

The Influence of Interparental Conflict on Children

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When parents face conflict with one another, children are affected. This publication outlines child behaviors and their purpose, as children are in the midst of interparental conflict and after the conflict has occurred. This is No. 2 in a series of five NebGuides addressing interparental conflict.

Introduction

The goal of this guide is to help parents recognize how and why their child reacts to interparental conflicts. In the first NebGuide in this series, G2304, *Interparental Conflict*, we discussed different forms of Interparental Conflict (IPC) and how it impacts parents. This guide focuses on the impact of IPC on children.

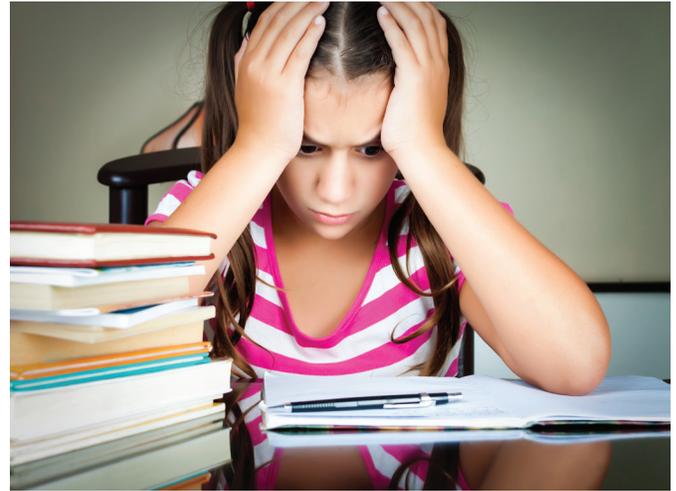
All families have disagreements. When disagreements occur between parents, whether they are in a romantic relationship or co-parenting separately, it is referred to as “interparental conflict,” or IPC.

Conflicts between parents, even when they don't involve the children, can be upsetting for kids. Witnessing or becoming involved in conflicts between parents is associated with poorer mental health, increased stress, behavior problems, and poorer school functioning for both children and adolescents.



Children are highly sensitive and attuned to how their parents get along. Even infants respond to hostility between parents! By age 3, children can pick up on even subtle stress in the co-parenting relationship (e.g., ignoring one another, tension, snide comments). The more frequent and destructive the conflicts between parents are, the more detrimental they can be for children.

The most distressing type of IPC is when parents argue *about* their child, or about things related to the child. This



increases the likelihood that children will blame themselves for problems in their parents' relationship. Examples of common child-related conflict topics include:

- Child misbehavior and discipline
- Schoolwork
 - Who is going to drop off/pick up children
- Rules for child behavior (e.g., curfew, screen time, dating, time spent with friends)
- Children's participation in activities (e.g., sports, lessons)

It can be challenging for parents to avoid disagreements about these complex issues. However, child-related topics, especially if they lead to destructive conflict, are better discussed **without the child present**. When these issues are addressed with kids, it is better for everyone if parents are on the same page.

The Effect of Interparental Conflict (IPC) on Children

Feeling safe is a fundamental human need. Feeling confident and safe in the family is called **emotional security**. Feeling secure sets the stage for better physical and mental health and school adjustment. Emotional security is equally important for both boys and girls. For children, family harmony is extra important.

When a child is deeply worried about his or her safety and the well-being of the family, it is referred to as **emotional insecurity**. Destructive and unresolved conflicts between parents contribute to children's emotional insecurity. Insecurity, in turn, can lead to children's broader difficulties effectively managing their behavior and emotions, maintaining mental health, making friends, and performing well at school.

Children are particularly vulnerable to insecurity because they rely on their parents and other family members for food, shelter, emotional well-being, and any number of other things. When children see their parents fighting, they may feel less sure about whether their parents can provide all of these important things—including love and emotional support. Worse yet, when children witness conflicts between their parents, they often worry that they are to blame—even if the conflicts don't involve them at all. If children blame themselves, they may also worry that their parents will reject or resent them for causing problems in the family.

However, remember that most if not all families have disagreements. Disagreements between parents are not inherently bad for children. IPC contributes to children's emotional insecurity only when disagreements are characterized by the use of **destructive** conflict strategies, such as yelling or insulting one another. Children also vary in whether they view IPC as worrisome.

The Message behind Children's Behavior during Interparental Conflict

How do parents know if their child is being negatively affected by IPC? Simply asking may not work, as many children—especially younger children—have difficulty describing their feelings. Children often aren't aware of why they feel or behave in certain ways. Even older children and adolescents may react with fear and anxiety in response to IPC without really understanding why.

Instead, it may be helpful to pay attention to the child's behavior during and immediately after IPC. Parents (who are usually distracted by the conflict) commonly miss or misinterpret a child's behavior during IPC. Understanding why the child is acting in a certain way may help parents better understand the meaning of destructive conflict for kids.



During Interparental Conflicts

During interparental conflicts, children often behave in ways that are intended to reduce their exposure to IPC. Even for secure children, witnessing parents in conflict is unpleasant. Children commonly exhibit four types of behavior during IPC to help them minimize their exposure.

Disrupt. Some children will try to disrupt parents' conflicts by acting out, misbehaving, interrupting (such as yelling at parents to "stop!") or physically getting in between parents. For some children, it may seem worth the risk of getting in trouble if it means their parents will stop fighting. If parents notice that children act out more when they are fighting, keep in mind that they may be using this strategy to interrupt and distract the parents from IPC.



Camouflage. Other children respond to IPC by getting very quiet, staying still, and making themselves as small and unobtrusive as possible (e.g., curling into a ball, avoiding eye contact). These behaviors help kids to "fly under the radar" and avoid drawing parents' attention or anger to themselves. Precisely because these behaviors are designed to avoid notice, parents involved in IPC commonly miss these subtler signs of child distress.



Mediate. Children also commonly try to intervene in an attempt to mediate conflicts between parents. Children may try to offer solutions or negotiate a compromise. Mediation is an active attempt by the child to resolve conflicts for parents (and thus end their exposure to IPC) when they are worried that their parents can't resolve disagreements on their own.

Escape. What better way to reduce exposure to IPC than to escape it all together? When IPC starts, children may run away, leave the room, hide, or even cover their eyes and ears so they don't have to see or hear the conflict. These behaviors help children avoid being overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of parents fighting.



Parents do NOT need to stop or change these behaviors. They serve an important function in helping children to feel safer when they're distressed by IPC. Children commonly display several of these behaviors at different times. Just because children show some of these behaviors does not mean that they are insecure. Secure children exhibit these behaviors too.

Instead, the key is to recognize these behaviors as responses to witnessing IPC. Be aware and pay attention to the degree of distress the child is indicating. Children who regularly demonstrate these behaviors and/or appear to be highly distressed about IPC may be expressing significant concerns for their safety in the family. We will discuss things that parents can do to help their children feel safe and secure in a later section.



After Interparental Conflicts

A child's behavior after the conflict (i.e., once parents are no longer talking or arguing about the topic) can also tell parents a lot about how IPC is affecting their child.

Seeing parents argue isn't fun. That's why secure children still often respond to IPC in the ways described above. However, emotionally secure children are confident that conflicts, even intense ones, will be resolved in a way that keeps them safe and retains family harmony. Therefore, when conflicts are over, secure children feel better quickly and move on to something else. The ability to return to normal after intense distress (or any emotion) is called **emotional regulation**. Feeling safe allows secure children to regulate their distress once the conflict is over.



For other children, IPC may be so distressing that it takes substantial time and effort to calm back down, even after it is over. Emotional regulation may be more challenging for children who view conflicts between parents as substantial disruptions to family harmony. Remaining on alert can help these children avoid becoming entangled

in the fallout of interparental conflicts. Even when conflicts are truly over, insecure children are on the lookout for anything that might renew the conflict so that they are prepared to avoid it. In this sense, remaining distressed and alert is helpful. Unfortunately, difficulty regulating distress is a main cause of the negative effects of insecurity over the long term.

Signs that a child is having difficulty calming down following IPC can take many forms:

- The most recognizable sign is when children continue to display distress, anxiety, or anger even after the conflict is over.
- Some children try to soothe or care for one or both parents as if they were the adult. These behaviors represent the child's concern and recognition of how upsetting IPC can be for parents. However, despite the display of concern, these children are taking on an adult role in parents' conflicts that they are not emotionally nor developmentally prepared to handle.
- Other children try to lighten parents' mood by behaving overly happy, doing extra chores, or trying to change the subject to something "safer."
- Other children adopt a quieter approach, avoiding parents or remaining withdrawn for long periods after the conflicts are over.

Many children exhibit various combinations of each or all of these behaviors—any of which may indicate continued worries about IPC.

Resources

The Institute for Family Studies

The Institute for Family Studies has an excellent blog in which experts explain, in plain English, current research on family life, marriage, divorce, and parenting. <https://ifstudies.org/blog>.

Parental Conflict

This book provides an accessible look into the current knowledge of why interparental conflict affects kids, how it can impact children differently, even in the same family, and current best strategies for helping kids exposed to IPC. Reynolds, Jenny, et al. *Parental Conflict: Outcomes and Interventions for Children and Families*. Policy Press, 2014. ISBN: 9781447315810.

In the Name of the Child

This book is written by clinical psychologists who work with children and families going through divorce. They do a fantastic job of letting readers inside a child's mind. Johnston, Janet, et al. *In the Name of the Child: A Developmental Approach to Understanding and Helping Children of Conflicted and Violent Divorce*. Springer Publishing Company, 2009. ISBN: 9780826111272

7 Rules to Protect Your Children from Marital Conflict

Athena Staik is a licensed marriage and family therapist. Read her compelling *7 Rules to Protect Your Children from Marital Conflict* in this blogpost: <https://blogs.psychcentral.com/relationships/2014/02/7-rules-to-protect-your-children-from-marital-conflict>

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