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**Research Article**

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# Relational Spillover Across Family Subsystems: Maternal Negative Affect, Parenting Stress, and Discipline Linking Couple Relationship Commitment to Child Adjustment Across Childhood

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**Abstract**

Guided by the Family Stress Model and spillover theory, this study examined whether mothers' couple relationship commitment is linked to children's adjustment through maternal negative affect toward the child, parenting stress, and discipline. Participants were 949 mothers from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Negative affect was coded from mothers' 5-minute speech about the child, an index akin to expressed emotion criticism. In structural equation models, lower commitment at age 5 was associated with greater negative affect and parenting stress, each of which was associated with more frequent discipline. Discipline, in turn, predicted internalizing, externalizing, and social problems at age 9. Indirect effects through both maternal pathways were significant but small and were largest for externalizing problems. Maternal negative affect and parenting stress may be modifiable targets for clinical intervention and prevention in families with strained couple relationships.

Keywords: Couple relationship commitment; Parenting stress; Maternal negative affect; Expressed emotion; Child behavior problems

## Introduction

Early to middle childhood is a period in which children's emotion regulation, behavioral control, and peer functioning consolidate within family relationships, with implications for later adaptation and psychopathology (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). Internalizing, externalizing, and social problems that emerge during this period are early indicators of developmental risk rather than transient concerns. Childhood depressive symptoms, social anxiety, and loneliness predict psychological distress and suicide-related risk in adolescence (Liang et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2019), and co-occurring internalizing and externalizing symptoms mark a trajectory of elevated suicide-related outcomes and broader maladjustment (Duprey et al., 2020). Identifying modifiable family processes through which this risk accumulates is therefore a priority for prevention and clinical intervention.

Family processes are central to children's socioemotional and behavioral development. Although most research has focused on parent-child relationships (Frosch et al., 2019; Ranson & Urichuk, 2008), the couple relationship also organizes the emotional climate in which parenting occurs and children develop (Adler-Baeder et al., 2013; Haselschwerdt & Tunkle, 2025). Within family systems frameworks, the couple subsystem is a primary regulatory context for parents' emotional functioning and caregiving (C. P. Cowan & Cowan, 2019; P. A. Cowan & Cowan, 2012). Positive couple functioning is associated with more adaptive parent–child interactions and better child regulation, whereas couple conflict and instability are linked to children's internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Lavner et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2024; Zemp et al., 2016).

Studies linking couple relationships to parenting have mostly examined conflict, relationship quality, or satisfaction, and less is known about how couple distress shapes mothers'

own emotional processes, such as negative affect toward the child and parenting stress. Clarifying these maternal processes is clinically important because they are modifiable targets that clinicians can address in parent- and family-focused interventions, even when the couple relationship itself is not the focus of treatment. Even less is known about relationship commitment, an individual's intention to maintain the relationship over time, which may signal relational insecurity even in the absence of overt conflict. The present study addressed these gaps by testing an extended Family Stress Model in which mothers' couple relationship commitment predicted maternal negative affect toward the child and parenting stress, which in turn predicted discipline practices and children's internalizing, externalizing, and social problems from early to middle childhood.

The present study makes two contributions. First, prior work on couple functioning, parenting stress, and child adjustment has relied largely on parents' self-reports of their emotional processes (e.g., Chiang & Bai, 2023), which are subject to reporting biases. We instead used an observationally coded measure of the negative affect mothers expressed while describing their child, the Maternal Description of Child (MDoC; Martin et al., 2015). This measure is conceptually akin to the criticism component of expressed emotion (EE) and allows us to test whether the emotional climate mothers express toward their child operates alongside, and distinctly from, self-reported parenting stress. Second, we drew on the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a large, predominantly low-income, racially and ethnically diverse birth cohort that oversampled nonmarital births. Our analytic sample comprised mothers who were still in a romantic relationship with the child's father when the child was about 5 years old, many of whom were not married. Most research on relationship commitment has examined established marriages; in relationships that lack the institutional supports of marriage, continuity

may rest more heavily on partners' personal commitment, making commitment an especially consequential aspect of family life.

**From Couple Functioning to Child Outcomes: A Spillover Process**

Children are highly sensitive to the emotional climate of the family: supportive couple relationships foster adaptive development, whereas chronic relational strain increases risk for maladjustment (Chiang & Bai, 2022; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Forman & Davies, 2005; Han, 2019; Zietlow et al., 2024). The Family Stress Model (FSM; Conger & Conger, 2002) describes how stress originating in one domain, originally economic hardship, is transmitted across family subsystems: financial strain increases parents' emotional distress, which disrupts parenting and, in turn, children's adjustment. The model's core premise, that stressors affect children through parents' emotional and relational functioning, can extend to relational stressors.

Spillover theory specifies how experiences in the couple subsystem transfer into the parenting subsystem (Erel & Burman, 1995). Supportive couple relationships promote parents' emotional resources and adaptive caregiving, whereas chronic hostility and interparental conflict undermine parents' regulatory capacity and contribute to harsher, less responsive, and more disengaged parenting (Gao et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2020; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Sears et al., 2016). Longitudinal studies show that compromised parenting mediates the association between couple distress and children's internalizing and externalizing problems (Davies et al., 2016; Greenlee et al., 2022), and couple distress has also been linked to lower social competence and more peer difficulties in middle childhood (Schulz et al., 2024). A meta-analysis likewise found that interparental conflict, parental stress, and compromised parenting quality are associated with broad child maladjustment (Van Dijk et al., 2020). Together, these

findings indicate that relational strain becomes organized into caregiving processes that confer risk for children's socioemotional and behavioral difficulties.

In the present study, couple functioning was indexed by mothers' relationship commitment, their dedication to maintaining the relationship and prioritizing it over competing concerns (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Commitment is distinct from satisfaction, conflict, or hostility: it reflects investment in the relationship's future rather than the emotional tone of day-to-day interactions (Stanley et al., 2010). Commitment is particularly relevant in the FFCWS, in which most parents were unmarried at the child's birth and relationships were frequently unstable (Carlson et al., 2004); even in our analytic sample of mothers still with the child's father at age 5, nearly 40% were not married to him. Lower commitment may signal anticipated relationship instability and less expected partner support in childrearing, which may heighten mothers' sense of caregiving burden and color their emotional stance toward the child.

**Maternal Distress Pathway: Affective Representations and Parenting Stress**

Spillover from the couple relationship may operate through mothers' emotional functioning, including their affective representations of the child and their parenting stress. Research on adult attachment suggests that relational insecurity shapes both: insecure maternal attachment has been associated with more negatively valenced representations of the child (An & Kochanska, 2022), reduced emotional availability, and elevated parenting stress (Hassall et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2019; Madsen et al., 2022). Whereas attachment style is a relatively stable individual characteristic, low commitment to one's partner may evoke a comparable sense of relational insecurity and uncertainty (Stanley et al., 2010), which may heighten parenting stress and shape how mothers perceive and describe their child. The MDoC is well suited to capture the

latter process because mothers' spontaneous descriptions of their child reflect their underlying representations of the child and the emotional climate of the relationship (Martin et al., 2015).

Parents' affective representations of their children reflect the affective tone and evaluative perceptions through which they interpret and respond to children's behavior (Bugental & Johnston, 2000; Coplan et al., 2002). Negative representations, such as perceiving the child as difficult, oppositional, intentionally provocative, or emotionally taxing, have been associated with harsher discipline, lower warmth and responsiveness, and more coercive parent–child interactions (Nix et al., 1999; Park et al., 2018). Parents who attribute hostile intent to children's misbehavior respond with more anger and harsh parenting, which in turn predict child maladjustment (Coplan et al., 2002; Nix et al., 1999; Sanders et al., 2004), whereas more positive attributions are associated with less harsh parenting and fewer behavior problems (Park et al., 2018). Affective representations may therefore function as an interpretive lens through which relational stress is translated into caregiving behavior.

Mothers' negative affect expressed when describing their child also connects to the EE literature. EE refers to the emotional attitudes a caregiver conveys when speaking about a family member, most centrally criticism, and is typically assessed with the Five-Minute Speech Sample (FMSS; Magaña et al., 1986), in which a caregiver speaks freely about a family member and trained coders rate the content and tone of that speech (Sher-Censor, 2015). Parental criticism assessed in this way is associated with both internalizing and externalizing problems in youth (Rea et al., 2020), predicts children's antisocial behavior even within monozygotic twin pairs (Caspi et al., 2004), and is linked to more antagonistic and less responsive observed parenting (McCarty et al., 2004), including coercive parenting in high-risk families (Narayan et al., 2012). Because such measures are coded from what parents say and how they say it, they capture the

emotional climate surrounding the child partly independently of parent self-report. The MDoC negative affect scale, coded from the frequency of negative statements and the negativity of mothers' tone, parallels FMSS criticism and can be viewed as an EE-informed index of the emotional climate mothers express toward their child.

Parenting stress is a second intrapersonal mechanism linking relational distress to parenting and child adjustment. Interparental conflict and relationship dissatisfaction have been linked to elevated parenting stress, which in turn predicts less supportive and more coercive parenting (Greenlee et al., 2022; Kuo & Johnson, 2021) and mediates associations between couple distress and children's internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Greenlee et al., 2022). Parenting stress also reflects the cumulative emotional demands of caregiving under chronic interpersonal and contextual stress and is associated with greater parental hostility, lower emotional availability, and diminished responsiveness (Kim et al., 2019; Zvara et al., 2020).

Negative affect toward the child and parenting stress may thus represent two parallel pathways through which experiences in the couple subsystem shape parenting and children's adjustment. Mothers may be particularly vulnerable to these spillover effects: daily process research shows that fluctuations in couple conflict predict short-term increases in maternal negative affect and reduced emotional availability (Kuo & Johnson, 2021). By specifying these maternal mechanisms, the present study extends family stress models to identify proximal processes through which relational experiences are transmitted across family subsystems. The theoretical model is depicted in Figure 1.

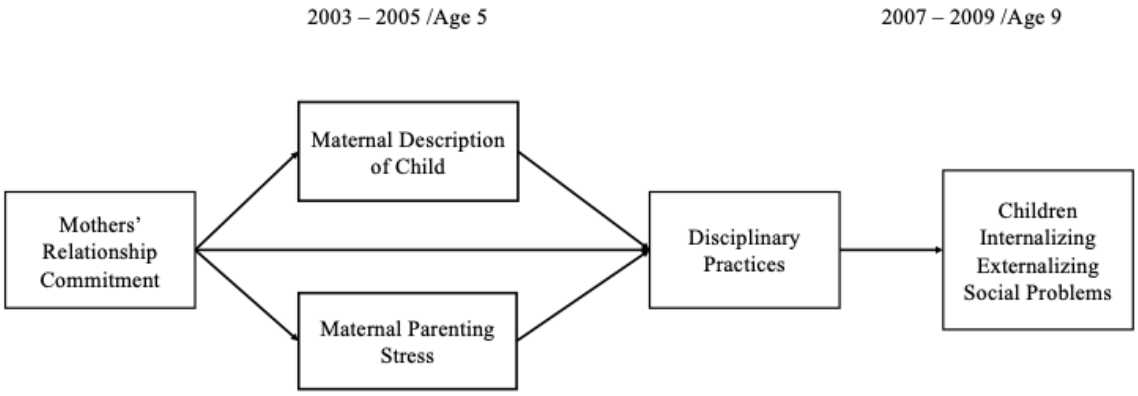


**Fig. 1** Hypothesized model linking mothers' low couple relationship commitment to children's internalizing, externalizing, and social problems at Year 9 through two parallel maternal pathways (negative affect toward the child and parenting stress) and discipline practices at Year 5

## The Present Study

Using FFCWS data, the present study examined longitudinal pathways linking mothers' couple relationship commitment to children's socioemotional and behavioral outcomes from early to middle childhood. We tested two parallel maternal pathways, negative affect toward the child and parenting stress, through which low commitment may be linked to discipline practices and, in turn, to children's internalizing, externalizing, and social problems at age 9.

We hypothesized that lower couple relationship commitment would predict (1) higher parenting stress and greater negative affect toward the child, which in turn would be associated with (2) more frequent discipline practices at age 5. We further hypothesized that (3) more frequent discipline would predict more internalizing, externalizing, and social problems at age 9, and (4) that the association between commitment and these child outcomes would be mediated through the two parallel maternal pathways.

# Methods

**Data and Sample**

We used longitudinal data from the FFCWS (formerly the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study; https://ffcws.princeton.edu/), a birth cohort study that follows a stratified sample of children born in 20 large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000, including an oversample of births to unmarried mothers (N = 4,789) (The Trustees of Princeton University, 2021). Surveys, home observations, and interviews with mothers, fathers, and primary caregivers were conducted at the child's birth and ages 3, 5, 9, and 15. We included mothers who completed the MDoC (2003–2005) as part of the FFCWS In-Home Study (n = 1,789) and who were in a romantic relationship with the child's father (married, cohabiting, or visiting) when the child was 5, yielding an analytic sample of 949.

At Year 5, mothers' mean age was 35.67 years, and 47.7% had a high school diploma, an equivalent credential, or less. At baseline, 40.8% of mothers identified as non-Hispanic Black, 28.3% as non-Hispanic White, 27.5% as Hispanic, and 3.5% as another race or ethnicity (data available for 947 of 949 mothers). At Year 5, 60.4% of mothers were married to the child's father, 31.4% were cohabiting with him, 3.3% were in a nonresidential romantic relationship with regular visits, and 5.0% were in a nonresidential romantic relationship without regular visits.

The median annual household income was $15,000–$20,000. Because exact income was missing for many participants at Year 5, FFCWS imputed household income in two steps: dollar amounts were first imputed for parents who reported only an income range, using parents in the same range who reported exact amounts, and income was then imputed for parents who reported none. Imputations were based on relationship status, age, race/ethnicity, nativity, prior-year employment, earnings, number of adults in the household, and welfare receipt, drawing on both

parents' characteristics for married and cohabiting couples and on the reporting parent's characteristics otherwise.

**Measures**

***Low Relationship Commitment (2003-2005; Year 5)***

Low couple relationship commitment was measured with four items adapted from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) and rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Example items included: "*Relationship with a father is more important than almost anything else*," "*I want the relationship to stay strong no matter the rough times we encounter*," and "*I may not want to be with father a few years from now*." Items were reverse-coded as appropriate and averaged, with higher scores reflecting lower commitment ($\alpha = .67$).

***Negative Affect Toward Child (2003-2005; Year 5)***

As part of the FFCWS In-Home Study, mothers completed the MDoC at child age 5, providing a spontaneous 5-minute description of their child (Martin et al., 2015). The MDoC captures mothers' internalized representations of the parent–child relationship and the affective tone with which they interpret their child. Audio recordings were coded on separate scales for mothers' positive feelings, negative feelings, and detachment toward the child. The present study used the negative affect scale, which captures the negative content of the mother's description, the frequency of negative statements, and the negativity of her tone when discussing the child, reflecting disappointment or dislike.

During the MDoC task, mothers responded to prompts such as, *"All children are easier to raise in some ways and harder in others. How would you like [child] to be different?"* and *"How do you feel when you're away from [child]?"* Negative affect was coded on a 5-point scale

(1= 0-2 negative statements without negative tones, 2= 2-3 negative statements and few negative tones, 3= 4-6 negative statements and mixed tone, 4= many negative statements and negative tone, 5= nearly every statement is negative and tone is consistently negative). Prior work suggests that the MDoC dimensions represent distinct constructs (Martin et al., 2015), supporting the use of negative affect as a single variable. The positive affect and detachment scales were not analyzed because they showed limited variability in the analytic sample. Conceptually, the negative affect scale parallels the criticism component of EE as assessed with the FMSS, which is likewise coded from critical remarks and negative tone (Magaña et al., 1986); because the MDoC was not designed as a formal EE instrument, however, we treat it as an EE-informed index rather than a direct equivalent.

***Maternal Parenting Stress (2003-2005; Year 5)***

Parenting stress was assessed with four Aggravation in Parenting items from the Year 5 core survey, adapted from the Child Development Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (Hofferth et al., 1997). Items (e.g., *"I find that taking care of my child(ren) is much more work than pleasure"; "I often feel tired, worn out, or exhausted from raising a family")* were rated on a 4-point scale (1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree), reverse-coded, and averaged so that higher scores indicate more parenting stress ($\alpha$=.64).

***Disciplinary Practices (2003 – 2005; Year 5)***

*Discipline* practices were modeled as a latent construct indicated by mothers' nonviolent discipline, psychological aggression, and physical assault, each measured with the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale (CTSPC; Straus et al., 1998). Nonviolent discipline was measured with four items asking *how often in the past year the primary caregiver had, for example, "explained to child why something child did was wrong," "put the child in time out or sent the child to*

*room," and "took away privileges from him/her."* Responses were coded on a frequency scale (0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = twice, 3 = 3–5 times, 4 = 6–10 times, 5 = 11–20 times, 6 = more than 20 times); responses of 7 (yes, but not in the past year) were recoded to 0. Items were averaged, with higher scores reflecting more frequent nonviolent discipline.

Psychological aggression was measured with five items (e.g., *"shouted, yelled, or screamed at the child"),* and physical assault was measured with five items (e.g., "spanked child on bottom with bare hand"; "slapped child on the hand, arm, or leg"). Both were coded and scored in the same manner as nonviolent discipline, with higher scores representing more frequent use.

***Child Internalizing, Externalizing, and Social Problems (2007–2010; Year 9)***

Child outcomes at Year 9 were internalizing, externalizing, and social problems, each examined as a separate outcome and assessed with items from the school-age Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/6-18; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). The primary caregiver, in most cases the biological mother, rated the focal child's behavior on a 3-point scale (1 = *not true*, 2 = *somewhat or sometimes true*, 3 = *very true or often true*). Internalizing problems (32 items) comprised the Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn/Depressed, and Somatic Complaints subscales (e.g., *cries a lot*; *unhappy, sad, or depressed*; *worries*). Externalizing problems (35 items) comprised the Rule-Breaking and Aggressive Behavior subscales (e.g., *cruel, bullies, or shows meanness to others*; *stubborn, sullen, or irritable*; *physically attacks people*). Social problems (11 items) captured difficulties in peer relationships (e.g., *doesn't get along with other kids*; *not liked by other kids*). Items were averaged so that higher scores indicated more problems ($\alpha$ = .88, .91, and .71, respectively).

***Covariates (2003 – 2005; Year 5)***

We included maternal education and household income at Year 5 as covariates. Maternal education was coded as an ordinal variable (1 = *less than high school*, 2 = *high school diploma or equivalent*, 3 = *some college or technical school*, 4 = *college degree or higher*). Household income was constructed by FFCWS as described above; because it was positively skewed, we used its natural log.

**Analytical Approach**

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) in Mplus version 9.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2025) to test the hypothesized model (Figure 1), in which mothers' couple relationship commitment, negative affect toward the child, parenting stress, and discipline practices at Year 5 predicted children's internalizing, externalizing, and social problems at Year 9. We estimated direct and indirect effects of commitment on each child outcome and tested indirect effects with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples; indirect effects were considered significant when the 95% confidence interval excluded zero.

Model fit was evaluated with the Comparative Fit Index (CFI > .90 acceptable), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI > .90 acceptable), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA < .06 good; < .08 acceptable; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Standardized coefficients ($\beta$) are reported and interpreted using conventional benchmarks of approximately .10, .30, and .50 for small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988). Missing data were handled with full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation under the missing-at-random assumption.

## Results

We provided descriptive statistics and a matrix of the correlations for study variables in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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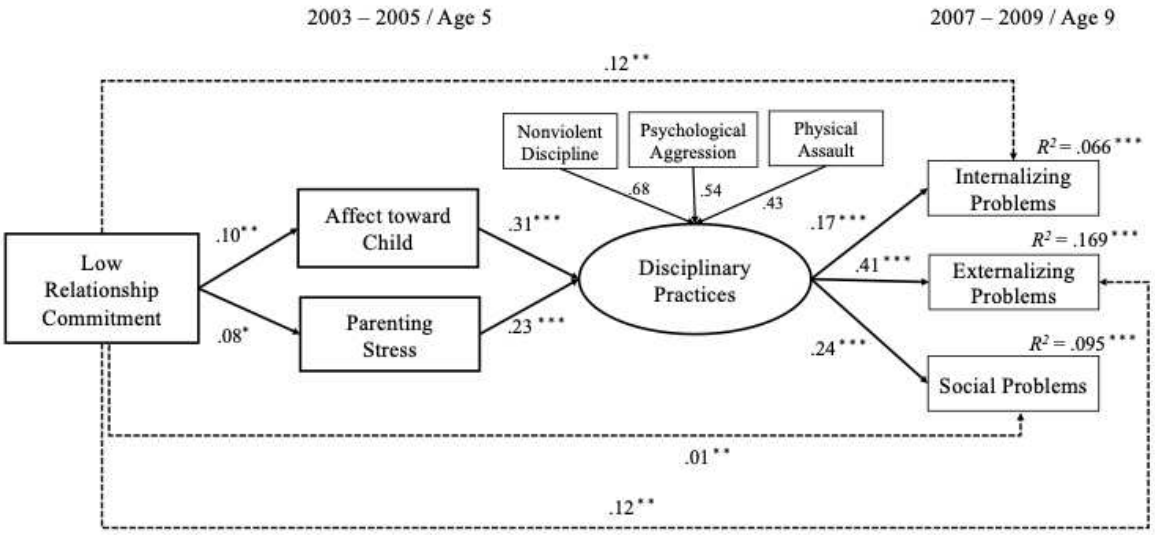
All three indicators loaded significantly on the latent discipline construct (*ps* < .001): nonviolent discipline ($\beta$ = .68), psychological aggression ($\beta$ = .54), and physical assault ($\beta$ = .43).

The model fit the data well, $\chi^2(22) = 96.15$, $p < .001$, CFI = .97, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.05, .07]. Lower relationship commitment at Year 5 was associated with higher parenting stress ($\beta$ = .08, $p < .05$) and greater negative affect toward the child ($\beta$ = .10, $p < .01$). Both negative affect ($\beta$ = .31, $p < .001$) and parenting stress ($\beta$ = .23, $p < .001$) were associated with more frequent discipline, which in turn predicted children's internalizing ($\beta$ = .17, $p < .001$), externalizing ($\beta$ = .41, $p < .001$), and social problems ($\beta$ = .24, $p < .001$) at Year 9.

Direct effects of lower commitment on internalizing ($\beta$ = .12, $p < .01$), externalizing (β = .12, $p < .01$), and social problems ($\beta$ = .10, $p < .01$) remained significant. Total indirect effects of low commitment were also significant for internalizing ($\beta$ = .008, 95% CI [.003, .019]), externalizing ($\beta$ = .020, 95% CI [.007, .037]), and social problems ($\beta$ = .012, 95% CI [.004, .024]). Both specific serial pathways were significant for all three outcomes: lower commitment was associated with greater negative affect, which was associated with more frequent discipline and, in turn, more child problems ($\beta$s = .005–.013); likewise, lower commitment was associated with greater parenting stress, more frequent discipline, and more child problems ($\beta$s = .003–.007). Indirect effects were largest for externalizing problems. The model explained 6.6%, 19.6%, and 9.5% of the variance in internalizing, externalizing, and social problems, respectively (Figure 2).

**Fig. 2** Final structural equation model of the pathways from mothers' low couple relationship commitment through maternal negative affect toward the child, parenting stress, and discipline

practices (Year 5) to children's internalizing, externalizing, and social problems (Year 9). Values are standardized coefficients




## Discussion

This study tested whether mothers' couple relationship commitment is linked to children's internalizing, externalizing, and social problems through maternal emotional processes and discipline. The findings supported this sequence. Lower commitment was associated with greater negative affect toward the child and higher parenting stress. Each maternal process was associated with more frequent discipline. Discipline, in turn, predicted more child problems at age 9. This pattern is consistent with the Family Stress Model and with evidence that parenting carries couple distress to children (Davies et al., 2016; Greenlee et al., 2022; Van Dijk et al., 2020). Effect sizes, however, varied across stages of the model.

As hypothesized, lower commitment was associated with both maternal processes, although these associations were small (β = .10 for negative affect; β = .08 for parenting stress). This is consistent with spillover frameworks in which relational stressors initiate family processes that accumulate over time (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). The two processes likely

capture different aspects of maternal functioning: parenting stress may reflect affective overload and diminished regulatory capacity, whereas negative affect may reflect a negative interpretive stance toward the child (Belsky, 1984).

Supporting Hypothesis 2, negative affect (β = .31) and parenting stress (β = .23) were each associated with more frequent discipline, so both pathways converged on parenting behavior. Supporting Hypothesis 3, discipline predicted all three child outcomes, most strongly externalizing problems (β = .41) and more modestly social (β = .24) and internalizing problems (β = .17). Discipline thus appears to be a proximal mechanism linking family relational processes to child adjustment, particularly for behavior problems. Because nonviolent discipline was the strongest indicator of the latent discipline factor, however, this construct primarily reflects how often mothers engaged in disciplinary responses rather than harsh discipline alone.

Hypothesis 4 was also supported. Total indirect effects of commitment were significant for all three outcomes, and both serial pathways, through negative affect and through parenting stress, were significant, with the largest indirect effects for externalizing problems. Because the direct effects of commitment also remained significant, the mediation was partial: maternal emotional processes and discipline account for part, but not all, of the association between commitment and child adjustment. Other mechanisms, such as interparental conflict, coparenting, or father involvement, may account for the remainder.

The indirect effects were small (βs = .003–.020), which is common in longitudinal family process research when effects pass through several mechanisms. Small effects can still be clinically meaningful. From a developmental psychopathology perspective, they may accumulate when repeatedly reinforced within family relationships (Belsky et al., 2007; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010), and because couple strain, parenting stress, and frequent discipline are common, small

effects may matter at the population level. Nevertheless, the mediated pathways should be interpreted cautiously because commitment, negative affect, parenting stress, and discipline were all assessed at age 5.

These findings extend FSM and spillover research by suggesting that spillover operates not only through conflict or affective dysregulation but also through parents' affective representations of the child, consistent with a representational spillover process across family subsystems (Katz & Gottman, 1993). Rather than restructuring parents' cognitive schemas, relational strain may narrow their interpretive flexibility and increase negative evaluations of the child. Parenting stress, in contrast, may reflect regulatory burden, whereby relational strain contributes to emotional exhaustion and diminished caregiving capacity (Belsky, 1984). Stress-related and representational processes may therefore constitute partially distinct pathways from relational experiences to caregiving difficulties and child outcomes (Crnic, 2024; Zvara et al., 2020). Children may also respond to the broader emotional climate of the family, not only to discrete parenting behaviors (P. A. Cowan & Cowan, 2002; Davies et al., 2002); caregiving environments characterized by parenting stress, frequent discipline, and negative maternal affect may shape children's internal working models of relationships and their emotional and behavioral regulation (Kim et al., 2019; Kochanska & An, 2024).

The association between maternal negative affect and discipline merits attention in light of the EE literature. Negative affect was coded by trained raters from mothers' speech, whereas parenting stress and discipline were reported by mothers themselves; yet negative affect was associated with discipline at least as strongly as parenting stress was ($\beta$ = .31 and $\beta$ = .23, respectively). This pattern suggests that the emotional climate mothers express toward their child carries information about discipline that is not reducible to shared reporter variance or to mothers'

subjective sense of burden, consistent with evidence that parental criticism measured from speech samples tracks observed parenting behavior (McCarty et al., 2004; Narayan et al., 2012). At the same time, the association between commitment and negative affect was small, suggesting that the emotional climate directed toward the child is also shaped by other factors, such as maternal characteristics or the child's own behavior. Future research could examine whether maternal negative affect also conditions the developmental consequences of discipline, as the EE literature would suggest (Peris & Miklowitz, 2015).

The FFCWS context is also important for interpreting these findings. Many families in the cohort experienced economic hardship and relationship instability, and most parents were unmarried at the child's birth (Carlson et al., 2004). Our analytic sample was restricted to mothers still romantically involved with the child's father at age 5, of whom 60.4% were married. In this context, commitment may signal whether mothers anticipate continued partner involvement and support in childrearing, so the association between lower commitment and higher parenting stress may reflect anticipated parenting with less support as well as relational strain. That this association emerged among mothers who were still in a relationship suggests that uncertainty about the relationship's future matters even when couples remain together. These findings underscore the value of studying family processes in populations underrepresented in the couple and parenting literature and caution against assuming that associations observed in married, middle-income samples generalize unchanged.

**Implications for Clinical Practice and Prevention**

The findings have several implications for clinicians who work with children and families, including child psychiatrists, psychologists, and marriage and family therapists. First, when children present with internalizing, externalizing, or social problems, assessment should extend

beyond the parent–child dyad to the couple relationship. Low commitment may not surface as overt conflict, yet in this study it was linked to child problems through mothers' emotional functioning. Asking caregivers about their expectations for the relationship's future, in addition to conflict and satisfaction, may help clinicians identify families in which couple uncertainty is spilling over into parenting (Zemp et al., 2016).

Second, maternal negative affect toward the child and parenting stress are modifiable treatment targets. Parenting stress can be addressed through stress management and practical support for caregiving demands (Crnic, 2024). Negative affect toward the child may respond to interventions that target parents' attributions and representations of the child, such as attributional retraining (Sanders et al., 2004) and approaches that strengthen parental reflective functioning (Slade, 2005). Parental criticism has also been discussed as an intervention target in its own right (Peris & Miklowitz, 2015); reducing negative views of the child may reduce reliance on discipline and, in turn, children's problems. In addition, how a parent describes the child in a brief, open-ended interview carries clinical information. Speech-sample methods such as the MDoC or FMSS could be adapted as low-burden tools for detecting a negative emotional climate toward the child (Sher-Censor, 2015).

Third, the findings support integrating couple and parenting services rather than delivering them separately (C. P. Cowan & Cowan, 2019). Couple-focused programs have shown benefits for children's outcomes (Lavner et al., 2020), and these benefits may be strengthened by explicitly addressing parents' stress and their emotional stance toward the child. Conversely, parent training for child behavior problems may be more effective when clinicians also assess, and when needed address, uncertainty in the couple relationship. For prevention, these maternal processes could be targeted early, before discipline patterns and child problems become

entrenched, particularly in families experiencing relationship instability. Because the mediated pathways were cross-sectional at age 5 and the indirect effects were small, these implications should be tested in intervention studies before they inform practice guidelines.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Several limitations should be noted. First, most constructs were derived from maternal report or coding of maternal speech, raising the possibility of shared method variance; associations may partly reflect broader maternal affective tendencies. Second, the FFCWS oversampled unmarried parents in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000, so the findings may not generalize to rural families, to more recent cohorts given changes in the policy and economic context, or to families in which the parental relationship had dissolved by age 5. Third, causal conclusions cannot be drawn, and family processes are likely reciprocal; children's difficulties may also increase parenting stress and couple strain. Moreover, because commitment, parenting stress, negative affect, and discipline were all assessed at age 5, the mediational pathways among them are cross-sectional and may yield biased estimates of longitudinal mediation (Maxwell & Cole, 2007); their temporal ordering is theoretical rather than empirically established. Fourth, commitment captures only one facet of couple functioning, so the findings should not be generalized to couple relationship quality more broadly. Fifth, we examined only maternal pathways. Although mothers may experience stronger affective spillover from couple distress (Sears et al., 2016), future research should include both parents, multiple reporters, observational or biological measures, and transactional models. Finally, although demographic covariates were not significantly associated with study outcomes, future research should examine how broader sociocultural and contextual stressors shape these family processes.

**Conclusion**

In sum, this study provides longitudinal evidence that mothers' couple relationship commitment is associated with children's internalizing, externalizing, and social problems through maternal emotional processes and discipline. Both parenting stress and maternal negative affect, an observationally coded, EE-informed index of the emotional climate mothers express toward their child, linked commitment to discipline, and discipline in turn predicted child adjustment, most strongly externalizing problems. These findings support spillover and Family Stress Model perspectives and identify maternal emotional processes as promising targets for clinical intervention and prevention in families with strained couple relationships.

## Statements and Declarations

**Funding.** The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

**Competing Interests.** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Ethics Approval.** This study is a secondary analysis of de-identified data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Institutional review board approval was not required because the data are publicly available and de-identified.

**Consent to Participate.** Informed consent was obtained from all participants by the FFCWS study team.

**Consent to Publish.** Not applicable.

**Data Availability.** The data analyzed in this study are available from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (https://ffcws.princeton.edu/).

**Author Contributions.** Sungmin Pearl Park: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original

draft, Writing – review & editing. Seonhwa Lee: Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 949)*

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Low Relationship Commitment | — | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Maternal Negative Affect Toward Child | .095** | — | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Maternal Parenting Stress | .087** | .155** | — | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Nonviolent Discipline | -.068* | .177** | .133** | — | | | | | | | |
| 5. Psychological Aggression | .084* | .204** | .196** | .387** | — | | | | | | |
| 6. Physical Assault | .079* | .165** | .141** | .320** | .613** | — | | | | | |
| 7. Internalizing Problems (Year 9) | .107** | .210** | .222** | -.001 | .156** | .143** | — | | | | |
| 8. Externalizing Problems (Year 9) | .170** | .270** | .205** | .187** | .208** | .166** | .283** | — | | | |
| 9. Social Problems (Year 9) | .144** | .168** | .182** | .071* | .136** | .079* | .338** | .697** | — | | |
| 10. Maternal Education | -.181** | -.024 | -.059 | .236** | .022 | -.004 | -.174** | -.127** | -.162** | — | |
| 11. Household Income (log) | -.222** | -.007 | -.052 | .148** | -.048 | -.061 | -.173** | -.121** | -.127** | .433** | — |
| *M* | 2.011 | 1.832 | 2.129 | 4.334 | 1.705 | 1.069 | .244 | 1.166 | 1.187 | 2.478 | 10.298 |
| (*SD*) | (.781) | (.850) | (.658) | (1.320) | (1.008) | (.973) | (.192) | (.191) | (.217) | (1.036) | (1.363) |

Note. Variables 1–6, 10, and 11 were assessed at Year 5, and variables 7–9 at Year 9. Low relationship commitment was rated 1–5, with higher scores indicating lower commitment. Maternal negative affect toward the child was coded from the Maternal Description of Child (1–5). Parenting stress was rated 1–4. Nonviolent discipline, psychological aggression, and physical assault are Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale past-year frequencies (0–6). Internalizing, externalizing, and social problems are Child Behavior Checklist/6-18

item means. Maternal education was coded 1 (less than high school) to 4 (college degree or higher), and household income is the natural log of annual household income. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) are presented at the bottom of the table.

*$*p < .05$. $**p < .01$*