

How family conflict affects children

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(Medical Xpress)—New research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) reveals why some children are badly affected by negative family conflicts while other children survive without significant problems.

Researchers found that the way in which children understood the conflicts between their parents had different effects on their emotional and behavioural problems. Where children blamed themselves for the conflicts between their parents, they were more likely to have behavioural problems, such as anti-[social behaviour](#).

But if their parents' fighting or arguing led to a child feeling threatened, or fearful that the family would split up, the child was more likely to experience [emotional problems](#), such as depression.

The impact of everyday conflict between parents on their children's behaviour and mental health is driven by how the children understand the problems in the relationship as well as the nature of the conflict itself, the researchers found. These disagreements include; hostile relationships between parents, poor [parenting practices](#), negative parent-child relationships and [maternal depression](#).

Professor Gordon Harold of the University of Leicester said the research highlighted the importance of ensuring that intervention programmes focused on helping parents to resolve these day-to-day conflicts with their partner, while also reiterating the importance of promoting [positive parenting](#) strategies.

As the nature of the parents' relationship is so important, intervention programmes that focus solely on [parenting skills](#) and practices may miss out ways of helping children deal with emotional and [behavioural problems](#) especially when there are high levels of inter-[parental conflict](#).

Professor Harold said: "Children exposed to everyday conflicts between their parents - conflicts

that are non-violent, but frequent, intense and poorly resolved - are at elevated risk for mental health problems, even when we consider poor parenting practices or genetic susceptibility factors passed on from parents to children, in explaining the effects of hostile relationships on children."

"Importantly, children may not actually be responsible for their parents' relationship problems. Rather, they simply need to feel or perceive that they are responsible in order to experience negative psychological outcomes," said Professor Harold.

Professor Anita Thapar, of the Institute of Psychological Medicine and Clinical Neurosciences at Cardiff University said "The research showed the pattern of family and genetic contributions varied for different types of child mental health problem as well as for boys and girls. This research looked at the relationship between genetic liability to child [mental health problems](#) and negative family experiences in the development of these problems and sought to take account of specific parental influences on children".

The research also found that girls may be a higher risk for depression when their parent's relationship is hostile or there is a negative mother-child relationship. Depressive symptoms displayed by daughters resulted in increases in parent-to-child hostility from both mothers and fathers.

"By highlighting parents' conflict management strategies as well as parenting practices, intervention programmes can be developed that target risk mechanisms specific to the types of problems experienced by children living in households with high levels of parental conflict, such as parental separation or divorce," said Professor Harold.

More information: Based on the findings from '[Family and genetic influences on children's psychological development](#)'.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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