

Parent Conflict after Separation: Taking a Closer Look¹

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High conflict is often described as the most damaging factor in the post-separation adjustment of children and adolescents. High conflict that continues in the years after separation is indeed a major risk factor for children's longer-term well-being. However, more recent research has demonstrated that it is only one of several important factors creating risk and potential detriment. The quality of parenting after separation and divorce, for example, is now recognized as equally important, if not more so, because competent and warm parenting acts as a protective barrier against the effects of high conflict.

Parent conflict has typically been treated in the family law field in a simplistic manner and as a unitary phenomenon. We tell parents conflict is bad for children, and tell them to stop it, but our exhortations are usually not specific enough to be effective in motivating behavioral change. Conflict is a complex and multi-dimensional set of behaviors and interactions that is best understood when it is scrutinized and differentiated by mediators, evaluators, family lawyers, therapists, judges, and educators providing post-separation programs. This then provides a more sophisticated conflict framework for counseling and educating clients, mediating, decision-making, and for understanding the child's experience.

There are different paths for understanding the effects on children of parent conflict that include looking more closely at each parent's behaviors and interactions; categories and intensity of conflict; the child's experience prior to separation and in the year or two after; and the mechanisms by which conflict affects children's adjustment. First, it is perhaps obvious but important to recognize that parents in high conflict are not carbon copies: neither in the extent and intensity of their anger, the underlying reasons for their anger, nor in their capacity and desire to contain their anger. Experienced practitioners in the separation/divorce field recognize that in as many as 35% of parent couples labeled as "high conflict", one of the parents has disengaged emotionally from the former partner and has no interest in conflict, litigation, or exposing the children to hostile exchanges, while the other is effectively driving and sustaining the conflict. The wide-spread assumption that both parents contribute equally to the conflict is not accurate or justified, and practitioners and judges need to find ways to acknowledge and deal with this, particularly when chronic litigation patterns are evident.

It is useful to differentiate among categories or sources of conflict, as there may be implications for which parents are likely to reduce or cease their conflict within a normative period of time or persist in endless conflict, as well as the likelihood of settlement without litigation. While not an exhaustive list, serious conflict arises from: anger/rage about betrayals and the act of separation; domestic violence patterns; strongly held views about the distribution of time between parents; significantly different child rearing values; misunderstandings arising from poor, incomplete communications; child alienation situations; mental illness and severe

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personality disorders; and questionable allegations regarding danger to the child. These categories of conflict may require different strategies and intervention.

It is important to recognize that children whose parents have been/are in high conflict are not similarly affected, and some are socially and emotionally well-adjusted. The key is in examining the many facets of conflict. Intensity of conflict, rather than frequency, is a better predictor of child adjustment. Conflict that focuses on the child is more detrimental than conflict about other issues (e.g., finances). The amount of *legal* conflict is not associated with child outcomes whereas high interparental conflict is. Destructive conflict should be differentiated from low or moderate conflict, where risk for children is only slightly elevated or insignificant. Destructive conflict is characterized by overt hostility between parents, aggressive interactions, poorly resolved conflicts with no efforts to compromise, and child-focused.

The type of conflict behavior most consistently associated with negative outcomes after separation and divorce is when one or both parents use their child to express their anger and disputes. Specifically, behaviors that place children in the middle include: asking children to carry hostile messages to the other parent, asking intrusive questions about the other parent, creating a need in the child to hide information or conceal positive feelings about the other parent, contempt expressed toward and demeaning the other parent. These behaviors are associated with depression and anxiety in adolescents, and more aggression in younger children. Ultimately, as children reach late adolescence, research has demonstrated that they are more likely to be less close to, and reject or reduce contacts with these parent(s). It is very important for practitioners working with parents to know, and to convey to parents, that when high conflict parents do **not** use their children in this manner, the children can be as well-adjusted as children in low conflict families. Therefore, it seems appropriate to explain to parents the concept of “encapsulation” of conflict, i.e., containing and reserving parent conflict and angry behaviors for specific designated times and places away from the children. Children exposed to continued high conflict two or three years after separation/divorce have significantly more symptoms of aggression, antisocial behaviors, acting out, problems with peers and authority figures, anxiety and depression and lower self-esteem, compared to children with low-moderate levels of conflict. Rather than admonishing parents to magically “stop” conflict, it is more instructive, realistic, and motivating to describe specific parent behaviors associated with poor adjustment, the type of adjustment problems, and encouraging encapsulation of their conflict.

What are the pathways that link high conflict to poor outcomes for children? A direct pathway is that children model their parents’ aggressive behaviors in their own social interactions, and fail to learn appropriate social skills, including dealing with conflict with peers. The most important indirect pathway from high parent conflict to poor adjustment is the impact of parent conflict on quality of parenting. High conflict parents interact with their children in more angry, rejecting, and coercive ways than do parents with low conflict, which then impacts child adjustment. Fathers are more likely to withdraw from the parenting arena when parent conflict is high. Good quality parenting by either mother or father (warmth, availability, appropriate authoritative discipline, and monitoring), or a good relationship with a caregiver or mentor, is a protective buffer against the pernicious effects of high conflict, and can serve to mitigate the overall impacts of separation and divorce as well.

To learn more about conflict and other risk and protective factors for children and adolescents following separation and divorce, see Kelly, J. B. (2012). Risk and protective factors associated with child and adolescent adjustment following separation and divorce: Social Science Applications. In K. Kuehne & L. Drozd (Eds.), *Parenting plan evaluations: Applied research for the family court* (Chapter 3, pp. 49-84). NY: Oxford University Press.

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Dr. Kelly was Founder and Executive Director of the Northern California Mediation Center for 19 years, and a forensic expert, custody evaluator, therapist, consultant, and Parenting Coordinator in high conflict custody cases. She was appointed to both the American Psychological Association Task Force to Develop Guidelines for the Practice of Parenting Coordination and the AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination.

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