

## **Research Findings on Marital Conflict and Maladjustment in Children**

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Child-rearing is a formidable and often stressful life task that can lead to considerable marital conflict. Current research indicates that marriages are most conflictual during the child-rearing years (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cox, 1985; Glenn, 1990). Typically, marital discord increases during infancy (Isabella & Belsky, 1985; Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983) and reaches its peak by pre-adolescence (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983).

While the stresses of child-rearing can lead to marital conflict, it is also the case that the stresses of marital conflict can lead to adjustment problems for children. As far back as the 1930s social scientists have reported the link between marital discord and psychological problems in children (Hubbard & Adams, 1936; Towle, 1931; Wallace, 1935), and support for this association has been consistent over the years (Baruch & Wilcox, 1944; Gassner & Murry, 1969; Jouriles, Bourg, & Farris, 1991; Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Owen & Cox, 1997; Rutter, 1970).

Even though marital conflict is a predictor of adjustment problems for children, the fact remains that most children exposed to marital conflict do not develop psychological difficulties. Marital conflict is a common occurrence, even in harmonious homes, and studies show that it typically accounts for only about 10% to 20% of all the differences in psychological adjustment between children (Grych & Finchman, 1990). Thus, overall marital conflict is not a major factor in explaining maladjustment in children. However, when it becomes chronic and severe, marital conflict very much becomes a major explanatory factor.

The greater the frequency, intensity, aggressiveness, and lack of resolution in the fighting, the more marital conflict becomes a strong predictor of maladjustment in children (Finch, Grayish, Osborn, 1994). Few family problems are more closely related to children's poor adjustment than chronic levels of marital conflict (Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Rutter, Yule, Quiton, Rowlands, Yule, & Berger, 1974). In addition, approximately 40% to 50% of children exposed to severe marital hostility (i.e., marital violence) exhibit extreme behavior problems (Jouriles, Murphy, & O'Leary, 1989; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985). This is a proportion between five to six times the behavior problem rates found in the general population (Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985).

Children subjected to chronic and severe marital conflict are at risk for a wide

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range of emotional and behavioral problems, interpersonal difficulties, and impairments in thought processes (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Children in these environments are especially vulnerable to conduct and oppositional disorders involving excessive aggression, vandalism, noncompliance, and delinquency. Up to 25% of the differences between children with these disorders are accounted for by marital conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1990). The relationship between marital conflict and more internalized disorders like depression and anxiety are not as strongly associated. Only about 10% of these disorders are explained by marital conflict (Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Shaw & Emery, 1987, 1988); but as might be expected with sex role socialization, girls are much more susceptible to these types of internalized disorders (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981; Cohn, 1991).

High levels of marital conflict also increase the risk that children will develop dysfunctional social skills and relationships (Grych & Fincham, 1990). For example, marital conflict is linked to discordant parent-child relationships (Camara & Resnick, 1989; Forehand et al., 1991; Howes & Markman, 1989; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991). Degree of marital conflict also predicts teacher reports of poor interpersonal skills and social competence in school settings (Emery & O'Leary, 1984; Long, Forehand, Fauber, & Brody, 1987). In addition, chronic marital conflict is associated with diminished academic performance, manifested by poor school grades and teachers reports of problems in intellectual achievement and abilities (Long et al., 1987; Long, Slater, Forehand, & Fauber, 1988; Wierson, Forehand, & Combs, 1988). In sum, as this review of the literature indicates, high levels of marital conflict are a clear harbinger for a wide range of adjustment problems for children.

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