



The Effects of Parent Conflict on Children

There are several overwhelmingly sound reasons to handle divorce and other difficult family transitions as cooperatively, courteously, and sensibly as possible. But one reason trumps all the others: parent conflict injures children. Often severely.

The greatest irony of the divorce gone mad is that the very people who would run into a burning building to save a child are now engaged in a conflict that is doing more than anything else to tear apart that child's heart and spirit.

My experience with families in the hurt, anger, fear, and confusion of divorce tells me that for a child nothing compares to the destructive power of parents' conflict and resentments. If you are in such a conflict, your child is frightened, embarrassed, deeply worried, and full of self-blame.

Protecting a hurt child today is entirely up to you. And we have no doubt that in you lives a hero who wants to rise to that challenge. In all your hurt and confusion, you can remember that it's your goodwill and courtesy that can save the day—and that child.

On the following pages you'll find comments from just a few of the many researchers and counselors who stress one essential truth: parent conflict is the most dangerous thing in the life of a child whose family has come apart.

Just in case there was ever any doubt.

*Charlie Asher
June 2005*

1. Edward Teyber, *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992.

“Children are more likely to develop personality and behavioral problems in unhappy, unloving families in which the parents fight continually than in any other kind of family situation.” 19

“Without question, the single biggest problem for children of divorce is being exposed to continuing parental conflict.” 79

“Parents must realize how much children suffer when they are embroiled in parental battles and take steps to manage their anger responsibly, shield children from parental conflicts, and work cooperatively in [each] child’s best interest.” 80

“Parental cooperation, or at least the absence of overt conflict, is essential for children’s secure adjustment.” 81

“Children believe they are responsible for all of the major occurrences in their lives—including parental fighting.” 82

“If both parents join the parental battle, children lose emotional access to both of them. There is no safe shelter from the storm. But if one parent can exercise restraint and not retaliate destructively, children lose psychological access to the other parent but still have emotional contact with the restrained parent.” 83

2. Robert E. Emery, *Renegotiating Family Relationships: Divorce, Child Custody, and Mediation*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1994.

“Some children do side with one parent or the other following a separation or divorce. In other families, loyalties are so deeply divided that different children end up allying with a different parent. However, from the children’s perspective, the biggest problem often is not choosing the right side but having to choose at all.

“This is especially true in acrimonious divorces. . . . Empirical evidence consistently points to parental conflict as the factor that most consistently predicts maladjustment among children whose parents have separated or divorced (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Emery, 1982, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Clinical experience and recent research (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991) indicate that a particular problem is when children feel caught in the middle of a custody dispute. Most children do not want to be forced to take sides with one parent against the other, and as fervently as they may wish for a reconciliation, children’s foremost desire often is for their parents to stop all of their fighting.”

“In fact, a considerable body of research points to parental conflict as one of the most consistent predictors of postdivorce adjustment problems among children (Emery, 1982, 1988; see also Chapter 9).” 32

“Conflict between parents is a consistent predictor of increased psychological difficulties among children from divorced—and married—families. Numerous experimental and field studies point to the detrimental role of parental conflict, particularly conflict that is extended, open, angry, unresolved, and involves the child (Cummings, 1987; Emery, 1982, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990).

“The stress caused by exposure to anger is perhaps the most notable consequence of parental conflict on children. Children as young as 18 months old become emotionally upset when they witness angry exchanges between adults, and by the age of 5 or 6, children’s distress is evident in their attempts to intervene in the conflict (Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981, 1984). 205

“Parental conflict throughout the divorce transition is a consistent predictor of maladjustment among children” 217

3. M. Gary Newman, *Helping Your Kids Cope with Divorce the Sandcastles Way*. New York: Random House, 1998

“[I]t’s clear that children of all ages regard fighting between parents as their number-one divorce-related problem.” 197

“Parental conflict not only sends kids messages about love, marriage, and relationships, it speaks volumes to them about who they are. To a child’s ears, any comment about his parent—positive or negative—is a judgment of him. Any critical barb about your ex goes right to your child’s heart.” 202

4. Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *What About the Kids?* New York: Hyperion, 2003.

“High conflict between parents not only causes children immense suffering, it causes serious problems in their development. They soon have the sense that they cannot trust any adults.” 204

“Perhaps the most serious effect of parents’ quarreling over children is that the kids learn that feelings are too painful; they teach themselves not to feel pleasure or pain. In the battle between you, they learn to be polished diplomats. They’ll tell each of you what you want most to hear—not because they’re liars but because they want desperately to soothe each of you, to calm you down, to reduce their fears that you’ll become enraged. They’re afraid of your anger, they pity you, and they want you to feel better.” 204

“Studies show that a child who is ordered into going back and forth between two homes occupied by intensely angry adults feels safe nowhere.” 206

“Children caught in the flames of a high-conflict divorce have been referred to as ‘children of Armageddon’—victims of the final war on earth. They are true casualties. Parents trapped in mutual anger often become heedless of anything else.” 213-214

5. Elizabeth S. Thayer and Jeffrey Zimmerman, *The Co-Parenting Survival Guide: Letting Go of Conflict after a Difficult Divorce*. Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2001.

“It may be hard to remember this, but children’s needs intensify during a divorce. They feel the stress and they experience the conflict. Their lives are turned upside down. They didn’t ask for the divorce, but they’re subjected to seeing the two people they love most engaged in a bloodless but at times bitter and devastating battle.” 2

“The conflict between parents accentuates the [child’s] anxiety about abandonment.” 34

“Children of divorce are always coping with the loss of their parents’ marriage.” 153

6. Janet R. Johnston and Vivienne Roseby, *In the Name of the Child: A Developmental Approach to Understanding and Helping Children of Conflicted and Violent Divorce*. New York: The Free Press, 1997.

“[A] protective nurturing environment for the child in the fractured family can be cultivated only when the child can be seen and understood as an individual separate from the parental conflict, and when the parents can be helped to reframe their agendas in terms of the child’s developmental concerns and preoccupations.” ix

“[D]ivorce disputes can quickly spread and encompass the social networks of the couple, resulting in a modern form of ‘tribal warfare’ where significant others, including extended kin, new partners, mental health professionals, attorneys, and even judges, become a part of the tangle of disputing relations and serve to entrench the fight.” 6

“[These children] are likely to be hypervigilant and distrusting of others, and they do not expect the world to be a cooperative or protective place. . . . [T]hese children turn inward, unto themselves, to figure out how to solve problems and interpret social reality. . . . The bind is that, as children turn inward, they must rely on an increasingly impoverished and distorted understanding of the nature of reality.” 55

7. **Janet R. Johnston, Karen Breunig, Carla Garrity, Mitchell Baris, *Through the Eyes of Children: Healing Stories for Children of Divorce.* New York: The Free Press, 1997.**

“Children typically suffer pain, confusion, and insecurity when their parents separate. They are especially hurt by the outbursts of anger, bitterness, lack of respect, inability to communicate, and overt hostility that can repeatedly flare up between battling parents.” xiii

8. **Karen Fagerstrom, et al., *Divorce: A Problem to Be Solved, Not a Battle to Be Fought.* Orinda, California: Brookwood Publishing, 1997.**

“The law concerns people’s rights. However, in the words of Justice Potter Stewart, ‘There is a difference between what you have a right to do and what is right to do.’ When divorcing individuals become focused on their rights at the expenses of what’s right for the family, they run the risk of losing sight of the big picture for their children and for the future.” 33

9. **Carla B. Garrity and Mitchell A. Baris, *Caught in the Middle: Protecting the Children of High-Conflict Divorce.* New York: Lexington Books, 1994.**

“For children, divorce is not a one-time event but a continuous process. Over time, it shapes and reshapes their lives and perceptions of the world.” 12

“The level and intensity of parental conflict is the most potent factor in children’s postdivorce adjustment.” 19

“The ongoing conflict between their parents is a constant reminder to the children that their right to be loved and cared for by both parents has been irretrievably compromised.” 20

“The most important reason for working out a contentious relationship is that high conflict has far-reaching negative effects on children. Those who witness intense bitterness between their parents and are caught repeatedly in loyalty binds are at high risk for later emotional disturbance. Parental conflict interrupts many of the critical tasks of psychological development. It changes the nature of the parent-child relationship, creates anxiety and distress, overstimulates and frightens children, weakens parents’ protective capacity, and compromises identity formation. Most of all, it leaves children powerless to do anything about it.” 26

“As adults, these children typically experience problems with intimate relationships, conflict resolution, and self-identity. Growing up without a model for loving relationships between men and women, children of high-conflict divorce are frequently unable to maintain their own marriages successfully. Not having learned the skills of communicating, cooperating, and resolving disputes, they lack problem-solving strategies and tools for handling conflict in an intimate relationship. . . . These children often face hard struggles in defining their own identity. As they struggle over time to fit into the two polarities represented by their feuding parents, the result is often one of confusion. These children experience a great deal of identity diffusion, liking and accepting some parts of themselves and devaluing other parts.” 27

“Children’s psychological adjustment is very directly affected by the amount and intensity of adult anger they experience. The more severe the conflict, the greater the effect.” 41

10. Neil Kalter, *Growing Up with Divorce: Helping Your Child Avoid Immediate and Later Emotional Problems*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1990.

“Conflict between parents is one of the most serious stressors a child encounters during the immediate crisis of parental divorce.” 12

“A major stressor for children in the long-range phase of the divorce process is continued interparental hostility.” 17

“Parental warfare is perhaps the most damaging environmental source of stress that can undermine their successful adaptation to divorce. . . . However, it is not only sadness and anger that can burden early elementary school children whose parents are embroiled in an anger-filled, bitter divorce. . . . [T]hese children are also prone to developing depressive reactions. . . .” 225

“[A]t times parental warfare becomes so chronic and lasts for so long that what began as a child’s reactions to this external source of stress and the internal stresses it stimulates becomes incorporated into the youngster’s personality development.” 232

“Parental warfare is a source of potent psychological stress for adolescents. Teenagers must normally come to terms with and manage their own anger and the impulse to act on it. Open hostilities between parents can fuel a youngster’s anger to the point that she feels flooded by rage, which then becomes too powerful to keep under control. She is compelled to seek special outlets for this excess fury. . . . The most effective way to help teenagers who are being overwhelmed by their own anger is to remove the stresses giving rise to their fury. Intense conflict between parents is among the most common sources of stress that results in the adolescent feeling enraged. . . . Reducing parental warfare alleviates a major cause of a youngster becoming flooded with angry feelings.” 363-364

11. Philip M. Stahl, *Parenting After Divorce: A Guide to Resolving Conflicts and Meeting Your Children’s Needs*. Atascadero, California: Impact Publishers, Inc., 2000.

“Statistics suggest that about twenty percent of the parents who separate and divorce will have very high conflict for many years after the divorce. The courts can’t help these folks, but a commitment to their children can.” 3

“When fighting continues after the divorce, children become disillusioned and disgusted. When parents divorce, children hope the fighting will go away so that they can have some peace in their lives. Many times I have heard children say that they wouldn’t mind the divorce so much if their parents would finally learn to get along better. After the divorce, all children really want is for their parents to act grown up, leave them in peace, and let them love the other parent. Instead, when conflicts worsen, children are left with many wounds.” 19-20

“Conflicts between parents are likely to cause [in children]:

- Tension, anxiety, and regression
- Feelings of confusion and embarrassment
- Feelings of responsibility and self-blame
- Withdrawal or clinging behavior at transitions
- Long-term emotional and behavioral wounds
- Feelings of disillusionment, fear, insecurity, or vulnerability
- Temper tantrums, school problems, or self-destructive behaviors.” 25

12. Debbie Barr, *Children of Divorce: Helping Kids When Their Parents Are Apart*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.

“Divorce presents many children with an unprecedented problem. . . . Not only are the children facing the greatest crisis of their young lives, but they are doing so without the emotional support of their parents.” 21

“Children especially need acceptance, love, and encouragement when divorce divides their homes. They are virtually always innocent bystanders, not willing participants, when their parents divorce. Even if they strongly oppose divorce, they are powerless to stop it.” 22

13. Mary Ellen Hannibal, *Good Parenting Through Your Divorce*. New York: Marlow and Company, 2002.

“Children inevitably suffer the most in a divorce. I know, because as the divorce court judge for many years in San Francisco, California, I often witnessed the pain and heartache firsthand.” Parents have many people to talk with. “But I often wondered, what about the children? Where do they go? To whom do they talk?” Comments of Judge Ina Gyemant vii

“When kids’ feelings are not acknowledged, or parental feelings are projected onto the children, children are in danger of disconnecting from their own true impulses and needs. The depression, anxiety, and acting out that are all associated with kids from divorced families begin right here. . . .” 24

“Kids fear parental anger focused on the other parent. . . . When parents fight, it makes kids wonder and worry. They wonder what’s going to happen next. They worry about one or both of you being hurt, or that in the midst of the rage they are witnessing, they will be hurt. Remember, children’s boundaries of self include parent figures, so they interject themselves into the midst of the fighting.” 36

“Divorce causes tremendous loyalty issues in kids; they feel very uncomfortable about acting as a go-between. When you fight you put your child in an impossible position. . . . To put it simply, you and your co-parent may hurl pain at each other but the person you are hitting most squarely is your child.” 37-38

“Even very young children . . . feel shame or a sense of not belonging among peers from intact families. . . . When parents divorce, it’s often like kids don’t belong in their own home anymore. . . . Kids feel dropped out of the social fabric. Different than other kids. They can feel shame, embarrassment, jealousy of intact families.” 41

“Conflict essentially stops kids in their tracks—they are less free to go about the business of being a kid, meeting the developmental tasks that are essential to forming a healthy self.” 58

- 14. Stanton E. Samenow, *In the Best Interest of the Child: How to Protect Your Child from the Pain of Your Divorce*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2002.**

“I have yet to encounter a case of divorce in which the offspring do not experience intense sadness, considerable anxiety, and confusion.” 2

“Having lost the family as a unit, children are apprehensive about the future. . . . [S]ome youngsters feel they have lost any semblance of control over their lives. . . . A school counselor described a youngster in her divorce group as ‘feeling like a human guinea pig.’ . . . Their fear and sense of powerlessness are heightened when children witness scenes in which their parents are at each other’s throats.” 19-21

- 15. Susan Blyth Boyan and Ann Marie Termini, *Cooperative Parenting and Divorce: Shielding Your Child from Conflict: A Parent Guide to Effective Co-Parenting*. Atlanta: Active Parenting Publishers, 1999.**

“Other than birth itself, divorce may be the most significant event in the life of a child who experiences it. It’s the knife that slashes not only his family but his world into pieces.” 2

“Conflict between parents
Diminishes the parents’ role as protector
Complicates the child’s role identity
Fails to teach effective conflict-resolution skills,
Promotes poor conflict resolution
Puts the child in a loyalty bind.” 7-9

- 16. Andrew I. Schepard, *Children, Courts, and Custody: Interdisciplinary Models for Divorcing Families*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004**

“Children who are exposed to more intense conflict between parents are more likely to suffer harm resulting from their parents’ divorce. The lower the level of conflict between parents, the more likely those children will emerge emotionally whole.” 31

17. **Constance Ahrons, *We're Still Family: What Grown Children Have to Say about Their Parents' Divorce*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004**

“The thing that stresses children most, sometimes for many years, is lingering conflict between their parents.” 80

18. **Shirley Thomas, *Parents Are Forever: A Step-by-Step Guide to Becoming Successful Coparents after Divorce*. Longmont, Colorado: Springboard Publications, 2004.**

“Nothing is more important for parents than learning to manage their negative feelings so they do not destroy all the positive efforts they make on behalf of their children.” 24

19. **Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing up in an era of family upheaval*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997.**

“Our data show that the long-term consequences of interparental discord for children are pervasive and consistently detrimental . . . [and] have a broad negative impact on virtually every dimension of offspring well-being. . . . [L]ow parental marital quality lowers offspring well-being, and parental divorce lowers it even further.” 219

20. **Elizabeth M. Ellis, *Divorce Wars: Interventions with Families in Conflict*. Baltimore: Port City Press, 2000.**

“Divorce has negative effects on children primarily through exposing them to conflict before, during, and after the divorce.” 41

“Although active quarrelling predicted poor outcomes in children, active fighting between parents combined with a lack of warmth toward each other and a lack of concern for family members tripled the rate of juvenile delinquency in these children.” 42

“Chronic conflict . . . causes chronic distress and agitation in children as well as a loss of emotional control. . . . In a home marked by conflict and unpredictability, children form insecure attachments to their parents. They do not have a deep and abiding trust in their caretakers.” 49

“Ongoing postdivorce conflict reinforces the child’s belief that bad things will continue to happen to him or her in the future and that he or she is helpless to do anything about it.” 197

21. E. Mark Cummings and Patrick Davies, *Children and Marital Conflict: The Impact of Family Dispute and Resolution*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1994.

“Exposure to interadult discord has significant impact on children’s emotional, behavioral, interpersonal, and even physiological functioning. . . . [H]ow the parents fight and whether they are able to resolve their differences probably holds the key to understanding the impact of marital discord on children.” xii

“Of all the problems associated with discordant marriages, marital conflict is emerging as a primary predictor of maladjustment in children.” 2

“[C]hildren in high-conflict homes are more likely to view themselves and their social worlds in overly negative and hostile ways.” 5

“One of the most important aspects of the family environment for children whose parents are divorcing is the level of parental fighting. In fact, parental fighting is actually a better forecaster of children’s function after the divorce than the changes in the parents’ marital status . . . and the children’s subsequent separation from a parent.” 9

“Children are affected by mere exposure to marital discord. Anger between adults . . . is stressful and emotionally arousing for children of all ages, and it also increases their aggressiveness. Repeated exposure sensitizes children, increasing their arousal and aggression when exposed to anger and also their tendency to intervene in parents’ fights.” 61

“[Because] conflict creates distress for children and is linked with the development of mental health problems in children, family conflict is of societal concern and constitutes a significant social problem.” 131

“Both the specific characteristics of an angry environment in the home and the children’s own vulnerabilities to parental anger as a stressor contribute to children’s relative risk for the development of mental health problems.” 138

22. Archibald D. Hart, *Children and Divorce: What to Expect—How to Help*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982, 1989.

“The anger and resentment between the parents, which is so prevalent in most divorces, creates intense fear in the child.” 28

“Divorce is a threat to the child’s very existence as he or she knows it, a shaking of everything stable and sure. It is an emotional earthquake of the highest magnitude.” 57

“The damage to a child’s self-esteem during a divorce usually comes not so much from the loss of united parents and a single home as from the indignities caused by other people’s reactions, the legal process, and the way the child is battered emotionally. When children are treated like pieces of property to be bartered, when their feelings and wishes are ignored, when they are used as hostages in a parent’s effort to gain material advantages in a settlement, or when they are used as weapons to satisfy an urge for revenge against the other spouse, you have a situation that has the potential to do a great deal of harm to the way a child values himself or herself.” 108

“Every unhappy marriage, not just those heading for divorce, places an emotional strain on children. The greater the conflict, the greater the emotional strain.” 121

“Some parents desperately hold onto the belief that children are not affected by the parents’ conflicts. Sadly, this just isn’t true. Unhappy homes make unhappy children, and every divorce will take its toll unless some corrective steps are taken.” 121

23. Andrew I. Schepard, *Children, Courts, and Custody: Interdisciplinary Models for Divorcing Families*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

“Children who are exposed to more intense conflict between parents are more likely to suffer harm resulting from their parents’ divorce. The lower the level of conflict between parents, the more likely those children will emerge emotionally whole.” 31

24. Richard A. Warshak, *Divorce Poison*. New York: Regan Books, 2001.

“We can understand and empathize with the spouse who feels wronged and wants revenge, or the spouse who is overwhelmed with anxiety at the thought of losing the children, or the spouse who prefers to forget that the marriage ever was. But using the children to get revenge, to cope with anxiety, to erase the past, is unacceptable. Parents must hold themselves to a higher standard. They must have the courage to face what they are doing to their children. They must honor their mission to safeguard their children’s welfare, even when the darkest feelings beckon them to dim their awareness of their betrayal of their children. Divorce poison must be left in the bottle. Children deserve no less.” 22-23

