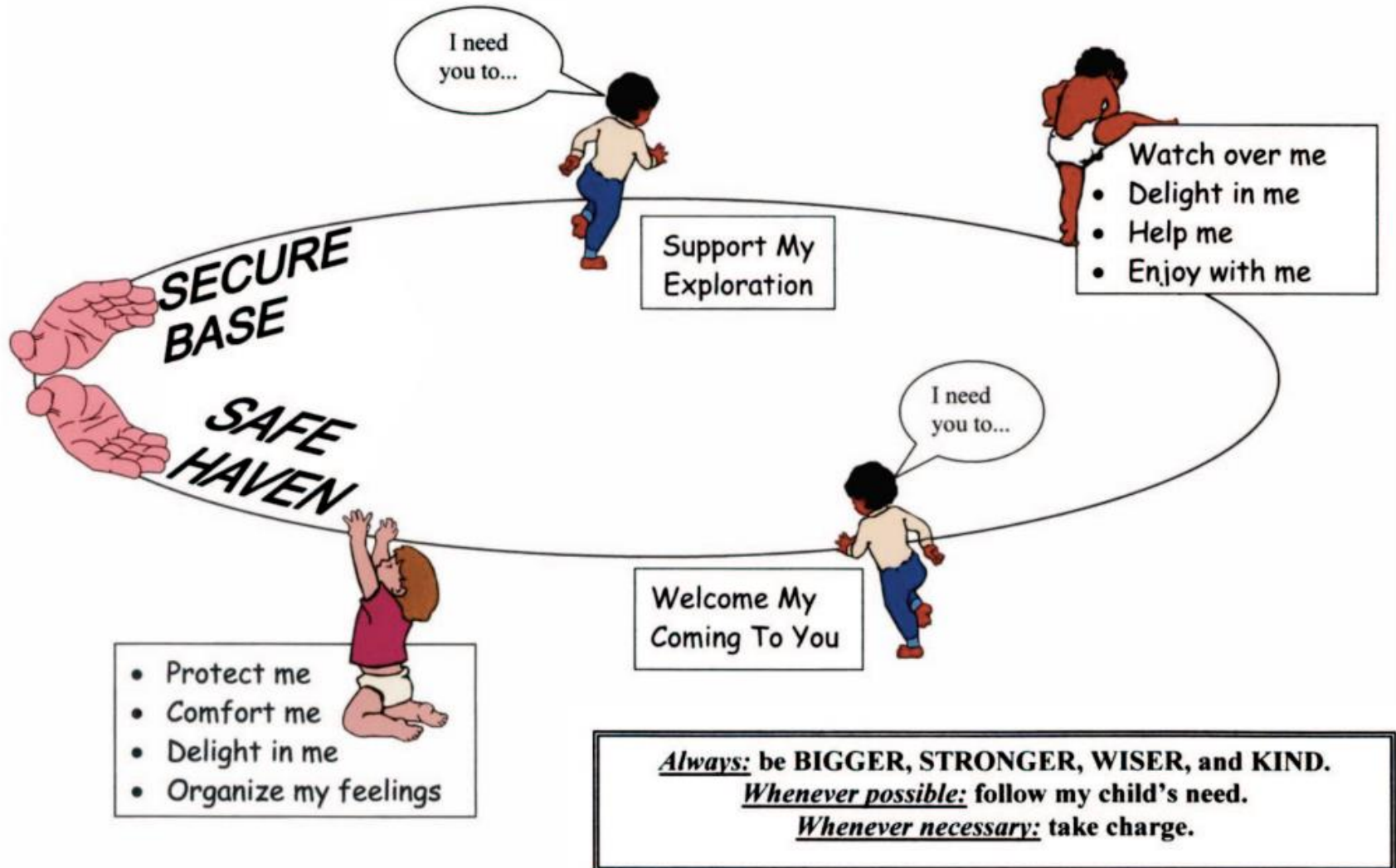
Thought Questions

- Cummings and Davies (1995) and Cummings and Wilson (1999) emphasize the importance of the broader family context, rather than one-on-one interactions within the family in shaping the child's sense of emotional security. They also suggest, that for example marital conflict threatens the child's sense of safety in an extreme way, but they do not reveal the consequences of broader family context for children. What kind of conflicts are there frequently observed in broader family connections and what consequences they have on the child?

(Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin, & Powell, 2000)

Thought Questions

- I noticed that Cox and Paley (2003) seem to present the family system as a nuclear family with only one child. As far as I am concerned, most families these days have two children or even more. Would it be reasonable to also consider the relationships between siblings to be a part of the family system?

Shanahan, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2007
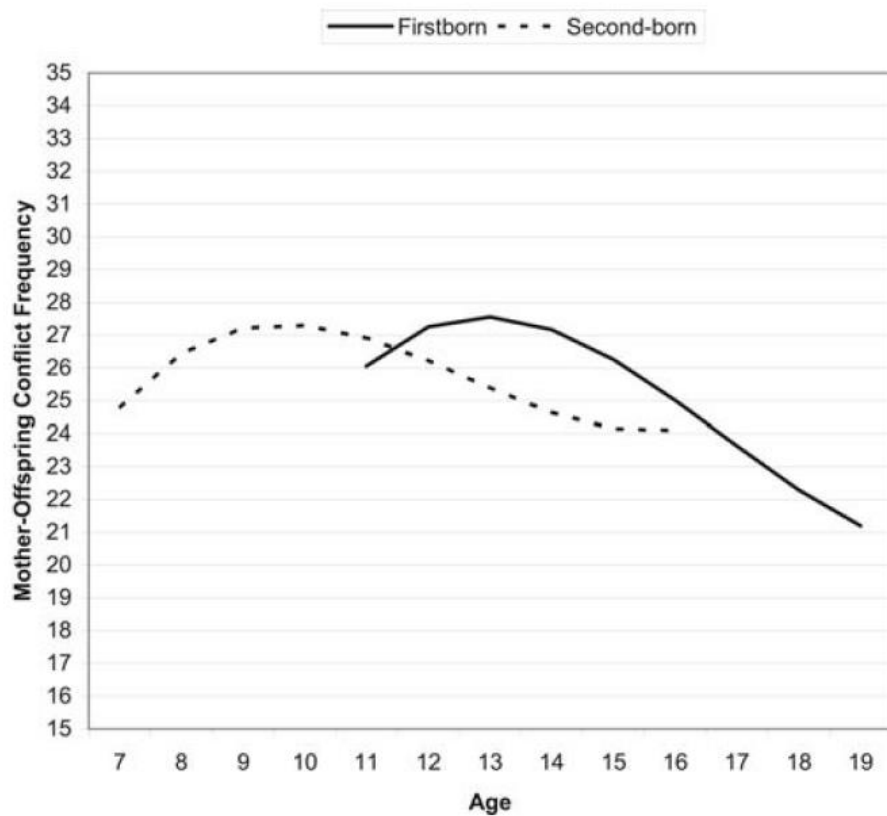## Conflict frequency with mothers and fathers from middle childhood to late adolescence…

Figure 2. Estimated trajectories of mother–offspring conflict frequency for first- and second-borns.
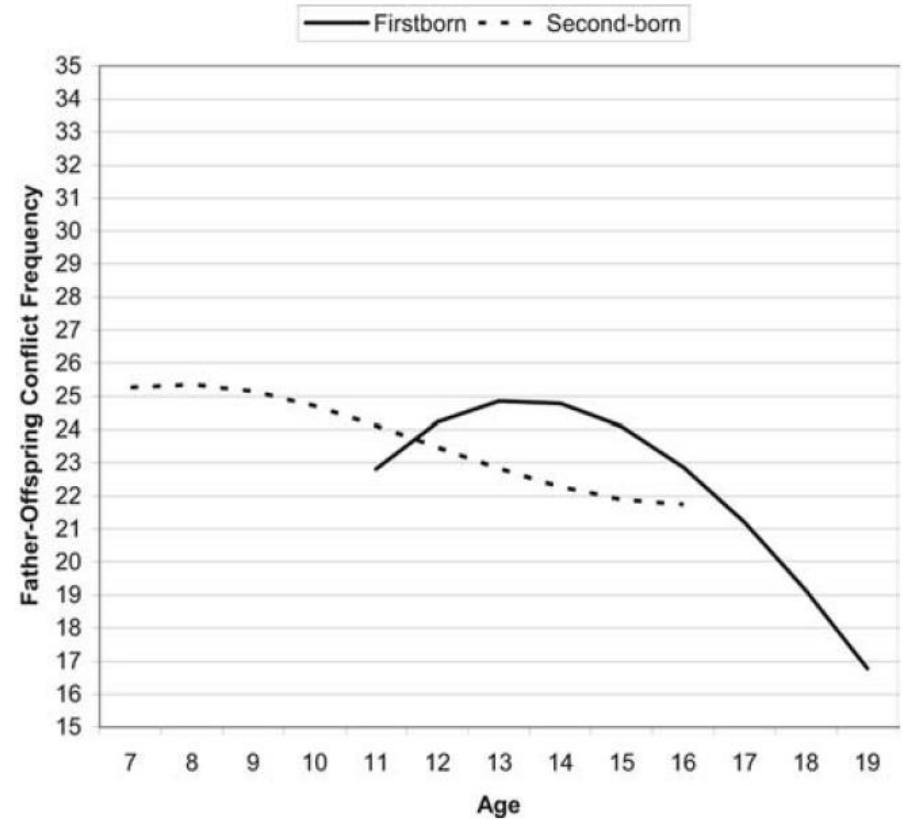
Figure 3. Estimated trajectories of father–offspring conflict frequency for first- and second-borns.