

Supporting evidence for myth busting slides

Practitioner training: digital resources for reducing parental conflict

What does the evidence show? Myth busting

Further evidence to accompany the myth busting slides in OnePlusOne's practitioner training slides (see slides 9 and 10 in "Slide deck for two-day practitioner workshop").

Myth: Children are better off in intact families no matter what.

Fact: High-conflict intact families can be more harmful than low-conflict separated ones.

Evidence: Regardless of the family structure, it's *destructive conflict* that is most damaging to children. Although there are often greater levels of conflict in families approaching or going through separation, staying intact isn't always the best choice, especially when destructive conflict is prevalent. When their parents' co-parental relationship is not characterised by conflict, children tend to have better psychological outcomes like commitment in their own relationships in adolescence or adulthood, satisfaction, and stability (Braithwaite, S. R., Doxey, R. A., Dowdle, K. K., & Fincham, F. D., 2016).

The more conflict parents have when their children are young, the weaker the relationship will be between fathers and their adult children (Kalmijn, M., 2015). This suggests children are not better off in intact families, but rather in families that display low-conflict whether separated or not.

Myth: Separation ends parental conflict.

Fact: Conflict often continues or worsens after separation.

Evidence: One of the biggest predictors of co-parenting relationship quality is the quality of the intact relationship. Studies show parental conflict is much higher among separated families, with 2-8% of mothers reporting frequent conflict while intact and an increase to 17-30% of conflict once separated (Lucas, N., Nicholson, J. M., & Erbas, B., 2013).

It is only when there is a decrease in interparental conflict following divorce that a child feels feelings of relief and a decrease in loneliness (Finkelstein, I., & Grebelsky-Lichtman, T., 2022).

Children from separated families are more likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantage, have psychologically distressed parents, and be exposed to higher levels of parental conflict than those from intact families (Lucas, N., Nicholson, J. M., & Erbas, B., 2013).

Feelings of anxiety are higher among children experiencing parental conflict in intact families compared to those whose parents have separated (Bannon, S. M., Barle, N., Mennella, M. S., & O'Leary, K. D., 2018). The quality of the relationship is more important than the status.

Myth: Children don't notice conflict unless it's physical.

Fact: Emotional tension and verbal conflict also have long-lasting effects.

Evidence: Parents' conflict resolution styles during the child's first year of life matter for their development. Negative styles such as anger, depression, and compliance, relate more to internalising problems, like the child feeling sad and depressed. Positive styles, like constructive resolution, were linked to fewer externalising problems such as showing anger (Craft, A. L., Perry-Jenkins, M., & Newkirk, K., 2021).

Moreover, children who believe they caused their parents' conflict or feel responsible for ending or resolving conflict may blame themselves for the separation (Allan, R., 2016).

Myth: Shared care always leads to better outcomes.

Fact: High conflict can make shared care harmful to wellbeing.

Evidence: Shared care is less beneficial when there is high parental conflict. In these cases, sole care can be more beneficial as it keeps the child's best interests at heart (Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A. K., Matthijs, K., & Swicegood, G., 2013).

In these situations, professionals recommend parallel parenting, which is when co-parents avoid contact with one another, as an important strategy for reducing a child's exposure to conflict (Allan, R., 2016).

High exposure to interparental conflict is associated with social and emotional adjustment problems among adolescents from divorced families. This is shown by a negative correlation found between interparental conflict and the adolescent's sense of wellbeing (Finkelstein, I., & Grebelsky-Lichtman, T., 2022).

Myth: Children in single-parent or stepfamilies are always at higher risk of poor mental health.

Fact: Socioeconomic status plays a major role. While these children may face greater challenges, outcomes are also linked to socioeconomic disadvantage.

Evidence: Children from single-parent and stepfamilies show poorer mental health outcomes across various domains, but when socioeconomic status (SES) is controlled for, many of these differences diminish or lose statistical significance — especially for younger children (Lucas, N., Nicholson, J. M., & Erbas, B., 2013). This suggests that it's not family structure alone, but the social and economic circumstances surrounding families that often drive disparities in child wellbeing.

References

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