

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Joseph Baker

Why You Shouldn't Fight in Front of Your Kids

You may think they don't notice. But they do. And scientific research has proven that children whose parents fight in front of them suffer emotional and physical challenges.

Dr. Baker wants parents to understand that what they say in anger isn't just hurting their relationship with their spouse: It may be damaging their children as well. Even subtle put-downs and negative attitudes can erode a child's sense of security and self-esteem.

Parental fighting doesn't just affect young children. According to a study by researchers from the University of Notre Dame, the relationship between parental discord and emotional security increases as children move into adolescence. The term "emotional security" refers to the way youngsters deal with problems (*Child Dev* 2006;77:132-52).

Although teens may appear more mature and able to accept parental discord, observing parents fighting has a cumulative effect. Children who experience longer-term marital conflict than younger siblings have more adjustment problems (*J Fam Psychol* 2003;17:339-50).

Dr. Baker understands that many parents don't comprehend the effect their words and actions have on their children. They might not even realize that what they term "discussing" is actually bickering, or that they are doing it in front of their children.

Dr. Baker is concerned about this behavior because chiropractic acknowledges the connection between emotional and physical health. For instance, emotional stress heightens the risk of developing vertebral subluxations, dysfunctional areas in the spine that are linked with an abundance of disorders from back pain to

Parkinson's disease. Dr. Baker corrects and prevents vertebral subluxations with specialized maneuvers called **chiropractic adjustments**.

The **chiropractic lifestyle** involves addressing the whole person, which means respecting the connection between the mind and body and its role in wellness. That's why Dr. Baker has focused this week's **Optimal Health University®** on why you should not fight in front of your kids.

Sleepless Nights

Even a moderate degree of parental conflict — such as subtle, belittling comments and "silent treatments" — can disrupt children's sleep, according to a scientific research study.

The 8- and 9-year-olds involved in the study had the quantity and quality of their sleep monitored by an actigraph. Worn for seven consecutive nights, the device resembles a watch and records a digitally integrated measure of the wearer's movements.

The study's results are sobering. Children in families with moderate to severe levels of conflict lost approximately 30 minutes of sleep per night (*Child Dev* 2006;77:31-43).

While 30 minutes may not seem like a



great deal of sleep for an adult, it is to a growing child. Youngsters who are sleep deprived may be irritable the next day and even develop symptoms that mimic attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Missed sleep is also linked with psychological disorders, such as anxiety and depression, an elevated risk of developing behavioral problems and poor performance in school.

Learning and Emotional Problems

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh have discovered that marital conflict dilutes parenting skills. Again, leading to behavioral and learning problems in children (*Clin Child Fam Psychol* 2004;7:29-57).

Depressed mothers also have a higher risk of marital discord and stress than nondepressed mothers. The result? Their children tend to have more emotional and behavioral problems (*Child Dev* 2003;74:1158-75).

Heightened Sensitivity

Children can become so "shell shocked" by witnessing conflict that they perceive even mild disagreements conducted in normal tones as fighting. For instance, you may hear a child insist that you "stop yelling!" even-

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though your voice is only slightly raised. This hypersensitivity is a characteristic of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Worse yet, this sensitivity has a cumulative effect. In other words, the longer a child is exposed to marital discord, the more “thin-skinned” he or she becomes to it.

To prove this theory, researchers from the University of Rochester and the University of Notre Dame conducted a 12-month study involving 223 6-year-old children and their parents. Children whose parents displayed frequent disagreements in their relationship responded to subsequent parental conflicts with elevated distress and negative thoughts (*Child Dev* 2006;77:218-33).

The worst part? These responses weren’t limited to the short term. Researchers noted that children continued to exhibit symptoms of distress and negative thoughts a year later. It’s also interesting to note that it didn’t matter whether parents were openly or passively hostile to each other. Both methods of negative conflict resolution were linked to lingering sensitivity in children.

Impairs Children’s Friendships ...

Research reveals that marital conflict sparks the same degree and intensity of aggressive behavior in boys and girls. However, each gender displays the aggression differently. Girls are more likely to express aggression verbally, using denigration and gloating, whereas boys are more likely to display physical aggression (*Child Care Health Dev* 2005;31:11-23).

The good news is that parents can reduce violent and aggressive behavior in their children. “Perceived parental disapproval of the use of violence may be an important protective factor against youth involvement in violence,” say researchers (*Pediatrics* 2006;117:441-7). Of course, a child won’t heed this disapproval if he or she continually sees Mom and Dad resorting to aggressive and violent behavior. That’s why it’s so important that what you *say* and what you *do* are consistent.

...And Future Marriages

Because children whose parents fight in front of them are more sensitive to conflict in their own marriages, they tend to either fly “under the radar” — avoiding anything that even remotely appears to be fighting — or mimic their parents’ behavior.



Based on a national study of 297 parents and their married offspring, researchers from Pennsylvania State University confirmed that parents’ marital discord has a negative impact on children’s future marriages. The parental behaviors most likely to predict problematic marriages in the next generation included jealousy, moodiness and “silent treatments” between spouses (*J Pers Soc Psychol* 2001;81:627-38).

Set a Good Example

Exposure to parents’ destructive conflict tactics and negative emotions increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior in children. On the other hand, “constructive conflict tactics and positive parental emotionality decreases the probability of aggression.” (*J Abnorm Child Psychol* 2004;32:191-202.)

While you should avoid fighting in front of your children, it is important not to isolate children from positive conflict resolution. It is vital that children see that their parents have different opinions and work together toward compromise in a peaceful, supporting manner. Children whose parents avoid discussing any differences of opinion

in front of them may grow to avoid confrontation at any cost, exhibit passive-aggressive behavior, tend never to “stick up for themselves” or become “emotional doormats.”

Research demonstrates that when parents use effective conflict-resolution skills, it teaches children valuable communication tools (*Pediatrics* 2006;117:441-7).

Erin Brown-Conroy, author of *20 Secrets to Success with Your Child* and *My Kid is Driving Me Crazy*, agrees. Taking a moment out of her busy schedule for a telephone interview, the mother of 13 children explains that parents can start by setting boundaries for themselves: a list of basic ground rules on what to do when they disagree.

Brown-Conroy suggests having an agreement already in place can help diffuse the situation. “For instance, you can have code words that allow you to acknowledge the disagreement but also allow you a breather: with the promise that you will come back together later, when you are both calmed down, and solve the issue.”

The agreement also needs to include an immediate cease-fire provision in case children walk into the room during a heated disagreement. “It’s all about not letting our emotions take over our heads. Parents need to stay focused on building strong, healthy relationships with each other and their children. And that includes learning positive conflict resolution skills.”

Many books offer winning step-by-step strategies for positive marital conflict resolution, such as *Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendricks, Ph.D. Other resources include local parenting organizations and family therapists.

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