



MT. HOPE FAMILY CENTER

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Background Information:

Conflict between parents reflecting hostile, disengaged, and constructive ways of managing common disagreements is frequent among families, and more than 70% of children have been found to intervene in parental conflict. Children's involvement in parental disputes places them at an increased risk for mental health challenges. There are many ways that children may intervene in parental conflict. Understanding the different ways that children become involved in parental conflict may help to identify which children are at greater risk for developing specific types of mental health problems.

What is the Project STEP study?

Project STEP was a 3-year study that focused on how children's development was affected by their parents' relationship with one another. The study included 243 parents and their preschool aged child. Children were about 4.6 years old at the start of the study. Families were from socioeconomically and racially diverse backgrounds (income ranged from \$2,000 to \$121,000, and 48% of families were Black) placing families at higher risk for conflict and stress. This study had two goals: 1) Identify different ways that children are involved in parental conflict, and 2) learn whether the different patterns of children's involvement in parental conflicts are related to different mental health problems.

Here's a quick summary of what we found:

- Highlighting the prevalence of children's intervention in parents' disagreements, 90% of children intervened in their parents' conflict. This conflict reflected disagreements between parents that occurred in front of the child.
- Narrative coding of mothers' interviews about common disagreements between parents showed that children become involved in parental conflict in three different ways:
 - Children who showed coercive involvement were bold, domineering, and aggressive when intervening (for example, talking over parents or yelling at parents)
 - Children who showed caregiving involvement tried to support parents via comfort or problem solving (for example, offering solutions or hugging parents)
 - Children who showed cautious involvement were apprehensive, vigilant, and guarded (for example, hiding behind parents or carefully approaching parents).
- Children's coercive involvement led to greater externalizing problems, callousness, and extraversion.
- Children's caregiving involvement was associated with greater separation anxiety.
- Children's cautious involvement was linked with greater separation anxiety and social withdrawal.

Why does this research matter??

- This research highlights three ways children may become involved in parental conflict. Each form of involvement was associated with a unique pattern of mental health outcomes. Early behavioral problems related to children's involvement (like callousness or separation anxiety) may increase their risk for more serious problems later in life, for example, life-course-persistent antisocial behavior and depression.
- These findings have important implications for prevention and early intervention:
 - The high prevalence of parental conflict and the high percentage of children who intervene in this conflict highlights the urgent need to design prevention and intervention programs for families.
 - Unique associations between different forms of involvement and children's mental health suggests different prevention and intervention programs may be needed for varying situations.
 - Prevention and intervention programs designed to support families must consider contextual influences on the family system including systemic oppression, racial trauma and poverty.

WANT TO LEARN MORE? READ:

Delineating the Developmental Sequelae of Children's Risky Involvement in

Interparental Conflict by Morgan Thompson, Patrick Davies, Rochelle Hentges, and

Melissa Sturge-Apple