



## 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:

- Ballard, M. E., Cummings, E. M., & Larkin, K. (1993). Emotional and cardiovascular responses to adults' angry behavior and to challenging tasks in children of hypertensive and normotensive parents. *Child Development*, 64(2), 500-515.
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### Rx Prescription for Practice Rx

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

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- Shaw, D. S., & Emery, R. E. (1988). Chronic family adversity and school-age children's adjustment. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 27, 200-206.

### 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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### Indirect Effects of Marital Conflict on Children

In addition to being directly affected by exposure to marital conflict, children can be affected through indirect pathways, as well (Cummings & Davies, 1994). That is, conflict within the marital relationship can affect parenting practices and the parent-child attachment, both of which affect child adjustment and developmental outcomes. One indirect pathway of effects that conflict can have on children is through the parenting interactions with children. The negativity and destructive conflict that spouses experience in the marital relationship may spill over into parenting situations and the parent-child relationship. For instance, if a mother and father are having an intense argument over whose turn it is to make dinner, the negativity experienced in that interaction may spill over into the interaction they have with the child about washing his or her hands before dinner (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Other parents may try to make up for any negativity in the marital relationship by being overly constructive and positive in the context of the relationship with their child. In other words, parents may try to "compensate" for the negative quality of their spousal relationship by being unusually or overly positive in the parent-child relationship. Additionally, ample evidence exists to support that conflict between parents may result

in reductions in parental energy and resources with less attention paid to children's needs. For more information about the indirect effects of marital conflict on children, please refer to the following list of references.

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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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