

The High-Conflict Family

What ongoing fighting means for your children

At some point, divorcing couples move on with their lives. For most, the high intensity of the divorce fades to a less destructive level. But what about couples who never quite “divorce” from the relentless acrimony, conflict, and chronic litigation? What is the long-term impact on their children when the fighting continues past the final judgment?

Continuous parental conflict robs children of the ability to develop strong and healthy relationships with either parent. Divided loyalties and the stress and adversity of “dragging around” this heavy and painful baggage exacts a high emotional price. The ultimate tragedy is that chronic and intense conflict between parents often robs children of the opportunity to develop the emotional and inter-personal skills necessary to become happy, healthy adults.

Children will always react to a divorce. The questions are when will they react, how will it be manifest, and how strong will the reaction be?

Children often experience a conflict of loyalty. When they are with one parent, they feel guilty about not being with the other, and vice versa. They worry constantly about pleasing one parent without hurting the other or about the amount of time they spend with each parent. Most children hold on to the often unrealistic belief that a reconciliation remains possible even in the face of severe conflict or abuse.

Even the most amicable divorces represent a loss for a child. Parents should keep in mind that children will likely feel some degree of grief over the loss of the intact family. When the divorce and subsequent loss is managed well, the experience will be less traumatic and may even represent a new beginning for all involved.

Infants

Although infants are unable to understand parental conflict and separation at a cognitive level, they are sensitive to changes in their parents’ energy levels and emotional states. Infants from 18 to 24 months need to develop an ability to trust people, primarily their caretakers. The development of this trust within the first two years of life is critically important to the child’s capacity to develop and strengthen bonds throughout life. The process by which infants develop a trusting bond with adults depends on the amount of time, the quality of time, and the reliability with which adults meet the child’s needs.

These children sense changes in their parents’ moods and tones of voice. They are aware of tension and distress but cannot interpret it or express it verbally. If conflict becomes so intense that it affects the child’s routine or the amount and quality of the parent-child interaction, children can

suffer significant consequences. They may respond with degrees of irritability, sleep disturbances, fear/anxiety symptoms, and other regressive behaviors. In severe cases, the children may experience delayed development or a failure to thrive. Because infants are highly vulnerable to environmental influences, ongoing parental conflict may inhibit the child's ability to develop positive and secure attachments far into the future.

Toddlers

Children ages two to five have strong emotional reactions to specific stimuli, such as raised voices, arguments, insults, physical violence, etc. They experience the confusion and fear provoked by their parents' behavior without understanding much beyond that something is terribly wrong. Although unable to verbalize these feelings, three and four year olds may feel caught in the middle (e.g., loyal conflicts). Their reactions tend to be characterized by distress, fear, and regression.

In a conflicted household, children who were otherwise curious can become withdrawn and passive. Some children regress to behaviors, such as thumb sucking and become clingy or lose previously accomplished skills, such as toilet training. Children also may begin to imitate and model parental anger. These children are simply reacting to the chaos of the world around them. The people who previously nurtured them, provided structure to their world, and kept them safe are out of control, angry, or emotionally unavailable to address their needs. A sense of safety, which is a necessary base from which to explore the world and socialize outside the family, gives way to anxiety and worry.

As adults, individuals who were deprived of a sense of safety and security during childhood can be fearful of new situations and of relationships with others. The need to fulfill excessive needs for security and reassurance can become problematic in relationships. They can be shy, dependent, withdrawn, and anxious as adults.

Four and five year olds begin to identify an intense emotional desire for the conflict to disappear. Sometimes they try to pretend that the conflict doesn't exist and manifest it in their play. Still believing in magic, these children try to fix the situation by being extra caring toward parents or by attempting to make their parents feel good. Unfortunately, this leads to more frustration and dismay as they are incapable of changing things.

Such children are old enough to understand "some" of the parental conflict, but unable to understand why they can't make it better. For a child at this stage of life, a high-conflict divorce creates a sense of helplessness and loss of control over his or her environment. If left unaddressed, a child's anxiety and insecurity can extend throughout childhood and into adulthood.

School-age children

By ages six through eight, children tend to get more involved in the parental conflict. Carla Garrity and Mitchell Baris, in their book *Caught in the Middle*, state that by this age, parents consciously or unconsciously, encourage children to take part in their quarrels. Children become messengers of one parent's displeasure with the other. Because six to eight year olds are verbal, they get grilled for information. They quickly learn that to survive they must tell each parent what he or she wants to hear or pretend to favor one parent over the other.

Children in this age group begin to understand that they can minimize the impact of parental conflict by "adjusting the truth" to fit their needs. The effects of this learned distortion: children learn to lie and, perhaps worse, stop recognizing their own feelings. The price becomes denial of self and learning to manipulate by distorting true feelings. As adults, these children are likely to

enter into dysfunctional relationships. They cater to their parents' conflict by becoming passive, accommodating partners, vulnerable to exploitation or even abuse. Children who continue to be manipulative throughout childhood often experience difficulties being honest and straightforward in relationships later in life.

Preadolescent children

Preadolescent children, ages nine to twelve, have reached a level of intellectual development that allows them a greater understanding of the content of their parents' conflict. They also are at a time in their lives when they begin to manifest strong judgment and individual opinions. They become interested in eavesdropping or "pumping" adults for information. They develop a "body of knowledge," accurate or distorted, regarding parental disagreements. This includes issues of child support, infidelities, friends and dating partners, alleged misdeeds by one or the other parent, etc. This knowledge becomes the foundation for a dramatic shift in behavior.

Based on the information they have gathered, these children begin to take sides in the parental conflict. This shift in behavior also leads them to act out their opinions by challenging or withdrawing from one parent while creating a supportive alliance with the other. Children are clearly not only caught in the middle but playing an active role in their parents' conflict.

This often results in one parent increasing the level of conflict and litigation as he or she feels the "loss" or alienation of the child. For nine to twelve year olds, the emotional price of high parental conflict is somewhat ironic. Still far from marrying age, these children are actively involved in a dysfunctional marital relationship and displaying emotionally charged reactions just like their parents. They begin to adopt and exhibit the unhealthy relationship patterns they have witnessed. Sadly, by this stage of the game, children are trying out the dysfunctional relationship patterns that may characterize their adult relationships.

Adolescents

With the arrival of adolescence, children begin to act more independently and to experiment with individual identity. Because adolescence is often a tumultuous developmental stage, high conflict at this stage may result in more intense reactions than would otherwise be expected, including acting-out behaviors, withdrawal from friends; anger towards parents, and feelings of depression and irritability. This is probably the most vulnerable time in their lives in terms of developing social and intimate peer relationships. It is also the time when they most need a "road map" for healthy, respectful, and reciprocal relationships. Children of high-conflict divorce are precisely the most likely to lack this skill.

Adolescence often is marked by sudden shifts in mood and emotions. This typically includes the adolescent's attitudes toward the family and parental conflict. Past allegiances can change or become more entrenched. Some children experience a renewed interest in a parent they might have previously rejected or might challenge the parent they were allied with.

During this stage, issues of sexuality and finding an intimate partner become worrisome and anxiety provoking. The adolescent's negative experience with a high conflict "marriage" magnifies and exacerbates the already intense and difficult task of developing intimacy, empathy, and reciprocity in relationships. Judith Wallerstein in *Surviving the Breakup* remarked that adolescents from divorced families presented with intensified worries:

[G]reater than the reality of their predicament... (they) worried about the present and the future, about who would support them and who would send them to school, about

whether they would succeed or fail as sexual partners, and about whether they would achieve a better marriage than their parents. Sometimes their anxiety bordered on panic.

For adolescents, the price is painfully clear. They must now try to form relationships with a distorted “road map.” They have been deprived of a healthy role model for relationships at a critically formative time of development. Relationship failures become intense, terrifying, and overwhelming. Anxiety, depression, acting out or escapist behaviors often typify their responses.

Because adolescents are capable of more independent behavior, they seek relief from their distress, including the use of alcohol and other drugs. They may be sexually promiscuous or seek thrills, such as shoplifting or drag racing to gain approval and attention. Typically, these behaviors lead to negative consequences, including depression, problems with the law, school failure, pregnancy, and others.

The great American behavioral scientist, Albert Bandura, spent a lifetime of scientific research demonstrating how humans learn by modeling the behavior of others. He defined how instrumental modeling is in learning new or alternative behaviors. It seems that parents in high-conflict situations are blind to all the behavioral evidence and common sense. Throughout the different stages of development, a child perceives and responds to the world differently. Each stage has its unique tasks and accomplishments, which are necessary for development to proceed successfully.

What parents cannot forget is that experience and learning are an integral part of each stage of a child’s life. This experience and learning is profoundly affected by what they live and see. The positive or negative consequences of parental relationship modeling should not be underestimated. Consequences might differ during various stages of childhood. However, the common denominator throughout all stages is that children learn through their models.

The bottom-line wisdom is that what they experience during childhood is likely to be what they pursue for themselves in adulthood. The price a child pays for years of exposure to the effects of destructive parental conflict is indeed high...it lasts a lifetime.

What parents can do

Parents should begin by establishing appropriate support systems for both themselves and their children. Be careful not to depend on your children for emotional support. Instead, seek out friends, join a single parents’ group or talk to close family members when support and encouragement is needed. Similarly, children should have people they can turn to, in addition to their parents, including peers, extended family, school counselors, etc.

Maintaining a sense of stability is another cornerstone of a successful adjustment to divorce. Although parents cannot change the physical separations that occur in a divorce, they can create stability by maintaining consistent discipline in both homes, keeping children in the same school, maintaining consistent routines (*e.g.*, bedtimes, meals, weekends, etc.)

In addition, parents can promote sibling relationships as a stabilizing factor. Although sibling relationships have the potential to be problematic, they are often the one constant relationship in a divorce. Siblings travel together between homes and are in a position to support each other through difficult times.

Finally, although difficult, parents can minimize the adjustment associated with a divorce by promoting the child’s relationship with the other parent as well as with extended families on both sides. Encourage the child to spend time with the other parent. Tell the child that you know he or

she wants to spend time with the other parent and that pleases you.

As time passes, children as well as parents are likely to experience the divorce in different ways. This means divorce in different ways. This means that a continuing dialogue about the divorce is important. Continue to respond to questions about different aspects of the divorce and discuss these developments with them as new situations arise (e.g., new partners and other changes).

For younger children, this may mean reading books, drawing, and allowing them to act out their feelings in other creative, age-appropriate ways. For older children, finding quiet time to discuss these situations is essential.

Fortunately, an abundance of divorce-related information is available in bookstores and over the Internet. Parents and others can turn to the American Psychological Information (www.apa.org) for suggestions and strategies. Books such as, *It's not your fault, KoKo Bear*, by Vicky Lansky are designed for parents and children (ages three to five) to read together. Another popular book, *Dinosaurs Divorce: A guide for changing families*, by Laurene Krasney and Marc Brown is designed for parents and young school-aged children.

If self-help measures are not sufficient to guide a family through the difficulties related to the divorce, seek the assistance of an experienced, trained mental-health professional. The family court services division in your area, your attorney, or professional organizations can refer you to a qualified psychologist or licensed social worker or mental-health expert. Before hiring any mental-health professional, ask about his or her qualifications in the field and experience in working with families of divorce.