



# Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

750 First St., NE • Washington, DC 20002-4242

OFFICE: (202) 336-5926 • FAX: (202) 336-6184

## PRESS RELEASE

Child Development (January/February 2006 issue)

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

### Contact Information:

Andrea Browning

Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

(202) 336-5926

abrowning@srcd.org

### **Parental Conflict May Affect Children's Behavior and Learning by Disrupting Their Sleep**

For years, researchers have known that children who grow up in homes with high levels of conflict tend to have behavior and learning problems. But they didn't know why. Now a new study published in the January/February 2006 issue of the journal *Child Development* finds parental conflict may negatively affect children by disrupting their sleep.

Researchers from Auburn University in Alabama and Brown University in Providence, R.I., assessed children's sleep in 54 healthy 8- and 9-year-old children, along with parental conflict from both the child and parental viewpoint. None of the children had any previously diagnosed sleep disorders, and their parents experienced conflict levels in the normal range.

The researchers measured parental conflict and assessed the children's sleep through parental and child reports. They also had the children wear an Actigraph, a watch-like device that records movement, for seven nights while in bed. Data from the Actigraph helped researchers determine when children went to sleep and woke up, how often they woke during the night and how well they slept.

Researchers found that even though children in higher conflict homes went to sleep about the same time as children in lower conflict homes, they slept less and didn't sleep as well. In families where parents had more conflict, children slept less, spent less time in bed actually sleeping, and moved around – fidgeted or tossed and turned – more. Children in higher conflict homes also reported they were sleepier during the day.

The associations between conflict and sleep were especially strong when the researchers looked at child reports of parental conflict (rather than parental reports) and the Actigraph measures of sleep. Those children who perceived their parents' conflict as frequent, intense and unresolved had more disrupted sleep.

“The data suggest that even in families with normal levels of conflict, parental arguments and anger can disrupt children's sleep,” said lead researcher Mona El-Sheikh, Ph.D., alumni professor at Auburn University. “This is significant because even mild loss of sleep can disrupt attention, alter information processing, weaken motivation, increase irritability and diminish emotion control,” she said.

While conflict in families is normal and inevitable, Dr. El-Sheikh notes, “The data here has implications for how parents manage conflict and how they help their children understand and cope with it.”

##

Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 1, *Marital Conflict and Disruption of Children's Sleep*  
By El-Sheikh M, Buckhalt JA, Mize J (all of Auburn University) and Acebo C (Brown University).

Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.