Parental conflict: outcomes and interventions for children and families

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Executive Summary

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Conflict is a normal and necessary part of family life. However, when conflict between parents is handled in destructive rather than constructive ways, it can have negative consequences both for parents and their children. Children are vulnerable to the impact of conflict whether their parents are together, apart, or in the process of separation. This summary brings together key strands of state-of-the-art research in this area. First, it reports on the latest research on how and why children are affected by conflict between parents including emerging research on the intergenerational transmission of conflict and the role of genes and early brain development in explaining differences in children's adaptation to parental conflict. Second, it reviews the growing body of evidence on the most effective approaches to supporting couples and children affected by conflict. The final main section brings together the conclusions of the two strands of the review and makes recommendations for developing support for families. Headline findings are as follows:

- Children exposed to conflict between parents are at risk of a range of negative outcomes including: emotional and behavioural difficulties, trouble getting on with others such as peers or family members, problems settling and achieving at school, sleep difficulties, and poorer health.

- Conflict between parents, rather than the event of parental separation or divorce, is a key factor in explaining why some children fair better than others when parental relationships breakdown.

- Conflict impacts how couples parent and the quality of relationship between parent and child. Parenting may be affected in a number of ways, with parents adopting a range of behaviours, from highly intrusive and hostile parenting through to lax, disinterested parenting, all of which are associated with negative developmental outcomes for children.

- Emerging research also points to the influence of inter-parental conflict on specific neurobiological processes, which in turn affect children's emotional and cognitive development.

- Conflict within families has been found to pass from one generation to the next. This 'intergenerational transmission' of family conflict is not solely explained by genetic factors. Rather, family environmental factors such as inter-parental conflict and harsh parenting practices affect children's psychological development irrespective of whether parents and children are genetically related or not.

- Some children are more vulnerable to the impact of conflict than others. Factors which may increase or decrease a child's vulnerability include: physiological make-up, temperament, age, support networks of peers, siblings or others, and coping strategies.

- Interventions to support couples experiencing or at risk of conflict can help improve aspects of the couple relationship including patterns of interaction and communication. Important elements of such programmes include a focus on skills-based training alongside the provision of information.

- Intervening early, with young adults, newly-weds or those embarking on a long-term relationship as well as couples going through the transition to parenthood, provides an opportunity to help couples before problems with conflict arise or become entrenched.

- Practitioners working with families, such as Family Support Workers, Health Visitors or Midwives, are well-placed to identify parents at risk of or struggling with conflict. With training, they may also provide information about conflict and relationship difficulties, sign-post families to more specialist support, or provide structured interventions themselves.

Why does conflict between parents matter?

Conflict between parents can place children at risk when it is frequent, unresolved, intense, or about the child (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003; Amato, 2005). Conflict between parents, not just the event of parental separation or divorce, is a key factor in explaining why some children fair better than others when parental relationships breakdown (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Coleman and Glenn, 2009).

Couples who continue to hold on to more positive ways of relating in the midst of heated conflicts, and who can find ways to resolve an argument, are less vulnerable to relationship breakdown and their children are less at risk of developing emotional or behavioural difficulties (Driver et al., 2003; Bradbury and Karney, 2004).

Research over the last decade has provided deeper insight into not only the outcomes for children of exposure to destructive conflict but also how children are affected and why some children appear more

vulnerable or resilient than others. In other words, there is more of an understanding of 'why, when, and how' parental conflict affects some but not all children (Cummings and Davies, 2010).

Research has also focused on how family relationship patterns are passed from one generation to the next. One explanation is that conflict between parents disturbs other relationships within the family, such as between a parent and child (Grych and Fincham, 2001). There is also evidence to suggest that a family environment marked by destructive conflict affects normal developmental processes, such as brain development, which in turn affect children's emotional, behavioural and social +development (Van Goozen et al., 2007).

Until recently it could be argued that shared genes may explain this 'intergenerational transmission' of troubled ways of relating. However, innovatively designed studies using samples of children and parents who are not genetically related provide evidence that this is not the case. Rather, family environmental factors such as inter-parental conflict and harsh parenting practices affect children's psychological development irrespective of whether parents and children are genetically related or not (Harold et al., 2011).

What matters about conflict?

Children can develop difficulties when conflict between parents is handled destructively. Destructive conflict includes: physical or verbal aggression (Cummings et al., 2000; Davies et al., 2002; Kitzmann et al., 2003); sulking or the 'silent treatment' (Ablow and Measelle, 2009); getting caught up in highly intense or heated arguments (Cummings and Davies, 2010) and withdrawing or walking away from an argument (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Children are particularly upset when they or issues relevant to them are the subject of an argument (Amato, 2005; Shelton and Harold, 2007).

Children react more positively when parents can continue to relate to each other with warmth and positive regard in the midst of other, more destructive ways of relating (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003). Children may also be less troubled by conflict when parents are able to resolve an argument. However, this 'resolution' needs to be genuine. Children are not fooled when parents tell them things have been sorted out but fail to relate to each other in ways that demonstrate that the relationship has been repaired. Parents' actions need to echo their words (Winter et al., 2006; Goeke-Morey et al., 2007).

There is emerging evidence that children can learn behaviours that are helpful in their relationships with others from observing parents handling conflict well, however, further research is required to confirm and expand our understanding of this (McCoy et al., 2009).

What are the outcomes for children exposed to destructive conflict?
A common outcome of destructive conflict between parents is the development of emotional or behavioural difficulties for children (Grych et al., 2003; Cummings et al., 2006).

Children's own social relationships can also be affected, with children prone to developing poor interpersonal skills (Finger et al., 2010). As a result, children and young people in high conflict homes may have difficulties getting on with others, such as parents (Benson et al., 2008), siblings (Stocker and Youngblade, 1999), teachers, peers (Parke et al., 2001) and, in the longer term, romantic partners (Cui and Fincham, 2010).

Children are also at risk of a range of health difficulties (Troxel and Matthews, 2004; El-Sheikh et al., 2008), including: digestive problems, fatigue (El-Sheikh et al., 2001), reduced physical growth (Montgomery et al., 1997), and headaches and abdominal pains (Stiles, 2002). They may also suffer with problems sleeping (Mannering et al., 2011).

Difficulties can extend into school, with children less able to settle, more likely to have trouble getting on with peers, and less likely to achieve academically because of the impact of conflict between parents on children's cognitive abilities and attention (Harold et al., 2007).

Conflict between parents is one of the key factors that explains why other family difficulties, such as impoverished circumstances, parental depression or substance abuse, are also associated with poor outcomes for children (Du Rocher Schudlich and Cummings, 2007). Difficulties put pressure on the couple relationship, resulting in conflict, which in turn undermines parenting and the parent-child relationship, leading to negative outcomes for the children (Harold and Leve, 2012).

What mechanisms explain how conflict affects children?
Conflict between parents affects children in two key ways. First, conflict impacts how couples parent and the quality of relationship between parent and child. Parenting may be affected in a number of

ways, with parents adopting a range of behaviours, from highly intrusive and hostile parenting through to lax, disinterested parenting, all of which are associated with negative developmental outcomes for children (Cox et al., 2001).

Secondly, how children understand, experience and respond to conflict between parents is also important, each with implications for the parent-child relationship and, in turn, children's development (Cummings and Davies, 2010).

Different theories have been put forward to specify the exact nature in which children's reactions to conflict affect their wellbeing. These include the Cognitive-Contextual Framework, Emotional Security Theory, Emotion Specific Theory and Family-wide Perspective (Grych and Fincham, 2001). Although theories place different emphasis on different aspects of the processes at work, the theories are complementary (Rhoades, 2008; Fosco and Grych, 2008).

Key elements include: how parents express and manage conflict, how children make sense of and understand inter-parental conflict; their emotional reactions to it, such as fear, anger, or sadness; how conflict affects children's sense of security in their relationship with each parent and the relationship between the parents; how children behave in response to their understanding and feelings; and the physiological reactions conflict triggers (Grych and Fincham, 2001; Cummings and Davies, 2010).

Emerging research also points to the influence of inter-parental conflict on specific neurobiological processes linked to normal brain development, which in turn affect children's emotional and cognitive development (Van Goozen et al., 2008).

Children do not get used to inter-parental conflict. The more children are exposed to conflict the more sensitive they become to its impact and more vulnerable to its effects (Cummings and Davies, 2002).

Are some children more vulnerable than others?
A range of factors have been identified that help explain why some children are more vulnerable to the impact of conflict between parents than others.

Boys and girls may experience and react to conflict differently, although with equally deleterious outcomes for both. This is because of differences in how girls and boys react to conflict, socialisation into different roles for boys and girls, and interactions between the sex of the parent and the sex of the child (Davies and Lindsay, 2001).

Older children appear to be more vulnerable to the impact of conflict between parents than younger children (Rhoades, 2008). This may be explained, however, by a number of factors, including, a failure to fully capture the impact on younger children and the interplay of age and developmental stage and how that affects children's responses to conflict. It may also simply mean that older children have become more sensitive to conflict because they have been exposed to it for a longer period of time compared to younger children.

Children's temperaments can also serve to increase or reduce their vulnerability to inter-parental conflict. Children with a difficult temperament are more vulnerable to the impact of conflict between parents (Ramos et al. 2005; Whiteside-Mansell, 2009).

Biological factors, including specific genetic susceptibilities and early brain development, may explain why some children are at greater short- and long-term risk for negative outcomes as a result of living with high levels of inter-parental conflict and discord as well as the perpetuation of conflict-based behaviours across generations (intergenerational transmission; Harold et al., in press).

Children's physiological makeup can also play an important role in differentiating between children who are at greater risk of poor outcomes. For example, some children's nervous systems help them to regulate their feelings and responses to conflict more effectively than other children (El Sheikh and Erath, 2011).

Children's coping strategies can also be important. In general, emotion-focused strategies, that help children to distance themselves from parental conflict, are associated with better outcomes for children than problem-solving strategies that may result in children becoming embroiled in the situation (Shelton and Harold, 2008).

A warm sibling relationship can also buffer children from the impact of a high conflict home (Grass et al., 2007). However, sibling relationships can also suffer with complicated alliances and divisions emerging within families, or as one child protects him or herself by deflecting parental anger towards a sibling (Cox et al., 2001).

Interventions to support couples

A range of approaches to supporting parents have been developed and assessed over recent years, though few have focused directly on couple conflict alone.

One approach is to support couples in developing their parenting skills in order to prevent or minimise the 'spillover' of conflict into parenting. However, programmes which deal with parenting alone are insufficient. Rather, parent education programmes are more effective with parents in conflict if they include a couple relationship component compared to those which deal only with parenting issues (Webster-Stratton and Reid, 2003; Cowan et al., 2011).

Such approaches may support couples already experiencing conflict. However, programmes may also be targeted at new or expectant parents. Couples going through the transition to parenthood are at risk of increased conflict (Glade et al., 2005) and decreased relationship satisfaction (Mitnick et al., 2009). Interventions to support couples in transition to parenthood appear to have a positive impact on couple communication where they include behavioural skills training (Pinquart and Teubert, 2010).

Programmes that specifically target couple conflict can help reduce destructive and increase constructive conflict behaviours when they combine an information component and skills training (Faircloth et al., 2011).

Programmes designed to prevent couple relationship difficulties emerging, such as marriage preparation courses, report some improvements in relationship outcomes. However, the effect appears to diminish over time (Knutson and Olson, 2003) and couples may need help in adopting relationship skills in everyday interactions, especially for partners in deprived circumstances or experiencing more complex difficulties (Carroll and Doherty, 2003; Blanchard et al., 2009; Fawcett et al., 2010).

Working with couples or even individuals at an early stage is likely to lead to greater success in changing destructive conflict behaviour and promoting effective communication and conflict resolution (Dolan et al., 2010). Opportune times include around the time of marriage or moving in together, over the transition to parenthood, and with young adults, before they embark on serious romantic relationships (Halford, 2004).

Although the extent to which programmes focus on conflict and the stage of intervention vary across programmes, a common finding is that couple-based programmes, which includes a conflict component, can improve aspects of the couple relationship (Faircloth et al. 2011). The most effective programmes in improving couple communication and relationship satisfaction, whether targeted at couples early in their relationship or later, include a behavioural skills training element alongside information (Petch and Halford, 2008; Pinquart and Tembert, 2010). However, few programmes assess whether there is also an impact on children.

Implications for practice

Programmes need to be tailored to the different circumstances and requirements of different groups. Some couples and individuals may benefit from programmes delivered in a group setting where they can share and learn from others and normalise their experiences (Schulz et al., 2006; Cowan et al., 2010). However, other couples may prefer the greater flexibility, anonymity and accessibility that self-directed, on-line programmes can offer. Although recent evidence indicates that a web-based self-directed version of relationship education can be as effective as traditional face-to-face relationship education (Duncan et al., 2009), few studies have directly compared different approaches.

Again, flexibility is required about how long any programme should be. Programmes of between 9-20 hours length appear to be the optimum length (Hawkins et al., 2008). However, programme length will also be influenced by programme content and by both the circumstances and needs of couples or individuals taking part.

In addition to interventions targeted at parents it may also be useful to support children who are exposed to conflict between parents. This may be particularly true for children whose parents are separated or divorced. These children may benefit from help exploring what parental conflict means for

them and ways to cope with it (Grych, 2005). However, more research is needed into the effectiveness of programmes for children (Grych, 2005).

Practitioners and those in regular contact with parents are in a prime position to identify families either at risk of or struggling with conflict. In so doing practitioners can help to raise awareness about the impact of conflict between parents on children. They are also well placed to signpost parents to helpful sources of support or even deliver more structured interventions themselves. Practitioners may also play a crucial role in providing follow-up support to parents who have participated in a formal intervention programme, particularly where the programme was self-directed or web-based. Whatever the nature of the support provided by practitioners, they are likely to benefit from training in identifying signs of relationship distress, information on conflict and its impact on the family, and in signposting parents to other forms of support.

Few couples seek support to help them deal with conflict (Coleman, 2011). Strategies to encourage and enable parents to seek help may include: normalising difficulties by making information easily available; reducing the stigma attached to seeking support; raising awareness of different types of support; providing robust evidence on the effectiveness of interventions; and making support more accessible by exploring innovative methods of delivery. Exploring different approaches will also enable programme developers to identify the most cost-effective avenues of support.

Policymakers can play a role by making information widely available to parents. Providing funding for research into both the short and long-term effects of interventions is also crucial to identify the most effective approaches to support families.

About the project
The full report updates the well received, comprehensive review of research on the impact of conflict between parents on children published by OnePlusOne in 2001 (Harold et al., 2001). In addition to the latest research on parental conflict, it outlines the recent evidence on interventions designed to support parents. The interventions covered a range from: programmes focusing on parenting alone and those that include an additional relationship component; those targeted at key transitional times such as becoming parents for the first time; programmes with a more centred approach to dealing with inter-

parental conflict (including for separated and intact couples); and early intervention approaches to relationship education such as marriage preparation.

The review was conducted by an inter-disciplinary team of researchers committed to using research to inform effective support for families, parents and children.

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