

How to Keep Children and Teens from the Harm of Marital Conflict

A teenager who lives half the time with each of his divorced parents recently described himself to me as the messenger and mediator between his parents. He told me that it is a rather dangerous job because he never knows when either one are going to “shoot the messenger.” When children experience their mother and father display hostility or contempt for each other, they suffer. It does not seem to matter whether the parents are living together, are married, separated or divorced, parental animosity harms children and teens. Decades of research consistently shows the damaging impact of parent to parent disrespect and aggression. Whether it is volatile and noisy or silent and passive, the hostile emotional family atmosphere has a significant negative effect on children at the time and for years to come.

Hostility between parents occurs in many families that remain together - not just in divorced families. In very unhappy high conflict marriages, parents may bicker constantly, may parent solo by each taking turns rather parenting as partners. Even in low conflict marriages, denigrating, blaming or even rolling your eyes is an inappropriate expression of hostility toward the other parent that children should not experience. While parents may want to stay together for the children, exposure to their ongoing conflict can be harmful to them.

It is not divorce itself, which has such a negative impact on children and teenagers. It is how conflict during and after the upheaval of separation is managed that matters most. Here are some of the effects on the emotional and physical health of children and teenagers:

- Increased risk of depression, anxiety, anti-social behaviour and aggression
- More difficulty regulating their emotions, focusing their attention, and soothing themselves when upset
- Lower academic performance
- More stress as evidenced by the presence of catecholamines or stress hormones.

About 20-30% teenagers in Canada have experienced the divorce of their parents and many more perhaps 20-30% live together in families where they experience parents conflict. Therefore helping parents resolve differences without harming children and youth is becoming more important than ever.

Six Ways to Protect Children the Harm of Marital Conflict

John Gottman and Joan Declaire in their book [The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child](#), suggest the following ways to manage your marital conflict so as to protect your children from its negative impact.

1. Don't use your children as weapons in marital conflict.

Most children need the love and support of both parents, particularly when they are trying to cope with the turmoil of their parents' conflict. Whether parents are together or living separately, they usually have loyalty to each. Using a child as a political football in parental disputes to hurt the other is damaging to the child because it makes them feel undue responsibility for the problems.

2. Don't allow your kids to get in the middle.

In high conflict marriages, children often assume the role of the mediator between Mom and Dad. Often the child wants to regulate the emotional family tensions and keep the peace. This job is too great for a child's capability. Do not ask children to be a go-between regarding any messages that are difficult. Some parents use their children to deliver messages to the other parent they are afraid to deliver themselves. This is both cowardly of the adult and destructive for the child.

3. Let your kids know when your conflicts are resolved.

Just as children are distressed by seeing their parents argue, they are also soothed when they are know that their mother and father have reached a resolution. Children learn an important lesson about how to solve interpersonal problems when they see their parents apologize, compromise and hug one another when the issue is resolved.

4. Establish networks of emotional support for your children.

Teen agers very often disengage from their parents when the experience a high degree of marital discord. They often spend more time with peers, in hobbies or with families with fewer problems. While this may be upsetting for many parents, it is also good for the teenager to have positive emotion support beyond their family. When marital conflict is high, it is extremely important for parents to know about your teen's network of support. Be sure to know your teenagers friends and be in contact with teachers, coaches, neighbours, parents of their friends, grandparents and uncles and aunts who know them and can be there for them emotionally.

5. Use Emotional Coaching to talk about marital conflict.

While it may be very difficult to talk to your children about their feelings, there is no better time than after martial conflict erupts. Emotional Coaching involves being aware of your child's feeling, recognizing the emotion as an opportunity for closeness and learning, listening with empathy and validating their feelings, helping them label their emotions and help your child problem solve.

6. Stay engaged in the details of your children's everyday lives.

One of the secrets to buffering children and teens from the negative impact of marital conflict is to stay emotionally available to them. It is important for you to know what matters to your children and especially your teenager in order to carry on a conversation. Know their musical tastes, friends names, their courses and their social life.

The best way to love your child is to support their love for the other parent. This teaches them to love you. It also teaches them that they, themselves are loveable. Teenagers who experience this respect and support for their loyalty to each parent have greater likelihood of a learning to resolve conflict themselves more successfully now and in later life.