INTERESTING READING

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HOW PARENTS ARGUMENTS REALLY AFFECT CHILDREN

It is normal for parents to argue, but the way these disagreements affect children varies greatly. What can parents and carers do to limit the harm caused by their rows?

What happens at home really does affect children's long-term mental health and development. But it is not only the relationship between the parent and child that is important. How parents get on with each other also plays a big role in a child's wellbeing, with the potential to affect everything from mental health to academic success and future relationships. When parents shout and are angry with each other, when they consistently withdraw or give each other the "silent treatment", problems can arise.

UK and international research conducted over several decades through observations in the home, long-term follow up work and experimental studies, suggests that from birth, children exposed to conflict may have increased heart rates and stress hormone responses; with the knock on affect potentially being anxiety, mental health issues, self esteem issues, anger issues…

Infants, children and adolescents can show signs of disrupted early brain development, sleep disturbance, anxiety, depression, conduct disorder and other serious problems as a result of living with severe or chronic inter-parental conflict.

Children's academic performance can be affected by exposure to ongoing conflict

Similar effects are also seen in children who are exposed to ongoing but less intense conflict, compared with children whose parents constructively negotiate or resolve conflicts.

Nature or nurture?

The impact on children is not always as might be expected. For example, divorce - and parents deciding to live apart - has often been seen as having a particularly damaging and lasting effect on many children. But in some cases, it is now thought that it could be the arguments that take place between parents before, during and after a separation that do the damage, rather than the break-up itself.

Similarly, it has often been assumed that genetics play a defining role in how children respond to conflict. And it is true that "nature" is central to a child's mental health - playing a part in problems from anxiety, to depression and psychosis.

But the home environment and the "nurture" they receive there can also be very significant. AS PARENT/CARERS WE ARE SHOWING OUR CHILDREN HOW TO BEHAVE PROPERLY?! **Are you always happy with the example you set your children?**

Increasingly, it is thought that underlying genetic risks for poor mental health can be made worse - or better - by family life and the example you set.

The quality of the relationship between parents appears to be central, whether or not they are living together, or if the children are genetically related to the parents or not - for example, if they were conceived using donor eggs or sperm, or adopted.

Rows about children. What does all of this mean for parents?

First, it is important to recognise that it is perfectly normal for parents and carers to argue or disagree with each other. However, when parents engage in conflicts with each other that are frequent, intense and not resolved, children do less well. Even more so if the row is about children, for example where children blame themselves or feel at fault for the arguments.

These negative effects can include sleep disturbance and disrupted early brain development for infants, anxiety and conduct problems for primary school children, and depression and academic problems and other serious issues, such as self-harm, for older children and adolescents.

Children who feel isolated because of parental conflict can struggle to form relationships. For decades, we have known that domestic abuse and violence can be particularly damaging for the children involved. But parents don't even need to display volatile or aggressive behaviour towards one another for damage to be done. Where they become withdrawn, or express low levels of warmth for each other, children's emotional, behavioural and social development is also put at risk. **The problems don't end there.** Not only are children affected in their own lives, but research shows that bad relationships can pass from one generation to the next. **It is a cycle that needs to be broken if we want positive and happy lives for today's generation of children, and the next generation of parents and families.**

If you would like any further information please contact Family Liaison Officer, Thomas Harding Junior School.