




IMPACTS OF FAMILY CONFLICT ON A CHILD



In its practice, the Office often encounters families in conflict. During a divorce or family breakdown, different opinions among family members may arise - for example, a parent may disagree about the other parent's contact with the children, or about the amount of child support they should pay. These disagreements can continue a long time after the family has separated. Such conflicts affect everyone in the family, but they affect children in ways that adults may not realize. Parents in conflict should be very careful about what is conveyed to their children through their words or actions. Children see any conflict between their parents as a threat, resulting in a psychological burden which may not be evident at first sight. Moreover, the consequences of this burden may emerge only later, for example with problematic behaviour in adolescence or early adulthood. There is no age at which a child is no longer affected by family conflict - and this is true whether parents are still living together, are about to separate, or have already separated some time ago.

Parents and children in such situations often need to be supported by the people around them, and may even need professional help. From our point of view, in "divorce wars", it is the child that loses, no matter what the court's decision may have been.

Perceptions of parental conflict

The main consequence of parental conflict is that children and adolescents find it difficult to adapt to various life situations. A child's difficulties may be reflected in their outward behaviour, but they may also be kept inside, without any apparent external manifestations.



We frequently observe the following three reactions to parental conflict in children, which can occur all at once or individually::

1. The child **internalizes** the family situation. To escape from the anxiety and tension they feel from the quarrels and tense atmosphere at home, the child withdraws into a world of their own. Because the child is very “well-behaved” on the outside, other people tend to think that the situation has not affected the child, or that they are coping just fine, when in fact the conflict is affecting the child more deeply than they let on.
2. The child’s reactions are **apparent on the outside** – they are restless, irritable, and/or aggressive. The child might act out and misbehave to show that they are worried and upset, or to distract their parents from arguing. Parents might interpret these manifestations simply as naughtiness in the child, and they may try to eliminate them with the help of psychologists, psychiatrists or neurologists. However, parents are often not willing to admit that the child’s misbehaviour has been caused by their conflicts and by the consequences of divorce or separation, e.g. a loss of closeness with the father or mother.
3. The child tries to **take on parental responsibility** (in other words, the child attempts to fill the role of a parent). The child tries to solve the situation for their parents (e.g. “Dad, don’t do that to Mom”, or “Mom, I will tell Dad you feel that way”).



When emotions are real, but invisible

The child’s problems may not be evident right away, since the child may withdraw and hide their feelings, hoping that their situation will get better. During this time, they might try hard to please their parents and keep their problems to themselves, while in fact they are experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, sadness, general depressiveness, guilt over the divorce/conflicts, self-accusation, fear, mistrust or even shock.

When a child’s misbehaviour is blamed on the child or a parent


It is common for a child in a family conflict to experience sleep disorders, attention deficit disorders, misbehaviour, refusal to obey a parent (who the child might blame for the divorce), or psychosomatic problems (headache, stomach ache etc.). The child might act hostile or aggressive, or manifest risky behaviour. Very often, the child’s school performance and behaviour at school deteriorates (as a result of increased anxiety and decreased ability to concentrate), and this may result in a lower quality of peer relationships.

In adolescents, parental conflicts may also go hand in hand with negative ideas and experience in romantic relationships, feelings of loneliness, problems with resolving conflict and coping with their own emotions, aggressive behaviour in their relationships, a lower degree of self-esteem, and poorer school performance. In this period, the child can also exhibit various “escape reactions”, such as truancy, alcohol and drug use, running away from home, self-harm, or delinquent behaviour.

Negative manifestations of the child’s feelings are often misinterpreted as a consequence of bad upbringing on the part of one or both parents. It is important to realize that this is likely not the case; the problems listed above are typically seen in children who have experienced a family conflict, and should not be immediately blamed on the parents.

When problems appear years later

If the conflict between parents goes on for a longer time (say, for years before and after the divorce), the child’s neurological system is under constant tension and repeated stresses, and so the consequences are deeper and more permanent. A quarter of all children from divorced families have mental problems in adulthood (mostly depression) and problems with functioning in society. They also manifest long-term consequences, such as prolonged



adolescence, and a lack of opportunities to adopt the role of an adult (in particular the role of the adult that is not present in the family). They have a lower chance of completing university studies, a higher risk of using addictive substances, and more frequent difficulties in relationships with significant others. The key psychological issues among children from divorced families are lack of trust and security – and these issues can last long into their adulthood.

Impact on the relationship between child and parent

A family conflict not only causes stress for the child directly, it also worsens the child's relationships with their parents. The child might find it more difficult to go to their parents for help. The more often a child witnesses a strong conflict (anger, resentment, aggression), the more sensitive they get, and the more likely to worry about the family's relationships and future. These anxieties make it more difficult for the child to cope with the family breakdown.

If the child is forced by either parent to take his or her side, it will harm their relationship with both parents (even with the one who is trying to “win over” the child). It will also harm the child's self-esteem. In the middle of a quarrel, a parent may unknowingly assign various roles to their child which the child should not have. For example, the child may be forced into the role of a mediator, a confidant (of one or both parents), an ally of one parent against the other, or an informant for one parent against the other. At the same time, the conflict might cause the parent to be overprotective of the child, to be too dependent on the child, or to reproach the child too harshly.



Other relationships in the family


A divorce very often destroys internal family relationships, and therefore removes the environments in which a child used to feel secure and safe. It is hard for the child to decide who the good or the bad person is, who is fair and who is not, or who likes or does not like them. Such an atmosphere leads to a lack of self-esteem and a general distrust in people.

The child's assessment of the conflict

How much the child is troubled by the conflict is related to the importance attached to it by the child itself. When a child witnesses their parents' conflict, they see a threat, they try to find out who is to blame for the conflict (they often blame themselves), and they try to decide what can be done in response to the situation. How they see the conflict is affected by many factors – not only by the conflict's characteristics (e.g. what form it takes and how strong it is) and by the family context (e.g. the prevailing emotional climate in the family, any past experiences with parental conflict), but also by the child's age, sex and personality.

Recommendations to parents

For healthy development, a child **needs emotional certainty**. Emotional certainty is present when **family relationships remain positive** and more or less **stable** during a conflict, and when family members (especially both parents) **react sensitively and warm-heartedly to a child's needs**. If the parents manage to solve the conflict constructively, this can have a positive impact on their child's ability to adapt to the new situation.



Recommendations for parents (adopted from Matějček, Dytrych 1994):

- **Do not underestimate your child's perceptiveness about the conflict or divorce.** Research shows that, apart from minor exceptions, children are always affected by their family's separation. Just because a child does not break down, cry or make a scene, it does not mean they are not suffering from the divorce. In periods of conflict, parents tend to be fully engaged in their own problems, and they are often not aware of the fact that they are treating their child differently. In any case, the child finds it very hard when "his or her" people are arguing, or are hurting or offending each other.
- **Stay aware of your parenting tasks and duties.** Parenthood cannot be cancelled. Children need both their parents, even after the divorce. It is also essential not to confuse your child's emotional needs with their material needs.
- **Do not continue the conflict after the divorce.** Your child can get used to living in two different worlds, but they cannot get used to endless mutual hostility between these two worlds.
- **Do not incite hostility in your child against your ex-partner.** A child is very suggestable, so it is easy to provoke in them resentment or fear of the other parent. Yet a victory seemingly won by one party is unstable and short-lived. Hostility can very easily be turned against the one who encouraged it in the first place.
- **Maintain a positive image of the other parent.** It is necessary to guide children actively and purposefully toward a good opinion of the other parent. It is not enough to just avoid talking badly about each other. You must say nice things about your ex-partner for the child's sake, even if you don't always feel like it.
- **Prevent buying and bribing your child.** A child must be able to rely on the honesty and maturity of their parent. By bribing your child, you are showing discrepancies between your words and actions.
- **Arrange contact with the other parent in the best possible way.** Parents sometimes waste lots of energy and time preventing or reducing their child's contact with the other parent. It is more efficient to focus energy on creating reasonable and purposeful conditions of contact. Your marriage has broken down, but your parenthood goes on, and it is necessary to keep these relationships going for the sake of the child.
- **Be careful with new partners.** When you are introducing a new partner to the child, it is best to take things easy and not rush. The child may not immediately understand how a new person fits into the family. Remember that it has taken you some time to get to know your new partner; you should allow the child plenty of time too.
- **Do not hide anything from your child, but also, don't unload too much on them too soon.** Divorce is a life crisis and a source of tension and anxiety for children. You can release some of that anxiety by informing your child about what is going on in their family so that they understand the situation. **If something is not discussed at home, it does not mean that children do not think about it. The conflict will stir your child's imagination; they may idealise the parental image and blame the divorce on themselves. You should not overburden your child with a lot of information in the beginning, but the information which you share should serve as a basis to build upon in the future. You should not give your child false ideas which you will have to deny or change later.** Divorce and conflict are very emotionally demanding for children; a child often does not know what to ask about it, or how to ask. That is why you cannot wait until your child shows they are interested in talking about the conflict; you must take the initiative and talk to them first.

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