

What role does the inter-parental relationship play in supporting positive child development in the early years and enhancing outcomes in later life?

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Setting the Scene: How the Inter-Parental Relationship affects Children's Psychological Development

Helping children and practice professions that work with children to improve outcomes and long-term life chances for at-risk or vulnerable youth has long been of interest to child and family specialists, including researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

An historic challenge in this area has been the effective translation of the latest research findings relevant to child and family focused practitioners so that up-to-date information is made available that improves practice, and ultimately the welfare and well-being of children who may benefit from this latest information. While the family experiences that children have early in their lives (e.g. levels of inter-parental discord, positive versus negative parenting practices) have been identified as playing a significant role in affecting long-term outcomes, accumulating evidence suggests that a complex array of family and individual level factors may congregate to explain why some children experience significant difficulties as a result of early family experiences, while other children show little or no such difficulties.

Historically, researchers have examined the role of family factors such as parent marital status (divorced versus married), socioeconomic factors (e.g. household income, poverty), domestic violence, parent mental health, parenting practices (primarily mother-child parenting competence/consistency) and the role that these (and other) factors play in explaining poor child and adolescent outcomes (e.g. anxiety, depression, aggression, conduct problems, poor academic attainment, substance misuse, criminality, suicidality and other outcomes).

Increasingly it is recognised that rather than examining and legislating for (at a policy and practice level) the influence of one or more of these well documented family level influences on children, adverse family influences on children are more likely to operate as 'chain-of-event processes', not as simple cause and effect links. For example, instead of each of these specific influences exerting independent effects on children (i.e. poor parent mental health predicts poor psychological outcomes for children), these influences likely 'interact' such

that poor parent mental health may lead to poor parenting practices, which in turn affects poor outcomes for children. With this 'process orientated' configuration in mind, very recent research has highlighted that the actual relationship dynamic between parents (how parents manage or contend with conflicts in their relationship, whether they are living together or not) may not only be a significant factor for children, but may impact on multiple additional family influences on children. For example, it is increasingly recognised that while divorce is a stressful event for children,^{1,2} levels of conflict between parents before, during and after divorce

explains more about children's adaptation to parental separation (and post-divorce adjustment) than the event of divorce per se.³ More recent research shows that where children experience ongoing and acrimonious conflicts between their parents or caregivers (even when parenting practices are targeted through intervention and support), sustained intervention effects on child outcomes may be undermined.⁴ This article will review this new evidence, and highlight how this knowledge may be effectively utilised by practitioners (and policy makers) to improve family-linked outcomes for children.

Impact of inter-parental conflict on child mental health outcomes

Conflict that occurs between parents/carers that is frequent, intense, child related and poorly resolved has been evidenced to adversely impact children to a greater extent than conflicts occurring between parents that are expressed without animosity, concern topics unrelated to the child and are successfully resolved.⁵ Where conflicts between parents/carers are destructive in terms of frequency, intensity, child relevance and poor resolution properties, inter-parental conflict impacts on children of all ages, with effects evident from infancy.^{6,7} Children as young as six-months show distress such as increased heart rate in response to hostile parental exchanges.^{8,9} Children up to the age of five years show distress by crying, acting out, freezing or withdrawing from conflict, and attempting to intervene⁸. Inter-parental conflict has also been associated with behavioural problems,^{10,11} cognitive ability,¹² and physical health (e.g. accidents/illness) in children as young as 2 years old,¹³ and with

impaired social functioning (e.g. increased conflict with peers) during primary school.¹⁴ Furthermore, the effects of inter-parental conflict can impact on later child outcomes into adolescence and adulthood, including mental health difficulties (e.g. aggression, antisocial behaviour, depression, and anxiety), academic attainment and employability, and future relationship stability.⁴



How does inter-parental conflict impact child mental health outcomes?

Children are affected in different ways as a result of hostile inter-parental conflict. It is therefore important to understand the processes through which some, but not all, children are affected. Multiple developmental theories exist to explain individual and contextual influences on children's normal and abnormal development: Perspectives range from early psychodynamic,^{15,16} learning,¹⁷ social learning,¹⁸ ethological,¹⁹ ecological,²⁰ family systems,²¹ and more recent individual-contextual perspectives.^{22,23} Increasingly, theoretical models have moved away from individualised, 'dogma' driven perspectives to recognising that individual differences in multiple aspects of child development are more realistically explained by process-based versus outcome-focused theoretical models. One such model, specifically aimed at explaining how family contextual influences (e.g. household economic pressure) affect long-term child outcomes (e.g. behaviour problems), and the role that primary family relationships (e.g. the inter-parental and

parent-child relationships) play in accounting for individual differences in child outcomes, is the Family Stress Model.²⁴ The 'Family Stress model' provides a well-evidenced framework to understand the processes through which inter-parental conflict impacts on child outcomes. This model proposes that early environmental experiences impact on children's long-term outcomes via the child's home environment: early influences create a cascade of effects that impact on child adjustment. Specifically, economic pressure affects parental (mothers and fathers) mental health (specifically symptoms of depression), which affects couple relationship quality, which in turn adversely affects parenting practices, which then affect children's symptoms of psychological distress. This model highlights the importance of the inter-parental relationship as a central mechanism through which earlier family-level stressors impact on both parenting and child mental health outcomes.^{6,24,25}

The role of parenting relative to poor inter-parental relations in explaining outcomes for children

Disruptions in parenting is one of the primary processes through which inter-parental conflict impacts on child outcomes, with evidence highlighting how the emotional impact of inter-parental conflict 'spills over' into the parent-child relationship.²⁶ Across all ages, couples in relationships that are characterised by hostility and distress are typically more hostile and aggressive toward their children and less sensitive and emotionally responsive to their children's needs.^{26,27} Historically it was thought that the main mechanism through which children are affected by inter-parental conflict is primarily via parenting²⁶ and that as long as children experienced positive parenting, outcomes would improve for children, regardless of wider family-level problems (such as inter-parental conflict). However, children who witness ongoing

and acrimonious levels of inter-parental conflict experience negative outcomes, even when parents sustain positive parent-child relationships. A second set of pathways through which inter-parental conflict can impact on child outcomes is via child attributions for, or their emotional processing of, their parents' inter-parental conflicts.^{28,29} For example, children who perceive conflict as threatening or who feel unable to cope may experience more externalising type problems (aggression, conduct problems), whereas children who blame themselves for parental disagreements may experience more internalising type problems (anxiety, depression).⁵ Children's sense of emotional security may also be compromised in the context of inter-parental conflict, with associated outcomes for internalising and externalising outcomes.³⁰

Extending the role of parenting influences on children: Recognising the importance of fathers

As outlined throughout this brief review, past research examining the role of family socialization processes on children's psychological development has historically emphasized the mother-child relationship as a primary transmission site through which family level influences convey effects to children. The attachment³¹ and parenting-style³² theoretical traditions have predominated as frameworks in articulating the salience of the mother-child relationship on children's psychological

outcomes. As highlighted throughout this review, the inter-parental relationship is increasingly recognised as a factor relevant to children's psychological development, even when parenting practices are considered. However, a core limitation of past research in this area is the predominant focus on the mother-child relationship to the relative neglect of the father-child relationship in explaining family level influences on children. The role of fathers is increasingly being recognised as an important

influence on children's emotional, behavioural, social and academic development.^{6,33} Specifically relating to associations between inter-parental conflict, hostile parenting, and children's mental health outcomes, several studies support the hypothesis that emotions expressed in the couple relationship may 'spillover' to the parent-child relationship thereby affecting children's emotional and behavioural development²⁶ with recent studies suggesting that fathers' parenting may be more sensitive to couple relationship problems than mothers.²⁷ In the context

of intervention studies, Cowan and Cowan (2002)³⁴ highlight that fathers' active engagement in family-focused interventions (including maternal parenting-focused programmes) increases efficacy in relation to sustained outcomes for children. This evidence base underscores the importance of targeting both the mother-child and father-child relationships in the context of future 'family' focused intervention programmes and associated policy contexts.

Factors that accentuate or ameliorate the impacts of Inter-parental conflict on children

The association between inter-parental conflict and specific child outcomes are moderated (either improved or made worse) as a result of a range of additional factors unique to the child, family and wider community. Although relatively under-explored, evidence is beginning to highlight the importance of parent and child gender as a factor that affects the impact of inter-parental conflict on child mental health outcomes. For example, although the effects of inter-parental conflict are similarly negative for boys and girls, boys and girls may react differently to inter-parental conflict.^{35,36} Boys and girls are both likely to see inter-parental conflict as a threat.⁵ However, boys are more likely to interpret inter-parental conflict as a threat to themselves, whereas girls are more likely to perceive inter-parental conflict as a threat to the harmony of the family, feel caught in the middle of conflicts, and feel the need to intervene.^{37,38} Parent gender is also an important factor that may affect the impact of inter-parental conflict on children. Inter-parental conflict may differentially impact parenting for mothers and fathers.³⁹ The effects of inter-parental conflict is thought to be more likely to 'spillover' into the father-child relationship than the mother-child relationship.^{40,41} However, mothers may be more likely than fathers to compensate for difficulties in the couple relationship by over-investing in the parent-child relationship.⁴²

Parent mental health is also an important factor associated with both inter-parental relationship quality and child adjustment.^{43,44} However, associations may vary by parent gender, with evidence suggesting that, in the context of depression, depression for men predicts later marital satisfaction. In contrast, for women, marital satisfaction predicts later depression.⁴⁵

While children of all ages are affected by inter-parental conflict, responses to inter-parental conflict may vary by child age or developmental stage.⁴⁶ For example, very young children (from age 6 months) show distress in response to overt (e.g. hostile exchanges) inter-parental conflict.^{8,9} Responses to covert conflict (e.g. inter-parental disengagement) are evident in slightly older children.^{47,48} Older children may additionally be more sensitive to conflict.⁴⁹ A better understanding of factors that ameliorate or accentuate the effects of inter-parental conflict on children provide a starting point to better understanding what works for whom, when, to allow interventions to be tailored to need more effectively.



Alternative explanations for the effects of inter-parental conflict on children

One of the main challenges to this area of research has been the theory that common genetic factors (genes that are shared between parents and children) may be associated with the child's behaviours more so than the environment the parent provides.⁵⁰ In biologically related families, genetic factors are passed down from parents to children, and may also affect the environment parents provide.⁵¹ Much previous research has used genetically related parents and children, which does not allow these two explanations to be fully disentangled. Research designs where parents and children

and not genetically related (e.g. adoption studies, child born via assisted conception) allow us to disentangle these influences.⁵² Evidence from such studies demonstrates the importance of the rearing environment as an influence on child outcomes: children are affected by rearing environments whether they are genetically related to their rearing parents or not. We can therefore be more confident of the impact of inter-parental conflict and negative parenting practices on child outcomes, with implications for intervention programme targets also underscored.

What is still to be done?

The inter-parental relationship is recognised as an important factor for child adjustment, however more needs to be done to fully understand the processes through which inter-parental relationship quality and disrupted parenting practices impact on child adjustment. A particularly underdeveloped area of research is the impact of parent and child gender on these processes. For example, as noted above, evidence suggests that the impacts of inter-parental conflict may differ for boys and girls. Additionally, inter-parental conflict may differentially impact parenting for mothers and fathers. Furthermore, the gender of the parent relative to the child may

also be important. Evidence suggests that mothers and fathers may treat opposite-sex children differently from same-sex children in the context of hostile inter-parental relationships: mothers may be more hostile to their sons, and fathers may be more withdrawn from their daughters.^{39,41} However, much more research needs to explore gender differences in relation to inter-parental conflict and child adjustment. A second underdeveloped area of knowledge to be improved on is to understand the impact of inter-parental conflict on co-parenting (how mothers and fathers parent together; whether or not parents agree on attitudes towards parenting/discipline) and child adjustment. Finally, it is important to develop a greater understanding of the impact of parent mental health on inter-parental conflict, and on the processes through which inter-parental relationships impact on child adjustment. The Family Stress Model highlights the importance of parent mental health, depression in particular, on the couple relationship. Further work in this area is required.



Interventions targeting the couple relationship

Research evidence demonstrates the importance of targeting the couple relationship, where inter-parental conflict is a feature of that relationship, to promote positive outcomes for children. Educating both parents and practitioners of the findings of this robust evidence base would provide an important opportunity to help parents understand how their relationship can affect their ability to provide positive parenting, and can also have a direct impact on their children.

International evidence suggests that interventions have the potential to improve the quality of the couple relationship (e.g. improving communication; conflict management), leading to improvements in parenting and more positive outcomes for children.⁴ These effects have been demonstrated in the context of domestic violence, in families where couples are separating, as well as intact households. However, most of this evidence does not consider the direct impact of couple relationship quality on child outcomes.⁴ The UK evidence is at an early stage, with relatively limited past investment in this area, leading to a lack of robust evidence to date specific to a UK context. There is now, therefore, a need for the

development of a robust evidence base of UK trials to provide evidence of what works, for whom, and in what circumstances. Commitment of UK Government funding to facilitate the development of relationship support programmes provide an opportunity to robustly examine interventions within the UK to overcome this challenge. Recent UK Government investments underscore this new commitment.⁵³

Finally, intervening early in the course of a problem can reduce the risk of later negative outcomes: this highlights the necessity for early prevention (in addition to supporting intervention strategies). For example, evidence identifies key transition points in the early years that can pose a challenge for parents and that provide opportunity for early prevention strategies. Two such transition points are: (a) adults about to become parents for the first time, and (b) children beginning formal education. Whilst the context of disadvantage and economic pressure serves as a valid starting point to focus intervention strategies in current policies, future considerations should extend beyond the context of disadvantage, targeting a wider array of children who are affected by negative family environments.

Summary

This brief review builds on a comprehensive report by Harold, Acquah, Sellers & Chowdry (2016)⁴ that demonstrated that the scientific research examining the role of the couple relationship as a factor that affects children's psychological outcomes and long-term development is well established. Specifically, this review highlights that the quality of the inter-parental (couple) relationship, whether parents are living together or not (and whether they are genetically related to their child or not), plays a significant role in affecting children's long-term emotional, behavioural and academic outcomes, even when parenting practices are supported. There is also a growing international body of well-evidenced interventions that indicates positive impacts on child outcomes by supporting the inter-parental relationship. In addition, this evidence base highlights

complementary benefits to both positive parenting practices (for mothers and fathers, as well as co-parenting processes) and child outcomes when the inter-parental relationship is supported. However, the review notes that the state of intervention evidence in the UK is at a very early stage of development with many gaps in knowledge about how to engage families effectively, how to replicate quality of intervention at scale, how to evaluate and monitor impacts on child outcomes, and how to promote and facilitate provider capacity. Building on recent UK Government investments, opportunity is at hand to remedy this dearth of knowledge, with the core objective of improving outcomes for today's generation of children, and promoting more positive outcomes for tomorrow's generation of parents.

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