Parental conflict and its effect on children

Thisfact sheetprovidesinformation forparents aboutthewayshigh levelsof parental conflict can affectchildren,bothin familieswho livetogetherandin families who have separated.

How does parental conflict effect children?

It is normal for parents to disagree sometimes, however, high levels of conflict and animosity between parents places childrenat a greater risk of developing emotional, social and behavioural problems, as well as having difficulties with concentration and educational achievement.

Frequent and intense conflict or fighting between parents also has a negative impact on children's sense of safety and security, which affects their relationships with their parents and with others. Parental conflict that specifically focuses on issues related to children is also linked to adjustment problems, particularly when it causes children blame themselves for their parents' problems.

'Good quality parenting', that is parenting that provides structure, warmth, emotional support and positive reinforcement, has been found to reduce the impact of parental conflict.

What is the difference between high parental conflict and family violence?

The key difference between parental conflict and family violence is the use of power and control. Family violence involves an intentional pattern of coercive behaviour for the purpose of exercising power and control over one or more members of a family. Parental conflict involves disagreements about parenting in which neither parent holds overarching power over the other, and neither parent experiences being fearful for their safety or wellbeing as a result of theother parent's behaviour.

The information in this fact sheet does not pertain to family violence. For information about the impacts of family violence on children please see the fact sheet*The impact of family violence on children*.

What about after parents separate?

Parental separation often initiallyleads toanincrease in parental conflict and anger, although for some families the level of conflict reduces when parents do not see each other regularly.

The level of conflict between parents usually reduces significantly in the first two to three years after separation but, in a small number of separated families, the conflict remains high for many years after that. Unfortunately, for a few children, their parents remain in high conflict throughout their childhood.

The type of post-separation conflict that has been found to have the most harmful effect on children is that which occurs when parents use children to express their anger and hostility. Children who are placed in the middle of their parents' dispute (by either parent) are more likely to be angry, stressed, depressed or anxious, and have poorer relationships with their parents than children who are not used in this way.

Examples of post separation, high conflict behaviours that have been identified as being detrimental for children include:

- asking children to carry hostile messages to the other parent
- asking children intrusive questions about the other parent
- demeaning or putting down the other parent in the presence of the child/ren
- asking the child/ren to hide information from the other parent, and
- making the child/ren feeltheyneedto hidepositivefeelingsfor the other parent.

What can help children adjust to separation?

Resolving parental conflict hasbeen showntopositivelyhelpchildrenand protect them from the negative effects of parental separation.

Other protective factors for children after separation include:

- having a positive, warm and caring relationship with at least one, and preferably two, actively involved parents
- having positive relationships with siblings, and
- being able to spend time with other important people with whom the child has a close relationship (such as aunts, uncles and grandparents).

Providing children with an environment in which they feel physically and psychologically safe is critically important for their wellbeing and should be given a high priority by all separated parents.

Where can I get assistance or further information?

Family RelationshipAdvice Line

TheFamily RelationshipAdvice Linehas arange of fact sheets and other information on family law services, including: children's contact services; counselling; family dispute resolution; parenting orders program; post-separation cooperative parenting; and supporting children after separation.

Phone: 1800 050 321
Website: https://www.familyrelationships.gov.au/

Raising Children

Onlineparenting information

Website: https://raisingchildren.net.au/

National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line

Phone: 1800 737 732
Website: https://www.1800respect.org.au/

Police or ambulance

Call000atanytimeif you are worried about you or your children’s safety.

LifeLine

Phone: 131 114
Website: https://www.lifeline.org.au/

Translating and interpreting

Phonetogain access toaninterpreter in your own language.

Phone: 131 450
Website: https://www.tisnational.gov.au/

Kids Help Line

Telephonecounselling for children and young people.

Phone: 1800 551 800
Website: https://kidshelpline.com.au/