

Interparental Conflict and the Parent-Child Relationship

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Conflict between parents can place stress on their relationship with the child. This publication offers strategies to reduce the negative “spillover” of this conflict to the child. This is No. 3 in a series of five NebGuides addressing interparental conflict.

Introduction

The goal of this NebGuide is to help parents recognize how interparental conflict can negatively impact children by disrupting the parent-child relationship. In the second NebGuide in this series, G2305, *The Influence of Interparental Conflict on Children*, we discussed the direct effect of interparental conflict (IPC) on children. Now we will discuss another way in which IPC impacts kids—indirectly by undermining the parent-child relationship.

The Indirect Effect of IPC on Child Security

Conflict with a spouse or co-parent can disrupt parents' relationships with their children. IPC is often stressful for parents, and it can be difficult to keep these negative emotions contained when transitioning to parenting.

The influence of IPC on parenting is called **spillover**. Spillover occurs when the negative emotions experienced



in IPC disrupt parents' ability to be present and supportive in the parent-child relationship.

What Does Spillover Look Like?

One way in which IPC can undermine parenting occurs when parents bring the anger, irritation, and hostility



problems as well as difficulties in school and in peer relationships. Remember, from a child's perspective, IPC is most worrisome when it leads children to fear that their parents can't manage conflict in ways that maintain family harmony.

Fathers and IPC



of IPC into their interactions with their child. Parents commonly describe themselves as having little patience or “a short fuse” following IPC. This can make it difficult to remain calm when their child misbehaves and to avoid feeling annoyed by the child's attempts to gain their attention. Parents may snap at their kids or yell at them more than they normally might if they weren't already angry and burnt out from IPC. Angry parents are also more likely to use harsh discipline strategies like spanking or yelling.

Another way in which IPC can negatively impact the parent-child relationship is by leaving parents too exhausted or stressed to be able to provide care. Some parents cry, storm out, withdraw to a separate area of the house, or snap at their kids to leave them alone. These are all signs that IPC is not only overwhelming the parent, but also leaves the parent with less energy to provide the support the child needs.

IPC can end up limiting children's access to the very people (the parents!) that they rely on most to help them feel safe. Thought of in this way, it is not surprising that many children remain “on high alert” even after conflicts between their parents are over. Parents may find that their child appears to be extra needy after an IPC, or more likely to misbehave. This may be the child's way of trying to ensure a parent's attention (even if it's “bad” attention) after IPC.

Spillover also helps to explain how IPC that parents are careful to keep behind closed doors can still have a negative impact on kids. Even if children do not directly witness IPC, the negative impact of interparental conflicts on parenting can lead to negative consequences, including mental health

There is some evidence to suggest that fathers may be more vulnerable to spillover from IPC. In other words, a father's parenting may suffer more than a mother's in families where a lot of destructive interparental conflict occurs. A father's warmth, support, and play help to promote healthy development for both boys and girls. It may be extra important for dads to be aware of how IPC impacts their parenting.

What Parents Can Do to Reduce Spillover

Manage stress and emotions before interacting with the child.

Parents can engage in stress-reduction activities **after** IPC and **before** interacting with their child. For some parents, this may be as simple as counting to 10 or taking a deep breath. For others, it may take a little more. Try some of the following strategies to see what works best:

- Utilize breathing techniques (e.g., deep breathing or paced breathing)
- Mindfulness meditation (e.g., paired muscle relaxation)
- A number of free apps provide short, guided meditations, including *The Mindfulness App*, *Headspace*, *Insight Timer*, and *Smiling Mind*
- Mindfulness is great for kids too! *Mind Yeti* is a free, kid-friendly app to help practice mindfulness breathing and attention.

- Exercise (e.g., engage in short, intense exercise or go for a walk to calm down)
- Reduce body temperature by using cold water (e.g., an ice pack, splashing water from the sink)

Create Opportunities for Positive One-on-One Time with the Child.



Read a book, play a game, share a meal, go for a walk. Do something that both enjoy. Showing children that their parents love and care for them, and that interparental conflicts won't change that, goes a long way towards helping children cope with IPC. Children need to see that interparental conflicts don't automatically throw the family into chaos. Plus, they will be reminded that they have strong, supportive parents available when they need them. Ideally, **both** parents have these positive one-on-one experiences.

Avoid speaking poorly about the co-parent.

When one parent criticizes or says cruel things about the other, it can damage the child's relationship with the parent being criticized. Keep in mind that children want a

relationship with both their parents, and they do not need to be aware of everything happening in the interparental relationship. Speaking poorly about the co-parent is another way of involving the child in conflicts that should stay between adults, which can hurt the child.

Resources

Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids

This book by a clinical psychologist provides a guide for more effective parenting via parental emotion regulation and how to connect emotionally with children. Markham, Laura. *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids: How to Stop Yelling and Start Connecting*. TarcherPerigee, 2012. ISBN: 9780399160288.

Stress Reduction Strategies

For more on stress reduction strategies, see: <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/distress-tolerance-dbt-when-you-reach-your-tipping-point-try-tip-0424175>

Parenting Your Child Effectively

G1729, *Parenting Your Child Effectively: My Plan to Improve My Parent-Child Relationship* can be found here: <http://extensionpubs.unl.edu/publication/9000016364786/parenting-your-child-effectively/>

Parenting the Positive Way

See the Parenting the Positive Way handout here: https://campus.extension.org/pluginfile.php/135385/mod_book/chapter/17656/Parenting_the_Positive_way.pdf

Our Relationship . . . And Parenting Through Conflict

G1808, *Our Relationship . . . And Parenting Through Conflict* can be found here: <http://extensionpubs.unl.edu/publication/9000016365265/our-relationship-and-parenting-through-conflict/>

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