



Society for Research in Child Development

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PRESS RELEASE

Child Development (January/February 2006 issue)

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE ON FEBRUARY 9, 2006 (12:01 AM)

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Parents Who Fight May Harm Children's Future Emotional Development

How parents handle everyday marital conflicts has a significant effect on how secure their children feel, which, in turn, significantly affects their future emotional adjustment. This finding, from researchers at the universities of Notre Dame, Rochester (NY) and Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., was published in the January/February 2006 issue of the journal *Child Development*. It provides powerful new evidence regarding the impact of parental behavior on children's future behavior.

"A useful analogy is to think about emotional security as a bridge between the child and the world," explained lead researcher Mark Cummings, Ph.D., professor and Notre Dame Chair in Psychology of the Psychology Department of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. "When the marital relationship is functioning well, it serves as a secure base, a structurally sound bridge to support the child's exploration and relationships with others."

"When destructive marital conflict erodes the bridge, children may lack confidence and become hesitant to move forward, or may move forward in a dysregulated way, unable to find appropriate footing within themselves or in interaction with others."

The researchers based their report on two separate long-term studies of marital conflict and children.

The first study involved 226 parents and their 9- to-18-year-old children. The researchers examined the effect of marital conflict over three years, finding that forms of destructive marital conflict, such as personal insults, defensiveness, marital withdrawal, sadness or fear, set in motion events that led to later emotional insecurity and maladjustment in children, including depression, anxiety, and behavior problems. This occurred even when the researchers controlled for any initial adjustment problems.

The second study again examined the connection between marital conflict and emotional problems over a three-year period, this time in a different group of 232 parents and much younger children (kindergarteners). Researchers again found that marital conflict sets in motion events that led to later emotional insecurity and maladjustment. Again, researchers controlled for any initial adjustment problems, further supporting the conclusion that marital conflict was related with children's emotional insecurity and adjustment problems.

Both studies involved representative community samples and everyday conflict behaviors (for example, verbal hostility) about everyday sources of conflict between parents, such as childcare and household responsibilities. Because of this, the findings can likely be generalized to most American families.

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Parents and even mental health professionals are likely unaware of the significance of marital conflict for the well-being of children, said Dr. Cumming, and few may know that children's security is so closely tied to the quality of parental relationships.

At the same time, however, other work from Dr. Cummings and his peers find that constructive marital conflict, in which parents express or engage in physical affection, problem solving, compromise or positive feelings, may *increase* children's security.

"Thus," Dr. Cummings noted, "this study is a warning to strongly encourage parents to learn how to handle conflicts constructively for the sake of both their children and themselves."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 1, *Interparental Discord and Child Adjustment: Prospective Investigations of Emotional Security as an Explanatory Mechanism*. By Cummings EM, Schermerhorn AC (both of the University of Notre Dame), Davies PT (University of Rochester), Goeke-Morey MC (Catholic University of America), and Cummings JS (University of Notre Dame). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.