Review Article

# Psychology – child emotions the link between inter-parental conflict and health emotional development of children

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## Introduction

Children start developing their emotions during the infancy stage, which lasts approximately from birth to the age of two years. During this stage, a great deal of initial learning occurs for the child, about their general environment and the people that are in it.[1] Much of this learning occurs through interactions with parents and observations of parental relations, who are the first and most prominent figures in a child's early life.[1] Happiness, distress and disgust are amongst the initial emotions to appear in children just a few months after birth. Later on, social emotions appear followed by the emotion of fear between the ages of two and four years. Generally, emotions start to differ as a child begins to mature.[1]

So far, it is known that parents significantly influence the emotional development of their children. Parents do far more than meet the basic survival needs of their child, and research is increasingly finding that they have an enormous influence on a wide variety of health outcomes for their children, including behavioural habits, physical and mental health outcomes and emotional development.[1] In the past couple of decades, incredible effort and research has gone into understanding how inter-parental conflict might affect a children's ability to grow, develop and function in a healthy way. For instance, nearly two thirds of all studies included in one author's meta-analysis that related to inter-parental conflict were published in the 1990s, demonstrating just how much interest has grown in recent years for this field.[2]

In this regard, it is important to fill the gap in knowledge regarding what kinds of parental behaviours influence the emotional development of their children, and in what ways. It is important to explore how positive and negative parental behaviours influence the emotional development of children. As Fincham (2001) states, "This is a particularly opportune time to examine the current status of the field and to contemplate future directions" (p. xiii). In this particular research, it will be explored whether and how inter-parental conflicts affect the emotional security and development of their children.

This research paper will conduct a meta-analysis of existing literature to answer the important question: does inter-parental conflict negatively affect the emotional security of children who are part of the family?

## Literature meta-analysis

Children's exposure to inter-parental conflict appears to be high globally and increasing. For instance, in Australia, researchers have found that inter-parental conflict affects millions of children annually.[3] The number of reported family violence cases in Australia has increased in the last six years. Statistics indicate that nearly 25 per cent of women experience abuse that is perpetuated by a partner at some point in their lives, and that this affects a minimum of one million children yearly.[3] These statistics likely represent a gross underestimation, given that family conflict statistics are obtained from the police, child welfare and family court data, which only captures the most severe forms of psychological, physical and emotional abuse. Researchers like Westrupp[3] have concluded that community prevalence of inter-parental conflict is likely much higher than these statistics indicate.

Increasingly there has also been far more international recognition of the enormous health burdens and economic consequences that both high and low-lying levels of inter-parental conflict can create.[3] For instance, women who are regularly exposed to violence within their family are identified as being at a higher risk of experiencing significant and long-term negatively mental and physical health outcomes. Research also indicates that reports of domestic violence tend to occur for parents that are younger, less educated, come from single or divorced families and have higher levels of stress and alcohol related problems. For children, the health effects associated with inter-parental conflict are numerous, and include (but are not limited to) increased prevalence of mental health problems such as mood and anxiety disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct or oppositional defiant disorder, as well as a number of physical health problems such as obesity, asthma and accidental injury.[3]

While most of the existing literature has focused on the most severe cases of domestic abuse-which might include physical, emotional and sexual abuse-researchers are increasingly linking lower levels of inter-parental conflict to difficult child development.[3] Thus, researchers are now recognizing that inter-parental conflict can include less severe but far more common types of conflict, including verbal conflict (such as disagreements, anger, hostility or arguments) and lower levels of physical conflict (such as pushing, kicking, hitting or shoving). As such, findings in this field are increasingly becoming more generalizable to the rest of the population.[3]

Researchers and clinicians have long presumed that there is an important relationship between the quality of parental relationships and the emotional, physical, cognitive and psychological development of their children.[2] The link between inter-parental conflict and

children's behavioural and emotional development dysfunction has been well-established for both intact and divorced families.[4] Meta-analysis have found that the average affect size for inter-parental conflict on child development was between a small and medium effect (as described by Cohen,[5]) which is nearly twice the effect size for the association between child adjustment and divorce.[2] Inter-parental conflict has been found to be highest for households with children who are under the age of five years.[3] Inter-parental and parent-child conflicts have found to negatively impact children across all ages in terms of emotional, social, academic and health problems, and children's risk becomes particularly high when parents are involved in a highly distressed marriage.[6]

Children who experience significant conflict within their family will often have trouble with their social and emotional development and well-being. This is true for children who regularly hear their parents fighting-a phenomenon that has been referred to as 'background noise' in a child's upbringing (Moges and Weber, 2014). Even though the anger and conflict is not being directed right at the child, children can easily develop problems with their emotional security and regulation as a result. This often occurs because from the earliest ages, children emulate what they see, often copying the behaviour of their parents with other social relations. If children are used to witnessing conflict and poor emotional regulation on a regular basis, this will be their understanding of social relationships as their social network expands later in life.[1]

While the link between children's behavioural and emotional development and inter-parental conflict is accepted by researchers, there are often variations given that not all children who witness inter-parental conflict develop behavioural problems. For instance, marital dissatisfaction is a very broad construct, making it critical that researchers identify exactly what factors related to discordant marriages that are leading to the negative development outcomes of children.[2] As such, more recent research has sought to identify the characteristics of children who are exposed to inter-parental conflict, as well as their coping responses and contextual factors of the inter-parental conflict that may be affecting their adjustment problems (Rhoades, 2008). Findings suggest that rather than being the conflict itself that is leading to problems, there are more proximal processes that account for the relation between inter-parental conflict and the emergence of child behavioural problems.[4]

Researchers like Rhoades[4] have found that when studying the effects of inter-parental conflict on children's emotional development, it is more useful to consider children's responses to conflict as one potential proximal variable. These responses effectively indicate how children are processes and creating meaning from the inter-parental conflict they witness, particularly in relation to their own goals, desires and needs.[4] According to Rhoades,[4] children's responses to conflict are important because:

a. Children's own responses to inter-parental conflict are most proximal to their own psychosocial and physical adjustment,

b. These responses provide an index of how children interpret and cope with inter-parental conflict, which should ultimately mediate the relation between inter-parental conflict and child adjustment, and

c. The literature on children's relations to inter-parental conflict is sufficiently large to warrant a systematic, quantitative review and provides an established theoretical background (p. 1944).

Research has increasingly focused on how parents express and manage conflict in their relationship. Although conflict is admittedly present in almost any relationship, it often becomes more intense and frequent when relationship quality starts to erode. Children who observe inter-parental conflict have reported that it is a significant stressor, and various studies have demonstrated that children will exhibit stress when they are exposed to aggressive or angry interactions that involve their parents.[2] Inter-parental conflict has been found to be a better predictor of children's development problems that marriage dissolution, demonstrating that constant exposure to conflict can be more distressing for a child than going through a divorce in the family.[2]

Emotional development in children is something that is to a great extent learned, as children over time learn to regulate their emotions. Most of this learning occurs directly from observing and interacting with parents, who are the first and most prominent people in a child's early life. According to Moges & Weber,[1] "children see how their parents display emotions and interact with other people, and they imitate what they see their parents do to regulate emotions" (n.p). While a child's temperament can affect their ability to regulate their emotions, it is significantly guided by the parenting styles that they receive and the interactions they observe.[1] In fact, children who are more prone to negative emotions can be particularly vulnerable to episodes of anger or hostile and neglectful parenting and interactions, making the importance of emotional and behavioural regulation even more pronounced in such cases.[1]

Rhoades[4] have found that hostile internal representations of inter-parental conflict can be strongly associated with children's behavioural and emotional problems. These findings led them to develop the Emotional Security Hypothesis (EST), which assumes that "children's reactions to inter-parental conflict are a function of the perceived implications of the conflict on the well-being of the family and have the goal of preserving and promoting the child's own emotional security". The cognitions that a child begins to associate with their threatened sense of family security over time will elicit a fear and helplessness response that can eventually become generalized to a wider variety of life events.[4] Children may also develop cognitions of threat and self-blame that can become associated with internalized behaviour problems. If children begin to feel that they are responsible for their parents' conflicts, they can often experience guilt, shame and sadness that negatively impact their emotional well-being and development.

While little is known about how inter-parental conflict can influence the physical health outcomes of children, findings have indicated that these two factors are consistently related. This could occur through stress responses, which have a destructive effect on children's physical health over time. Children might spend time worrying about the conflicts they are witnessing within their family and contemplating the meaning of such conflict-such as eventual family dissolution or worry about abandonment-which can increase the overall stress that a child experiences. Continual stress and self-blame can also lead to various other undesirable effects on children, such as low-self esteem and self-worth, which ultimately can impact a child's physical health and well-being. If children are stressed and worried about family problems, they may also struggle with academic progress because of their distraction and inability to engage with meaningful social relationships.[4]

One of the major problems within this field of study is how exactly to define inter-parental conflict, given that some level of conflict occurs within all relationships and that conflict differs greatly in its aggressiveness, severity and long-term prevalence. As such, studies have often focused on the frequency with which parents argue or

engage in certain conflict behaviours in strictly numerical terms. Parental reports are often used as well to determine how often and how serious conflict is that emerges. These types of data collection methods are quite often far from complete, however, given that they do not take into account a wide variety of factors that affects how a child perceives of the conflict in question [7]. For instance, children have been found to adjust better to conflict when the type of conflict is something that they have witnessed consistently and feel more familiar with.[2]

Particular types of conflict have been associated with particular types of behavioural problems by certain meta-analysis' of the literature. For instance, the effect size for conflict that is expressed overly is nearly twice the size of effect for conflict that is expressed covertly. Overt conflict can be defined as conflict that is expressed in terms of hostile and aggressive behaviour, while covert conflict is expressed indirectly.[6] Such differences indicate that parental management of conflict could be more important than when and how often conflict actually occurs.[2]

Effect sizes have not been related to child gender or age, although the magnitude of the effect was found to be larger for boys than for girls. Generally, findings relating the gender of the child to the extent that they experience developmental difficulties associated with conflict have been inconsistent and have not led to any reliable conclusions about the role of gender.[2] Similarly, age has not been found to be a significant predictor of behavioural and emotional problems in children as a result of inter-parental conflict, although it is recognized that the earlier years of a child's life are critical for sound emotional development. There are also further questions relating to the ethnic compositions of children who make up study samples, with more research needed in this area in the future.[2]

## Future directions

Theory on inter-parental conflict and child development is only useful insofar as it can be translated into meaningful practice and engagement.[7] Despite the fact that numerous attempts have been made to create programs that support parents, couples and/or children, few of these programs have actually been subject to rigorous or systematic evaluation.[6] As well, the theoretical and empirical basis for programs that are developed often goes unidentified or untested, meaning that researchers are left to question which programs are working well and why. Cummings[6] identify the importance of using a transnational research approach for the creation and evaluation of programs that explicitly seek to translate research findings into effective practice. Cummings[6] developed a program based on Davies and Cummings Emotional Security Theory (EST) that utilizes a family-wide model for understanding the effects of inter-parental conflict on children. Such programs that have a wider definition of inter-parental conflict and focus on the family more holistically have shown incredible promise for the future.

## Conclusion

Inter-parental conflict has consistently been linked to negative outcomes with regards to healthy child development, in terms of their physical, psychological, social and emotional well-being. These negative impacts occur through several mechanisms that are both direct and indirect, including through the internalization of shame and fear, and through the children's tendency to emulate the behaviours they are witnessing regularly at home.[8–14] Future programs that target these problems should focus on translating research into practice, so that such programs are grounded in sound theoretical and empirical research. More research should also be directed towards defining the limits and scope of inter-parental conflict, as well as focusing on ethnic differences on the association between inter-parental conflict and child development. The issue of inter-parental conflict and children's emotional development is important, especially given the high health and economic burden that this issue places on governments and health care systems. In the future, this health issue should be a priority for policy makers, practitioners, teachers and of course, parents.

## Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

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