

Emotional harm – understanding the possible implications of sustained parental conflict upon children

Approximately 3 million of the 11 million children in England will experience parental separation/divorce during their childhood. Around 10% of separated parents in England use the courts to resolve contact disputes. For the majority of children, parental separation is a time of conflict and emotional instability, but this is usually short-lived and the child settles down to follow a normal pattern of development. For a small but significant minority though, family breakdown can cause long-term emotional harm, particularly if there is serious and continuing conflict between the parents.

Risk factors for emotional harm:

Financial instability

Economic hardship can affect child outcomes and increase marital conflict, maternal ill-health and poor-quality parent-child relationships.

Serious inter-parental conflict

Especially when this is in the presence of the children. This threatens the emotional security of the child and can influence their views about family structure and relational commitment. Destructive, unresolved inter-parental conflict can be extremely damaging, particularly if the child witnesses conflict and subsequently gets caught up in conflicts of loyalty.

Lack of parental cooperation

Emotional problems can be exacerbated by the unreasonable behaviour of a parent e.g. implacable hostility towards the other parent, or the child being directly hostile to the non-resident parent.

Parental mental health problems

Maternal mental illness in particular, can adversely affect the child's emotional stability

Family transitions

These can include parental repartnering, acquiring step-siblings and large extended families can make a difference to outcomes. This is known as the 'Instability Hypothesis'.

Lifestyle and location changes

Events such as moving house, changing schools and adopting routines can adversely affect children.

Loss of emotional support

Loss of emotional support from family members, e.g. losing contact with grandparents (usually the parents of the non-resident parent) and aunts, uncles and cousins.

Negative outcomes for children:

(Note: this is a range of factors and many of them depend on the circumstances of the family prior to family breakdown. They cannot be considered in isolation)

Decreased educational attainment.

In longitudinal studies, children who have experienced parental separation are more likely to have poorer literacy and numeracy skills. (Cautionary note: this may be related to the socio-economic background of the family rather than the separation itself).

Social problems.

Girls are more likely to cohabit/marry earlier and tend to become parents much earlier. Children of divorced families are more likely to experience marital breakdown themselves.

Behavioural problems.

Children repeatedly exposed to marital conflict, even in utero are more likely to experience behavioural problems. Related to this, children who have experienced family breakdown are more likely to be involved in substance misuse.

Emotional problems.

Emotional frailties of a parent can impact on the emotional stability of the child. This can lead to a small but significant gap in child wellbeing.

Economic hardship.

Family breakdown may lead to single-parent families moving to a smaller house in a poorer area. This can impact on the child's life chances if, for example, they opt not to go to university.

Protective factors against emotional harm

Emotional stability.

A more emotionally stable, resilient and confident child is more likely to cope better with familial change. Children that employ active coping skills, such as problem-solving and gathering social support tend to adjust better to family breakdown than those that employ distraction or avoidance techniques.

Effective parenting.

Warm, authoritative and effective parenting can protect children from negative outcomes. Children who retain a warm, close relationship with their non-resident parent are more likely to achieve positive outcomes. The quality of the relationship is more important than the quantity of contact for the child's emotional wellbeing. Positive parenting from the resident parent is more important than the same level of parenting from the non-resident parent.

Parental collaboration.

Parents who work together to ensure the best outcome for their child are more likely to achieve positive child adjustment. Alienated children are less likely to adjust positively to family change.

Staggered repartnering.

Transition is aided if parents repartner at different times, not simultaneously. It is recognised that children need a period of 'emotional recovery'.

Financial stability.

This ensures that the child does not experience a dramatic and possibly detrimental lifestyle change.

Mental health.

Stable parental mental health, particularly maternal mental health.

Family and friend support.

Interpersonal factors –support from family (particularly grandparents) and friends.

Structural stability.

Staying at the same school and not dramatically changing the child's routine.

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