

When Mom and Dad Fight, Jack and Jill Can't Sleep

AUBURN, Ala., Feb. 9 - When parents fight, children lose sleep over it. And when parents fight with hostility or treat each other with indifference, the negative effects on children can be long lasting, reported investigators in two studies.

In separate research published in the January/February issue of *Child Development*, investigators at Auburn University here and colleagues found that eight- and nine-year old children from high-conflict homes didn't sleep as long or as soundly as kids from more harmonious homes.

The data suggests that even in families with normal levels of conflict, parental arguments and anger can disrupt children's sleep, said Mona El-Sheikh, Ph.D. "This is significant because even mild loss of sleep can disrupt attention, alter information processing, weaken motivation, increase irritability and diminish emotion control," she added.

In a separate but thematically related study, psychologist Patrick T. Davies, Ph.D., of the University of Rochester (N.Y.) and colleagues found that in households where parents treat one another either with hostility, or with disengagement or indifference, children have significantly heightened distress reactions, even when the parents treat the children warmly.

"Our results highlight the possibility that several different types of conflict between parents may negatively affect the well-being of children over time," said Dr. Davies. "Conflict between parents may have distinct meanings and implications for the child and family system even after considering the effects of parenting difficulties."

In the sleep study, Dr. El-Sheikh and colleagues looked at marital conflict as a predictor of the quality and quantity of sleep in 54 healthy eight- to nine- year-olds in the community.

The investigators asked mothers, fathers and children to report separately on marital conflict. They measured the quantity and quality of the child's sleep on seven consecutive nights using an actigraph, a lightweight device the size of a wristwatch that the child wears during sleep. The actigraph measures sleep onset time, sleep end or morning awakening time, total sleep minutes, sleep duration, and percentage of deep sleep.

The authors found that "increased marital conflict was associated with disruptions in the quantity and quality of children's sleep as well as subjective sleepiness, even after controlling for child age, ethnic group membership, socio-economic status, sex, and body mass index ($p < .05$)."

Kids from higher-conflict homes tossed and turned, fidgeted, and woke up significantly more frequently than their peers in more tranquil homes. Children from turbulent homes also said they were sleepier during the day.

The relationship between domestic conflict and poor sleep was particularly strong when the children reported that their parents fought frequently, intensely, and without resolution.

The results, the authors wrote, support the sensitization hypothesis, which holds that children who are chronically exposed to high levels of parental conflict have greater emotional and behavioral reactivity in response to conflict, and have a range of psychological problems.

Dr. El Sheikh said that the data from her study have "implications for how parents manage conflict and how they help their children understand and cope with it."

In the second study, Dr. Davies and colleagues examined the question of whether different modes of destructive conflict between parents played different roles in the reactions of children who witness it.

The investigators followed 223 six-year-olds and their parents in two sets of paired sessions performed one year apart. They interviewed both parents and the child together, and the mother and the child alone in two interviews. The parents were asked to try to "manage and resolve two common, intense interparental disagreements that they viewed as problematic in their relationship."

The researchers also observed parent-child interactions during play and clean-up tasks, and recorded the children's responses to a simulated telephone argument.

They found that "interparental hostility was associated ($p < 0.05$) with all three domains of child reactivity (subjective emotional reactivity, overt behavioral reactivity and negative representations of the

interparental relationship) across one of the two measurement occasions."

The results confirm those of an earlier study by Dr. Davies and colleagues, which found that when the parents behaved with hostility toward each other, the children were more likely to be highly emotionally reactive and to have "negative internal representations of interparental conflict."

They also found that when parents disengaged or withdrew from each other, it was significantly associated with negative internal feelings by the child about interparental relations, and was also associated with increases in subjective negative behaviors in response to conflict over the course of the year.

Dr. Davies said that over the long term, the stress of witnessing parental hostility or withdrawal, or both, may have an affect on their overall development by changing the way that they respond to parental conflict.

Action Points

Understand that children from homes with high levels of interparental conflict may suffer from interrupted sleep and poor quality sleep, which can in turn negatively affect their behavior and learning.

Be aware the children from families where the parents are openly hostile to one another or withdrawn from one another may have significant negative feelings about their families and about marital relations.

By Neil Osterweil, Senior Associate Editor, MedPage Today
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