

# THE STABILITY AND QUALITY OF THE PARENTS' PARTNERSHIP AS A CONTEXT FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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## SUMMARY

The breaking up of parents' partnership has long been recognized as an important risk factor for children's development. Among the many stressors which precede, accompany, and follow on from parental separation and divorce, inter-parental conflict plays a particularly salient role as a risk factor which undermines children's well-being and has long-term consequences for their adjustment to the parental break up. This paper discusses empirical research evidencing the detrimental effects of inter-parental conflict not only on divorced families but as well as on nuclear families. In the light of such evidence, available support services and prevention programmes for separated families are briefly reviewed. It is argued that policy and practice should pay more attention to children's needs in conflicted family contexts and should improve conditions for children's healthy development. Among the six measures which are recommended in order to achieve this aim, the implementation of successfully evaluated prevention programmes is particularly emphasized. Focusing on children's needs, such programmes should strengthen mothers' and fathers' parenting competencies; they should reach out to heterogeneous target groups and should be adjusted to the needs of families experiencing high levels of recurring legal conflict. Furthermore, issues of building and maintaining a strong partnership should be systematically included in parenting programmes.

## INTRODUCTION

Parents' partnership has long been recognized as an important factor that influences children's development – be it as resource or as risk factor. There is little doubt that children thrive when two mutually committed and loving parents jointly care for and invest in their offspring. However, the likelihood of these conditions occurring is changing. Most prominently, in the light of the obvious changes in partnership stability, considerable public and scientific attention has been paid to the effects of parental divorce on the children involved. Since the 1970s, when the “Golden Age of Marriage” started to decline, marital instability has increased considerably across many countries. Within Europe (EU-27), the crude divorce rate (number of divorces per 1000 inhabitants) doubled between 1970 and 2010 (Eurostat, 2013). At the same time, marriage rates have declined, cohabitation has increased, and a rising number of children are born to unmarried parents. In the U.S.A the percentage of births to unmarried women has increased more or less steadily since the 1960s, peaking in 2009 and leveling off since then to 40.6 percent in 2013 (Curtin, Ventura, & Martinez, 2014). Other countries show similar trends. Although unmarried childbearing increasingly occurs in cohabiting unions, such unmarried unions are at high risk of breaking up (e.g. Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006), even when joint children are involved (Bastin, Kreyenfeld, & Schnor, 2012; Schnor, 2012). Thus, it is no longer only the instability of parents' marriages but also the instability of unmarried unions which has become an issue for children's well-being.

In the meantime, a wealth of studies has accumulated, all seeking to describe and explain the impact of parental divorce on the children involved (for an overview see Amato, 2010). As these studies enabled researchers to build a

more differentiated picture of the factors that undermine or support children's well-being in the context of partnership breakup, other factors of the inter-parental relationship came into focus. In particular, inter-parental conflict and cooperation emerged as prominent factors which are likely to affect children's well-being. Hence, qualitative features of the inter-parental relationship became salient issues not only in research which focused on the adults' perspectives on partner relationships, but also among developmental and clinical child psychologists who seek to trace the significance of partnership relationships for parenting and child development (Grych & Fincham, 2001).

Building on these interconnected yet distinct lines of research, this chapter aims to emphasize and explain the salience of conflict and cooperation between parents for children's development. The chapter begins by providing an overview of the relevant perspectives, models, and findings in research on children and youth in divorced and separated families. Then the focus turns to the role of inter-parental conflict, and addresses the quality of co-parenting between a child's mother and father. Finally, the prevention programmes and support services that aim to improve the inter-parental relationship in separated families will be outlined. To sum up, it will be argued that more attention should be paid to the quality of the inter-parental relationship, not only in research but also in European policy and practice.

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE

Over the past decades, large numbers of studies have contributed to a refined understanding of how parental divorce may affect children's and adolescents' well-being and their developmental trajectories up to adulthood. Such research has looked at a wide variety of outcomes including emotional well-being and mental health (e.g. Strohschein, 2005), behaviour problems and delinquency (e.g. Burt, Barnes, McGue, & Iacono, 2008), cognitive competencies (Sanz-de-Galdeano & Vuri, 2007), academic achievement and educational attainment (e.g. Francesconi, Jenkins, & Siedler, 2010), and their life-course trajectories with respect to home-leaving, employment and earnings, partnership stability, and early childbearing (Cherlin, Kiernan, & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). In order to systematically build on these many empirical studies, several meta-analyses have sought to integrate the available evidence on the differences between children who experienced their parents' separation and those raised in nuclear families (with both biological parents). In an update of his earlier work, Amato (2001) inspected empirical evidence from studies mostly conducted in the U.S.A during the 1990s and found overall consistent evidence for disadvantages experienced by children from divorced families when compared to children in nuclear families, even though the effect sizes were rather small. Furthermore, evidence from research conducted in Europe was analyzed in a recent meta-analysis (Amato, 2014) which covered 17 studies, including investigations that have focused on behavioural and emotional problems, educational achievement, health problems, substance use (alcohol and tobacco), risky sexual behaviour, delinquency and attachment security. Almost all of these studies reported poorer outcomes for children with divorced parents than for children with continuously married parents. Across all studies, the mean weighted effect size (-.17) proved small and very similar to the overall effect sizes from the American studies. Accordingly,

Amato (2014, p. 15) concluded "Irrespective of national and cultural characteristics, the gap between children with divorced and continuously married parents is about the same on both sides of the Atlantic."

At the same time, there is considerable variability in findings across studies and countries (Amato & James, 2010). While some authors stress the dramatic consequences which parental breakup may have for the wellbeing of their offspring (Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1988), others highlight the coping potential of children from divorced families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Considerable cross-country differences were revealed by the large-scale PISA assessment of academic competencies among 15 year old adolescents. In the case of Germany, the data did not suggest any disadvantages for youth in single parent families when compared to those in two-parent families, whereas marked differences emerged in other countries such as the U.S.A (Ehmke, Hohensee, Heidemeier, & Prenzel, 2004). Even within countries, findings are not entirely homogeneous. For example, in line with the PISA data, several studies based on large samples in Germany did not find higher levels of depression, impaired self-esteem, more problems in peer relationships, or increased behaviour problems among children and adolescents from separated single-parent families when compared to nuclear families (Walper, 2002; Walper & Wendt, 2005, 2007). Similarly, a recent German study looking at young children whose parents cohabited but were not married when the children were born did not reveal increased emotional or behavioural problems among those who experienced parental separation compared to those whose parents' partnership remained intact (Walper & Langmeyer, 2014). However, other research conducted in Germany reported increased emotional and behavioural problems up to two years after the parents had separated (Schmidt-Denter, 2000), a higher likelihood of insecure attachment to parents among young boys in single-parent families (Gloger-Tippelt & König, 2007), and – in a clinical sample – more conduct disorder among youth raised in separated single parent families (Steinhausen, von Aster, & Goebel, 1987).

In seeking to account for such variability in the findings, researchers have long pointed out that divorce is not a uniform single event but typically comes with other stressors triggered by the dissolution of the parents' union. This *divorce-stress-adjustment perspective* views disadvantages among offspring from separated families as being caused by divorce-related stressors and differences in coping resources (Amato, 2000). Prominent divorce-related stressors are economic problems, reduced contact with the non-resident parent, and conflict between parents, e.g. about child custody and child-support payments. Several findings suggest that a large share of the disadvantages which were identified for children in single parent families can be explained by the higher risk of inadequate financial resources (see also Amato, 2010; McLanahan, 1999), at least in countries where divorce is a risk factor for economic disadvantage (Garriga & Härkönen, 2009). Support has also been provided for the important role of inter-parental conflict: Compared to the effects of divorce, inter-parental conflict seems to have broader and stronger effects on the children and adolescents involved, undermining the quality of the parenting, the children's relationship with their parents, and their well-being in many domains (Walper & Beckh, 2006; Walper, Kruse, Noack, & Schwarz, 2004). Furthermore, elevated levels of emotional and behavioural problems

among children in divorced families could largely be accounted for by the higher prevalence of intense conflict between separated parents (e.g. Schick, 2002). Among children with separated parents, more negative trajectories of children's development were linked to the greater severity of problems in the parents' post-divorce relationship (Schmidt-Denter, 2001). And healthy outcomes were found to be most likely when divorce helped parents to minimize or even get over their conflict and acrimony (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). However, separation and divorce do not necessarily lead to a decrease in conflict. Highly conflicted former couples often continue to be involved in violent disputes and may take their case to court many times – conditions which prove particularly stressful for their children (Johnston & Roseby, 1997).

Interestingly, while public discourse emphasizes reduced contact with the non-resident parent as one of the major risk factors for children of divorce, the evidence concerning its disadvantages for children's well-being is less conclusive. In a meta-analysis, non-resident fathers' parenting quality proved to be more strongly linked to several features of children's well-being, while frequency of contact was only very weakly linked to child outcomes (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Obviously, the amount of contact is less important than the quality of interaction during jointly shared time. Furthermore, compared to nuclear families, children in separated families seem to profit less from their non-resident fathers' involvement in their upbringing (Carlson, 2006). One likely interpretation refers to the overall low rate of contact which may not enable non-resident fathers to make a significant contribution to their children's well-being. At the same time, frequent contact may not only promote children's positive experiences but may also confront them more strongly with the problems which exist between their parents. Indeed, some findings show that conflict among separated parents is more likely to undermine children's well-being when children have frequent contact to their non-resident father than if such contact is rare (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Kalmijn, 2016). Finally, even if there is a positive link between non-resident fathers' involvement in their children's lives and the well-being of these children's, the causal link is far from clear. A large study on adolescents in separated families even suggested that such links did not reflect the positive effects of paternal involvement; rather it seemed that adolescents' emotional or behavioural problems discouraged fathers' involvement (Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007). Despite such findings, issues of contact play a major role in legal disputes, and frequent contact is increasingly supported by family law, especially in countries like Belgium or Australia which promote the equal sharing of parenting time for separated parents, i.e. a dual residence model for children.

In contrast to the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, the *selection perspective* cautions against overestimating the causal role of separation/divorce and alerts us to the common factors that precede parental separation and contribute to the stress experienced by their offspring. Relevant factors are parents' personality problems, low socio-economic resources, problems in the parents' partnership, but also genetic factors which may contribute to similar problems in parents' as well as children's social behaviour (Amato, 2000; Garriga & Härkönen, 2009). Support for the selection perspective comes from prospective longitudinal studies which provide us with information about family characteristics and children's development even prior to parental

separation (e.g. Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986; Cherlin et al., 1991). Many of these findings suggested that disadvantages in children's development can already be observed several years before their parents decide to separate. Such pre-separation disadvantages often account for the differences that are observed later when children or adolescents from now separated families are compared with their age-mates in stable nuclear families (Sanz-de-Galdeano & Vuri, 2007). But they may not be the only source of strain among children from divorced families. Other data suggest that pre-separation disadvantages (i.e. selection effects) as well as additional stresses caused by their parents' separation contribute to lower levels of well-being among children whose parents have split up (Cherlin, Chase-Landsdale, & McRae, 1998; Cherlin et al., 1995; Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, & Kiernan, 2005).

## THE ROLE OF INTER-PARENTAL CONFLICT AND CO-PARENTING

While some degree of conflict is common in most families and can be seen as a normal part of negotiating individual needs in family life, conflict can be played out in quite different ways. It may be rare or frequent, it can be more or less intense, it may involve not only verbal but also physical aggression, and it may finally be resolved or continue for a long period of time, be it as repeated outbursts, constant nagging or "silent treatment". Such variations in inter-parental conflict are not only important in understanding the heterogeneity among children with separated parents, but have also proven important for children in nuclear families (Grych & Fincham, 2001).

Much attention has been paid to the effects of children's exposure to domestic violence, i.e. the experience of physical or sexual assault between the parents, most frequently with the male parent being the perpetrator. A meta-analysis of 60 studies showed that exposure to domestic violence was not only linked with children's internalizing symptoms and externalizing problem behaviours, but also – and even more so – to children's trauma symptoms (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008). Boys' externalizing problems seemed to be more strongly affected by domestic violence than girls', be it because boys are more likely to model their father's physical aggression, or because boys are more likely to react by acting out when stressed, or because they are more often exposed to violent disputes between their parents than girls (who may – wrongly – be seen as more vulnerable by their parents). There is some evidence for each of these points. In evaluating children's well-being in the context of domestic violence, it has also to be taken into account that domestic violence is a strong risk factor for child abuse and neglect (McGuigan & Pratt, 2001). Not surprisingly, co-occurring child abuse was found to contribute to children's emotional and behavioural problems over and above domestic violence (Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003).

Not only physical aggression between parents has an impact on children's well-being, but exposure to verbal aggression in inter-parental conflict also seems to be important. As pointed out in the cognitive-contextual framework, children's experiences and interpretations of their parents' conflict are important triggers for their reactions. The level of threat that children feel when their parents argue as well as the blame they put on themselves in seeking

to find reasons for their parents' conflict seem particularly relevant. Both have emerged as salient factors that explain elevated levels of internalizing problems among children who experience inter-parental conflict (Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000). Longitudinal evidence is particularly important in clarifying the direction of the effects across time, because – similar to many other domains of family life – causal links could work both directions: Inter-parental conflict may not only contribute to children's problem behaviour but could also be triggered by children's difficult behaviour. Such longitudinal evidence suggests that inter-parental conflict does play a causal role by contributing to an increase in the perceived threat and self-blame experienced by children which, in turn, are linked to children's specific reactions. While the perceived threat predicted increased internalizing problems, self-blame contributed to more externalizing behaviour (Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003). Hence, children's appraisals shape their reactions.

Even if children do not directly witness their parents' fights, inter-parental conflict is likely to affect the family climate and thus undermine this major resource for children's well-being. As shown by many studies, inter-parental conflict is likely to spill over into the quality of parenting by reducing parental warmth and positive affection, distracting the parents' attention away from their children's needs and whereabouts, and triggering harsh, irritable parenting (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Erel & Burman, 1995). Thus, problems in parenting and an impaired quality of parent-child relationships have been pointed out as an important explanation of children's increased problems in conflicted homes.

A third view of inter-parental conflict suggests that the toxic effects of parental arguments are most prominently rooted in children's psychological and physiological stress and their emotional insecurity caused by the inter-parental conflict. Among the many functions that parents have to serve in raising their children, is to provide a secure base and safe haven for their children's development. However, inter-parental conflict is likely to undermine children's emotional security in the family system by weakening the levels of the parents' sensitivity and care (which form the foundation of the system) and by demanding overly high levels of alertness to what is happening between parents (Davies et al., 2002; Walper et al., 2004). Given children's dependency on and loyalty to their parents, they may try to stop their parents from fighting, may seek to distract them from their argument, or may be forced to escape to be safe from harm. In any case, children caught in strong inter-parental conflict have little secure ground to stand on.

The content of parents' arguments matters too. Inter-parental conflict about their children's behaviour or parenting issues seems particularly stressful for children. Such conflict may be seen as an indicator of problems in co-parenting, i.e. parents' cooperation and alliance in child rearing (Feinberg, 2003). Positive co-parenting is characterized by a high degree of cooperation, little differences in parenting behaviour and attitudes, little disagreement about parenting, and the absence of mutual sabotage or undermining the other parent's influence on the child. Across the phase from infancy to adolescence, dysfunctional co-parenting has been shown to contribute to internalizing as well as externalizing problem behaviours of children (e.g. Baril, Crouter, & McHale, 2007; Caldera & Lindsey, 2006). Furthermore, a high quality of

co-parenting was found to be linked to children's development as a distinctly positive factor, even when controlling for individual parenting or marital quality (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).

Such evidence not only helps us to understand the risks to children's well-being in conflicted families. It also provides important guidelines for designing support services and prevention programmes for these families. The next section briefly addresses such approaches before the chapter closes with a number of recommendations.

## **SUPPORT SERVICES AND PREVENTION PROGRAMMES FOR SEPARATED FAMILIES**

In legal disputes following parental separation, family courts seek to solve problems and arbitrate the dispute between parents. However, other services are often needed to prepare, support or substitute for legal decision making. For example, since many of the cases repeatedly taken to court focus on contact and parenting time, some countries (e.g. the U.S.A) involve parent coordinators to allow for intensive case management in working on parenting plans (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2004). In most cases, such alternative routes of problem solving are preferred over legal disputes in order to avoid the risk of escalation.

Mediation is a major tool to promote consensual decision making among conflicted parents (Emery, 2011). It is mostly offered by lawyers or psychologists who are trained in both professional fields (family law and psychological counseling). Mediation is broadly available and even mandatory for separating parents in some countries (e.g. in Austria). In a structured setting with rules for communication, the neutral mediator aims to explore parents' needs that are expressed in their conflicting positions and helps to negotiate a solution that best fits each party's interests. However, violence or an imbalance of power between both former partners typically provides a contraindication. While agreements derived from mediation have been shown to be better accepted and more stably adhered to by parents than decisions by the family court, the evidence on the positive effects of a mediated solution on children is weak. Mediation does not typically involve issues of parenting and does not necessarily include children's perspectives. Hence, it provides only a limited tool where children's well-being is concerned.

Counselling for separating or divorced parents, high-conflict therapy (Lebow, 2003) and child therapy (Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001) may provide more targeted tools to address issues of inter-parental conflict dynamics and children's social and psychological problems in this context. These approaches are particularly well-suited to giving attention to the emotional and cognitive factors which compromise parents' and children's well-being and allow for a deeper treatment of the individual psychological problems involved.

In the U.S.A, psycho-educational prevention programmes for divorcing parents have become very common over the past twenty years. Using a group setting, such programmes prove efficient in providing information to parents and, building on the benefits of mutual exchange between parents, many promote



active participation and networking. However, these programmes vary considerably in length, content, and in the methods used. While some simply offer one short session to inform parents about the legal procedures involved in getting divorced, others are designed to provide more in-depth guidelines for parenting and learning experiences for parents in the context of separation and divorce. The following major aims of such more intensive programmes have been pointed out (Grych, 2005): to reduce inter-parental hostility in managing conflict, convey the message that conflict should not be fought out in front of children, strengthen the parent-child relationship, sensitize parents to the risk of putting pressure on the child to side with one parent against the other, improve children's coping competencies, and help to avoid dysfunctional cognitions among children (e.g. self-blame). For example, the New Beginnings programme which involves 11 sessions for separated parents who live with their children proved successful in reducing the risk of children's problem behaviour over six years, particularly in the context of high environmental stressors and elevated levels of children's problem behaviour prior to the interventions (Dawson-McClure, Sandler, Wolchik, & Millsap, 2004).

Whereas such prevention programmes are widely available in the U.S.A, they are often missing in other countries. Building on experiences from the U.S.A, we developed the programme "Looking Out for Our Kids" (LOOK; German: "Kinder im Blick") for Germany. This programme is comprised of six sessions, each three hours long, and is offered in two parallel or sequential groups in order to include former partners in separate groups. It aims to improve parents' well-being, their parenting competencies, and to reduce inter-parental conflict. It is highly structured, involving a distinct topic for each session, practical demonstrations and training in role play, guided self-reflection, and group discussions. It received a high level of acceptance by the parents, even by those who were sent to take the course by the court or other agencies instead of participating voluntarily (Retz & Walper, in press). Furthermore, parents' well-being and children's ability to cope with parental separation improved more strongly than in two control groups (no treatment, regular counselling or mediation) (Krey, 2010; Walper & Krey, 2011). The effects on parenting were more obvious in parents' self-reported changes than in pre- or post-comparisons, and inter-parental conflict could best be reduced when both parents participated in the programme. Overall, this programme provides a useful approach to supporting separated parents, even when their relationship was highly conflicted. It is now widely implemented in Germany and is often recommended by family courts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the available evidence clearly shows that inter-parental conflict is a substantial risk factor for children's well-being in separated as well as in nuclear families, in practice it has not received sufficient attention in many European countries. In order to improve conditions for children in conflicted family contexts, the following measures are recommended:

- 1 Available and successfully evaluated parenting programmes which aim to support separated families in working to reduce inter-parental problems and acrimony need to be widely implemented. Even though

- many separated families are able to work out solutions on their own, the proportion of those who are less successful in coping after they have separated is fairly large. The range of services offered for those in need of professional support has to be expanded, going beyond classical counselling and mediation to allow for a stronger focus on children's needs.
- 2 The impact of these programmes in reaching out to the target groups and in stimulating the desired changes has to be systematically evaluated over the long-term. Such evaluation research should try to provide solid and differentiated evidence that can be used to decide which programme should be offered under which conditions. Accordingly, the evaluation should allow for differential analyses of certain subgroups.
  - 3 Furthermore, it may prove necessary to refine available programmes or develop new approaches to suit the target population in a given region. For example, the increasing ethnic, cultural, and religious heterogeneity due to migration may require an adaptation of well-established services and programmes to be appropriate for the various groups. Such adaptations have to be systematically evaluated to increase the knowledge base about successful programmes.
  - 4 In designing and evaluating such programmes, special attention needs to be paid to highly conflicted families. Whereas some programmes offer special groups for parents in a high-conflict relationship, our own experience suggests that these parents may well profit from a heterogeneous group setting which is not restricted to parents in similarly stressful and difficult conditions. However, there should be more systematic research evaluating such alternatives.
  - 5 Issues of co-parenting and building a strong partnership should be more systematically included in (universal) parenting programmes. Early prevention programmes which address families with infants or toddlers seem particularly well-suited to establish such approaches, which not only focus on the parent-child relationship and parenting competencies, but also strengthen the resources of a satisfying, supportive partnership. Since these reach families at an early point in the family cycle, the likelihood of true prevention is high since partnership problems should be less likely to have become chronic than in later phases. Yet, such efforts should not be at the expense of investments in other phases of family life. In particular, school age and adolescence are important periods that profit just as much from a positive parental partnership. Since partnership counselling or therapy are often approached only when problems have become chronic, the regular inclusion of partnership issues in parenting programmes may help to reach relevant target groups at a sufficiently early point in family and partnership development.
  - 6 Finally, since partnership problems show up early in violence perpetrated during dating in adolescence, suitable prevention programmes (see Hickman, Jaycox, & Aronoff, 2004) should be devised and implemented for this age group.

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