

# 7 Marital Quality and Parenting

**Recent studies report that marital conflict accounts for up to 40% of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties** 20, 21

Seven out of 10 young people considered parents getting on well together as one of the most important factors in raising happy children. Only a third of parents thought the relationship between them was relevant to raising happy children.<sup>22</sup>

In 1998, 28% of calls to ChildLine were from children ringing with concerns about the relationship between their parents.<sup>23</sup>

## Key to family functioning

The parents' relationship is at the heart of family functioning.\* How parents relate to each other (even when they no longer live together) affects the quality of all other family relationships, including the relationship between parent and child and relationships between siblings.

Marital quality, however, is a difficult area to research. Theoretically, conceptually and methodologically, measuring 'quality' has led to a great deal of confusion and disagreement. In a discussion of marital quality and its measurement in research, Kluwer (2000)<sup>1</sup> suggests, "*it is important to realise that what is generally considered 'high' and 'low' marital quality is not only affected by the views and feelings of the intimate partners themselves, but also by the views of scientists, and, at a larger scale, by social norms and cultural standards*".

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## Marital quality and parenting

It is widely assumed that the quality of marital and parent-child relationships are interrelated. In an extensive review of 68 studies, Erel and Burman (1995)<sup>2</sup> examine the significance of the marital relationship on the parent-child relationship and explore whether any linkage might be described in terms of the spillover hypothesis or the compensatory hypothesis.

## The spillover hypothesis

Spillover refers to the direct transfer of feelings or behaviour from one setting to another. For example, this may involve the expression in one system (eg. the marital relationship) of feelings that were engendered in another system (eg. the parent-child relationship). This may be

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\* *The marital relationship in stepfamilies is not as central as it is in first-marriage families. Children in stepfamilies have a greater impact on parental behaviour than children in first-marriage homes<sup>21</sup>. Although conflict in stepfamilies is no more severe than in other families,<sup>22</sup> children may be exposed to a higher overall level of conflict because they are involved in more than one home and their own parents may continue to argue over them.*

manifested in the child becoming a scapegoat, with attention on his/her behaviour providing the parents with a distraction from their own difficulties. Spillover may also result in inconsistent parenting, either between parents, or from one parent whose communication with the child becomes unpredictable — for example, in the presence of the other parent.

## The compensatory hypothesis

The compensatory hypothesis suggests that a parent who does not find a fulfilling relationship in their marriage will seek to satisfy this need in the parent-child relationship. Thus the child will benefit from greater parental attention, although possibly only from one parent. Moreover, such an effect may operate in reverse, indicating that periods of high marital quality could, in turn, lead to a decrease in the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Erel and Burman (1995)<sup>2</sup> find clear support for the spillover hypothesis. They conclude that positive parent-child relations are less likely when the marital relationship is troubled.

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## Types of marital conflict

A number of research studies examining the impact of the parental relationship on children have focused on the way parents manage conflict.

Couples argue in different ways. While some forms of conflict are destructive, others may be beneficial for children. Three types of conflict have been identified as having an effect on children:

- *Destructive conflict* is particularly detrimental to children's well-being. It is characterised by verbal or physical aggression<sup>3</sup>, non-verbal conflict or the 'silent treatment', intense quarrels, and arguments about or involving the children.<sup>4</sup>
- In contrast, children may learn from observing *constructive conflict*, where parents manage

**In 2000, 54% of divorcing couples in England and Wales had one or more children under the age of 16.**<sup>24</sup>

Approximately 40-50% of children exposed to severe marital hostility, exhibit serious behavioural problems — a rate between 533% and 667% greater than in the general population of children in the US.<sup>25</sup>

10% of children live with one birth parent and a step-parent. Over 90% of stepfamilies consist of a couple with at least one child from a previous relationship of the woman.<sup>26</sup>

and resolve disagreements effectively.<sup>5</sup>

- Similarly, children may learn from *productive conflict*, where problems are openly discussed but not necessarily resolved.<sup>6</sup>

Children are sensitive to whether and how their parents have made up following a fight. Children as young as five are able to infer resolution of a conflict when arguing adults leave the room angry and return some minutes later, happy. However, resolution without positive feeling is still better than no resolution. Even if parents cannot make up immediately, as long as children are given positive cues that things are resolved they should be unaffected.<sup>5, 7</sup>

Children may learn from parents' techniques for handling and resolving conflict. In particular, children benefit from observing parents when they demonstrate warmth, try to compromise, and use negotiation and humour to resolve differences. From a child's perspective, the best ending to a fight is a warm and meaningful compromise with apologies.

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### Marital conflict and its effect on children

Disagreements between parents are a normal and necessary part of family life. Although most children are unaffected by their parents' relationship difficulties, exposure to parental conflict can be stressful for children whatever their age. Where the effects of conflict have been studied, even children as young as one and two years old have been found to become distressed when parents quarrel.<sup>4, 8</sup>

Marital conflict can undermine parents' ability to discipline children effectively and consistently. Distressed and distracted parents are likely to be less emotionally available to their children and to be more inconsistent in their day-to-day discipline.<sup>9</sup> They are also more likely to disagree with each other about child-rearing practices.<sup>10</sup>

How children make sense of parental conflict and the meanings they attribute to it are important factors in how discord affects their well-being. For example, conflict may be harmful if children believe they are to blame for their

parents' quarrelling.<sup>11</sup> This may lead a child to believe that future quarrels will have further negative consequences, such as one or both parents turning their anger towards the child and blaming him/her for the marital problems.

Children's perceptions of parental conflict can threaten their emotional security, undermine the confidence they have in the quality of their relationship with their parents, and even make them question the future stability of their family<sup>12</sup> — especially for children who have been exposed to parental conflict over a longer period.

Children may soon learn to expect the worst. They develop expectations about parental conflict based on past experience. Children whose parents successfully work out their problems are less likely to worry about the repercussions of conflict. On the other hand, children exposed to poorly managed conflict consistently become disturbed, even when their parents have minor disputes. These expectations may extend to other situations, with children becoming more disturbed in disagreements with peers, siblings and other adults (such as a teacher).<sup>11</sup>

Rather than get used to their parents' quarrels, the more that conflict occurs the more sensitive children become to it and the more likely they are to react with aggression and become more vulnerable to its effects.<sup>13</sup>

Some children develop behavioural problems, becoming aggressive and difficult as a result of exposure to marital conflict.<sup>14</sup> They can be affected directly by observing marital conflict and distress because they may 'model' or mimic their parents' behaviour. Children may also attempt to distract parents by misbehaving when they quarrel. If the child succeeds in ending the fight, s/he may 'act up' again and again. Consequently, bad behaviour is rewarded by the quarrel ending and inappropriate behaviour is reinforced.<sup>13</sup>

Children can also develop emotional problems, such as anxiety and depression. These 'internalising problems' are important signs of a child's distress that may be overlooked by parents, teachers, or other adults. Withdrawn

RELATIONSHIPS TODAY  
7 Marital Quality  
and Parenting

In 2000, two fifths of all marriages were remarriages for one or both partners.<sup>24</sup>

In 2000, a total of 142,457 children aged under 16 were in families where parents divorced; a quarter of these were aged under five.<sup>24</sup>

It is estimated that in England and Wales 28% of children will experience divorce in their family before reaching age 16.<sup>27</sup>

and quiet behaviours may be 'encouraged' inadvertently and so reinforced by adults who are relieved at not having to deal with disruptive behaviour.<sup>13, 15</sup>

### Differing responses

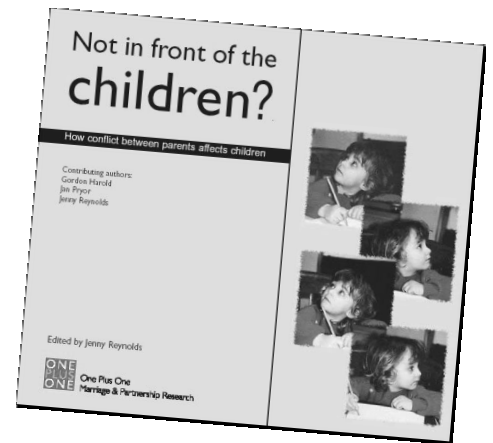
Some children are less likely to develop problems as a result of parental conflict than other children, although they are exposed to similar levels and types of discord. Responses may vary according to the child's temperament<sup>13</sup>, strategy for coping with discord<sup>16</sup>, and the child's age and sex.<sup>3</sup>

Early work suggests that boys might experience greater disturbances as a result of marital conflict and that boys are more exposed than girls to family discord.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, evidence is converging to suggest that the mother-son relationship is particularly vulnerable to acrimony when the mother is experiencing other family problems. However, it is also the case that girls manifest distress in more subtle ways that are difficult to detect.<sup>3</sup>

Some children respond to parental conflict by comforting their parents or helping them with the task or problem that created the conflict. This is particularly true of girls. However, this parent-child role reversal may put the child at risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems and of experiencing difficulties establishing healthy relationships in later life.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusions

How parents get on affects their own happiness and the happiness and adjustment of their children. While most children will be distressed but not disturbed by their parents' quarrels, a significant minority will experience psychological problems. Being a good partner is part of being a good parent.



*Not in front of the children?*, by Gordon Harold, Jan Pryor and Jenny Reynolds, is available from One Plus One or via the website: [www.oneplusone.org.uk](http://www.oneplusone.org.uk). Price £9.99 plus p+p £2 UK; £3 Europe; £4.50 USA/rest of world.

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