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RELATIONSHIPS

The impact of couple conflict on children

Summary

- Couple conflict which is frequent, intense and poorly resolved can be profoundly harmful for children to be exposed to.

- However, exposure to discordant, but non-violent, conflict between parents also exerts negative effects on child development.

- Exposure to couple conflict can affect children of all ages (including babies) and can manifest itself as increased anxiety, depression, aggression, hostility, anti-social behaviour and criminality as well as deficits in academic attainment.

- Greater acknowledgement is needed by practitioners and policy-makers that conflicted behaviour between parents exists across a continuum of expressed severity – ranging from silence to violence.

- The effect of inter-parental conflict on children depends both upon the manner in which it is expressed, managed and resolved, as well as the extent to which children feel at fault for, or threatened by, their parent's relationship arguments.

- The inter-parental relationship serves as a model for the expectations children have of other family relationships, including the parent-child relationship.

- Intervention programmes that focus on the inter-parental relationship have the potential to rectify the negative consequences of family stress, family conflict and family breakdown on children and parents, and help prevent the intergenerational transmission of factors that lead to disrupted family relationships and family breakdown.

The impact of couple conflict on children

Research on the impact of couple or inter-parental conflict on children has a long and established history (Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Harold & Conger, 1997; Cowan & Cowan, 2002). From as far back as the 1930s it has been recognised that discord between parents has a potentially debilitating effect on children's psychological development (Towle, 1931).

While periodic conflict between couples is natural, and something which most children will be exposed to at some point in their lives without necessarily experiencing adverse effects, couple conflict which is frequent, intense and poorly resolved is very harmful, research indicates.

This kind of conflict can have an effect on children of all ages. Babies as young as six months, for example, exhibit higher physiological symptoms of distress such as elevated heart rate in response to overt, hostile exchanges between their parents when compared to exchanges between non-parental adults. Infants and children up to the age of five years show signs of distress by crying, acting out, freezing, as well as withdrawing from or attempting to intervene in the actual conflict itself. Children between the ages of 6 and 17 years show signs of emotional and behavioural distress when exposed to ongoing, acrimonious exchanges between parents (see Harold, Pryor & Reynolds, 2001). Additional research indicates that exposure to this form of discord can manifest itself in a number of ways including increased anxiety, depression, aggression, hostility, anti-social behaviour and criminality as well as deficits in academic attainment (Harold, Aitken & Shelton, 2007).

Historically, inter-parental conflict has been considered a threat to children only if it is overt, openly acrimonious or hostile in form and content. Indeed, practitioners and policy makers have in the past treated conflict between parents as a threat, not only to marital partners, but also to children, if – and only if – the behaviour between parents is severe enough to warrant being described as domestic violence.

Research conducted in recent decades, however, has highlighted how children's exposure to discordant, but non-violent, conflict between parents also exerts negative effects on child development (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Rhoades, 2008). Indeed, research supports the proposal that practitioners and policy-makers move away from considering conflict between parents as a simple present or absent dichotomy (i.e. violent or not) in favour of an acknowledgment that conflicted behaviour between parents exists across a continuum of expressed severity – ranging from hostile silence to physical violence.

Research findings show that in the context of both maritally intact and separated households, conflict between parents need not be overtly hostile in order to adversely affect children (Amato, 2001; Cummings

& Davies, 1994). For example, parents who are embroiled in a relationship that may be described as non-acrimonious, but who are emotionally withdrawn from each other to such an extent that the relationship is devoid of any warmth or affection, may put children as much at risk for long-term emotional and behavioural problems as parents involved in a relationship marked by frequent, intense, poorly resolved and overtly hostile conflicts.

How parents manage conflict, therefore, may determine children's adjustment to conflict more so than the actual occurrence of conflict per se (depending on level of expressed severity). Indeed, the emerging picture from research suggests that the effect of inter-parental conflict on children depends both upon the manner in which it is expressed, managed and resolved, as well as the extent to which children feel at fault for, or threatened by, their parent's relationship arguments (Grych et al., 2003).

Furthermore, distinguishing between constructive and destructive conflict management styles may further explain why differences exist in children's adaptive and maladaptive responses to inter-parental conflict. Destructive conflict behaviours such as violence (Holden & Ritchie, 1991), aggression (Jouriles et al., 1996), non-verbal conflict or 'the silent treatment' (Cummings, Ballard, El-Seikh, & Lake, 1991) and conflicts about child-related matters (Grych & Fincham, 1993) are linked with increased distress or risk for psychological adjustment problems in children.

> Practitioners and policy-makers should move away from considering conflict between parents as a simple present or absent dichotomy in favour of an acknowledgment that conflicted behaviour between parents exists across a continuum of expressed severity – ranging from hostile silence to physical violence.

By contrast, constructive conflict expression and management such as mutually respectful, emotionally modulated conflicts (Easterbrooks, Cummings & Emde, 1994), conflict resolutions and explanations of unresolved conflicts (Cummings et al., 1991) are linked with a lowered risk for child distress and an increased potential for improved social competence and general well-being among children. Resolution of conflict, in particular, has been shown to be a powerful factor in reducing the negative effects of conflict on children. For example, one study (Cummings, 1991) found that children exposed to unresolved conflict (continued fighting, silent treatment etc.) responded more negatively than children exposed to partially resolved conflicts (changing topic or submission) who, in turn, responded more negatively than children exposed to resolved conflicts (apology, compromise). This finding emphasises the importance of conflict management, and the need for the promotion of positive conflict management strategies in interventions aimed at addressing the adverse effects of family conflict on children (e.g. parental separation and divorce).

The body of research considered in this briefing paper highlights the significant role that the couple relationship plays in promoting positive or negative developmental outcomes for children. The inter-parental relationship not only serves as a factor directly related to the psychological well-being of children, but serves as an orienting influence on the experiences and expectations children have of other family relationships, including the parent-child relationship.

Promoting intervention programmes and assessment strategies that focus on the inter-parental relationship may therefore pay significant dividends in rectifying the negative consequences of family stress, family conflict and family breakdown on children and parents in the short-term; and help prevent the intergenerational transmission of factors that lead to disrupted family relationships and family breakdown in the long-term.

As Cowan and Cowan (2008) conclude, the time has come to move away from family-focused interventions that emphasise parenting level interventions only, to programmes that keep the family as a system in mind.

Programmes that enhance couple relationship skills are in keeping with this proposal and have been evidenced to offer significant advantages to children across maritally intact and separated contexts (Cowan, Cowan & Heming, 2005; Pruett, Insabella & Gustaffson, 2005).

Couple relationships: why are they important?

Few would dispute the suggestion that the quality of our closest relationships profoundly affects how we feel about ourselves. Much less widely acknowledged however – although just as true – is the fact that the quality of these relationships has material and measurable consequences for our lives and those around us, affecting the emotional, cognitive and physical development of our children, our capacity to work and to be fulfilled in work, and our physical and mental health as we get older.

Policy-makers, commissioners of health and social care services and frontline staff delivering care, amongst others, have an invaluable opportunity to make the quality of couple relationships a central focus of their work. This series of briefings from Tavistock Relationships aims to inform and support them to do this, since no serious attempt to improve the nation's health and well-being can afford to overlook the fundamental role which the quality of our close relationships has on our lives.

This briefing paper is an abridged version of Parents and Partners: How the Parental Relationship affects Children's Psychological Development, by Professor Gordon Harold and Dr Leslie Leve, which forms Chapter 2 of How Couple Relationships Shape Our World: Clinical Practice, Research and Policy Perspectives, edited by Dr Andrew Balfour, Mary Morgan and Chris Vincent).

The Early Intervention Foundation's review - What Works to Enhance Inter-Parental Relationships and Improve Outcomes for Children (2016) – is also an invaluable resource for those interested in the evidence base linking the quality of the interparental relationships to children's outcomes.

Established in 1948, Tavistock Relationships is recognised in its field as a centre of advanced practice and study, both nationally and internationally. Our ethos is to develop practice, research and policy activities which complement and inform the development of services to couples.

We run a variety of practitioner trainings, ranging from introductory courses to doctoral programmes in couple counselling and psychotherapy. Our courses are accredited by the British Association of Couple Counselling and Psychotherapy, the British Psychoanalytic Council and the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists. Our trainings are validated by the University of East London (UEL).

Tavistock Relationships also supports the work of frontline practitioners, and aims to foster an approach to family support and mental health service provision which takes the impact of couple relationships on child and family functioning into account.

In addition, we undertake research and policy activities which encourage the development and growth of effective and innovative relationship support services.

Tavistock Relationships also provides services to couples and parents throughout London. We operate a range of affordable counselling and psychotherapy services supporting clients experiencing challenges in their relationships, their sexual lives and their parenting.

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