

Chronic Parental Conflict: Risks for Children

What is chronic parental conflict?

It is normal for two parents to have different ideas, opinions, values, and priorities, however sometimes this can lead to disagreements. Children can develop difficulties when conflict between parents is handled destructively.

Harmful conflict includes:

Yelling	Intimidation and threats of harm
Criticising	Throwing or destroying things
Blaming	Grabbing
Put-downs	Shoving
Mocking	Slapping
Sarcasm	Hitting
Swearing	Kicking
Ignoring	Pinching

How is this effect children?

Research suggests that children do not get used to inter-parental conflict. The more children are exposed to conflict, the more sensitive they become to its side effects.

Short term

- emotional and behavioural difficulties
- trouble getting on with friends
- problems settling and achieving at school
- sleep difficulties
- poorer health (eg tiredness, headaches, stomach pains)
- feeling unsafe
- feeling guilty
- worrying about taking sides

Long term

- emotional and behaviour difficulties
- finding it harder to maintain successful relationships as adults
- conflict within families has been found to pass from one generation to the next
- more likely to be involved in an early pregnancy

What Can You Do About Chronic Parental Conflict?

Shield Your Child

Shield your child from hostile interactions that include the following: yelling and screaming; put-downs, name-calling and harsh criticism; blaming; mocking and sarcastic remarks; hostile and aggressive facial expressions; and threats of harm and intimidation.

Children should NEVER be exposed to any physical violence such as parents throwing things or damaging things, or physical violence between parents such as grabbing, shoving, slapping, hitting, kicking or any other form of physical assault.

Change the way you communicate

Differences of opinion are okay as long as they are handled constructively. Modelling respect for others, compromising, and cooperation are invaluable learning experiences you can provide for your child.

Give Your Child Some Information

You can be honest with your child in a brief and reassuring manner.

You should not provide them with any long explanations or emotional details of the conflict. A brief explanation that mum and dad are having problems agreeing on things and are trying to work through it all that is normally needed. Reassure your child that you will always love him or her.

Children often think the conflict is all about him or her. Make sure your child knows that the conflict and arguments are not his or her fault.

Don't Criticize the Other Parent in Front of Your Child

Don't Let Your Child Take Sides

Don't Make Children Your Confidantes

Help Your Child Deal With Anger

Parents may have role-modelled inappropriate ways of dealing with anger when in conflict with each other. Since anger is a normal emotion that arises in all people, everyone needs to learn strategies to be able to express and control anger appropriately. Your child may need help in this area. There are many books and other resources for parents to help their children deal appropriately with anger.

Seek Professional Help