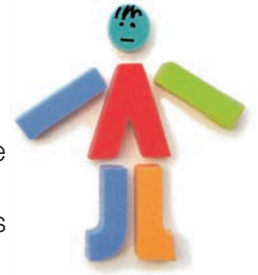


Briefing Sheet 3



What about the children?

Conflict is a normal part of family life, but friction between parents can be a symptom of a struggling relationship and can have an extreme effect on the children. Children who are exposed to severe discord may develop a range of emotional and behavioural problems. Different children respond in different ways, even siblings in the same family.



Frequent, intense, physical, unresolved and child-related conflict has a particularly negative effect on children.

Children are particularly at risk when:

- Conflict is frequent and intense
- Disputes are full of physical and verbal aggression
- Parents treat one another with quiet contempt or the 'silent, hostile treatment'
- One parent withdraws during an argument or walks out
- Disagreements are about the child.

However, it is important to distinguish between conflicts that are simply expressive or emotional because of the character of each partner and the relationship, and between rows that are wrought with feelings of contempt, scorn or criticism.

Different kinds of conflict

Research shows that being exposed to conflict is stressful for children of any age:

Destructive conflict – unresolved and harmful

- Children are most affected when arguments between parents are not resolved, the fighting continues, or parents give each other the silent treatment. This is particularly adverse for children's wellbeing.

Productive conflict – unresolved but parents can move on

- This can be disruptive but children are less affected by conflict that parents openly discuss but do not necessarily resolve. There may be partial resolution or one parent may change the subject or give in so that they can produce a result. Children are not harmed and can learn from seeing the outcome.

Creative conflict – a good outcome

- Children are least troubled by arguments where the parents apologise, negotiate, reach a compromise and resolve the argument. Humour and warmth may play an important role. This gives children a good model to copy and they continue to feel secure and reassured.

Children benefit from seeing conflict handled well and negotiated positively. They learn valuable lessons that they can use in their own lives.

The fallout for children

Most children are resilient and understand that their parents love them, even when parents are not getting on too well together. It helps children to be aware of their parent's conflict but to know that things have been sorted out successfully, or even partially, allowing the parents to move on. They need to see parents make up, and they need to know they are loved. Children who never see or hear their parent's conflict are at a disadvantage in having no model for their own relationships.

Resilience of children

- When loved and given affection most children cope and thrive
- Other family members can give support and increase the children's understanding
- How conflict is resolved is the key. Children need to be aware when and how this has happened.

Conflict that is destructive for children

- Physical or verbal aggression
- Intense rows full of contempt and criticism
- The silent treatment
- When one partner withdraws
- When the conflict is child-related.

A child may react to conflict by becoming **a troublesome child, a sad and troubled child** or by reversing roles and becoming **a parent child**. Sometimes, an adult close to the family can support the child through difficult times, or a sensitive teacher or friend may recognise a child's distress and help. Older children are more able to cope if they can turn to their friends, for example, for support or distraction.

Possible poor outcomes for children

Behavioural problems – acting it out

- Aggression and hostility
- Antisocial, rule breaking, uncooperative
- Delinquency and vandalism

Emotional problems – keeping it in

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Withdrawal
- Being moody and unsettled

Social problems

- Difficulty getting along with others
- Doing badly at school – underachieving, disruptive, poor social skills
- Children and young people may adopt health-risking behaviours, e.g. smoking, drinking, anorexia.