

'Impact of parental conflict on children' transcript

About this transcript

This is a transcript of the 'Impact of parental conflict on children' video which forms part of our advice and guidance for parents and carers resource which can be found at www.annafreud.org/conflict.

The transcript was created on 19th April 2021 and should be accessible to screen-readers. If you have difficulties with this transcript, please contact network@annafreud.org.

Impact of parental conflict on children

Hello, my name is Emma Morris and I'm a member of the Family Ties team. I'm going to be talking here a little bit about the impact of parental conflict on children.

Now what we know from our experience is that of course, most parents and carers they love their children very much and actually the last thing they would want to do is harm their child in any way.

However, and very sadly, it is the case that many children are harmed unintentionally by their parents as a result of being exposed to or involved in parental conflict.

Now, there is significant evidence that indicates that exposure to parental conflict is harmful, that it has a negative impact on wellbeing. For example, there's evidence that indicates increased anxiety and depression amongst children exposed to parental conflict, and increased behavioural difficulties including aggressive and hostile behaviours. Children exposed to parental conflict often have more significant difficulties in their own interpersonal relationships, and they experience anxiety around loyalty conflicts. Which parent do they support when their parents are against each other? And cognitive dissonance - when they have two stories or versions of what's right and what's wrong, both from trusted sources, it's very confusing and anxiety provoking for them to try and make sense of that.

Finally, there is also evidence to support that these children have greater difficulties with adjustment going forwards in life. And there is also evidence that the impact the negative impact of parental conflict on children is something that they carry forwards with them into their future, in that it negatively impacts on their own life chances through into adulthood in areas from education and employment, through to health and mental health and family stability.

Exposure to parental conflict can also lead to a breakdown in a parent-child relationship which can be significantly harmful for a child, and sometimes even quite traumatic. This isn't always as simple as a fact that maybe one parent has done something wrong or one parent has turned the child against the other parent, often it's a result of the child being caught in the middle of the parental conflict. And, as a result of being put in this position, their loyalty bonds and their attachment systems get activated which make it more likely that they put themselves alongside one parent at the expense of their relationship with the other parent, which has really sometimes disastrous long-term negative effects for those children.

So, for some children their relationship with one parent can suffer as a result of being exposed to parental conflict and what can happen if the child is chronically and consistently caught in the middle over time, if they are placed in this position and under this stress for increasing amounts of time and to a high degree, what can happen is that sometimes they can reject the other parent altogether. They can come to demonise or hate the other parent or sometimes even deny their existence. And this can be as well very harmful psychologically for children because obviously children are a product of both their parents and they're aware of that. So, if they hate or detest or despise or kind of wipe out one of their parents, essentially they wipe out everything about themselves that comes from that parent. And you can see that the difficulty that this may pose for children in terms of their own development, their own identity development, because if they hate one of their parents, they hate the part of themselves that comes from that parent. And what we see in extreme cases is children trying to cut away the part of themselves that comes from that parent or numb that part of themselves with drugs or alcohol, for example.

So, despite all this evidence that exposure to parental conflict can be harmful for children, social awareness of the negative impact of parental conflict as an issue is actually very low. Often what we tend to see is that people underestimate the harmful impact that parental conflict can have on children. Sometimes what we hear is parents saying things like, "Well we never argue in front of the children" and that makes us think, well does that mean that your children don't know you're arguing? Or we hear parents say things like "Well we never involve the children in our arguments" and you have to ask, does that mean that the children don't know what the arguments involve?

It can be very painful because no parent likes to think that they're harming their child but here what we ask is that, together with your social support, your social network, you think a little bit more carefully about the extent to which your child or children may be exposed to parental conflict. And exposure to parental conflict goes beyond having arguments explicitly in front of the children or directly trying to recruit the children to your cause. It's much more subtle than that.

And we ask no matter how painful it is that you think together with your social support about how your child may potentially be harmed by exposure to parental conflict and that you work together with your social network, and with the other parent to take responsibility and

to commit yourselves to prevent that harm by protecting the child from exposure to, and involvement with, parental conflict.

Now in this clip I've talked a lot about there's evidence to support this or research to suggest that and it would be absolutely fair if some parents or carers wanted to go away and find out a bit more about that research or substantiate it. I've purposefully not put lots of references throughout this video because it makes it difficult to read and can be quite distracting but if you are interested in finding out more about the research, a good place to start is a review that was funded and commissioned by the Department of Work and Pensions and written by the Early Intervention Foundation and the University of Sussex. It's called [What works to enhance interpersonal relationships and improve outcomes for children](#). The other reference here is a book written by the Family Ties Team at the Anna Freud Centre, that covers some of the ideas that we've been talking about, and it brings together a lot of the individual references and pieces of research that link harm to children and exposure to parental conflict : [High-conflict Parent Post Separation: the Making and Breaking of Family Ties](#).