



ParentingNI  
Supporting Families

# Report on the Long Term Effects of High- Conflict Parental Separations

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## Introduction

This is the second in a three-part series of reports looking into the effects of parental separation. The previous report, entitled “The Impacts of a Poorly Managed Separation: A Research Note on Parental Separation and Divorce” looked at the immediate impact of a parental separation on parents and children.

The primary focus on this report will be the impacts of parental separations which are characterized by long lasting, high levels of direct parental conflict. This report will draw on both academic sources and primary case studies. It is important to set out at the earliest possible stage that neither this report, nor Parenting NI takes a moral viewpoint on parental separation. Parenting NI recognises the difficult, complex and unique circumstances that each family faces in Northern Ireland. As such, none of the findings of this report nor the suggestions contained within should be misconstrued in order to justify or condemn parental separation.

In order to understand the lasting impacts of high-conflict separations, a number of key concepts must first be defined. The first is the term “parental separation”. In this report, parental separation can be formal such as a divorce. It can also be more informal, in the cases of parents who were not married. Parents that are considered to be separated for the purposes of this report are those who do not live together, even partially. While many of these will have court-mandated contact circumstances, many will not.

The second term to be defined is “high-conflict”. Conflict is a complicated and ambiguous term, and can mean anything from raised voices and caustic comments to actual physical violence. The precise type of conflict is relevant in examining the impacts of parental separation on children. “Conflict” cannot be seen as simply a monolithic value. Morrison and Corio (1999) attempted to quantify parental conflict, and used the following measurement:

“The frequency with which they and their spouse argue about each of nine topics: children, money, chores and responsibilities, showing affection, religion, leisure time, drinking, other women and the respondent’s relatives.”

However, this does not necessarily cover all potential aspects of parental conflict. Johnston (1994) noted that there were three aspects of conflict when looking at what she called “high conflict divorces”. These were:

- Domain: disagreement over finances, property division or access to children
- Tactics: How parents attempt to navigate and negotiate disagreements
- Attitudinal: Degree of negative emotional feeling or hostility between parents

It is therefore a mix of these that will determine what constitutes “high conflict” separation for the purpose of this analysis.

Finally, the third term that needs to be defined is “long term”. In the previous report, it was noted that parental conflict post-separation is typically most severe for around 12 months after the initial break. After this, most individuals are able to resolve major complications in approximately a year (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). Therefore, for the purpose of this report long-term high-conflict parents who separated more than a year previously will be the primary focus.

Now that these key terms have been established, the format of the report will examine the different types of conflict that can persist in high-conflict separations. It will then consider the impacts on parents, as well as children. It will conclude by briefly examining other contributing factors that may interact with high-conflict separations that might exacerbate or mitigate impacts. Finally, the context will be set for the final report of this series.

## Types of Conflict & Conflict Resolution

The previous report outlined the number of issues that could be the root cause of a parental separation. These include finances, moral disagreements or parenting ideals. Often, these issues continue to be the cause of post-separation conflict. The manner in which parents choose to attempt to resolve these disagreements (as well as new separation specific-ones like access to children) are typically the forms of conflict post-separation.

Dadds et al. (1999) identified three broad categories of conflict resolution. These were:

- Attacking: Being sarcastic, verbally abusive, angry;
- Avoiding: withdrawing from arguments, avoiding talking, becoming cool or distant;
- Discussing: trying to understand a partner’s feelings and reasoning tactics.

These conflict resolution types exist in a relationship before separation, but become acutely important. Separation is likely - even when relatively amicable – to increase opportunities for conflict and demand greater compromise. Thus, it is important to understand the impacts of the chosen approaches to conflict resolution. Conflict resolution styles fluctuate, and are not fixed. One parent may adopt a relatively relaxed style on one topic, but a more aggressive style for another. Equally, parents do not necessarily mirror each other’s style. McIntosh (2003) found that when post separation conflict does occur, it is more likely to be intense, compared to non-separated parents. This means that any amount of conflict in the parental relationship is likely to be emotionally damaging for both the parents and children.

Manifestly, the “best” option for conflict resolution is the discussing method. However, in many high-conflict relationships, this is not likely to be the method used. Instead, Mitcham-Smith & Henry (2007) found that high conflict separations were marked by parents’ inability to communicate civilly, long-term parental battles, and entrenched conflict. This is mirrored in the cases of parents who have sought the support of

Parenting NI. For example, one father who had been separated from his partner for around a decade noted that as a result of a communication breakdown and mutual antagonism, he had not seen his son for more than a year at the time of calling. He stated:

*“I just feel that [his ex-partner] is trying to ‘get back’ at me.”*

Destructive conflict – where parents are actively in conflict in a manner which children are consistently aware of – is highly damaging to both the mental health of parents and outcomes for children (Grych, 2005). While active verbal conflict is associated with negative outcomes for children, it is important to also recognise that withdrawal or avoidance via submission has a significant negative association as well (Goeke-Morey, Cummings & Papp, 2007). Negative conflict resolution techniques were found to have a negative impact on children aged 5-8’s perceptions and understanding of family relationships (Stadelmann, 2010). This means that children who experience these types of conflict resolutions are more likely to see families as less stable or secure.

Conflict is particularly harmful when the child perceives the argument to be “about” them. This increases the likelihood of the child self-blaming as being the “cause” of parental conflict, and Grych et al. (2000) noted that children who believe that they are the cause of the conflict may feel shame, guilt, and a strong desire to help resolve conflicts when they arise. When children attempt to intervene themselves to “stop” the conflict, it is likely to have negative outcomes for both the child’s own wellbeing and the family more generally. Generally, girls have been found to be more likely to self-blame, while boys tended to act increasingly aggressive in response to long-term and prolific parental conflict - Parent reports of greater overt conflict were significantly correlated with parent reports of internalizing problems in boys and externalizing problems in girls (Grych et al. 1992).

However, either gender can react in equally negative ways, for example in one case study provided by Parenting NI, one client’s 6-year old daughter had become angry and aggressive as a result of a 5-year-old separation with continued high conflict. In later ages, Davies & Lindsay (2004) found that the relationship between inter-parental conflict and child internalizing symptoms was stronger for girls than for boys. They found that girls tended to withdraw, whereas Cummings et al. (1994) found that boys associated marital conflict with threat, and thus were more likely to externalize problems often via anti-social or violent behaviour.

The main point to be drawn out from this research is that the exact type of conflict has a role to play, but the primary factor is the way in which parents resolve conflict. Where there is positive, discursive solution, children are least affected. Where there is disruptive, negative conflict, they are most badly affected. Siffert & Schwarz (2011) found that experiencing negative parental conflict resolution may undermine children’s ability to cope with negative emotions in a variety of situations. This supported the findings of older research, which noted that “the degree of parental cooperation, as well as the way in which former spouses resolved conflict, explained a significant amount of variance in children’s adjustment to divorce” (Camara & Resnick, 1989) who also found

that avoidant or aggressive conflict resolution was directly related to poorer child adjustment.

The following section will outline the impacts over the long-term of high-conflict separations. However, it is useful and important at several points of this report to recognise and highlight that separation in and of itself is not a sufficient predictor of poor outcomes for children. McIntosh (2003) noted that separation may be “helpful or harmful depending on whether it adds or removes stress from children’s lives, and this is supported by the experience of Parenting NI. This factor is primarily in the control of parents, and it is this advice that Parenting NI would ask parents to keep in mind when dealing with separations.

### Effects of conflict on Children

As discussed, the effects of ongoing, high level parental conflict on children can be very detrimental. In looking at this topic, Parenting NI collected case studies of parents who had sought support. These cases included parents with high levels of conflict, and who had been separated for more than a year. The cases covered a wide range of ages of both parents and children, as well as genders and backgrounds.

While the specific circumstances were different in each case, common problems were present in the majority. Parents reported that their children often developed behavioural problems, problems with relationships, they had poorer outcomes in school and were increasingly involved in anti-social or risky behaviour. One parent reported, that following an 18 month separation of a relationship that had lasted almost two decades that:

*“My son has had severe attitude problems since the separation. He is more aggressive, and he can’t be reasoned with anymore”*

Another parent, whose relationship had ended more than two years prior told Parenting NI:

*“My daughter [who is of primary school age] is really struggling to manage her emotions while at school. She has severe separation anxiety, and it is making it difficult for her to make and keep friends”*

Aside from the time since separation and the high-levels of current parental conflict, there were relatively few commonalities in these cases. Some had involved domestic violence, or substance abuse but many had not. It is important to highlight that the negative impacts on children is not limited to that are traditionally seen as “especially conflictual” separations.

The research on this topic backs up the experiences of Parenting NI. As early as 1987, Long and Forehand found that “children from divorce families whose parents display high levels of conflict show greater maladjustment than children from divorced families

whose parents display low levels of conflict”. This maladjustment can take many forms, for example educational attainment. Keith and Finlay (1998) found that children of divorced mothers on average completed around 2 years less education than their mothers. A study of Swedish siblings found conclusively that parental separation indeed has a statistically significant negative association with educational attainment in adulthood (Björklund & Sundström, 2002).

Additionally, research has suggested that “boys were more affected by parental separation than girls in terms of cognitive performance at 15 months, whereas girls were more affected than boys in terms of negative behavior with their mothers at 6 and 15 months” (Clarke-Stewart et al. 2000).

The institute for Family Studies (2018) found that “children from high-conflict homes are more likely to have poor interpersonal skills, problem solving abilities and social competence”. While conflict is harmful regardless of parent’s marital status, long term high-conflict separated parents pose a potential risk to children’s wellbeing.

A report by the Australian Institute of family studies (Qu et al. 2014) determined that children whose separated parents who reported a negative parental relationship over a period of four years were “most likely of all groups to have consistently low wellbeing and the least likely to have consistently high wellbeing”. This was also true for children whose parents reported a worsening of relationships.

Additionally, Jekielek (1998) noted that parental conflict “leads to a deterioration in parent-child relationships”, and that children tend to react badly to inconsistent disciplinary behaviours of parents with high levels of conflict.

There are physical health concerns as well. Fabricius & Luecken (2007) found that “the combination of high conflict and little time with the father exposes children to more risk than either one alone for long-term, serious physical health problems”. Children are more likely to feel high levels of stress in long-lasting conflictual parenting environments, and this often translates into increased risk of physical health concerns. These effects are cumulative, meaning that the longer the child feels stressed by parental conflict, the more severe the risks. Parenting NI’s experience mirrored this, as lack of contact, or irregular contact with the father of the child was an aspect of many of the case studies looked at in this report. One parent, whose ex-partner had infrequent contact noted that:

*“I am constantly at his mercy. He can just come and go as he pleases, and I’m left to pick up the pieces”*

Parental separation is also considered an “Adverse childhood experience” or an ACE. ACEs are negative, stressful events in a child’s life and were first codified in a landmark study by American healthcare provider Kaiser Permanente in 1995. ACEs are linked to an enormous amount of negative health outcomes for children, lasting into adult life. These include physiological impacts like higher suicide rates or depression, physical outcomes like higher rates of cancer as well as a number of other negative impacts.

One ACE is parental separation – the questionnaire used by the Center for Disease Control in the US (under whose authority ACEs were first studied) specifically asks patients if their parents were ever divorced or separated.

Other examples of the questionnaire are issues like drug use – asking if a household member was ever a problem drinker or alcoholic or a household member used street drugs. It also asks questions that may be associated with the worst elements of high conflict separations such as if their mother was “treated violently” or if they suffered physical or emotional neglect.

While parental separation is considered an ACE, it is important to note that having a single ACE does not necessarily have a major impact – around 40% of individuals in the original study reported at least 2 ACEs.

Their impacts are multiplicative, meaning the more you have the worse the risk. The relevance of this to long-term conflictual separations comes from the fact that neglect (or feelings of neglect), domestic violence and emotional abuse are also ACEs. Because having a “hot” conflict between parents increases the likelihood of these occurring, coupled with the fact that parents with high conflict have been found to be less effective parent’s increases risk of exposure to ACEs.

This is supported by findings that state that parents whose relationship is highly conflictual may be impacted negatively, with parents potentially adopting inappropriate parenting styles, for example “highly intrusive and hostile parenting through to lax, disinterested parenting, all of which are associated with negative developmental outcomes for children” (Reynolds et al. 2014).

While it is not surprising or unknown that there are negative consequences of divorce or separation on children, it is important to note that parental conflict has a uniquely damaging impact on children. McIntosh (2003) noted that “divorce does not have to be damaging ... and yes, enduring parental conflict places the odds against all children, in all families”. Equally, Amato (2000) noted that “for adults as well as children, the end of a highly conflicted marriage is likely to be followed by improvements, rather than declines, in well-being” if the levels of conflict subside, rather than continue.

Therefore, whatever the negative impacts of a separation might be (and it is possible that this is less than the damage of avoiding a needed separation in some cases), enduring parental conflict dramatically increases the likelihood of negative outcomes for children.

### **Effects of Conflict on Parents**

In many ways, the impacts of high-levels of long lasting conflict on parents mirror the impacts on their children. Divorce or separation are high-stress incidents, and this is exacerbated by high levels of conflict. The need, for example, to regularly attend court or having lengthy arguments will naturally have negative consequences on both the mental and physical health of adults.

The case studies provided to Parenting NI note that a majority of cases self-reported feeling:

- Worried/anxious (13 out of 15 cases)
- Stressed (13 out of 15 cases)
- Exhausted (12 out of 15 cases)

As well as a number of other negative impacts as a result of their high-conflict separation circumstances. Divorce or separation was found to have a link to negative outcomes for adults with regards to mental health and alcohol consumption (Richards et al, 1997).

Men in particular can suffer severe mental health risks as a result of a highly conflictual post-separation situation. Cantor & Slater (1995) noted that “Males may be particularly vulnerable to suicide associated with conflict in the separation phase”. While the conflict tends to reduce for most couples around a year post-separation, lingering conflict can thus prolong and increase the danger of suicide in parents, particularly men.

There are also a number of negative consequences for women following separations – Huax and Platt (2015) found that separation is likely to go hand in hand with higher rates of maternal depression and with higher rates of child behavioural problems. Additionally, a 2014 phone survey in the United States found that on average women reported less wellbeing post-separation than men. When this is coupled with the fact that women are often the primary carer for children, this impact can build.

These impacts are particularly important for parents who are in high-conflict situations as these effects are harder to mitigate if they are unable to resolve conflict.

Parents also run the risk of unintentionally transferring undesirable behaviour to their children by allowing conflict to continue long after separation. Theobald & Farrington (2013) found that “behaviours learnt in families where there is high conflict and dysfunctional communication may be indirectly associated with the inability to maintain strong, stable intimate relationships”. This includes the parent-child relationship, which may be damaged by high levels of parental conflict. Parents thus may suffer poorer relations with their own children, which in itself can be linked to a number of negative outcomes for both parent and child.

Amato (2000) found that adults and children from divorced families, as a group, score lower than their counterparts in married-couple families on a variety of indicators of well-being. For adults, this included education attainment, stress levels and health outcomes. There were a number of moderating and mitigating factors that reduce these negative outcomes, including “continuing discord between former spouses”. On the reverse, if continuing discord does not reduce, the likelihood of these negative outcomes increases.



The individual experiences of the parents who sought support from Parenting NI suggests that the impacts of long term, high conflict separation has a number of deleterious effects on the mental health of parents. One client noted:

*“I feel powerless and uninformed, [the involvement of social services and police] has been useless and stressful”*

Another parent described her experience:

*“I am having panic attacks, and can’t sleep. I don’t feel able to trust people and am afraid to leave the house. The stress has cause me to lose hair, and I don’t feel like I am living my life”.*

Additionally, in the cases of parents who sought support from Parenting NI, the levels of conflict tend to get worse rather than better as time passes. All but two of the cases stated that they felt that the issues had gotten worse over time. Because of the direct link between negative outcomes and parental conflict, this suggests that the issues can rapidly progress to intolerable levels if not addressed.

## Conclusion

It is not particularly controversial to suggest that long lasting high levels of parental conflict is bad for children and adults alike. Research is unambiguous in stating that the longer that conflict persists, and the higher the intensity of conflict during that time, the worse the outcomes. However, it is equally undeniable that most parents are aware of the damage that this situation does to themselves and their children. No parent seeks to put their child in a harmful or stressful situation, but the emotional or material factors of the separation may lead to unintended harms.

Every separation is different – and the circumstances that cause pervasive conflict in one relationship cannot be assumed for another. Therefore, solutions must take dynamic and bespoke forms where possible in order to mitigate conflict.

In the next, and final report on this topic, strategies to mitigate or overcome conflict will be examined. Examples such as family mediation, as well as parenting tips will be put forward to parents as potential conflict reduction techniques and programmes.