



2 How Conflict Affects the Children

The separation itself is not as upsetting to children as the conflict and confusion that may surround it.

- While children react to conflict in different ways, they are likely to experience fear, worry, and anger. If the conflict is extremely intense, they may experience emotional trauma, depression, and stress.
- Children are sensitive to conflict. They spend time and energy worrying about the conflict between you and the other parent. They are exposed to all sorts of emotions during the conflict, and “soak up” the emotions around them, especially when the arguments are centred on them.
- No one feels safe in the middle of unresolved conflict. Even if the conflict is between the two parents, the children may feel it is aimed at them, or that it is their fault.
- In some cases intense conflict between parents can have long-term consequences on the children. For example, it may have a negative impact on their ability to form healthy, trusting relationships with future partners.

When there is a conflict, children may react in some of the following ways:

1. Playing one parent against the other

Children learn different ways to get their needs met. Instead of asking for what they want, they can become indirect and manipulative. At the extreme, they become focused on themselves and fail to learn empathy and compassion for others. Playing one parent against the other can become more of an issue as the children get older.

2. Telling parents what they want to hear

- Children may say the same thing to both parents. For example, children may tell each parent: “You’re the one I want to live with.”
- They might try to please both parents because they are afraid of rejection.
- They might try to please both parents because they are afraid of hurting each parent.

3. Taking more responsibility than they can handle

- Children may feel they have to look after one or both of their parents, or their siblings. They may become very involved in a parent's life at the cost of giving up their own.

You can encourage your children to talk about how they are feeling. You can also make sure you do not discuss adult concerns with them.



4. Falling apart emotionally

- On the outside the children may seem calm and act "normal", but on the inside they may be falling apart. If there is no safe place to talk about their anxieties and feelings, children keep them hidden.
- Children may become emotionally disorganized or "unhinged." They might not be able to balance their emotions, make sense of life, and have normal, meaningful relationships.



Example:

Bill made it a rule that whenever his son Dean was spending time with him, he would only use his middle name, Sean. This is a name Dean had never used when the parents were living together. His dad did not allow Dean to mention his mother. It was as if his life with his mother did not exist.

Dean felt that part of him was not acceptable to dad. He hated cutting off part of his life when he went to stay with his father. Dean became seriously depressed and attempted suicide.

It is important to support the children's relationship with the other parent.

If a parent is alienating a child in an extreme way, consider counselling for that child.

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Violence affects children who witness it

- It is abusive for children to have to witness violence.
- Children who witness family violence often act the same way as children who have been abused themselves.
- To say, "I only hit my partner – I never hit the kids," does not mean the children are not affected.