

Pan Bedfordshire Parental Conflict Guidance

What is parental conflict?

Parental conflict occurs in every relationship and can sometimes lead to feelings of anger, even extreme anger, between partners or ex-partners. Parental conflict can mean many things and can often take the form of loud, angry arguments. One common feature of parental conflict is each person blaming the other for what's going on.

Parental conflict is generally issue-focused. While the parents may have clear differences or preferences, they are often able to negotiate a solution to the conflict. There might be greater levels of blaming and may include patterns of relating carried over from experiences in their own family. While the intensity of conflict may vary, this will have different impact for each individual child depending on their individual characteristics, background, resilience and vulnerability, and their circumstances.

Parental conflict is not to be confused with Domestic Abuse which includes hitting or pushing, name-calling, checking partner's phone or social media, scaring a partner by shouting at them, calling a partner names, punching or smashing objects, stopping a partner from going out and telling a partner what to wear (among many other things).

Reducing parental conflict is everyone's business

Any practitioner or volunteer working with children, young people and families can have an impact on reducing parental conflict. The risk of conflict between parents is higher at crucial transition points in family life, such as becoming pregnant, having a baby, a child starting or changing school, or separation and divorce. It is also known that around 11% of all children in the UK have parents who are in a distressed relationship, with children in workless families almost three times as likely to experience this.

Reducing parental conflict may be one of the most important ways of reducing child mental health problems. However, relationship difficulties are often seen as a private matter, and couples tend to only seek help when they are in crisis. Front-line practitioners can often lack the confidence, tools and knowledge to raise relationship issues with parents and so miss opportunities to identify and support families experiencing parental conflict.

Children are vulnerable to the impact of conflict whether their parents are together or apart, or in the process of separation.

How parental conflict impacts on children

Children are able (more than we think!) to pick up on tension between parents, which can make them worry. When conflict becomes loud, aggressive arguments children are likely to feel very scared. What makes it worse for them is that the very people who are the ones they look to for comfort when they are frightened are the ones being scary. It can be confusing for small children who can't understand what is going on and are likely to blame themselves for the arguing. If aggressive arguments happen often then children live with these bad feelings much of the time when parents live together. If parents are separated it can cause them to feel very anxious when their parents have contact with each other, for example when they are being collected or dropped off.

Children can develop difficulties when there is conflict between parents:

- Mental Health
 - Depression and Anxiety
 - Behavioural problems
- Academic problems
- Physical Health problems
- Social Relationship Problems

- Peers
- Future relationships
- Substance Misuse
- Low employability
- Inter-Personal Violence
- Physical or verbal aggression;
- Sulking or the 'silent treatment';
- Getting caught up in highly intense or heated arguments;
- Withdrawing or walking away from an argument.

Children may also be less troubled by conflict when parents are able to resolve an argument. However, this 'resolution' needs to be genuine. Children are not fooled when parents tell them things have been sorted out but fail to relate to each other in ways that demonstrate that the relationship has been repaired. Parents' actions need to echo their words. Children can learn behaviours that are helpful in their relationships with others from observing parents handling conflict well.

Children are also at risk of a range of health difficulties (Troxel and Matthews, 2004) including:

- Digestive problems
- Fatigue
- Reduced physical growth
- Headaches and pains
- Problems sleeping

Difficulties can extend into school, with children less able to settle, more likely to have trouble getting on with peers, and less likely to achieve academically because of the impact of conflict between parents on children's cognitive abilities and attention (Harold et al, 2007).

Conflict between parents is **one of the key factors** that explain why other family difficulties, such as impoverished circumstances, parental depression or substance abuse, are also associated with poor outcomes for children (Du Rocher Schudlich and Cummings, 2007).

Using children in conflict

During angry conflict there is sometimes the temptation to hurt the other person in some way, either physically or emotionally. Doing so is abusive – always. When looking at conflict between intimate partners, or people who used to be intimate partners, we often find that children are used as weapons to inflict emotional hurt or exert control. This is also abusive towards the children themselves and being used in a conflict between parents can wreak childhoods. Here are a few ways that children are commonly used as weapons during parental conflict:

- Parental Alienation Syndrome. This is where one parent tries to turn a child against the other parent by constantly saying negative things about them. If done often over a period of time this can stop the child from wanting to see the other parent. This usually happens once couples have split up. Whilst some things that are said about the other parent may be true it is often the case that what is said by the alienating parent is an opinion rather than fact. Sometimes lies are deliberately used to affect how the child sees the other parent.
- Using access to the children to punish or control the other person.
- Sometimes access to children will be stopped – or threatened to be stopped – by one parent to punish or control the other, for example if they haven't paid maintenance money or have a new partner.
- Using children to spy on the other parent. This often takes the form of asking children questions about whether their mum/dad has a new partner or where they go.
- Hurting the children or harshly punishing them. Sometimes a parent will physically hurt a child to emotionally hurt or control the other parent (forcing them to do things by making them worry that the child will be hurt if they don't).
- Telling children about the conflict. For example telling the children about arguments or details of court proceedings, usually to make the other parent look bad.
- Threatening to take the children away.
- Threatening to call, or calling, Social Services on the other parent:

- Sometimes concerns might be genuine, sometimes they may be made up or exaggerated, but during parental conflict the motivation for calling Children's Services can often be to hurt the other parent or make them look bad.
- Telling the other parent (dad) that the child isn't theirs.

There are many other ways besides these that children can be used as weapons in parental conflict. To reiterate, this behaviour constitutes abuse, not only towards the adult involved in the conflict but the child too.

An example; a child has parents that are separated and in conflict. They see the parent they don't normally live with at weekends. This contact is cancelled at short notice by this parent, prompting the other parent to tell the child "your mum/ dad doesn't care about you". This is emotionally abusive towards the child. Even if this is their genuine opinion it is clearly not in the child's best interests to hear it because they are likely to feel hurt and rejected.

Why reducing parental conflict is difficult

- Separate planning & commissioning between children's and adults services
- Concern about interfering in the private matter of a relationship between two adults
- Lack of services + frontline practitioners lacking confidence, tools and knowledge to identify and deal with relationship conflict
- Low income families most at risk least likely to access support.
- Couples only seek help when they have already reached crisis point

Are some children and families more vulnerable than others?

Financial difficulties impact on parental mental health, which can increase parental conflict. This in turn can impact on parenting and children's outcomes. According to data from the Department of Work and Pensions, children in workless families are up to three times more likely to experience damaging parental conflict.

A range of factors have been identified that help explain why some children are more vulnerable to the impact of conflict between parents than others. Boys and girls may experience and react to conflict differently, although with equally deleterious outcomes for both. This is because of differences in how girls and boys react to conflict, socialisation into different roles for boys and girls, and interactions between the sex of the parent and the sex of the child (Davies and Lindsay, 2001).

Older children appear to be more vulnerable to the impact of conflict between parents than younger children. This may be explained, however, by a number of factors, including a failure to fully capture the impact on younger children and the interplay of age and developmental stage and how that affects children's responses to conflict. It may also simply mean that older children have become more sensitive to conflict because they have been exposed to it for a longer period of time compared to younger children.

Children's temperaments can also serve to increase or reduce their vulnerability to inter-parental conflict. Children with a difficult temperament are more vulnerable to the impact of conflict between parents. Biological factors, including specific genetic susceptibilities and early brain development, may explain why some children are at greater short and long term risk for negative outcomes as a result of living with high levels of inter-parental conflict and discord as well as the perpetration of conflict based behaviours across generations (Ramos et al, 2005; Whiteside-Mansell, 2009).

Children's physiological makeup can also play an important role in differentiating between children who are at greater risk of poor outcomes. For example, some children's nervous systems help them to regulate their feelings and responses to conflict more effectively than other children (El Sheikh and Erath, 2011).

Children's coping strategies can also be important. In general, emotion-focused strategies, that help children to distance themselves from parental conflict, are associated with better outcomes for children than problem-solving strategies that may result in children becoming embroiled in the situation (Shelton and Harold, 2008).

A warm sibling relationship can also buffer children from the impact of a high conflict home (Grass et al, 2007). However, sibling relationships can also suffer with complicated alliances and divisions emerging within families, or as one child protects him or herself by deflecting parental anger towards a sibling (Cox et al, 2001).

Evidenced based early intervention programmes to support couples

A range of approaches to supporting parents have been developed and assessed over recent years though few have focused directly on couple conflict alone.

- [Enhanced Triple P](#) - Parenting intervention of 10 sessions for families with parenting problems with a couple component.
- [Triple P Family Transitions](#) - Parenting intervention with a couple component involving five sessions for separating families.
- [Family Foundations](#) - Couple relationship programme over five sessions for parents expecting their first child.
- [Family Check-up for Children](#) - Parenting intervention for families with moderate to high needs with a couple component.
- [Incredible Years Preschool \(Advanced\)](#) - Parenting intervention of 18–20 sessions for low to high needs with a couple component.
- [Incredible Years School Age Basic \(Advanced\)](#) - Parenting intervention with a couple component for families with children aged 6–12 years.
- [School children and their Families](#) - Universal couple relationship programme of 16 sessions when children transition to school.

CAFCASS also has a number of tools that can be used at <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/grown-ups/professionals/ciaf/resources-for-assessing-harmful-conflict/>

In summary:

- Children exposed to conflict between parents are at risk of a range of negative outcomes including: emotional and behavioural difficulties, trouble getting on with others such as peers or family members, problems settling and achieving at school, sleep difficulties, and poorer health.
- Conflict between parents, rather than the event of parental separation or divorce, is a key factor in explaining why some children/young people fair better than others when parental relationships breakdown.
- Conflict impacts how couples parent and the quality of relationship between parent and child.
- Parenting may be affected in a number of ways, with parents adopting a range of behaviours, from highly intrusive and hostile parenting through to lax, disinterested parenting, all of which are associated with negative developmental outcomes for children/young people (Cox et al; 2001).
- Conflict within families has been found to pass from one generation to the next. This 'intergenerational transmission' of family conflict is not solely explained by genetic factors. Rather, family environmental factors such as inter-parental conflict and harsh parenting practices affect children/young people's psychological development irrespective of whether parents and children/young people are genetically related or not.
- Some children/young people are more vulnerable to the impact of conflict than others. Factors which may increase or decrease a child/young person's vulnerability include: physiological make-up, temperament, age, support networks of peers, siblings or others, and coping strategies.
- Intervening early provides an opportunity to help couples before problems with conflict arise or become entrenched.
- Practitioners working with families are well-placed to identify parents at risk of or struggling with conflict. With training, they may also provide information about conflict and relationship difficulties, sign-post families to more specialist support, or provide structured interventions themselves.

