

Book review

Harold, G., Pryor, J., Reynolds, J. 2001. *Not in front of the children: How conflict between parents affects children*. London: One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research, The Wells, 7–15 Rosebery Avenue EC1R 4SP. pp 79, £9.99. ISBN 1 874207 10 0

This book will be of great interest to all those working with children and families. It describes what is known about the impact of interparental conflict on child health and development. It draws on research to formulate implications for policy and for practice. For those who are interested in the research evidence, the book is well referenced, and for those who just want to know more about the subject, it is very easy to read. There are boxes illustrating some of the more important concepts in greater detail and clear summaries of the key points in each chapter.

Chapter one defines what it is about conflict that matters. It makes clear that conflict is a normal part of family life and that what is important is how it is handled. A key message here is that ‘closed doors’ do not fool children, and that withdrawal or giving the ‘silent treatment’ are detrimental as well as physical and verbal aggression. This chapter includes a useful table about the different methodologies used to research the topic and outlines their strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter two describes the aspects of child health and development on which conflict impacts: behaviour, emotional well-being, social competence academic achievement and health related

lifestyles. Chapter 3 looks in greater detail at possible mechanisms. Chapter 4 covers the inter-relationship of conflict and separation. The authors quote a small number of studies suggesting that children from high conflict families fare better after separation, and, because the separation causes an escalation of conflict, those from low conflict families fare worse. There is also a section on conflict in stepfamilies.

Chapter five focuses on the reasons why some children are more affected than others. Children’s temperament, developmental stage, coping strategies, sibling relationships, parental mental health and family stresses all play a part in determining the extent of the impact of conflict.

The final chapter discusses the policy and practice implications. Three ways of helping to protect children are outlined: improving the handling of marital conflict, parent education and support, and support for children who are experiencing family conflict. The results of trials of some of these programmes are presented and the pros and cons of different approaches discussed.

All in all, the book provides an excellent overview of a health problem which deserves more attention. By disseminating the results of a growing literature in such an accessible way it will itself play a part in protecting children from this problem.

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