



Children and Marital Conflict: A Review

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Abstract

This *CASEmaker* includes selected references and information on the effects of interparental conflict on children. Children of all ages are affected both directly and indirectly by conflict between parents. It is not *whether* parents argue therefore, but rather *how* they handle those arguments that will determine the ways in which their children are affected. This research provides an empirical basis for family support programs and practitioners to assist parents who are experiencing ongoing interparental conflict.

Introduction

Conflict and differences of opinion are unavoidable and therefore inevitable experiences for anyone in close personal relationships. Conflict, however, is not just when individuals yell, scream, and fight. Conflict is defined as any difference of opinion, ranging from very pleasant and positive discussions to loud and potentially aggressive, negative arguments (Cummings, 1998; Faircloth & Cummings, 2008). Conflict within a family has widespread effects, especially on the children who witness it. Thankfully, constructive conflict not only prevents negative child outcomes or buffers negative effects, but actually constructive marital conflict is predictive of positive outcomes for children including promotion of children's prosocial behavior (i.e., lower incidence of psychological problems and higher self-esteem), increased emotional security, and parental warmth. Raising parents' awareness of their own conflict characteristics and building their capacity to handle conflicts with their spouse constructively is critical. The results of numerous studies support that parents have the capacity to learn new ways of relating to one another for the sake of their children and that they make long lasting changes as a result of their increased competence.

Marital Conflict

Marital distress has been identified as a strong predictor of both adults seeking mental health services and children's academic, mental health, and sleep problems (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998; Cummings, Pelligrini, Notarius, & Cummings, 1989). The phrase marital conflict is often times used inter-

changeably with terms such as fight, argument, or yelling. That is, conflict is typically viewed as something that is negative or damaging. Over the last 25 years, however, considerable research has examined the behaviors used and emotions expressed by spouses towards each other during conflict and how they affect children. Clearly, some conflict behaviors are constructive for children to see and other conflict behaviors are destructive for them to see. This research supports that marital conflict can be defined as any difference of opinion between partners, regardless of how innocuous that difference of opinion may be, and that the presence and severity of marital conflict directly influences the relationship between marital functioning and the psychological health of family members (Cummings, 1998; Faircloth & Cummings, 2008). Furthermore, marital conflict serves as an even better predictor of children's adjustment problems than does the global measure of marital distress. Marital conflict predicts child outcomes even after controlling for other family factors such as parenting practices and maternal depression. For more information about the effects of marital conflict on families, please refer to the following list of references:

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Marital Conflict and Children

All children, regardless of gender or age, are affected by marital conflict (Cummings, 1998; Cummings, Ballard, & El-Sheikh, 1991). Children are affected by marital conflict through both direct and indirect pathways. In terms of children's psychological functioning, exposure to repeated instances of destructive marital conflict has been linked with internalizing problems such as depression and low self-esteem, externalizing problems such as delinquency and aggression, and declines in academic performance, social and interpersonal adjustment, and general mental health (Cummings & Davies, 1994). There are many risks associated with the healthy development of a child who is repeatedly exposed to marital conflict, including emotional abuse (Cummings, 1998). Contrary to common belief, children who are repeatedly exposed to conflict are not more tolerant of or used to it than other children (Ballard, Cummings, & Larkin, 1993; Cummings, 1998; Cummings & Davies, 1994). In fact, children who are repeatedly exposed to angry interaction between their parents become sensitized to marital conflict, making them more vulnerable to its effects. Children who are sensitized to conflict have lower thresholds for exposure to distress and aggression leading them to become highly aroused and distressed by even the mildest of disagreements. Children who are exposed to repeated instances of destructive conflict between their parents also display increased attempts to involve themselves in the conflict or intervene to stop the fight all together. They also display heightened physiological arousal and report emotional distress in the form of fear, anger, and sadness in response to witnessing marital conflict. Alternatively, children who witness constructive instances of conflict between their parents actually benefit from seeing their parents handle that conflict (Cummings, 1998). They learn constructive problem-solving skills to use in their own conflicts in the future. Witnessing constructive conflict also strengthens children's sense of security in the family as a source of stability, responsiveness, and love. The children who witness conflict between their parents are affected directly in a variety of ways and the interested reader can consult any of the following references for greater detail:

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Improve your knowledge and understanding about marital conflict and children with these resources:

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Gender Difference

Both boys and girls are affected by exposure to conflict. The evidence of this can be seen when children are as young as 6 months old and continuing on into childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (Shred, 1997). Children will respond differently to marital conflict based on their particular developmental abilities. In general, boys are more likely to display externalizing symptoms (i.e., anger and aggression) and girls are more likely to display internalizing symptoms (i.e., fear, sadness, and withdrawal). Interestingly, however, as children get older this pattern of responding seems to switch. By the time boys reach adolescence, they are actually exhibiting more sadness and withdrawal in response to marital conflict, and girls at this age seem to be responding with more overt anger and aggression. Some of the ways that marital conflict effects boys and girls differently are described in:

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Emotional Security

Emotional Security extends the secure base notions that John Bowlby (1969/1982) theorized were operating in the primary attachment relationship out to the entire family using an ecological model. According to Emotional Security Theory, children's reactions to marital conflict are based on their ideas about how the conflict will impact their well-being and the well-being of the family as a whole. When children are confronted with marital conflict they make behavioral and emotional attempts to regain feelings of security and safety about the unity and functioning of their family. In this way, emotional security can be seen as the goal of children's functioning in the presence of marital conflict and children will act on their environment to achieve this goal. Emotional Security Theory stresses that children react not only to the occurrence of conflict, but also to the meaning that the disagreement has to the family unit. The ways in which children interpret marital conflict, and whether or not a specific conflict episode poses a threat to the stability of the family will determine children's reactions to that conflict. For more information about Emotional Security Theory, please refer to the following reference list.

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Conclusion

This *CASEMaker* bibliography includes references related to marital conflict and its effects on the entire family, especially children who witness it. While conflict is inevitable in close relationships, the presence of conflict does not determine child and family outcomes. Rather, the ways in which parents handle differences of opinion directly and indirectly affect couples and children. When conflict is handled constructively, marital relationships are strengthened and children benefit from increased feelings of security about the family. The material included in the references provides a foundation for understanding how and why conflict between parents can be a determining factor in the stability of families, the success of spousal relationships, and the healthy development of children.

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