

Parental conflict and its effect on children¹

This fact sheet provides information for parents about the ways family conflict affects children, both in families who live together and in families who have separated.

In families where there is a high level of conflict and animosity between parents, children are at a greater risk of developing emotional, social and behavioural problems, as well as 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 focuses on children is also linked to adjustment problems, particularly when 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 conflict.

Conflict in families after separation

Parental separation often initially leads to an increase 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 two to three years after separation, although it remains high in approximately ten per cent of families.

Research has found that following separation and divorce, children are twice as likely to have emotional, social, behavioural and academic problems compared to children from families that are still together. However, this may not be the case in all families.

The increased risk of poor adjustment in children may partly be due to high conflict and other problems in the family before the separation. This may affect the child/ren's ability to cope with the separation.

High levels of conflict and ill feeling between parents following separation has also been found to have a negative impact on children's adjustment following their parents' separation.

The type of post-separation conflict that has been found to have the worst 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.

Problematic parent behaviours

The types of parent behaviours that have been identified as being highly problematic are:

- asking children to carry hostile messages to the other parent
- asking children intrusive questions about the other parent
- creating a need in the child/ren to hide information
- creating a need for the child/ren to hide positive feelings for the other parent, and
- demeaning or putting down the other parent in the presence of the child/ren.

Children should feel able to talk openly about their lives in both households, but not feel obliged to do so. They should also feel safe when expressing their feelings regardless of which parent they are with.

Children who blame themselves for their parents' fighting have also been found to be at greater risk of poor social and emotional adjustment following their parents' separation.

The risks to child development associated with exposure to family violence do not necessarily stop following their parents' separation due to the ongoing risk of family violence and its impact on parenting practices. (See the fact sheet *Exposure to family violence and its effect on children*.)

Other factors identified as having a negative impact on how children adjust following their parents' separation include:

- the psychological adjustment of the parent/s after separation
- the quality and type of parenting received by the child/ren
- the relationship between parent/s and the child/ren
- the loss of important relationships
- changes in family structures, such as parents re-partnering, and
- a reduction in financial resources.

Protective factors

Resolving parental conflict has been shown to positively help children and 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, and
- having positive relationships between siblings.

Providing children with an environment in which they feel physically and psychologically safe is critically important for their wellbeing and must be given high priority.

Assistance or further information

Family Relationship Advice Line

The Family Relationship Advice Line has a range 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: www.familyrelationships.gov.au

National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line

Phone: 1800 737 732

Website: www.1800respect.org.au

Police or ambulance

Call 000 at any time if you are worried about you or your child/ren's safety.

LifeLine

Phone: 131 114

Website: www.lifeline.org

Translating and interpreting

Phone to gain access to an interpreter in your own language.

Phone: 131 450

Website: www.tisnational.gov.au

Kids Help Line

Telephone counselling for children and young people.

Phone: 1800 551 800

Website: www.kidshelp.com.au

Australian Childhood Foundation

Counselling for children and young people affected by abuse.

Phone: 1800 176 453

Website: www.childhood.org.au

Relationships Australia

Support groups and counselling on relationships, and for abusive and abused partners.

Phone: 1300 364 277

Website: www.relationships.com.au

Our Place Online

An online forum for men and women who have suffered abuse in all its forms: psychological, verbal, physical, sexual and spiritual abuse. The forum is run by a community of volunteers all over the world. Our Place aims to help educate and support those wishing to heal from the damage done.

Website: www.our-place-online.net

¹ The information in this fact sheet is adapted from a review of the research conducted by Kelly, J. (2012) Risk and protective factors associated with child and adolescent adjustment following separation and divorce: Social science applications, Chapter 3. In Eds. K. Kuehnle & L. Drozd. Parenting Plan Evaluations: Applied research for the Family Court, Oxford University Press, New York.