Family Conflict

A guide for practitioners on understanding family conflict, including the latest report from 4Children,
a focus on the couple relationship and further resources

Introduction

A report released by the national charity 4Children in May 2012 revealed the extent of conflict and violence in Britain's families today.

All too often the violence depicted within families focuses on violence between partners, what is usually referred to as domestic violence. However, 4Children's research shows a wider picture of conflict and violence that encompasses the whole family – where both children and parents can be both victims and perpetrators.

This paper looks at the report findings and also discusses family conflict and the couple relationship, contributed by Krisztina Glausius from the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships.

4Children's report, *The Enemy Within*, highlights that although the impact of domestic violence is widely recognised by public authorities and charities, the awareness of family violence – including child on parent abuse, sibling abuse and in the wider extended family – remains low.

The report stresses that violence within the family threatens lives, breaks up families and has severe ongoing psychological and physical effects on hundreds of thousands of parents and children every year, "950,000 children are affected by domestic violence, either directly as victims of violence, or indirectly in terms of witnessing violence." (*The Enemy Within*, 2012)

The report looks at the measures in place in Local Authorities and found that even where excellent family violence support services exist, parents often do not know how to access them.

4Children says that it is clear that a new approach is needed – one focused on prevention and early intervention and covering the breadth of family violence. Children who are exposed to violence and maltreatment at an early age are more likely to become perpetrators of crime, including domestic violence, in the future.

The report calls for certain changes to be made to deal with the issue of family conflict including:

- Local authorities, police forces, health professionals and children's centres must embrace a definition of violence that specifically refers to violence committed by family members – and ensure that the definition influences the delivery of all their domestic violence services.

- A whole-family approach to dealing with family violence must be embraced to ensure that people are given the relationship and parenting skills that they need to deal effectively with family conflict and recognise the signs of an abusive relationship, and respond appropriately.

- Sufficient funding should be made available to services which deal with the sharp end of family violence, such as refuges, shelters, and violence prevention programmes.

- Family violence provision must be mainstreamed into current government policy to ensure that those who really need help get access to it, early and often.

4Children recommends that both local and national Government, charities and statutory professionals must provide specific early intervention support including bespoke programmes addressing adult

or adolescent violence, programmes designed to develop relationship and parenting skills, to enable parents to resolve conflicts with each other and with their children and awareness raising programmes, and to equip young people and adults to recognise unhealthy and abusive relationships, and identify the route to improve or leave them.

The report also calls for local authorities' new health and wellbeing boards, to ensure that families receive joined up support and that a "whole family approach" is adopted towards family violence from contact with the police to support from family workers.

4Children's Recommendations

1. Widen the definition

4Children's report recommends that the definitions of domestic violence are expanded in all statutory services to fully encapsulate family violence. The definition should stretch beyond intimate partners to include parent-on-child violence, adolescent-on-parent violence, extended family violence and domestic violence carried out by perpetrators under the age of 18.

2. Make family violence a high priority locally and nationally

4Children recommends making family violence a key interdepartmental priority for national government and for local authorities' new health and wellbeing boards, to ensure that families receive the joined up support they need.

3 Introduce a 'whole family approach' to responding to family violence

From contact with the police to support from family workers, to ensure that the whole family is strengthened and has the support they need to overcome their problems.

4 Raise awareness among professionals about the extent of family violence

To ensure that victims of family violence can receive the support they need at the earliest opportunity, and that opportunities for intervention are not missed.

5 Recognise the impact of family violence in national initiatives to strengthen families and turn around crisis

Make family violence a national or local measurement in the payment by results criteria for turning around 120,000 troubled families.

To read the full report visit www.4children.org.uk

Family conflict and the couple relationship
(written by Krisztina Glausias, Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships)

Interventions aimed at improving the quality of the parental relationship are crucial when working with parents in supporting them to achieve better outcomes for their children. There is a wealth of research and clinical evidence to suggest that effective, skilful parenting helps children to do better emotionally, psychologically and even physically. The parent–child relationship serves as a central feature of current family policy in the UK. (Harold, Leve, 2012). However, we at the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR) believe that a vitally important arena for intervention for creating better outcomes for children often gets overlooked. There is a growing body of research evidence suggesting that children can do significantly better when interventions target not only parenting skills but the relationship between parents. (Cowan and Cowan, 2008; Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Johnson & Measelle, 2005; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett & Wong, 2009).

Before addressing the effects of parental conflict on children and the way such difficulties can jeopardise their quality of life and their psychological health, it is important to address an important aspect of current reality. Frontline practitioners and service managers as well as policy makers at all levels are acutely aware of the rapidly shifting landscape of family life in Britain. Families now come in all shapes and sizes and it is fair to say that many of the parents who come, or are referred, for help with parenting are single parents, divorced or separated, or perhaps never formed a meaningful couple relationship with the other parent. How can we then think about the parental relationship in any meaningful way? 'It is important to keep in mind a broader definition of who might be understood as a parenting couple beyond the conventional image of mother and father living

together. Some parents will have separated yet need to actively co-parent together.' (Hertzmann, 2012)

We do not suggest that it is marriage or co-habitation that matters most in terms of outcomes – it is the quality of the relationship between parents that is important for children. All children biologically originate from two parents and there is always some sort of a relationship between the parents, whether in reality or purely in the imagination of the child, whether expressed through actual interactions or stories and family myths. Children pick up both conscious and unconscious messages from their parents about what it is like to be in a relationship and this, in turn, greatly impacts on their future capacity to form their own, adult couple relationships.

For the purposes of this article we narrow the lens to focus on some of the very real and immediate aspects of parental conflict and its effects on children. As practitioners thinking about the emotional experience of childhood and family life, we know that children thrive on consistent love and care, we understand that they need a stable, safe and secure environment and that they benefit from sustaining links with peers, significant adults and with their wider community. What is sometimes forgotten about is how crucially children need a good relationship between their parents. It seems that even when adults and professionals overlook this vital arena of wellbeing, children and young people are acutely aware of the importance of their parental figures getting on well.

When The Children's Society compiled their comprehensive report on childhood in Britain (*The Good Childhood Inquiry*, 2009) , they asked 30,000 respondents – 20,000 of them children – if they thought that "parents getting on well is one of the most important factors in raising happy children". Revealingly, 70% of the teenagers asked agreed with this statement, whilst only 30% of the adult respondents believed that it was true. It seems that adults often underestimate how important it is for children and young people to have parents, together or separated, who, by and large, have a good collaborative relationship.

So let's now look at the effects on children of growing up in a family environment where inter-parental conflict is prevalent. There is wide-ranging evidence showing that children of all ages are adversely affected by frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflict. Child-related conflict between parents can be particularly damaging as it is likely to undermine children's sense of security and might signify family breakup. Children understandably worry that if their parents fight a great deal then things cannot be safe and secure. In addition, evidence shows us that where parents are in conflict, their anger and hostility seems to 'spill over' into their relationship with their child. For instance, studies indicate that fathers who are in conflict with their female partners are likely to be more aggressive to their girl children. However, it is important to add that ordinary conflict and discord between parents can be regarded as part of normal family life and – particularly if children are also able to experience their parents resolving their differences – this does not seem to adversely effect their development. Most children are also resilient and able to, over time, recover from the loss and trauma of divorce, separation and family breakdown – provided their parents do not become embroiled in the aforementioned intense, ongoing, child focused and poorly resolved post-separation conflict.

When conflict between parents is intense, ongoing and poorly resolved, children, in their attempts to cope, may respond in a variety of different ways. Family conflict can cause children to internalise their symptoms and struggle with emotional difficulties, becoming withdrawn or depressed. Other children externalise their struggle and develop behavioural problems, such as aggressive acting out at school, fighting with peers, delinquency etc. Parental conflict is known to impact on children's social competence and their ability to get on with others, with their peers or teachers. This, in turn, can also adversely effect their academic attainment. Children's physical health can also suffer and smoking, drug and alcohol use and eating disorders are more commonly noted in children whose families are affected by serious discord. (Harold, Leve, 2012).

Research evidence conclusively suggests that children's age is not a protective factor when it comes to warring parents. Babies as young as six month have shown physical distress, such as elevated heart rate, in response to hostile exchanges between parents and their response was more marked when compared to their reaction to conflict between non-parental adults.

(Harold, Pryor and Reynolds, 2001). Older children also exhibit a variety of responses showing their distress, ranging from crying, acting out, freezing, withdrawing from, or attempting to intervene in their parents' conflicts. Older teens and adolescents also display signs of considerable emotional distress when exposed to high levels of parental conflict.

The effects of witnessing serious physical conflict, that is, domestic violence and abuse, on children have been well documented. However, it is important to note that children are adversely affected by the whole range of conflictual behaviours between their parents. Whilst they clearly understand the meaning of punching, hitting, kicking or shouting, they are equally aware of and suffer from parental cold war or constant denigration between the parents.

Severe conflict between parents affects children both directly and indirectly. When children grow up experiencing their parents as unable to resolve their conflicts, they might find it difficult to resolve conflict in their own friendships and relationships later in life. (Bengston, 1996 , Amato and Booth, 2001)

But how do these negative cycles or patterns get transmitted from generation to generation if appropriately targeted psychological support is not available? All of us carry conscious and unconscious ideas about what it is like to be a couple – so-called internal working models, unconscious ideas about the nature of relating. These are the models that, later in life, might influence our own ability to form secure, stable, significant relationships. What is more, these unconscious internal working models that influence the climate of a couple relationship can become particularly difficult to manage in the context of parenting, as parenting, which is such an emotionally charged experience, can activate more problematic ways of relating between the couple. And thus children growing up with intense, ongoing, unresolved parental conflict may also become more likely themselves to pass on such difficulties to their own children, the next generation. Focusing on helping parents to achieve and maintain a better relationship, whether still together or after separation in co-parenting, is a vital arena for intervention for achieving better outcomes for children and families. 'Because

inter-parental conflict serves as a primer for children's perceptions of all other relationships, the relationship between the parental couple has an enduring and profound influence on the individual's own psychological development' (Abse, 2012)

Based on this compelling evidence TCCR, as one of the range of services it offers to support the couple relationship, developed a Mentalization based model of therapeutic intervention aimed at helping parents struggling with severe, child focused, post-separation conflict. TCCR is currently also undertaking a Randomised Controlled Trial called 'The Parents in Conflict study' The trial is investigating different ways to help parents collaborate better around matters to do with managing their child, such as contact arrangements and parenting styles.

You can find more information on the Parenting Together Service, the Parents in Conflict Study and TCCR's other services in the reference and resources section of this guide.

THE TAVISTOCK CENTRE FOR COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Training ▪ Counselling ▪ Psychotherapy ▪ Research

References and resources

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Parents in Conflict study

The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships is undertaking a new 'Parents in Conflict' study about the best ways to help separated or divorced parents in conflict over their children. This is a ground-breaking study of the most effective ways to intervene with parents in conflict and so to mitigate the harmful effects of conflict on children's development. The study is funded by a grant from the Department for Education and is run in collaboration with the Anna Freud Centre and University College London.
www.tccr.org.uk

Parenting Together

Parenting Together is a service for parents, whether living together, separated, divorced or in reformed families, who are having difficulty parenting their children co-operatively and are in conflict over parenting issues.
www.tccr.org.uk/parenting-together-service

Break4Change

Break4change is a Brighton and Hove programme for families where young people are abusive towards their parent(s)/carer(s) i.e. hitting, name calling, making threats, stealing money or damaging possessions in the home.*
www.justice.gov.uk/youth-justice/effective-practice-library/break-4-change

SAAIF

The Ministry of Parenting runs Stopping Aggression and Anti-Social Behaviour in Families one of a few courses aimed at reducing family conflict by fostering better communication, increasing insight and awareness and providing tools for dealing with anger and aggression.
www.theministryofparenting.com