

Interparental Conflict

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Conflicts and disagreements naturally occur between parents in all family types. This publication provides information on several forms of conflict, how conflict impacts parents, and strategies to manage and reduce conflict situations. This is No. 1 in a series of five NebGuides addressing interparental conflict.

Introduction

The goal of this guide is to help parents understand interparental conflict, situations that increase interparental conflict, and the impact conflict has on parents.

What Is Interparental Conflict?

All families have disagreements. When disagreements occur between parents, whether they are in a romantic relationship or co-parenting separately, it is referred to as “interparental conflict,” or IPC.

As parents, our goal is to manage conflicts in a healthy way, try to reach a resolution, and keep children from being directly involved in the conflict as much as possible.



During IPC, adults typically use both negative (destructive) and positive (constructive) conflict strategies.

Destructive Conflict Strategies

Destructive conflict strategies are behaviors that serve to hurt the other person, either physically or psychologically. Destructive strategies vary in intensity and hurtfulness. They do not lead to resolution of conflict but rather

prolong the issues at hand and fuel the intensity of the situation.

Examples include:

- Bickering
- Snide, sarcastic comments
- Personal insults and attempts to belittle or embarrass the other person
- Ignoring or refusing to speak to the other person (called “stonewalling”)
- Screaming or yelling
- Hitting, shoving, slapping, or other physical attacks
- Throwing objects at the other person
- Slamming doors or breaking objects
- Expressions of intense anger, distress, or fear
- Making threats

Constructive Conflict Strategies

Constructive conflict strategies are behaviors that allow parents to express disagreement and work through problems without hurting one another.

Examples include:

- Speaking in a calm and respectful tone
- Stating clearly a personal position
- Actively listening to the other person’s ideas and avoiding interruptions
- Problem-solving and offering potential solutions
- Avoiding hyperbole (words such as “always” or “never”)
- Expressing praise or affection (e.g., smiling, hugging, compliments)
- Compromising (seeking a mutually satisfactory solution)
- Resolving the conflict by coming to some sort of agreement
- Speaking in “I” messages (e.g., “I am feeling scared . . .” or “I would like . . .”)

Using “I” messages can be an effective way of constructively communicating with the co-parent. “I” messages help



speakers to clearly state their point and take ownership of their feelings without speaking for the other person or putting that person down. An effective “I” message has several parts:

Name the feeling or emotion: “I feel upset . . .”

Name the situation: “. . . when you walk away while I’m talking . . .”

Name the consequence of the actions: “. . . because it makes me feel like you are not listening . . .”

Offer a suggestion: “Could we try letting each other know that we need a break before you walk away?”

“I feel upset when you walk away while I’m talking because it makes me feel like you are not listening. Could we try letting each other know that we need a break before you walk away?”

Most parents employ a combination of both destructive and constructive strategies in their disagreements.

Parents argue about many issues. However, research shows that the most common topics resulting in conflict include:

- Money
- Sex
- Chores/Housework
- Childrearing
- In-laws/Relatives

Situations That Increase the Likelihood of Interparental Conflict

Anything that *increases stress* in the family is likely to increase the frequency of IPC.

Periods of change, even when the change is “good,”



often mark times of heightened stress for families. For example, the following events commonly trigger increased stress, and thus increased IPC:

- Birth of a child
- Loss of a job
- Change in finances
- Moving
- Death or illness of a family member
- Children's entrance into adolescence
- Children entering school or going away to college
- Divorce or remarriage

The Impact of Interparental Conflict for Parents

Engaging in frequent destructive conflict with a co-parent can be detrimental to parents' health and well-being. It is difficult enough raising children with two cooperating parents!

Interparental conflict increases stress levels, which can result in physical as well as psychological health issues including:

- Poorer physical health (e.g., cancer, cardiac disease, chronic pain)
- Increased stress and fatigue
- Substance abuse
- Depression and anxiety
- Less happiness and lower life satisfaction

Reducing IPC and using more constructive conflict management strategies (e.g., compromise, problem-solving, listening, and "I" messages) can help parents be healthier. Decreasing the use of destructive conflict strategies helps to build trust and reliability between parents, paving the way for continued cooperation and communication moving forward.

Resources

The Gottman Institute

The Gottman Institute offers tons of information for couples looking to strengthen their relationship and decrease their use of destructive conflict strategies. <https://www.gottman.com>.

The Lost Art of Listening

This book provides practical guidance and exercises to improve active listening skills for reducing conflict and improving relationships with family members and romantic partners. Nichols, Michael P. *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*. Guilford Press, 2009. ISBN: 9781593859862

Using "I" Messages

This YouTube video shows divorcing parents how to use "I" messages. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNKk4f14VsI>.

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