



Society for Research in Child Development

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Children's Distress Over Parental Conflict Continues Over Time

Fighting with your spouse in front of your kids, or even ignoring each other, leads to negative thoughts and distress in your kids about your marriage and family today and even one year later. That's one of the major findings from researchers at the University of Rochester in New York and the University of Notre Dame in their study on marital conflict and its effects on children published in the January/February 2006 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

"Witnessing high levels of destructive conflict between parents has been associated with greater child distress and negative thoughts in response to conflict," said lead researcher Patrick T. Davies, Ph.D., professor of psychology. Although previous work has shown that children don't get used to this hostile conflict but, instead, become more sensitive to it, Dr. Davies and his colleagues wondered if different forms of destructive conflict between parents played different roles in children's reactions. They also explored whether differences between children's negative reactions to the conflict were consistent over time, and whether children's responses to the conflict changed as they got older.

To answer these questions, the researchers studied 223 six-year-old children and their parents for one year. They used interviews and observations at two time points one year apart to measure children's distress reactions and negative thoughts. By observing how parents worked out their disagreements, the researchers identified two types of destructive conflicts: hostility and disengagement or indifference.

"Our results highlight the possibility that several different types of conflict between parents may negatively affect the well-being of children over time," said Dr. Davies. "Conflict between parents may have distinct meanings and implications for the child and family system even after considering the effects of parenting difficulties."

In the long run, he said, the stress of witnessing these forms of conflict may have long-term implications for children's functioning by directly altering their patterns of responding to conflict between their parents.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 1, *Child Adaptational Development in Contexts of Interparental Conflict Over Time* by Davies PT, Sturge-Apple ML, Winter MA, Farrell D (University of Rochester), and Cummings EM (University of Notre Dame). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.