

## HOW MARITAL CONFLICT AFFECTS CHILDREN

By Cheryl Buehler\*

A popular tune from the past chimed "What a difference a day makes." Unfortunately, that is almost never true in the world of social science research. However, studies that focus on the effects of marital conflict on children may chime "What a difference a decade makes." We have learned a great deal in the last ten years about the ways in which marital conflict affects children. We also have some clues about how children and adolescents can be protected from the harmful effects of parents or parents and stepparents who fight.

What aspect of marital conflict most affects children? It's not the fact that parents disagree about the things in everyday life like who should do the dishes or whether to spank or withdraw privileges when children misbehave. Rather it is how we disagree about these issues that matters. Recent research shows that disagreements that result in hostile, aggressive ways of fighting (such as name calling, screaming, slapping) are harmful to children. Also, disagreements that don't get resolved in some way, at least from the child's point of view, have harmful consequences for children's development.

How do these harmful aspects of marital conflict travel through the family? My reading of the research suggests three pathways: parenting behaviors, parental depression, and children's interpretations of parents' fights. Fights that are intensely hostile, ongoing, and poorly resolved drain us of important energy for parenting. This may result in poor and ineffective disciplining, such as being too harsh and/or inconsistent. These types of fights also may result in emotional, psychological or physical withdrawal from children or the opposite - intrusive attempts to control children's thoughts and feelings. Hostile fights between spouses can induce depression. This may be particularly true when we believe we can't change our ways of fighting. A sense of homelessness is created, followed by depression that affects the children directly by modeling futility. Hopelessness and depression also can affect the children indirectly by decreasing our ability to parent effectively.

Importantly, children are not passive in this whole process. Instead they are active participants. They observe or hear the fights or sense the unspoken tension between parents or parent and stepparent, and then they react and/or interpret the conflict experiences. Research shows that children who blame themselves or find the fights threatening are more likely to develop problems than are other children. Children can feel threatened by fearing their parents will scream at one of them or their siblings. They also may worry their parents will divorce again. So, what can be done to protect children from hostile fights? We can help our children by not being physically aggressive with our spouses, by reducing the hostility (not screaming, being less contemptuous toward one another), and by drawing closure to the fights we do have. If that is not possible, we can learn to keep our marriage relationship separate from our parenting and stepparenting relationships. This involves not letting the anxiety and exhaustion from marital fights erode our capacity to deal effectively with children and stepchildren. We must retain patience, sensitivity, and consistency in our interactions with them. We also must deal with our anger and resentment toward our spouses in constructive ways, rather than turning it inward and becoming anxious, depressed or obsessive in our behaviors. Finally, we can get help for our children and stepchildren. Teachers and counselors can help children with their fears and feelings of self-blame. They also can encourage children to use a variety of sources of social support outside the family.

For many stepparents, these issues must be confronted in two different relationships - that of the current spouse and that of the former spouse. The concerns apply to both relationships, thus doubling our challenge. However, the returns for facing these challenges head-on also are multiple. The winner will be ourselves, our marriages, and our children and stepchildren.

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### Reference

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