



Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

1313 L Street, NW • Washington, DC 20005

OFFICE: (202) 289-7905 • FAX: (202) 289-4203

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Contact Information:

Andrea Browning

Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

(202) 289-7905

abrowning@srcd.org

Styles of Conflict Between Parents Have Different Implications for Children and Families

A considerable amount of research has examined how children fare when their parents fight. A new study goes further by examining how different types of conflict between parents affect children and families.

We've long known that conflict between parents detracts from parents' abilities to be warm, supportive, and emotionally available to their children, while also negatively affecting children's mental health. But much of the research that's been done so far has examined only one aspect of this type of conflict—hostility. Because parents differ in the ways they argue, how might different types of conflict (such as withdrawal or detachment) affect children? What effect might these different forms of discord have on the family as a whole?

Researchers at the University of Rochester and the University of Notre Dame studied 212 families with 6-year-old children over a three-year period. Their findings are published in the November/December 2006 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The study concludes that different types of conflict may have different implications for how mothers and fathers carry out their parenting duties. For example, mothers had difficulty being warm, supportive, and involved with their children when they experienced hostility with their spouse and when there was withdrawal between the parents. But fathers' ability to engage with their children was influenced mainly when there was withdrawal between the parents, not when there was hostility between them.

The study also found that the way fathers parent when they experience withdrawal from their spouses may have a greater effect on children's psychological problems than the way mothers parent under the same circumstances. Specifically, when fathers are emotionally unavailable, their children are more anxious, depressed, and withdrawn, and they also may exhibit more aggressive and delinquent behavior and have more trouble adjusting to school. When mothers are emotionally unavailable, only children's adjustment to school suffers.

"Taken together, the findings from the present study stress the importance of understanding *how* parents fight and the implications of this for the broader family system," according to Melissa Sturge-Apple, the study's lead author and a researcher at the Mount Hope Family Center at the University of Rochester. "Our results highlight the possibility that hostility and withdrawal between parents may negatively affect parenting and, in turn, child adjustment over time, and that these types of conflict may have distinct meanings and implications for the child and family system as a whole."

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 5, *The Impact of Hostility and Withdrawal in Interparental Conflict on Parental Emotional Unavailability and Children's Adjustment Difficulties* by Sturge-Apple, ML, and Davies, PT (University of Rochester) and Cummings, EM (University of Notre Dame). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.