

A Review Article on the Outcomes of Marital Conflicts on Child Growth and Development

Abhinandita Chakraborty^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Marital conflicts can have a significant impact on a child's development. Research has shown that children from households with high levels of parental conflict experience negative outcomes in terms of their cognitive and socioemotional growth. Adolescents from these homes are more likely to develop psychopathological problems. The review article analyzed the causal association between spousal relationships and behavioral problems in children with the help of rigorous literature review, and found that marital conflicts can be one of the potential causes of conduct issues among children. However, environmental and child-related factors can temper the impact of the conflict. The review offers a comprehensive look at the outcomes of parental disputes on youngsters.

Keywords: *Marital Relationship, Child Development, Conflict*

The main goal of this evaluative study is to investigate the impact of marital conflicts or strife on child development in intact families. The family is the primary setting for children to develop their social skills and is closely linked to their growth. Every couple of parents will experience some level of marital conflict while raising a family. One of the ongoing objectives of psychological research is to examine the progression and growth of children throughout their upbringing (Papp, 2012).

It is desirable for a child to be raised in a household environment that is joyful, loving, and guarantees a comprehensive and amicable growth of the child's character and individuality, as stated by the United Nations Convention on the "Rights of the Child" (Brockington et al., 2011). Witnessing marital conflicts is one of the most significant influences on how emotionally and behaviorally problematic children become as adults. According to research in the fields of family psychology and child development, the emotional maturity and stability of familial relationships are associated with the outcomes of children's development. Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that marital conflicts between parents will have a detrimental effect on their children's emotional and cognitive growth (Chi Liping, 2005; Cui Ying et al., 2018; Gerard et al., 2006; Narayan et al., 2014).

¹Post-Graduate Student, Department of Psychology, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

*Corresponding Author

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Additionally, parental marital disputes have an indirect impact on children's development through the cognitive-emotional processes of kids and family dynamics (Chi Liping, 2005; Chi Liping and Wang Geng, 2002; Cummings et al., 2012; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Zimet & Jacob, 2001), as well as a direct impact on kids' development. Children of divorce are said to find interparental conflict (IPC) to be one of the most stressful experiences in their lives (Wolchik, Sandler, Braver, & Fogas, 1986). Interparental conflict (IPC) can lead to loyalty conflicts between the parents, jeopardize the security of a child's continued affiliation with one or both parents, and reduce the responsiveness of the parents (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), all of which have the potential to induce a fear of being forsaken in the child.

When Edleson (1997) reviewed 31 studies on the topic of how witnessing adult domestic violence affects children's development, she discovered that those children displayed behavioral, emotional, and cognitive developmental issues. Edleson also pointed out that, in a small percentage of children, exposure to intense adult conflict is positively correlated with the emergence of psychopathological symptoms. Despite the possibility of experiencing negative consequences from being exposed to this type of family stressor, the majority of children continue to thrive and succeed in all areas of their development, including psychological and social development. As a result of the possibility that experiencing parental marital conflicts may aid children in acquiring some socialization skills, such as the ability to resolve conflicts in adaptive ways (Cummings & Davies, 1994). For instance, a young child may learn through observational learning the importance of making concessions and reaching compromises in personal interactions when they witness a contentious argument that ends in a compromise. On the other hand, children who experience marital conflicts may go through the same process of observational learning but end up with less adaptable socialization skills (Edleson, 1997). Accordingly, marital problems such as marital disputes and separation influence Development of the young one while heightening the chances of issues with acclimation (Amato, 2010; Kouros, Merrilees, & Cummings, 2008). This article will specifically examine the repercussions of parental marital strife on children's psychological health and societal advancement in relation to this.

Marital Relations

A marital relationship is referred to as the coming together of two individuals and encompassing aspects of joy, closeness, and dedication (Amidu, Owiredu, Gyasi-Sarpong, Woode, & Quaye, 2011). It is crucial for understanding how the family influences a child's development (Cummings & Davies, 2011). As a result, healthy marriages provide couples with fulfilling lives and have a positive impact on families and society as a whole (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007; Orathinkal & Vansteenwegen, 2006). Contrarily, marital issues, which lead to conflict and disagreement, can negatively impact family functioning as well as the health, happiness, and quality of life of married couples. They also pose a risk of affecting children's maturation in emotional and societal aspects (Cordova, Warren, & Gee, 2001; Harold, Aitken, & Shelton, 2007; Rhoades, 2008).

It is believed that a stable marriage with good qualities has an impact on how children develop socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. Although every couple hopes for a happy ending to their marriage, researchers recently found that the likelihood of experiencing marital dissatisfaction increases after becoming parents compared to the pre-parenting period (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). Even in healthy relationships, a couple who has just welcomed their first child will typically experience a decline in marital satisfaction (Schulz, Cowan, & Cowan 2006; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrère 2000). The consequences of

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the couple-child relationship are influenced by the increased responsibilities faced by the couple after the arrival of their first child, which is linked to increased parental stress and depression as well as a decline in marital quality (Lawrence et al., 2008).

Investigations have explored the relationship between the children and their violent behavior in their social settings because of witnessing conflict between parents in the home environment. Observing intense conflict in the home is one of the significant factors in the assessment of a child's aggressive conduct, according to Singer, Miller, Guo, Slovak, and Frierson's (1998) findings from a study that included 2245 children and adolescents. A study showed that if a child witnesses conflict in their parents' marriage, including physical violence or covert acts of aggression, they may emulate that behavior in their dealings with others (Kelly, 2000).

Blanchard conducted a study in Australia with a smaller number of young people and service providers from other relevant community organizations. According to service providers, aggression was one of the behaviors that kids most frequently displayed in response to marital conflicts. Many kids start modeling the aggressive behavior of their parents in extrafamilial social situations after seeing marital conflicts in the home. Additionally, research demonstrates that marital conflicts are more detrimental to children than divorce (Buehler, Lange, & Franck, 2007), making the frequency of marital conflicts important to consider as it can have a significant impact.

Connection between Marital Discrepancy and Child's Development Mechanism

According to current research patterns, it is clearly evident that the frequency and intensity of conflict in the marital relationship of parents has a significant impact on a child's mental and emotional growth, as well as their social and cognitive abilities. According to Davies and Martin's (2013) reformulation of the emotional security theory, increasing parental marital conflicts will negatively impact children's emotional security, which will lead them to adopt avoidance tactics to limit their exposure to the outside world. This will negatively impact their cognitive development. According to the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), children who frequently witness parental marital strife will pick up on their parents' aggressive behaviors and tend to believe that these aggressive behaviors are reasonable and acceptable so that they can grow in their own interpersonal relationships. Relationships (such as those between peers or siblings) exhibit similar behaviors, and non-adaptive interpersonal conflict resolution techniques develop. It is clear that parental marital conflicts hinders the emotional and social growth of children.

Parental marital conflicts may be detrimental to the development of children's executive function exhibition. According to Gustavson et al. (2015), impulse control, changing focus and short-term memory are the three main components of executive function. Earlier research has primarily concentrated on the outcomes of parental marital strife on specific aspects of children's executive function. For instance, Gustafsson et al.'s (2013) research discovered that children whose parents engaged in more physical conflict had worse working memory on a digit span test. Gustafsson et al. (2015) conducted a recent study that combined the three components of executive function (impulse control, concentration problems, and short-term memory) into a single variable and looked into the overall impact of parental marital conflicts on children's executive function. Research has shown that children who are exposed to parental marital conflicts may have a negative impact on their academic performance. This can happen for several reasons, such as increased stress and emotional distress, disruptions in the home environment, and decreased attention from the

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parents. In some cases, children may also experience difficulties in executive function, which can negatively impact their ability to succeed in school. In a cross-sectional study, Ghazarian and Buehler (2010) uncovered a fascinating connection between children's academic performance and their perception of parental conflict. The findings revealed that children's scores in subjects such as reading, language, math, society, and science were negatively impacted by the level of perceived conflict between their parents. In a follow-up study, King and Mrug (2018) discovered that children's academic performance two years later was significantly affected by witnessing parental marital conflicts. Additionally, a meta-analysis of parental marital conflicts and kids' academic success confirms this detrimental impact (Supol et al., 2020).

Davies and Windle's (2001) study showed that in families offering a strong supportive environment to children, the likelihood of child delinquency decreases, even if marital disputes are present in the family environment. The study utilized the Perceived Social Support from the Family Questionnaire to determine the level of perceived family support among adolescent males and females in the face of marital conflicts. The validity of this instrument as a practical tool has been well established (see, for instance, Windle & Miller-Tutzauer, 1992). A questionnaire with 27 items describing antisocial behavior, such as stealing, damaging property, or physically attacking another person, was used in the same study to assess delinquent behavior. Additionally, for the assessment of adolescent delinquent behavior, responsive options were used on a scale that indicated the frequency of the occurrence of the behavior. The study found that, despite being reported by the adolescents themselves and therefore having the potential for exaggeration or underestimation, a strong and positive relationship between parents and their children can act as a defensive measure against the negative effects of marital disputes on the child's behavior, particularly with regards to child delinquency. This was seen in both male and female children. Similar to this, the positive effects of parental support may offset any possible negative outcomes of observing marital strife on adolescents who grow up in homes where there is frequent conflict (such as engaging in antisocial behavior). However, it has been found that the relationship between violent behavior of children and marital disputes is stronger when adolescents, regardless of gender, are provided with adequate family support, which is needed for a child's overall development. In other words, strained relationships between parents and children may increase the risk of children committing crimes. According to this theory, seeing a marriage in conflict increases the likelihood that young people will commit crimes.

The available proof indicates that parent-child bonds play a crucial role in the emotional and behavioral growth of children, even in families devoid of matrimonial disputes. As an illustration, Field, Diego, and Sanders (2001) looked at a number of risk factors related to adolescent depression. A 24-question survey created by Blyth and Foster-Clark (1987) was used to evaluate relationships with friends and family. The Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977) which is a persistent and reliable measure (Schoenbach, Kaplan, Wagner, Grimson, & Miller, 1983; Wells, Klerman, & Deykin, 1987) to assess depressive symptoms. The emergence of adolescent depression may be influenced by strained parent-child relationships, according to research by Field et al. Even in households with positive family dynamics, a higher occurrence of self-reported depression was observed among adolescents who experienced difficulties in their relationship with their parents.

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A substantial body of literature supports the notion that children's perceptions of their parent-child relationship hold significant implications for their psychological and behavioral development, regardless of the quality of their parents' marital interaction, be it conflictual or harmonious.

Child's Dysfunctional Emotional and Social Development due to Parental Incongruity

Children's problem behaviors and social interactions serve as crucial indicators of their emotional and social growth (Thompson, 1988). Children also frequently engage in disruptive, obvious, and common aggressive and disobedient behaviors (Tremblay, 2000); these behaviors typically begin during the preschool years (Gartstein, Putnam, & Rothbart, 2012). Child behavior issues were defined as behaviors in children that are not adaptive or functional (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2004). Child behavior problems can be divided into two groups: internalizing behaviors, which are inward reactions to stress, anxiety, and social withdrawal, and externalizing behaviors, such as disruptive behavior, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness.

Studies have shown that children experiencing parental marital conflicts are at a higher risk of exhibiting externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and disobedience towards authority figures, as a result (Chi Liping, 2005; Philbrook et al., 2018) as well as internalized problem behaviors like anxiety and depression (Cao Yufei et al., 2017; Cui et al., 2007). Children who experience parental marital conflicts are more likely to internalize than externalize problematic behaviors (Philbrook et al., 2018; Rhoades, 2008). According to the follow-up study by (Gerard et al., 2006), marital disputes among parents not only have a short-term effect, making kids exhibit more problematic behaviors right away, but they also have a long-term effect, making kids exhibit more problematic behaviors five years later. The study conducted by (Cummings et al., 2012) lends credence to this long-term effect. Problem behaviors in grade 6 can be significantly exacerbated by parental marital conflicts experienced in grade 1. Similar to this, parental marital conflicts that occurred before the age of 64 months significantly and favorably predicted problem behavior at the age of 16 (Narayan et al., 2014; Yates et al., 2003). In addition, a meta-analysis of 74 longitudinal studies was performed, and it was discovered that longer measurement intervals showed a stronger correlation between parental marital conflicts and problematic behavior in children (Vu et al., 2016). This outcome could be attributed to the "sleeper effect," which states that children who have experienced parental marital conflicts may not initially display any overtly problematic behaviors, but over time, they will begin to do so; it could be as a result of cumulative effects, whereby a child's problem behaviors increase over time as a result of a long-term accumulation of parental marital conflicts.

The growth of children's teacher-student relationships may be negatively impacted by marital disputes among parents. By undermining children's sense of security in their parents' marriage and parent-child relationship, parental disputes may have an impact on children's teacher-student relationships by leading to more teacher-student conflicts (Coe et al., 2017). Conflict between the parents may also have an effect on the other social relationships that children have. For instance, parental marital conflicts have been shown to have a negative impact on children's adolescent romantic relationships (Li et al., 2020), and they have been shown to have an intergenerational transmission effect that can have an impact on a child's adult marriage or intimate relationship (Narayan et al., 2017).

Children who experience parental conflict are distressed, have negative emotional experiences, and are more likely to engage in conduct problems, delinquency, depression,

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anxiety, and other issues (Buehler et al., 2007; El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Mize, & Acebo, 2006), as well as sexual conduct problems (Orgilés, Carratalá, & Espada, 2015). Studies have indicated that children who experience high levels of marital disagreements between their parents are more likely to exhibit difficulties in developing their societal connections (Conger et al., 2000). In contrast, children from families with low levels of marital conflicts and happier marriages have been found to exhibit fewer behavioral problems and greater overall well-being (Amato, 1993; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Schoppe-Sullivan, Schermerhorn, & Cummings, 2007). As a result, families with low levels of conflict are less likely to experience behavioral difficulties in their children as they grow older.

Comprehensive Development of Children - The Physiological and Psychosocial Model of Marital Conflicts

According to Cummings et al. (2009), the influence of parental marital conflicts on a child's development may be significantly moderated by the child's age and gender. The effects of various forms of parental marital conflicts on child development are more thoroughly examined in a meta-analysis by van Eldik et al (2020). According to the findings, the age of the child played a different role depending on the nature of the parental conflict and particular facets of a child's development. The gender intensification hypothesis highlights the fact that as children get older, pressure on boys and girls to fit into traditional gender roles grows, while boys become more independent and girls become more concerned with maintaining interpersonal relationships. Due to this, as girls get older, they might be more susceptible to negative influences and more sensitive to parental conflict (Vu et al., 2016). According to Cao Yufei et al.'s (2017) study, parental marital conflicts have a stronger mediating effect on girls than it does on boys, making it more difficult for kids to satisfy their basic psychological needs and more likely for them to develop internalized problem behaviors. However, some studies have also discovered that both boys and girls are vulnerable after experiencing parental marital conflicts, though the signs of vulnerability differ between the sexes. According to Yates et al. (2003), parental marital violence more frequently causes internalization of problem behaviors in girls and externalization of problem behaviors in boys. Studies have shown that there is no significant difference observed in the impact of parental matrimonial disagreement on the growth and development of boys and girls (Davies et al., 2016; Vu et al., 2016). This indicates that both boys and girls are equally affected by conflict in their parents' marriage.

Research on how parental marital conflicts affect children's development has evolved over time, and now more attention is being paid to the critical role that physiological factors in children play in this process.

Further investigation is necessary to fully understand the physiological mechanism linking marital conflicts to child adjustment. The vagus nerve, a system that affects a person's heart rate, was the subject of a recent study by (El-Sheikh, Harger, & Whitson, 2001). The focus of this study was on a specific aspect of emotional regulation that involves this system. It was suggested that by comparing the differences in vagal tone between the normal state and conflict situations experienced by children exposed to verbal and physical conflicts between their parents, they could provide evidence for the idea that a higher vagal tone, which slows the heart rate and has a soothing effect on the child, acts as a safeguard for children experiencing marital disagreements. (El-Sheikh, 2001). The study revealed that a higher vagal tone provides protection against not only internalizing behaviors like anxiety, stress, and low self-confidence but also externalizing behaviors and general health problems. It also

shows that children who benefit from the physiological mechanism controlled by the vagus nerve, which results in a calming effect that lowers their heart rate, have higher resilience to the negative impacts of parental marital conflict. This is regardless of personal traits that the child may possess, as the calming effect is beyond their control. The findings of this study highlight the importance of recognizing the role of the vagus nerve in supporting children's well-being during challenging family circumstances. The relationship between parental depression and family functioning has been explored in several studies. Downey and Coyne (1990) reported that depression in parents can negatively impact family dynamics and affect children's adjustment.

Implication for the Development of Further Interventions

The findings of this study offer two recommendations to enhance prevention efforts for divorced families facing high levels of marital conflicts. Firstly, the results highlight the significance of improving children's coping skills to reduce their fear of abandonment. This can be achieved by promoting children's ability to reappraise their fears in response to marital conflicts. Instead of focusing on the parents' destructive argumentative behavior, try using a more positive strategy. For instance, programs could use statements such as "They are angry with each other, not me" or "They don't get along, but they still love me" to assist children in perceiving the conflict as less intimidating. Additionally, it's important to recognize that many children may feel their needs aren't being met after a divorce as they may be spending fewer hours in the company of one or both parents. Hence, the aim of the intervention should be to educate the child to differentiate between realistic and unfounded fears, and to teach them cognitive reappraisal techniques that they can apply to their specific situation. Furthermore, it's important to inform parents about common fears that children experience, such as the fear of abandonment, and to equip them with resources to be understanding and responsive to their children's needs.

Secondly, while previous research has shown that prevention programs that focus on positive parenting after divorce can reduce the risk for children but the current findings indicate that with even strong parenting, the damaging effects of marital disagreements on children may not be entirely alleviated (Forgatch & Degarmo, 1999; Tein, Sandler, MacKinnon, & Wolchik, 2004; Zhou, Sandler, Millsap, Wolchik, & Dawson-McClure, 2008).

CONCLUSION

This article presents a comprehensive overview of the existing research on the various factors that determine the effects of children witnessing their parents' conflict. The current work incorporates elements of the developmental psychopathology multi-dimensional approach described by Cummings et al. (2001). According to Cummings et al. (2001), the main objective of developmental psychopathology is to understand the interaction of complex processes that contribute to both typical developmental trajectories and the development of psychopathology. A more thorough understanding of those issues is made possible by the previous review of the literature. Poorer child outcomes result from more parental conflict, particularly when it involves hostile, violent, or aggressive behaviors or expressions. Parents can settle their conflicts and establish solid communication with their kids by learning effective communication and conflict resolution techniques. The child's age, gender, temperament, and past experiences should all be taken into consideration by parents when trying to resolve a conflict. It is equally important to observe children's emotions and behaviors, as well as how they interact. Parents can facilitate their children's understanding of the situation and promote language development by clearly communicating

the reasons for conflicts and expressing their own emotions (Herrera & Dunn, 1997). According to Xiao, Li, and Stanton (2011), open communication within the family and the expression of one's own perspective play a crucial role in the psychological adjustment of adolescents. As such, families should have a developmentally appropriate intervention plan. Additionally, it suggests that, in order to promote healthy child development, parents should receive support and counseling regarding how to handle stress and marital conflicts. A correlation was found between heightened marital conflicts and depression in both mothers and fathers, leading to increased internalizing issues in children (Cummings et al., 2005). Furthermore, a study revealed that conflicts with a depressing tone, like withdrawal and negative affect, in parents were related to their own depressive symptoms, which then predicted heightened child insecurity as demonstrated by their reactions to recorded parental conflicts (Du Rocher, Schudlich, & Cummings, 2007).

Further investigation is necessary to gain a clearer understanding of which children are most susceptible to the specific impact of marital conflicts and parental depression. The functioning of the family unit, including the marital relationship, may also be impacted by children. Future studies are also required to look into the dynamic, transactional relationships that exist between children's developmental outcomes, family functioning, and parents' mental health. The study of developmental psychopathology has the key objective of identifying the relationships between normal development and the emergence of psychopathology. The effects of parental depression on family functioning and children's adjustment have been noted, with research linking increased marital conflicts, parental depression, and child internalizing problems. In order to improve prevention and intervention programs, a sample that reflects the larger community should be recruited, and children who may be at risk for psychopathology should be identified. During the intervention programs clinicians should focus on educating children about adaptive coping mechanisms for stress in the home, with the goal of promoting both short-term and long-term outcomes. Although some coping mechanisms may be effective in the short term, understanding the underlying mechanisms of family stressors and their impact on child maladjustment requires further examination of children's regulatory processes. Additionally, reaction of children to conflict in their parents' marriage may also influence the couple's interaction and impact future marital conflicts interactions. Schermerhorn et al. (2007) suggest that it's important to understand how children's behaviors may impact the couple's dynamic and further contribute to marital conflicts. Therefore, it's crucial for clinicians and intervention programs to consider responses of children to parental marital disputes which may affect the ongoing dynamics of the parents' relationship and provide support and coping strategies for both the children and parents involved.

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