

The Effect of Parental Relationship on Children Psychological Growth

Haochen Zhao

*Marshall College, University of California, San Diego, San Diego, California 92093, United States of America,
 haaz031@ucsd.edu*

ABSTRACT

The research was conducted in the form of a literature review to examining the effect of the parental relationship on children's psychological growth. The result shows that parental relationships can impact children's general development. The effects of parental conflict on children's development are both short-term and long-term. Parental conflict affects children in a way that children can suffer from low self-esteem, the hardship of constructing relationships with others, mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and other traumatic symptoms. Children who experience severe parental conflict such as domestic abuse can also suffer from abuse of drug and alcohol, and they are more likely to be pro-violence, have higher tolerance of violent behavior in their adult relationship, develop anti-social behavior, and have gender stereotypes. Interparental hostility and conflicts are one of the factors for children to be emotionally insecure for both the short and longer term, which leads to decreases in friendship affiliation and self-devaluation.

Keywords: *Parental conflict, Domestic abuse, Children's psychological growth, Effects of parental relationship.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The atmosphere of the family plays an important role in the growth of children. Parents who form and maintain the structure of the family affect their children's point of view towards the family formation and their personal growth. According to scientific research in several fields of psychology, such as developmental psychology, abnormal psychology, clinical psychology, and etc., the relationship between parents has significant effects on many perspectives of children's development, for instance, behavioral, psychology, cognitive, and interpersonal relationship development. Children who grow up with negative parental relationships can suffer from long-term mental illness, even when they become adults. A negative parental relationship includes many aspects. Parental conflict, separation, divorce, and remarriage, domestic abuse can all put into account. The first hypothesis of this literature review study is that a negative parental relationship increases the possibility of children's mental illness. The second hypothesis of the study is that toxic actions, in specific, domestic abuse, negatively affect children's psychological growth.

In the book *How Couple relationships Share Our World*, the authors suggest that a well-formed and

healthy parental relationship can be more helpful than the state of marriage for children's psychological development. A positive parental relationship encourages children to decrease adult mental health and problems of parenting. Parental relationship links to children's emotional security[1]. The authors suggest that:

“Securely attached children tend to have higher social competence, ego-resilience, responsiveness, problem-solving skills, and peer engagement. By contrast, insecurely attached children tend to be more aggressive, more often rejected, less competent, and less prosocial; they also tend to elicit fewer positive and more antagonistic responses from others and have more externalizing problems.” (p. 33)

This stresses the importance that interparental relationship affects children's psychological growth and how they interact with others when they become adults. Moreover, an unhealthy parental relationship suggests harsh discipline of children. Studies suggest that children who grew up with harsh discipline are more likely to develop internalizing and externalizing problems through their early childhood to later adult lives. Children with harsh discipline can have an aggressive and impulsive temperament which possibly leads to anti-social behaviors. Children can be sensitive to the tension

between parents. Studies in the book show that as young as six months, infants who undergo distress between parents perform worse physiologically than those who are not. This illustrates that how powerful parental relationships can be to the growth of children.

Many researchers proposed different conceptual models of the relationship to study the toxic effects of parental conflicts on children's psychological[2]. The Cognitive Behavioral Model suggested that when the parental conflict is intense, children tend to get themselves involved in the conflict[3]. They try to figure out the cause of the conflict and the proper reaction to such conflict. The researchers suggested children's behavior affects their development generally. Social Security Model suggested that parental conflict can be one of the reasons to harm children's emotional security[4]. When conflicts occur and interparental relationships are intense, children have a hard time reforming their emotional security and negatively affecting their physiological performance. Further research suggested that children cannot be used to parental conflicts that are high levels of frequency and intensity. Social Learning Model suggested that interparental relationships affect how children build a proper relationship with others[5]. If children live in an environment filled with parental conflict, they tend to adapt to similar conflicts when interacting with others. Identification Model suggested that parental conflicts can be used to predict children's future psychopathologies, which depend on the sex of children and the dominance in parental conflict[6]. When children identify themselves with the dominant same-sex parents, it creates potential sexual conflicts for the children. When children identify themselves with non-dominance same-sex parents, their self-esteem can be heavily impacted since they might feel powerless regarding their sexes. Both types of identification can lead to behavior conflicts, anxiety, and other mental illness. The four conceptual models above suggest that parental conflict can be harmful to children's psychological growth.

A study shows that parental conflicts can be mediating variable for the effect of divorce and children's mental stage. The parental conflict contains six dimensions "frequency, content, level of implication of the child, intensity, parents' behavior, and the presence or the absence of resolution," as the authors analyze. For children who live in families that have a high frequency of conflict, the separation of parents or divorce has positive effects on their well-being. For those who live in families with a low frequency of parental conflict, parental separation, and divorce impact children negatively in the long term[2]. This demonstrates that both conflicts and divorces can be toxic to children's well-being.

Furthermore, the authors claim that the exposure of parental conflicts can affect children physiologically,

such as "increased cardiac rhythm, higher blood pressure, lower body temperature as well as frightened and anxious facial expressions", which can lead to further psychological impacts. As a matter of fact, children witness parental conflict and can be a part of the conflict through their parents' demands of allegiance. Children are often asked to choose which of the parents they agree with, or support and this kind of decision increase their mental stress upon the tense within the family as the authors say that "it causes children to feel bewilderment, anxiety, and guilt".

Davies et al. conducted two longitudinal studies to examine the effects of interparental conflict, children's emotional insecurity, and externalizing problems. Study 1 included 243 participants who were in preschool, while Study 2 consisted of 263 adolescents as participants. In Study 1, three forms of tasks were used as a representation of interparental conflict. The first task was the interparental conflict task which parents discussed pre-selected problematic disagreements in the relationship while the child played with toys in the same room. The second task was an interparental disagreement interview in which mothers attended a narrative interview to discuss their previous conflict. Then, children's disruptive behaviors were reported after witnessing the conflict. The third task was the family interaction task which both parents and the child were asked to build a model house designed for the requirement of help from parents. Study 2 used similar methods to further test interparental hostility, interparental disengagement, children's insecurity, and other externalizing problems. The results from both studies showed that interparental hostility correlated with children's insecurity. In addition, interparental disengagement can also lead to children's externalizing problems[6].

Davies et al. further prove interparental conflict is a factor of children's social problems from the specific perspective of insecurity and friendship affiliation. They conducted a series of longitudinal research that included 235 participants in total who are parents and children with the average age of 6 from local schools and communities. The research asked participants to attend six waves in total for data collecting across nine years. During Wave 1 and Wave 2, participants were asked to complete the scales for assessing the interparental conflicts independently. During Wave 2 and Wave 3, child participants were asked to complete Reactivity, Involvement, and Avoidance Scales for data collection of childhood insecurity in the interparental relationship. During Wave 3 and Wave 4, child participants became adolescents. They were asked to participate in a narrative interview. They first needed to provide the name of their best friend, who cannot be blood-related or living in the same house with them. Then, the researchers asked the participants to describe their friendship using The Three-Words Coding System. Participants also need to provide

a description of why each word was chosen. This step of data collection reflects adolescent friendship affiliation. During Wave 4 and Wave 5, child participants were asked to complete three assessments which are the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, the Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale, and the Emotional Symptoms scale. The purpose of this step of data collection was to test adolescent internalizing symptoms. After the data analysis, the researchers conclude that "the mediational role of children's insecurity in associations between interparental conflict and their social problems was further mediated by the devaluation of affiliation in best friendships". In other words, children who experience parental conflict in their early childhood are more likely to suffer from emotional insecurity in their early adolescence. Furthermore, children who are emotionally insecure are negatively impacted in the perspective of friendship affiliation[7].

2. METHOD

Since it is impossible to determine whether it is a casual relationship or correlational relationship between parental relationship and children's psychological growth within the limited research time, the research was conducted using the form of literature review. Databases like PsychINFO, American Psychology Association, JSTOR, and UCSD Library Database were used to search for relevant scholarly articles and conceptual information. The key terms for searching were a parental relationship, children psychological development, the general development of children, parental conflict, interparental relationship, the effects of domestic abuse on children, children social development. The scholarly articles and books of scientific research were gathered and selected to identify the types of children's mental health issues that correlated with parental relationships and conflict within the family.

3. RESULTS

The literature review shows that children's psychological growth correlates with the parental relationship. The negative parental relationship can be harmful to children's general development. Children can be impacted from perspectives of physiology, cognition, behavior, and psychology. Domestic abuse can negatively affect children's psychological growth as well.

4. CONCLUSION

The research results show that children are vulnerable to negative parental relationships, parental conflicts, and domestic abuse. Negative parental relationships, such as separation, divorce, and remarriage, affect children to construct emotional security, which further affects them to interact with others, build friendships and intimate relationships. In most cases, for children who grow up in

families with a high level of frequency intensity conflicts, the family breakdown has a positive effect on their mental growth. Children cannot be used to the conflicts within the family and between parents. The separation of parents helps them release the stress and tension from the family since the positive interparental relationship has more positive effects on children than parents' toxic marriage. For children whose families do not have intense parental conflicts, such family breakdown can negatively affect them. They are more likely to develop trust issues, form an intimate relationship with others, and lack self-esteem.

Parental conflicts are not only affecting children's self-esteem and their relationships with others, but they also can lead to children's development of anti-social behavior. When fathers are the dominant figure in parental conflicts, boys tend to be less likely to rebel against their fathers. When mothers are the dominant figure in conflicts, girls run into less trouble with their mothers. This demonstrates that when the dominant figure shares the same sex with the children, children tend to build an alliance with the parent, and they feel more powerful in the family and for themselves. Moreover, the possibility of sexual problems and sexual roles increases for the children, which can further lead to sexism and anti-social behaviorism. When children do not share the same sex with the dominant parent in parental conflict, children will have lower self-esteem and a higher possibility of suffering from mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, etc. Parental conflicts may also affect children to be emotionally insecure and further affect children to suffer from forming friendship affiliation. Emotional insecurity increases the possibility of social problems in children. They lack social competence due to the lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, which are all associated with the reason that they are emotionally insecure. Thus, parental conflict impacts children's emotional security and affects children to construct an interpersonal relationship.

Studies show that "domestic violence can have a severe impact on a child's health and psychological well-being and on a child's behavioral, social, emotional and cognitive development both in the short and longer-term"[8]. Children who experience domestic abuse can develop a higher level of aggression, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anti-social behavior. They also have a harder time forming social relationships. Disorders related to eating and sleeping commonly find in children who suffer from domestic violence. These victimized children are also suffering from poor school performance due to traumatic stress, and they often develop the pro-violence attitude and gender stereotypes. When they become adults later in their lives, they have a higher chance of being impacted by depression and traumatic symptoms. They have low self-esteem, higher tolerance of violence in their interpersonal relationship, and abuse of drug and alcohol usage. Domestic abuse is

one of the extreme cases of parental conflict. The results from research illustrate that children are negatively impacted by domestic abuse for both the short term and long term in their lives. Their psychological developments are severely impacted, which causes the children to be more sensitive and vulnerable.

For the future direction of the relevant research, research can be conducted if the impact of parental conflict on children's psychological development can be decreased when children can have an alliance in the family. In specific, if the number of a sibling in the family can affect how impactful interparental conflict can be for children or not. Researchers can also examine how useful having pets at home to help children to deal with stress and other mental health problems from parental conflict. In some cases, parental conflicts are caused by the disagreement of educating the children. Research can be conducted to examine if different causes of parental conflicts can affect children's reactions to conflict differently, for example, when the conflict is about children themselves comparing with when the conflict is not.

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