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# Conflict Between Parents, Part 1: The Effect of Conflict on Children

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When parents separate, they must find ways of answering a lot of difficult questions about how they will care for and manage their children. *Where will the children live? How much time will each parent spend with them? How will decisions about the children be made? Who will pay child support, and how much will be paid?*

Many couples are able to resolve these questions on their own. However, these questions are hard because they're about the thing that is most important to most people – their children – and so the questions often trigger powerful fears and anxieties about the future. *What if he tries to take the children away from me? What if she doesn't pay enough support and I can't make ends meet? What if she changes the children's names? What if his new girlfriend wants to play mommy?* As a result, many other couples can only manage these problems with the help of lawyers and mediators, and sometimes only with help of the court.

There's nothing wrong with needing help. Resolving these issues is *hard*. What I worry about is the conflict the unanswered questions arising from separation can create between parents, and the effect this conflict can have on their children.

Separation is always difficult for children. Although children are generally resilient and will usually get over the turmoil and disruption created when parents move apart, separation still undermines children's sense of stability and

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the security of their relationships. Separation is often the first real crisis they have experienced.

The “normal” negative outcomes for children of their parents’ separation – and by *normal*, I mean outcomes that happen often enough that they’re not unusual – include:

- mental health problems like depression and anxiety;
- emotional problems like sadness and anger;
- problems at school like falling behind or dropping out; and
- social problems like delinquency and falling in with the wrong crowd.

With support, lots of communication, and healthy parent-child relationships, the likelihood that these outcomes will happen can be minimized. Some children even thrive during and after their parents’ separation, and experience benefits like improving ability to talk about their feelings and to be independent, patient and compassionate.

However, the likelihood that one or more of the negative outcomes will occur, and the severity of their impact, increases when children are exposed to conflict between their parents. Almost every kind of parental conflict can have a harmful effect on children, including:

- aggressive behaviour, such as threats, yelling, and violence;
- verbally and emotionally abusive behaviour;
- constantly arguing and blaming each other; and,
- going to court to resolve disagreements.

Things can get even worse for children when conflict like this happens and a parent displays contempt toward the other parent, blames the other parent for every problem or has mental health issues, issues with substance abuse, a weak relationship with the child or an authoritarian approach to disciplining the child. However, conflict also has an effect on parents and the overall quality of the parenting they provide. Fathers sometimes withdraw from their relationship with their children, become less engaged in their day-to-day lives and provide less discipline. Mothers sometimes become less nurturing and display less warmth in their behaviour toward their children. Mothers and fathers often become angry more easily or may discipline their children in less predictable, more coercive ways.

What's really important to know is that the effects of conflict on children are the same whether the parents have separated or not. Parents who stay together "for the sake of the children" aren't doing their kids any favours if they're having a lot of conflict with each other. (Sometimes it *is* best to separate, making sure, of course, that the children are protected as much as possible from the negative effects of separation.) The research shows that the two factors that best predict how children will adjust to their parents' separation are:

- 1) the quality of the child's relationship with each parent; and,
- 2) the nature of the conflict between their parents and how long that conflict lasts.

As mentioned previously however, many parents manage to navigate their separation well and resolve all of these difficult questions about the care of the children in short order. Most of the parents who need help to answer these questions find resolution through negotiation or mediation and get it all wrapped up in anywhere from six to 18 months.

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The real problems tend to come up with parents who have to go to court and have a judge make decisions about parenting for them.

The research on parents who go to court shows that about 5 to 20% are "high conflict," meaning that they profoundly disagree about almost every issue in their case. The claims they raise about the other parent are inflammatory and extreme, as are the orders they're asking the judge to make. As a consequence, they are in court many times before getting to trial, their trials take more time than most, and they are in court many times after trial.

The legal battles of high-conflict parents can take *years* to wrap up. (A federal study of court files in divorce cases found 83,482 files that were more than two years old in the 2014/2015 study year. Of those cases, 29% were two to three years old and a whopping 55% were four years old and older!) You can imagine how difficult such persistent, long-term conflict can be on both the parents and their children.

The point I am trying to make here is about the critical importance of protecting children from conflict between their parents, whether the questions arising from separation are answered relatively quickly or get bogged down in endless litigation. I've written elsewhere about how lawyers should approach conflict when they're in

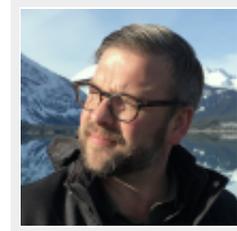
court on behalf of a parent, and Sarah Dargatz has written about appointing lawyers to represent children when the conflict between their parents is out of hand. In the next part of this series, I'll write about some easy steps parents can take to help protect children from conflict.

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