



Parental Conflict and Its Effect on Child Growth

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Abstract

This research paper focusses on the effect of parental conflict on children's mental, psychological, social, academic and physical health. The objective of the study is to explore the reasons behind parental conflict and the level of effect it holds on the overall behaviour of the child. The study also shows the role of parents in the overall development of the child and how the self esteem of the child strongly develops from the basic structure of the family. This paper aims to show the importance of a positive interaction between the parent and the child even during inter-parental conflict so as to avoid chronic effects on children that reflects on their personality, professional and marriage life.

Key words: Parental conflict, child behaviour, self-esteem, chronic effects, positive interaction

Introduction

Family is the key agent of socialization. The effect of family relationship on individuals especially on children has become an important topic for study in the recent times. Recent observations show that parental conflict holds a very negative effect on children and the difficulty they face in adapting to their own family systems after they witness conflict between parents. A conflict in a relationship occurs when there is a disagreement or difference in opinion, taste, belief between friends, partners, siblings, etc. When married couple are taken into consideration conflict occurs when they disagree with one another. This kind of disagreement leads to arguments that leads to decreased satisfaction, commitment and makes individuals negative, suspicious and grumpy. Poor communication or miscommunication is also a reason for conflict. This occurs due to interpersonal incompatibilities. This kind of conflict will put the individuals in great mental agony that they will find it difficult to cope up with everyday activities, career and even in their acquaintance with others. The conflict will become all the more serious if the partners in conflict are parents because the conflict between parents has chronic effects on children. Children with parents who have frequent poorly resolved conflicts are at a risk of mental, social and academic problems. The way in which parents handle their everyday conflict has a great impact on how secure the child feels and also in their adjustment emotionally with other relationships.

Reasons for parental conflict

Relationship means two different minded people coming together. Conflicts are bound to happen when two different viewpoints come together where one fails to understand other's feelings and differences. There are a variety of reasons that will lead to misunderstanding or fight between them which is due to poor communication where better communication will effectively help in resolving the conflict. To identify the common hot-button-issues a few married men and women were asked for the reasons they usually have a conflict. Based on their answers a few major reasons are listed below:

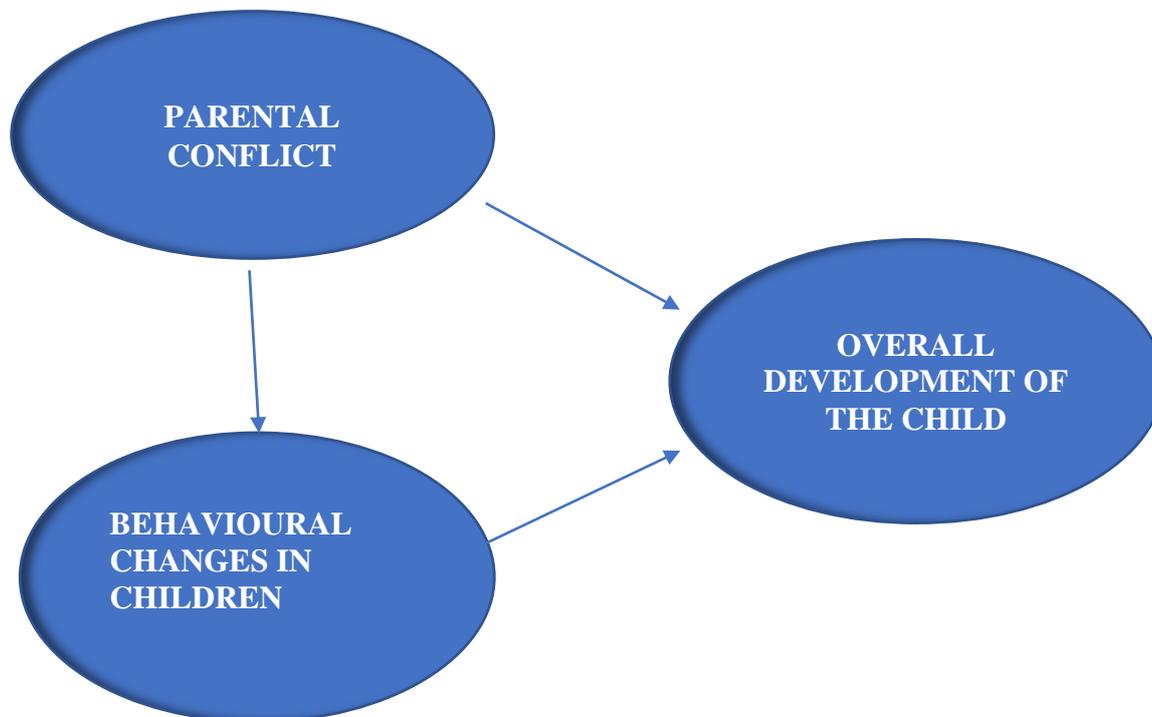
1. Power and control: one of the partners takes complete control and suppress the other. They think the other to be inferior to them in all means.
2. Adultery: one of the partners having extra marital affairs.
3. Dowry: demanding for money, gold or any kind of movable and immovable property from the bride's family even after marriage.

4. Financial difficulties: the family is unable to manage all their chores with their income they get which causes tension in the household.
5. Negative criticism: one of the partners always makes negative comments on the other, there is no appreciation at all where appreciation is a key to good relationship.
6. Insecurity: one of the partners feels insecure because the other is more beautiful or in a better job with a better salary or has a lot of other gender friends.
7. Drug addiction: through ages drug addiction has been one of the major reasons for conflict in a relationship as one of the partners spends a huge amount of their earnings in alcohol.
8. Abuse: abuse in a relationship can be either alcoholic or non-alcoholic. Alcoholic abuses include physical, verbal and sexual abuse by one of the partners due to high consumption of alcohol and non-alcoholic include verbal and physical abuse due to insecurity, suspicion, etc...
9. Extended family: this kind of conflict occurs when the wife is not willing to stay and take care of her in-laws.

Apart from the mentioned poor communication, resentment, personal intimacy, high expectations are all a few other reasons in which conflict occurs in a relationship. Based on the observation conflict leads a relationship into the following: 1) to divorce, 2) stay away from each other without divorce, 3) stay together and argue.

Effect on children

Children are prone to anxiety, depression, discomfort and even struggle in their own relationships on the light of parental conflict. These are all the usual symptoms found in children. Apart from the mentioned there are many other mental and physical illnesses that are suffered by children depending on the severity or aggressiveness of their parental arguments. In extreme cases it can even damage a child’s psyche. Most of the cases it becomes extreme bad for the child as they do not address the problem to anybody and dump it in the fear of being judged and looked at differently by their peer surrounding. This kind of emotional dump will lead them to instability. The child may find it difficult to process all that is going on in his/her mind and not being able to express it to anybody, may choose a wrong path just to escape reality.



The situation can be looked at differently in family with a single child and family with two or more children. In case of two or more children in the family the weight of the conflict automatically falls on the first born. First born are held responsible to take care of their siblings from the position of the parent when the parent tends to shake from their role on the grounds of mental agony due to marital conflict. Emotionally, mentally and academically it will become double the work for first born during their childhood and also includes financial support in their young-adult and youth stages. Though the weight falls on the first child, every child in the family with parental conflict undergoes the same level of mental trauma. In case of single child, the situation becomes even more worse as the child has no blood related soul to share the situation.

Almost 75% of a child’s personality depends upon their parents (web). Children usually look up to their parents for advice, guidance and support and they also unconsciously grab the qualities of their parents

through observation, which is why, when there is a conflict it makes the children uncomfortable. Researchers say that children from 6 months old to about 25 years can be affected and negatively impacted by parental arguments. The child can become more aggressive if it is exposed to more of harsh words and aggressive kind of conflict and as a result it may become more aggressive with power and control towards their partner or any other kind of relationship and they may find that nature to be normal. Conflict between parents due to extra marital affairs can make the child become suspicious about everything and everybody in their own life. This kind of mental trauma will make them completely pessimistic towards life, negative perception about people and will also make them very unstable in their professional and love life. In other cases, the children may also start feeling guilty that they are the reason for the fight if their name is used in-between the fight. Children also lose track in their academics facing problems in learning, struggle to sustain in a job, struggle to make good connection with friends and relatives and try to isolate themselves just to escape the situation which in long term can make them less social. There are few more cases where they are not well monitored and fall prey for alcohol, drugs and struggle not being able to come out of it. In rare cases there are even girls who fall prey to predators in pursuit of attention and happiness, thinking them to be genuine and get deceived. Children will also find it difficult to take sides while parents are in conflict and become frustrated listening to each other's complaints. They will be put in a puzzled position either to believe those accusations or not and this kind of stress will make them go away from the family system. With complete dissatisfaction and lack of hope and trust in parents, they will even try to break the family system and go far away in search of home and peace that their own home failed to provide. Total collapse in an individual will occur due to parental conflict.

Children's response

A few questions were asked to children between the age of 6 to 25 with parents in conflict to see the effect it had on them and the ways in which they tried to escape the situation. Based on their responses the following effects were noted.

1. Stress: the children felt a lot more stressed and anxious all the time which resulted in low academic ranks, low professional performance and had no interest towards anything in their day-to-day life.
2. Detachment: the children felt the compulsion to take sides when their parents fight and as a result they either detached themselves completely from one of the parents and in rare cases where they felt difficult to take sides, they completely detached themselves from the family system. This kind of detachment also affected their identity development because taking one of the parents' side they tried to completely erase all the behaviours that they acquired from the other.
3. Lonely: the children felt lonely all the time even when surrounded by people. They felt difficult to involve in simple conversation with others because their mind was always filled with the conflict that is happening at home and their role in solving it. So, most of the time they isolated themselves from people.
4. Passive: the children did not feel the urge to go and explore their lives and their happiness. They forgot that they are the heroes and heroines of their life and with complete lack of hope just started to accept the things that came their way.
5. Aggressive: most of the children said that they have problems with their friends and their partners. When the reasons were looked at, it was because of their aggressiveness, the tendency of not being sorry for their misbehaviour and trying to control the other which they unconsciously learnt from their parents when they were in conflict.
6. Poor adjustment: the children felt that conflict is the only way to solve a problem and as a result there were no adjustments in any of their relationships.
7. Health: the children also had a lot of health issues starting from sleep issues to heart problems. They had no interest towards food, they struggled to sleep and often felt their heart rate rising. Due to lack of nutrition through food their immune systems were affected and they frequently fell sick. A study shows that when children are exposed to frequent conflicts their adrenal glands produce stress hormones called adrenaline and cortisol which increases their heart rate and Blood Pressure. This kind of stress is called the toxic stress which weakens the child's immune system. They are also prone to hypertension and chronic heart diseases.
8. Psychological: 2-3% of children said that they feel like they are being controlled by some external factors. They felt like someone is following them all through day and night and instructing them in all their actions. They also say that these voices sometimes drag them to the verge of suicidal thoughts.
9. Bad behaviour: this was collectively seen in children going to primary school where they try to misbehave with friends or teachers just to seek the attention of their parents. They also try to scream, break things, hit their friends and even harm themselves and put the blame on others and try to bring

both the parents together to pamper them. They also unknowingly try to cause problems to warm nurtured children because they are not being nurtured in that manner.

Thus, the children feel the urge to find different ways to escape from the mentioned physical and mental effects. The children try to find new bond from outside, they tend to leave home and find a new place away from all these conflicts. In few cases the children get addicted to alcohol and drugs just to numb themselves from the external voices and depression. In extreme cases they also try to kill themselves.

Conclusion

Parents have the complete responsibility in the child's mental wellbeing. Not all relationships are going to be problem free, in such cases parents should know their responsibility and monitor their children and push them in the right path. So, parents can follow the following methods for the welfare of the child who is their sole responsibility. They should try to keep their arguments and discussions private without involving the child and also not anywhere in front of the child or else they should make it a point to tell the child the reason for their conflict and make the child understand that the conflict will be resolved. It is natural tendency of the child to feel guilty that they are the reason for their parents' conflict, so parents should make better communication with the children and make them understand that they are no way responsible for the conflict. They should resolve all their issues politely to make the children understand that arguing and shouting are not the only ways to resolve problems. Parents should try to find a solution rather than pointing mistake on the other that will provide as examples for problem solving techniques in children. In conflicts that lead to separation through divorce or staying away from each other, at least one of the parents should make it a point to explain and make the child understand the situation and guide them morally, mentally and emotionally. Each parent should not blame the other which is the most unacceptable thing to a child. As a child grows equal love and respect towards the mother and the father also develops and suddenly they will feel hard and traumatized when asked to take side. Hence, the father and the mother should talk to the child about the activities that disturb them and not blame the other completely. In case of separation, the child should be left free to choose their caretaker. Even though the marriage relationship is broke, parents can display the ways to show respect and develop good connection with others by their acquaintance with people around them. Apart from the mentioned parents should give extra care to children if they are between 6-18 years of age because that is the age where the overall cognitive development of a child happens. They should not keep the child away from them in hostel or with grandparents with the thought of keeping the child away from their conflict which will cause a lot more mental agony to them. Either they can try making the child involve in extra-curricular activities and try to keep them more physically active which is a scientifically proved method to fight mental trauma and which will also make them stay fit physically. When the conflict is never-ending the parents should try taking counselling as to keep their conflicts at bay and to know the ways to take care of their child's overall development and self-esteem. The child should be made to feel secure and loved and guided by at least one parent so that they do not fall for momentary things that make them escape reality and can positively move in academics, profession and in their peer relationships without anxiety, pessimism and depression.

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