

Kids Harmed When Parents Fight

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Feb. 9, 2006 -- Unsettled fights between parents impair children's emotional development, new studies show.

Mom and Dad may shout till they're red in the face. They may stew in stony silence. Whether their unresolved conflict results in hostility or indifference to one another, it takes its toll on their children, find University of Notre Dame psychologist E. Mark Cummings, PhD, and colleagues.

Psychologists have long known that a strong child-parent bond is the key to kids' mental health and social adjustment. The new research suggests that it's just as important for children to feel secure about their parents' relationship with each other.

"What we show is that children's emotional security is affected by the relationship between the parents -- not just the child's relationship to the parent," Cummings tells WebMD.

Cummings' and colleagues report their findings in the January/February issue of *Child Development*.

Children Affected at All Ages

Cummings, study co-leader Patrick T. Davies, PhD, of the University of Rochester, N.Y., and colleagues actually did three new studies. They first looked at 226 children (9 to 18 years old) and their parents, evaluated three years apart. They then repeated the study with 232 kindergarten-aged kids.

The researchers evaluated the parents' marital functioning and quality, conflict tactics, and their ratings of their children's adjustment. They also evaluated the children for depression and asked them, privately, about how their parents got along.

Finally, they followed 223 6-year-olds and their parents over the course of a year. They looked at how parents worked out their disagreements and measured the children's distress reactions and negative thoughts. In each study the researchers accounted for kids' individual adjustment and other factors, allowing them to see what changes in the children were directly linked to parental conflict.

What they found was that parental conflict wasn't a problem if the parents resolved their differences. But when these conflicts remained open, children responded with depression, anxiety, and/or behavior problems.

"Parents don't realize that children are sensitive to their conflicts," Cummings says. "But we find they are sensitive at very early ages -- starting at 1 year of age, at least. Children are like emotional Geiger counters with regard to their parents' relationship. If parents really resolve things, children will know it. If they don't, children will know that, too."

Child and adolescent psychologist Nancy Cahir, PhD, says the findings support her observations.

"A lot of times, the misconception with families is that as long as they don't hit their kids, everything is fine," Cahir tells WebMD. "But sometimes the conflict between the parents can be just as damaging as physical abuse. If the child is constantly hearing arguments that don't get resolved, the child will have difficulties with attachment, with adjustment, and with basic trust of other people."

Interestingly, older kids were at least as affected as younger ones. Teens, Cummings says, were even more strongly affected than younger children.

And that's not all. Another study in the same issue of *Child Development* shows that children in high-conflict homes have much more restless sleep and daytime sleepiness. The more unresolved the parental conflicts, the more disrupted the child's sleep.

Bad Fights vs. Good Fights

"Everyone will have fights now and again that are pretty negative," Cummings says. "Children are not fragile this way. It is only when there is an accumulation of negative fights that the children lose confidence in the emotional security of the family."

The fights that hurt kids -- and parents -- may have some or all of these negative features:

- Defensiveness
- Personal insults
- Verbal hostility
- Nonverbal expressions of hostility
- Stonewalling
- Physical aggression. All experts tell WebMD that physical violence is enormously damaging to children's emotional well-being.

The fights that don't hurt kids -- and which may actually help them -- have many of these constructive features:

- Problem solving
- Compromise

- Expressing positive feelings in the context of conflict
- Making supportive statements
- Verbal expressions of affection

What if parents can't help getting into a bad fight?

"One thing the parents could do is try to work toward a resolution, and let their child know about the resolution," Cummings says. "Even if the parents go behind closed doors and come out genuinely looking like they have resolved the conflict, the child will see it as resolved. And parents can explain to the child what happened."

The good news, Cahir says, is that even when children do suffer from parental conflict, much of the harm can be undone.

"Parents can get family or couples therapy to help them learn better ways to communicate," Cahir says. "And by doing so they are helping their children. Because the children learn from how the parents handle conflicts. If the parents can learn to control anger and not to blame the other, their behavior becomes a model the child can learn from."

This doesn't mean all fights are appropriate for children to witness, says Rebecca A. Jones, PhD, associate professor of clinical psychology at the Georgia School of Professional Psychology in Atlanta.

"I think it is really important that children be shielded from the really difficult fights that parents sometimes need to have," Jones tells WebMD. "They need to be shielded from conflicts that are too much for them to understand. If they do witness arguments, it is very important that they see their parents resolve those conflicts and compromise. Because that is how children learn that conflict is normal and healthy if resolved through communication."

What About Divorce?

Not all conflicts can be resolved. Sometimes parents find that they cannot continue with their relationship. Does this harm their children?

Jones, an expert in children of divorced parents, says kids do suffer when their parents' marriage breaks up. But it's even harder if parents stay together solely for the sake of the kids.

"There's been consistent evidence over the years that the process of divorce itself is hard on children," Jones says. "But even more important is the level of conflict between the parents. If children are experiencing a lot of fighting -- especially if the children are drawn into those fights -- that may be more harmful to their development than a divorce."

Cahir strongly agrees.

"If parents come to terms with the fact they are not happy with each other and cannot work it out, the children are better off if they divorce," Cahir says. "The bottom line is if the children see happy, content parents, they are better off. . I have had many clients say, 'I wish my parents had gotten divorced earlier,' because kids know when parents aren't happy. They learn that early on."

SOURCES: Cummings, E.M. *Child Development*, January/February 2006; vol 77. Davies, P.T. *Child Development*, January/February 2006; vol 77. El-Sheikh, M. *Child Development*, January/February 2006; vol 77. E. Mark Cummings, PhD professor of psychology, University of Notre Dame Nancy Cahir, PhD, private practice child and adolescent psychologist, Atlanta. Rebecca A. Jones, PhD, associate professor of clinical psychology, Georgia School of Professional Psychology, Atlanta.

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