

Do Children's Behavior Problems Cause Marital Conflict or Vice Versa?

Marital conflict has been found to be linked with more behavioral problems in children. From this we have concluded that poor marriages affect children's behavior. This conclusion may be only part of the story, however, because of the way that studies have been done.

In the present study, by studying children's behavior and marital conflict over time and by looking at influences on both, we were able to disentangle the influences that parents have on children and those that children have on parents. Do difficult children increase marital conflict? Does marital conflict contribute to a worsening of children's behavioral problems?

A second set of questions addressed within family differences in children's experiences of marital conflict. Siblings have been found to develop very differently from one another. We wondered whether some of these differences between siblings can be explained by siblings having very different experiences within the family. Thus we looked at the similarity in experience that siblings have of being argued about by their parents and of being in the room when their parents argue.

Two hundred and ninety-six children residing in 127 families living in England were interviewed at Time 1 and 2 years later. The sample included both intact and stepfamilies. When parents argued more about children, children showed an increase over time in behavioral problems at school. This was particularly the case in families with stepchildren. Children's behavioral problems also led to increased marital conflict over time. Siblings were found to have very different experiences of marital conflict from one another. For instance parents were found to argue a lot more about one sibling than another and certain siblings were found to be present in the room more than other siblings when parents argued. These differences in experiences of marital conflict were greater in stepfamilies than intact families.

The results of this study show us that directions of influence in relationships go from children to parents and parents to children. Siblings do have very different experiences of their parents' marital conflict, in part because different children evoke different experiences. Such differences in their experiences of marital conflict may contribute to some of the differences that we see between siblings. When therapists work with troubled families it is important to consider the ways in which child behavior evokes responses from parents and parental behavior evokes responses from children.

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