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How Parental Conflict Harms Adolescents

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Shelton, K. H. and Harold, G. T. [2008]. Interparental Conflict, Negative Parenting, and Children's Adjustment: Bridging Links Between Parents' Depression and Children's Psychological Distress. Journal of Family Psychology. 22, 712 - 724.

We have known for some time that parental distress, particularly depression [See Digests: 6, 1 & 5; 7, 1, 6, & 10; 8, 1, 3, 7, & 10; and 9, 1.], has a detrimental impact on children's well-being. This study examines more specific types of parental distress and whether they affect children in different ways.

The authors studied 352 intact families and one of their 11- to 13-year-old children, over a three year period. Thirteen percent of the families were blended while the remainder included natural parents. Ninety-nine percent of the families were Caucasian and of European ancestry. Parents were asked to complete questionnaires regarding their own depressive symptoms, insecurity, their children's behavior, and interparental conflict. Children were asked to respond regarding their own symptoms. Teachers were also asked to rate the children's well-being.

The authors found:

- Wives reported higher levels of depression, while husbands reported higher levels of relationship insecurity.
- Depression and insecurity among the parents led to greater interparental conflict. The more the parents felt depressed and insecure, the greater was the likelihood that the children felt rejected. Both parents and teachers reported knowing that the children were having more adjustment problems.
- When mothers were depressed or insecure, their children felt rejected by them and tended to misbehave more. This result was more likely for girls. When fathers felt depressed, the children did not feel rejected, but their anxiety increased, and they experienced more symptoms of distress. This was especially true for the boys.
- The longer interparental conflict continued, the worse the children felt.
- The authors concluded that as a result of parental conflict, the children felt that their parents were withdrawing from them. This perception prompted their distressed reactions.
- Mental distress increased over the 18 months prior to marital dissolution, but decreased almost an equal amount over the next 18 months.

Critical Analysis

This study has a number of advantages. First, it was longitudinal in nature. Following the participants as they did increased the reliability of their findings. A second advantage is that the authors included ratings from teachers. This is helpful as it adds observations from neutral parties. Third, this study specifically examined the roots of children's reactions based on their parents' distress. On the other hand, there were a number of drawbacks. First, the study was conducted in the UK with a sample of nearly all Caucasian participants. We do not know if their findings would be similar with a diverse U.S. sample. A second limitation is that the authors did not break down the results based on whether the children were living with their natural parents or with a step-parent. While we presume that this is because there were no differences between these families, the authors did not tell us so. Finally, the study is restricted to 11- to 13-year-old children. We do not know what, if any, differences there would be if the authors had studied a broader age range of children.

Recommendations

A major finding of this study is that both the parents and teachers knew that the children were distressed when their parents were in conflict. While teachers can do little about this, the parents certainly can. The unfortunate finding from this study is that they did not. The situation for children can only be worse when their parents divorce. We often tell divorcing parents that when children misbehave, it is necessary to impose more discipline and structure and to remain involved with them so that they will feel more secure. This study reinforces the wisdom of this advice and tells us that doing so is particularly important for mothers. Finally, parents often tell clinicians that they stay together for the benefit of their children. This study represents yet another reason why this is not the case [See Digests: 5, 1; 6, 1; and 8, 6]. While no one looks forward to divorce, doing so may be the better course in cases where parents' chronic conflict cannot be resolved.

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