

Effective Family Communication: Panacea for the Effects of Parental Conflicts on Children

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Abstract

When parents do not communicate respectfully with each other and do not have a good strategy for resolving conflicts, the result is damaging on the family. Parental conflict has a demoralising effect on children. It is a significant obstacle to their developmental and behavioural adjustments and may lead to permanent damaging effects on children's well-being. Thus, the crux of this paper is on parental conflict and its effects on children's well-being. It employed conceptual method to review the literature concerning parental conflicts and their effects on children. The present article found out that children are affected by mere exposure to parental conflict. This means that exposure to the parental conflict has a significant impact on children's emotional, behavioural, interpersonal, and even their physiological wellbeing. Thus, the article emphasised the value of effective family communication as an antidote to the effects of parental conflicts on the children, as well as on the import of intervening with parents in the conflict to increase their awareness on the disastrous results of their behaviours on their children. Therefore, effective family communication skills, such as active listening, keeping the focus on a single issue and preventing personal attacks, among others were recommended for successfully resolving conflict among couples and family members.

Keywords: Children, children well-being, conflict management, communication problems, family communication, parental conflict.

1.0 Introduction

In today's world, parents are busy protecting and keeping their children safe from psychological and technological harms. They want to control the books their children read, the music they listen to, the TV shows and movies they watch. They do these solely because of the fear of the negative influence that media can have on their kids' developmental and behavioural well-being. But surprisingly enough, many parents do not even see themselves and their relationships as having external influences on their children. No doubt,

according to Perle (2011), the children that experience parental conflict are often at a higher risk of many psychological and behavioural problems. Overwhelming evidence has accumulated over the past several years that witnessing destructive parental conflict is one of the most influential factors in children's development of adjustment problems.

One can agree to the fact that there is no relationship that is entirely free from conflict and disagreement, and surely all children see their parents argue at one time or another. Although, the wish of basically all children is that their parents do not argue or fight with each other and that they can, in some way, communicate effectively and work out difficulties in a mature fashion without resorting to hurtful comments and behaviours. This wish has a strong basis in reality as an ongoing, unresolved, chronic conflict between parents, whether living together or separated, has a hugely negative impact on the current and future well-being of their children. Parental conflicts can have a devastating effect on children. No one would be surprised to learn or hear that children suffer when their parents argue or fight. Besides representing a significant obstacle to their developmental and behavioural adjustments, parental conflicts may lead to lifelong damaging effects on children's well-being (Sarrazin & Cyr, 2008).

It is common and usual for couples to have different ideas, opinions, values, and priorities. Part of being successful in a relationship with another person is the ability to use appropriate communication skills in the proper time so that ideas and opinions can be expressed and received with respect and differences of view can be worked out using right conflict resolution strategies (Eugster, 2007). When parents do not communicate respectfully with each other and do not have an excellent family communication and policy for resolving conflicts, the result is chronic, unresolved conflict between them. That is to say; they will have an ongoing hostile emotional tone between them that continues to erupt over time and in same patterns. In such a case, the conflict never gets resolved; the same patterns of angry confrontations are repeated over and over again with only temporary or often no resolution or changes taking place between the parents (Eugster, 2007).

In this scenario, improving the family's communication skills can be very helpful for both parents and children. Having effective communication between family members not only reduces negative interactions but also allows them to solve problems productively. Communicating effectively helps parents to tackle one issue at a time as it arises and prevents them from piling up and causing adverse action and reaction between them. Positive communication also helps every family member feel valued and understood. Using productive, respectful communication models and skills help them

become more effective communicators and problem-solvers (Stewart, 2011). Effective communication, which must be built on a foundation of trust, active listening and understanding, can lead to better relationships between the members of the family. Thus, the more effectively a family is able to communicate together, the better. It keeps the members open to share thoughts and feelings, coax expression out of the children and foster a safe home environment in which all members can feel comfortable and secure in their relationships. (Ireland, 2018)

Thus, this paper reviews the literature concerning parental conflicts and their effects on children's well-being. The article emphasises the value of effective family communication as an antidote to the impact of familial conflicts on the children's well-being, as well as on the import of intervening with parents in dispute to increase their consciousness of the consequences of their behaviours on their children.

2.0 What is Parental Conflict?

It is pertinent to look at the nature of conflict itself before venturing into what constitutes a parental conflict. Conflict as seen by Aina (2002), "is a situation of disagreement (or incompatibility) between two parties, characterised by the inability of those concerned to iron out their differences and this does not necessarily have to result in strikes" (p. 157). Juneja (n.d) believes that conflict arises when individuals strongly oppose each other's opinions and views which means that conflict happens when two people disagree based on their own goals, values, ideas, needs, beliefs, interests and are unable to find a mid way. Whenever two individuals opine in different ways, a conflict arises. In a plain language, conflict is nothing but a fight either between two individuals or among group members which sometimes happens because no two individuals can think alike; there is difference in people's thought process as well as their understanding.

Disagreements among individuals or between a husband and wife can lead to conflicts and sometimes result in a fight. According to Switzer (n.d), conflict can ignite from the smallest word or action and can spark negative responses and behaviours among parents, friends, etc. She further states that unresolved or poorly navigated conflict can damage and even destroy marriages and even healthy relationships. On the other hand, Switzer believes that dispute does not have to be destructive all the time, if handled effectively, conflict can contribute to stronger, deeper relationships and can help to address ongoing problems and concerns in homes, workplaces and society at large (Switzer, n.d)

Hence, parental conflict can be seen as a clash between a husband and wife arising out of a difference in thought process, attitudes, understanding,

interests, requirements and even sometimes perceptions. Parental conflict is not just a difference of opinion; it is a series of events that have been poorly handled by a lack of communication skills to damage the success of marital bliss or relationship gravely. Marriage issues can be aggravated to the point that stubbornness, pride, anger, hurt and bitterness prevent effective family communication. One can just put it that, parental conflict arises from lack of proper or adequate communication skills since, without effective communication, it is almost impossible to get on the same page with one's partner and keep the relationship buoyant or stress-free. A lack of communication can quickly cause misunderstandings, resentments and feelings which make couples emotionally far away or distant from each other.

It is good to point out that conflict itself is a healthy and necessary part of family life (Reynolds, Houlston, Coleman & Harold, 2014). According to Neilsen, (2017) parental conflict is not uncommon. However, when the conflict between parents is handled in destructive rather than constructive ways, it can have negative consequences both for the parents and their children (Reynolds, Houlston, Coleman & Harold, 2014). This is to say that, the conflict between parents can result in heated arguments, physical abuses and definitely loss of peace and harmony in the marital home. Parental conflict can change relationships. A husband and wife who are supposed to be best of friends can become foes as a result of conflict not adequately managed. Unfortunately, parental conflict does not only affect the couple and disrupt their relationship; it also negatively affects their children before, during and after the battle. Thus, a child's well-being may be quickly put in jeopardy if they continue to witness parental conflicts. Children can further become emotionally and psychologically damaged, putting them at risk for developmental and behavioural problems. Parents should, therefore, put the best interests of their children in mind ahead of any personal disputes.

3.0 Causes of Parental Conflicts

The essential nature of human beings is to avoid painful or unpleasant experiences whenever possible (Runde & Flanagan, 2007). Communication problems are often cited as one of the leading causes of conflict between couples. Indeed, marriage is all about relating to one another, and if parents are not communicating well, then the relationship inevitably suffers. In other words, communication is one of the most integral elements of any healthy relationship. When a couple loses the ability to communicate effectively, it can have severe consequences for their ability to maintain a stable commitment to each other. Even the most minor relationship issues can be puffed up by a lack of communication, undermining a relationship's very foundation. Reports from "Marriage and Family Therapists" often indicate that poor communication is a common complaint of families who are having difficulties

in their relationships. When communication is unclear and indirect, it can lead to numerous family problems, including excessive family conflict, ineffective problem solving, lack of intimacy, and weak emotional bonding (Peterson, 2009).

Burns (2017) citing Gottman, (1994) claims that the trait that is most closely linked to the success or failure of marriages is the ability to communicate and not just to talk but to effectively communicate. He cites six poor habits of communication that are detrimental to building intimacy and family living and more often than not, result in conflicts between parents. The poor habits of dialogue among couples are:

- a. **Harsh Start-Ups:** Harsh start-ups happen when one of the parents begins conversations with the other with criticism, accusations, or questions that put the other person on the defensive before regular communication can take place.
- b. **The Four Horsemen:** There are four horsemen in marital communication which are:
 - i. Criticism: which deals more with the character and personality of one's spouse.
 - ii. Contempt: which results from long simmering negative thoughts about one's partner that turn into disrespect. Hatred often arises from little, and at times legitimate, concerns about a spouse that are never addressed or go unresolved over long periods.
 - iii. Defensiveness: We all have a self-protection instinct. But, becoming defensive with one's spouse rarely helps to resolve conflict and typically reduces the conversation into a blame game.
 - iv. Stonewalling: This is a tactic usually seen in a spouse who does not want to yield any ground in a discussion. Men are frequently the culprit here. It is not unusual for a man to withdraw (sometimes physically) to his cave, cutting off communication for a time.
- c. **Flooding:** This happens when either of the parents bombards the discussion with negativity whether it is in the form of criticism, contempt, defensiveness or any other negative approach. Some people would call consistent nagging a type of flooding.
- d. **Body Language:** Communication experts tell us that excellent communication is more about body language (nonverbal) than actual words (verbal). One spouse can shut down the other by sending the clear

message by their body language or other nonverbal cues that they are not interested, are bored, angry, or have quit listening. Good examples of nonverbal communication are: crossed arms, angry glares (despite the tone of voice), a blank stare, rolling eyes, lack of eye contact, turning one's back to the spouse, etc.

- e. ***Failed Repair Attempts:*** A repair attempt is when a couple puts the brakes on the tension in their relationship that deescalates the conversation. There are times with intense communication where a couple needs to take a timeout. In a relationship that is not working, a failed repair attempt does not work at decreasing the tension or lowering the stress level. Constant failed repair attempts are like a stress fracture that keeps getting worse.
- f. ***Bad Memories:*** When a couple is consumed with negativity, it does not only affect their past, but it can place danger in their future. In almost all cases there are great and happy memories in every relationship, but if things are so negative that they cannot remember the good times, the link is deteriorating (Burns, 2017).

4.0 How Parental Conflicts affect Children

The notion that the marital relationship of the parents is pivotal to children's welfare has been a cornerstone of clinical and scientific literature in family psychology throughout the past several decades, up to most contemporary contributions (Bodenmann, 2013). A vast corpus of research has expressed increasing concern that children who witness destructive parental conflict may suffer substantial damage (Barletta & O'Mara, 2006; Buehler *et al.*, 1997; Cummings & Davies, 2010) which is to say that, children are vulnerable to the impact of conflict whether their parents are together, apart, or in the process of separation. How often the parents fight, how intense/angry/hurtful they are, and how long such conflicts last, are all factors in the child's adjustment and development. Conflict impacts how couples relate and the quality of the relationship between them and their children. Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Papp (2007), stress that higher conflict is reflected in more negative effects on the child. Thus, how couples handle their disagreements provides the model of conflict resolution that their children learn.

According to Sutherland (2014), children start to notice and react negatively to their parents' disagreements from an early age. From a very young age – as young as six months, some researchers say – children show distress when they witness their parents argue or fight. Their reactions can include fear, anger, anxiety, and sadness, and they are at higher risk of experiencing a variety of

health problems, amoral behaviours, disturbed sleep, and difficulty in focusing on any task and succeeding at school. Some children may “externalise” their distress in the form of aggression, hostility, anti-social and non-compliant behaviour, delinquency and vandalism, or “internalise” it in the form of depression, anxiety, withdrawal and dysphoria.

In families where there is a high level of conflict and animosity between parents, children are at a higher risk of developing emotional, social and behavioural problems, as well as difficulties with concentration and educational achievement. Frequent and intense conflict or fighting between parents also harms children's sense of safety and security which affects their relationships with their parents and with others (Switzer, n.d). The parental conflict that focuses on children is also linked to adjustment problems, mainly when children blame themselves for their parents' problems. Arguing in front of a child or badmouthing the other parent is hurtful to the child. High levels of parental conflict and poor parenting often appear at the same time. Each factor influences the other. This is true with married couples and even separated/divorced couples. Krishnakumar & Buehler (2000) report that the relationship between parental conflict and poor parenting was stronger among married couples. In either case, the harm to the child resulted from an increase in harsh discipline and a decrease in parental acceptance of the child. If the conflict is present then and continues through the divorce, the harm to the child magnifies (Krishnakumar & Buehler 2000). Children can develop difficulties when a conflict between parents is handled destructively. Destructive conflict includes physical or verbal aggression (Cummings *et al.*, 2000); sulking or the 'silent treatment' (Ablow & Measelle, 2009); getting caught up in highly intense or heated arguments (Cummings & Davies, 2010) and withdrawing or walking away from an argument. Children are particularly upset and unhappy when they or issues relevant to them are the subject of an argument (Amato, 2005; Shelton & Harold, 2007).

5.0 Effects of Parental Conflicts on Children'

Children who are exposed to conflict between parents are at a greater risk of a range of negative outcomes including: emotional and behavioural difficulties, have trouble getting on with others such as peers or family members, problems settling and achieving at school, sleep difficulties, and poorer health (Reynolds, Houlston, Coleman, & Harold, 2014). A common outcome of the destructive conflict between parents is the development of emotional or behavioural difficulties for children (Grych, Harold & Miles, 2003; Cummings *et al.*, 2006). Finger, Eiden, Edwards, Leonard & Kachadourian, (2010) view that children's social relationships can also be affected, with children manifesting or developing poor interpersonal skills (Finger *et al.*, 2010). As a result, children in high conflict homes may have difficulties getting

on with others, such as their parents (Benson et al., 2008), siblings (Stocker & Youngblade, 1999), teachers, peers (Parke et al., 2001) and, in the longer term, even in their own romantic partners (Cui & Fincham, 2010).

In addition, according to Troxel and Matthews, (2004) and El-Sheikh *et al.*, (2008), children who witness conflict between their parents are also at risk of a range of health difficulties, including: digestive problems, fatigue, reduced physical growth, and headaches and abdominal pains (Stiles, 2002). They may also suffer problems with sleeping (Mannering et al., 2011). These effects on children do not end there, they can extend into their school activities, with children less able to settle, more likely to have trouble getting on with peers, and less likely to achieve academically because of the impact of conflict between parents on children's cognitive abilities and attention (Harold *et al.*, 2007).

The conflict between parents is one of the critical factors that explain why other family difficulties, such as impoverished circumstances, parental depression or substance abuse, are also associated with poor outcomes for children (Du RocherSchudlich & Cummings, 2007). Difficulties in communicating between each other can put pressure on the couple's relationship, resulting in conflict, which in turn undermines parenting and the parent-child relationship, leading to adverse outcomes for the children (Harold & Leve, 2012).

6.0 Understanding family communication

Family communication refers to the way and manner in which verbal and non-verbal information is exchanged between and among family members (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller & Keitner (1993). Communication itself involves the ability to pay attention to what others are thinking and feeling. This means that communication is not just about what is said but listening to what others have to say is also very crucial. Peterson (2009) argues that communication within the family is essential since it allows members to express their needs, wants and concerns to each other. To him, open and honest discussion creates an atmosphere that enables couples or family members to show their differences as well as love and admiration for one another. Hence, it is through communication that couples or members of the family can resolve the unavoidable problems that arise in all families.

Just as effective communication is always found in strong, healthy families, so also poor communication is most of the time located in unhealthy family relationships (Peterson, 2009). Parental poor communication is associated with an increased risk of divorce and marital separation and inflicts behavioural problems on the children. A family lacking healthy discussion is like a ship without a rudder. It flounders even in calm waters and gets dangerously out of control in a storm. Avoid a 'person overboard' tragedy between parents; it is

vital to understand the importance of family communication. Proper communication in the family ensures that every member is heard, understood and valued (Blood, 2017). Thus, learning how to express feelings adequately can reduce the arguing and yell in a household as well as increase satisfaction and the sharing of opinions. When a family knows how to communicate effectively, all of the members of the house learn conflict management, problem-solving skills and the sharing of thoughts and ideas (Ireland, n.d).

7.0 Effective Family Communication and Strategies for Resolving Parental Conflicts

Communication, although indispensable, is not easy. Individual differences in personality, communication styles and skills and expectations all play a part in how well a family communicates. Sometimes it may seem easier to look the other way instead of approaching a family member or a partner with a problem. However, ignoring issues can cause more harm than good within the family setting and particularly among couples. Understanding the importance of effective communication reveals that while sweeping things under the carpet/rug may be more accessible, in the long run, it is not the wisest thing to do. One of the primary communication skills for resolving conflict successfully is learning how to navigate an argument effectively. This includes keeping the focus on a single issue and avoiding personal attacks. Switzer (n.d) stresses that resolving involves "addressing the real concerns" and "getting to the core of the conflict." This means that an effective communication skill for successfully resolving conflicts is to address only one issue at a time and avoid introducing other topics, even if they are related. It is good to specify what the concern is about, even if it takes some time to isolate the primary issue at hand. Also, parents in conflict should avoid attacking the other person or making accusations, which only lead to distrust and defensiveness.

Listening is another communication skill that parents should acquire to be able to manage their conflict well. Active listening skills, such as talking less and asking questions for clarity, also play a role in effectively resolving the conflict. To listen effectively is to make sure one understands what the other person is trying to say, restating that person's thoughts and feelings as needed. Active listening encourages others to continue interacting. As an active listener, one can demonstrate one's interest in what is being said using both verbal and nonverbal communication cues. Thus, practising strong verbal and nonverbal communication further contributes toward the successful resolution of conflict, whether between individuals in the family or within a group (Switzer, n.d). Strong verbal and nonverbal communication involves making appropriate eye contact, not using threatening physical actions, and verbally expressing how the situation makes you feel, instead of attacking or accusing the other person.

According to Juneja (n.d), communication has a significant role to play in conflict management; for him, the transmission has to be clear and precise to avoid conflicts. The thoughts should be carefully put into sensible and relevant words for the other person to understand well. Parents should never use words which might hurt the sentiments of each other and they should equally avoid using derogatory sentences. During the conversation, one has to be polite and convincing. It is essential that one makes one's point very clear but without shouting on others as he/she might feel bad and it might go against one. In other words, couples should always exercise a little patient and wait for their turn to speak.

A long time ago, Hess & Handel (1959) saw that family communication could be enhanced through telling stories, creating family rituals, communicating rules and roles, communicating intimacy and communicating control. To them, active family communication functions to maintain the constancy and stability of the family system. Other strategies of communication in the family include the following:

- a. **Reach an understanding:** When one can communicate with the family members, one is able to share what one believes and learn what others feel is right.
- b. **Solve a problem:** Since many issues between the parents arise because of poor communication, coming together to talk about the problems can open the lines of communication and solutions can be found on what is negatively affecting both parents.
- c. **End gossip:** The fact remains that family members do sometimes talk about one another and the details of the topic can be misconstrued. Asking the family member that people are gossiping about is a great way to open communication so that one gets the right impression about the situation.
- d. **Encourage support:** When a family communicates effectively, everyone understands the others' need, making them better able to provide support for each other. Even if nothing can be done about the situation, just providing a listening ear can make a whole lot of difference.
- e. **Form tighter bonds:** Trusting in family members by communicating with them fosters the love they share and tightens the family bonds. When problems do come up, if a strong communication base within the family is established, one would feel as though one's family is a safe place to seek shelter.

Furthermore, one of the significant advantages of family communication, as argued by Blood (n.d), is that, if parents effectively communicate in the home, it

stays with the children as they grow. Children learn how to listen effectively, express themselves freely, reserving judgement and showing empathy. They learn the right words to use when communicating with others and most importantly, they are able to develop skills that affect all of their future relationships, professions, education and personalities. In other words, when parents relate to each other calmly and positively even during a disagreement, solve the problem together, and show children through their subsequent interactions that the conflict has been resolved, the children may be unaffected and may even learn conflict-resolution skills, which they can apply to their relationships down the road, from such situations (Sutherland, 2014). Thus, modelling excellent communication techniques is a vital role for parents. When children see parents argue healthily, discuss their days, and actively seek to support one another verbally and non-verbally, they learn how to behave in their relationships. This means that children whose parents or families engage in this critical communication-enhancing ritual are more likely to enjoy the additional benefits of improved academic success and greater psychological well-being.

8.0 Conclusion

The differences in ideas and opinions of individuals result in conflicts which must be avoided to prevent its adverse consequences like stress, anxiety unnecessary tensions and most importantly the adverse effects on the children. Children are affected by mere exposure to parental conflict. Exposure to the parental conflict has a significant impact on children's emotional, behavioural, interpersonal, and even their physiological wellbeing. This means that familial conflicts bring stress and emotional distress to children of all ages, and can also increase their aggressiveness. Because conflict creates misery for children and is linked with the development of mental health problems in children, parental conflict is of societal concern and constitutes a significant social problem.

Understanding family communication is central to managing parental conflict effectively to avoid its negative impact on the children. Effective family communication skills, such as active listening, keeping the focus on a single issue and preventing personal attacks etc., are part of successfully resolving conflict among couples and family members. Many benefits come from learning to resolve disputes through effective communication. One significant advantage of using effective communication to resolve conflict is a reduction in anxiety, whether within a family or in the workplace. Thus, learning effective communication skills can help parents to avoid their ongoing stress and discomfort that often results from unresolved conflicts. If they communicate effectively between and among themselves, they are better able to navigate conflict, prioritise and strengthen their relationship. Parents are able to also, consider how best to address the dispute at hand and seek to understand the

situation from the perspective of the other person. In other words, successfully resolving conflict involves empathy, flexibility and maturity as much as it does effective communication within the family.

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