

Understanding Conflict and How to Protect Children From Divorce Fallout



ALYSON JONES
& ASSOCIATES

IACP(International Association of Collaborative Professionals) Forum
October 25-28 2018 • Seattle
Washington

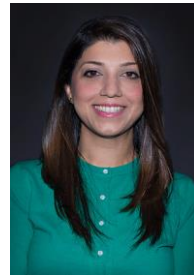
Samar Shata, MCP, RCC Child & Family Therapist, Alyson Jones & Associates



Salley-Ann Ross, MACC, RCC, Child & Family Therapist AJA, West Vancouver, Canada



Ida Forsat, MCP (Candidate), Child and Family Therapist, AJA



Alyson Jones MA, RCC Clinical Director AJA



And What about you?

- How many lawyers?
- How many mental health professionals?
- Mediators?
- Judges?
- How many of you have worked on high conflict cases?
- How many practice exclusively collaborative?

Let's get right into the bad news...

Children and Divorce

Children who have experienced a parental separation and divorce are at higher risk for:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Self-harming behaviors
- Suicide
- Academic issues
- Promiscuity
- Teenage pregnancy
- Alcohol and drug misuse
- Addictions
- Problematic relationships
- Divorce for themselves
- Aggression & violence
- Heart disease

We see this played out through Externalized issues:

- Disobedience
- Delinquency
- Aggression
- Anti Social Behaviours



Internalized Issues

- Depression and Self Harm
- Anxiety
- Lack of self-identity and personal boundaries
- Eating Disorders
- Increased somatic symptoms



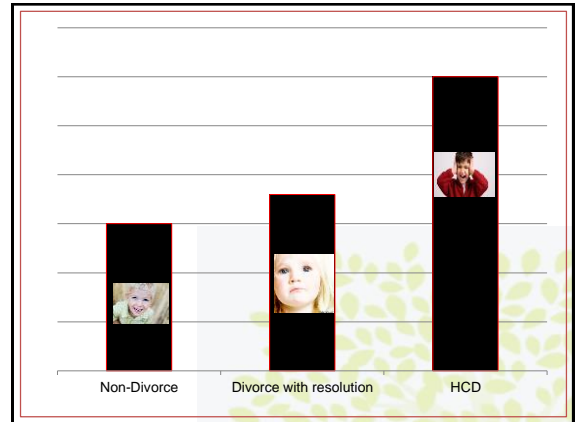
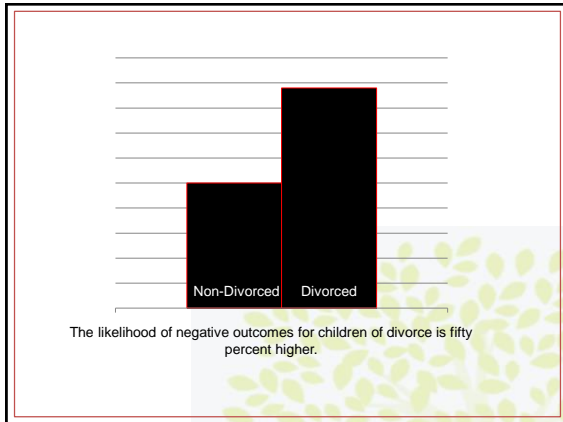
Problems in Learning

- The higher the conflict, the more academic problems
- Lower cognitive and educational performance
- Less engagement in school
- Decreased attendance
- Less respect for educational institutions
- This applies to all the different ages and stages



Why?

- Stress associated with a divorce.
- Parents are more distracted during a divorce and do not parent as effectively.
- Moves and major changes that the children do not get an opportunity to process appropriately.
- Diminished economic resources.
- Children caught in a high conflict situation.



And now for the good news...

- There is no denying that divorce does have an impact on children.
- If the divorce is handled well, children can adjust and develop resiliency.
- With appropriate responses, negative impacts can be mitigated.
- It is within the power of the parents to decrease the statistical probability of these negative outcomes.
- It is within the scope of the professionals working with transitioning families to reduce the negative outcomes of parental conflict.

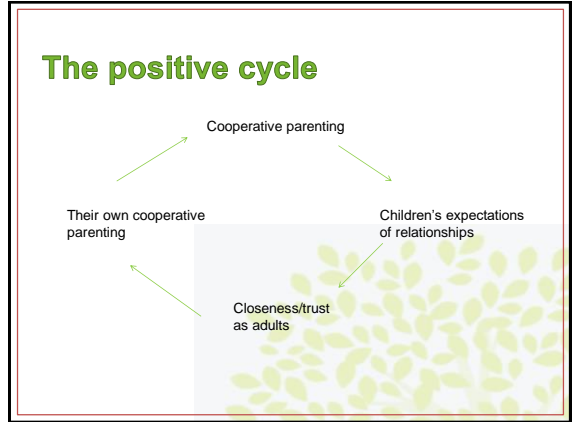
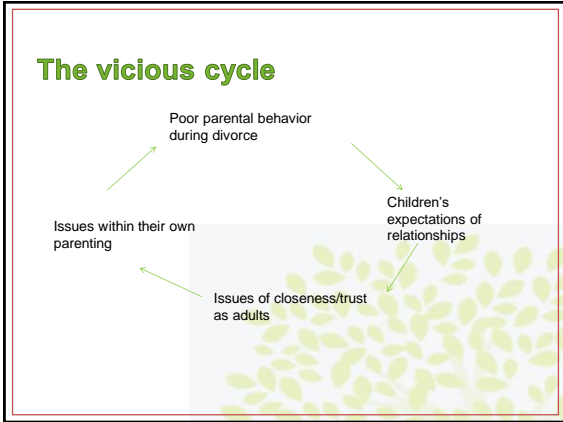
The Wound of Divorce

- Divorce is a wound that needs to be tended properly.
- With proper treatment and care a wound becomes a scar.
- These scars become part of us and our character actually part of our interesting life story.
- If the wound does not heal and continues to fester, it will become infected.
- It is the toxic wounds that hinder our lives and can potentially be life-threatening.



Divorce Adjustment

- Adjustment to divorce takes longer than expected and requires proper treatment.
- It is very difficult for children to adjust when their parents do not adjust.
- Parental behaviors during divorce have a great impact on future expectations in relationships of children regarding issues of closeness, trust, having children etc.



- ### Factors elevating risk creating High Conflict Divorces
- Episodes of violence between parents, ongoing conflict and hostility between parents
 - Court actions by parents
 - Psychological maladjustment of parent
 - Sudden or frequent changes of residence and school, interruption of peer relationships
 - Disruption of parenting routine, loss of relationship with a parent
 - Economic hardship, loss of security and stability, negative family reinforcement
- 
- 21



What is Conflict?

“An active disagreement between people with opposing opinions or principles”
(Cambridge dictionary)

An illustration of two stylized human figures, one blue and one orange, in a physical struggle or conflict.

- ### A Few Facts about Conflict
- Conflict is a reality in every family.
 - The people we are closest to evoke the biggest emotional reactions.
 - Not all conflict is “bad”.
 - Brief, moderate, and predictable conflict is not problematic, but rather this can actually prepare a child for the “real world”.
 - Our survival is dependent on our ability to deal with stress and manage conflict.
 - Each family has its own threshold as to when conflict becomes destructive.
-
- An illustration of two stylized human figures, one blue and one orange, in a physical struggle or conflict.

The Real Story About Conflict

- It is not the divorce itself that causes significant problems for children.
- It is the level of conflict and the quality of parenting afterwards that determines the impact.



Parental conflict is the predictor of child maladjustment rather than divorce itself

(Kelly, 2000)

The important message is:

How conflict is managed, rather than if conflict occurs, will determine children's adjustment and whether the conflict is destructive or not.

What Makes Conflict Destructive for Children?



- Conflict is a part of life. It is the style of conflict that determines if it is destructive or constructive.

Conflict is Destructive When:

- Highly hostile (physical or verbal).
- The intensity of the conflict is high (stress significantly increases in children).
- The frequency of the conflict is often, or occurs at unpredictable times (this leads to a prolonged fear reaction).
- There is no resolution (this leads to feelings of insecurity).
- There are no buffers for the children (this results in lack of protection from the conflict).

If the Conflict Centers on the Child, it is More Destructive to the Child

- Custody and access issues
- Differences in parenting styles and values
- **Children react to child-centered conflict by:**
 - Self-blame
 - Shame
 - Withdrawal
 - Feelings of inadequacy
 - Feelings of responsibility
 - Fear

Conflict Can be Constructive

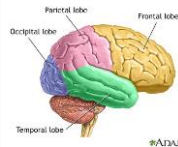
- Can help us understand and appreciate differences
- Resolved conflict builds empathy
- Can lead to effective patterns of resolution
- Can provide insight
- Can aid us in anticipating and resolving future conflicts
- Can bring us closer together as we listen, understand and validate each other
- Can provide a source of information
- Can increase unified parenting if conflict is managed well
- Can decrease anxiety as constructive conflict helps us face issues instead of denying or avoiding them
- Brings problems to light, and thus offers us the opportunity to brainstorm solutions and make progress.

CONFLICT AFFECTS BRAIN DEVELOPMENT



A Few Facts about Child and Brain Development

- Brain development is more pronounced at various developmental stages.
- During the first few years of life, there are high levels of brain development.
- Brain cells develop their primary connections over the first 2 years and then they are sculpted throughout the rest of the lifespan.
- Ages 5-6, the prefrontal cortex develops.
- During adolescence, there is also a "growth spurt" in brain development.



Primary Factors for Healthy Brain Development

- Safe environment
- Nutrition
- Exercise and activity
- Health care
- Secure attachments
- Attention and attunement from the caregivers
- Affection
- Lack of injury
- Stimulation of all 5 senses
- Opportunities for daily learning
- Repetition of stimuli

The Adolescent Brain

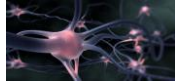
- Yes, they do have one... and it is firing on all cylinders!
- The "emotional brain" (limbic system) is often in charge.
- The frontal cortex is going through great growth.
- They need guidance for using their "thinking brain" (planning, organizing, problem solving, decision making).
- If experiencing a HCD, parents often let go of the lead and this can impact the development of a teen's higher functions.



Developmental Psychology and Brain Development

- Healthy brain development results in:
 - An effective network of pathways
 - Appropriate movement through each developmental stage
 - Increased opportunities for potential and mastery

Epigenetics



- Epigenetics – is the emerging science that explores how our brain development is impacted by genetics and environment.
- Nature and nurture are not independent factors.
- The environment in which the organism grows and develops will directly impact the genetic material of the organism.

The brain is not just a product of genetics; it is a product of the environment in which it grows.



Our neuron pathways are formed by our experience and our environment.

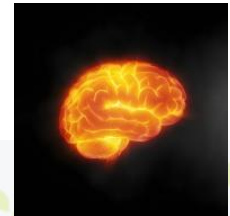
Neurological Pathways Directly Affect:

- The ability to process information
- Language and the ability to express emotions and thoughts
- Health and well being
- Behaviors
- Cognitive reasoning
- Higher functioning



Children Experiencing HCD Become Wired to be:

- Anxious
- Agitated
- Distractible
- Highly aroused
- Impulsive
- Aggressive
- Underdeveloped empathy and compassion



Acestoohigh.com

- What are ACEs? (Adverse Childhood Experiences)
- ACEs are adverse childhood experiences that harm children's developing brains so profoundly that the effects show up decades later; they cause much of chronic disease, most mental illness, and are at the root of most violence.

Center for Disease control and prevention – Aces study – acesstudy.com



What is Stress?



"A state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or very demanding circumstances."

(Oxford Dictionary)

Stress and the Brain

- Some stress is helpful as it can help protect us when there is danger, it can make us more alert, and it can assist us in accomplishing our goals.
- When stress is chronic, it throws our balance off and sends confusing signals to our brain, thus affecting brain chemistry.
- There are many hormones in action when we experience stress but Cortisol is our primary stress hormone.

Cortisol

- Cortisol is released from our adrenal glands.
- Simply put, the main function of cortisol is to restore balance in our system after a heightened experience.
- Too much or too little cortisol becomes problematic (too much can cause cell death and attentional deficits, and too little can impair our ability to regulate and respond).
- Our immune system becomes highly compromised when our cortisol is unbalanced and we are suffering from chronic stress.
- A high conflict divorce (HCD) often results in chronic stress for children, during very important stages in brain development.

Chronic Stress Associated with a HCD is Destructive to Children Because:

- A persistent fear response alters neurochemistry.
- Hyper-arousal will alter the ongoing baseline for appropriate arousal.
- It may result in dissociation (mentally and emotionally removing the self from the situation).
- It disrupts attachments (the child becomes focused on 'surviving' rather than growing, maturity is impaired).

Managing HCD situations is important, as the associated stress impairs the immune system of youth, and high conflict impairs brain development.



Brain Potential

- Brain growth and plasticity are directly affected by emotional interactions with our caregivers.
- Many brain capacities were originally thought to be fixed at birth, but we are now discovering that they are actually dependent on a sequence of experiences combined with heredity.
- The more brain cells are activated, the more potential.

The Brain & Memory

- The more repetition, the stronger the memory (this can be both beneficial and harmful).
- With HCD, the repetition of conflict can embed negative memories and disrupt healthy brain development.

Pruning the Pathways

- High conflict can disrupt the sensitive periods of brain growth in children and this can result in a disruption of potential. If certain synapses and pathways are not being activated, they may be discarded. This loss of pathways is often referred to as "pruning". A developing brain's capacity can be diminished by destructive conflict.



The younger the child of a HCD, the more difficult it is to reverse the negative impact on the brain development of children.

(Weinstein et al., 2000)

Thank Goodness for the Plastic Brain!

- The brain is more "plastic" than we originally thought.
- Plasticity is the brain's ability to change in response to repeated stimulation.



A quick look at the research...

There is a direct link between parental conflict and the child's cognitive and intellectual development. This link also applies to parental conflict and the child's ability to regulate attention and the stress response.

(El-Sheikh, 2008)

Trauma is not limited to children witnessing violent conflict between their parents, but non-violent discordant conflict between parents also has significant effects on the brain development in children.

(Cummings & Dawes, 2010)

Children from divorced families are two times as likely to be prescribed medication for ADD/ADHD than children from intact families.

(University of Alberta Study)

Long Term Effects of High Conflict:

- Changes in the nature of the child-parent relationship
- Creates significant anxiety and distress
- Impacts brain development and limits potential
- Overstimulates and frightens children
- Compromises identity development
- Creates feelings of helplessness and hopelessness

HIGH CONFLICT AFFECTS ATTACHMENT



It all begins with Attachment

- *Attachment* is a strong emotional connection, such as the bond between a child and caregiver
- *Attachment* joins people together emotionally
- In psychology, the concept of *attachment* helps explain development and personality
- Essential for human survival and development; we need each other and we protect each other. Parent-child attachment is normal and needed
- For the parent to protect and the child to be drawn to the protector is natural, and it is what has kept us alive and thriving
- As Divorce Professionals it is best to do whatever we can to support the secure attachment to both parents.

Attachment wounds

Attachment issues can occur when there is an insecure attachment to the caregiver, or when the security of the attachment is undermined by the actions of another through alienating behaviours.



HCD can lead to Attachment Disruptions or Disorders

- An Attachment Disruption occurs when the natural attachment between a child and caregiver is disrupted as a result of circumstances causing separation from a caregiver. Can be due to death, or to estrangement or alienation
- An attachment disorder is a disorder of mood, behaviour and social relationships which results from a failure of the child to form a normal attachment (bonding) with their primary caregiver(s).
- These issues can result when parents are highly distracted, negligent, aggressive or engaged in alienating behaviours.

Parental Alienation and Estrangement

- Although not all cases of HCD lead to parental alienation, there is no doubt that high conflict is a part of the cause for parental alienation. Alienation occurs when one parent is undermining the attachment of the other parent with the child(ren). When the child rejects the parent without concrete reasons (or as an act of allegiance with the favoured parent), then we may have an alienation situation.
- Parental estrangement occurs when there are legitimate reasons for the child withdrawing from the parent. This can be an outcome of abuse, neglect, addiction or complicated relationship issues. HCD often play a part in this dynamic as well.
- Sometimes there is a hybrid of both alienation and estrangement.

Parental Alienation (PA) is one of the most difficult and complex family issues to deal with in family therapy and family law cases.

What Helps Children in these HC Situations?

- Relationship with a reliable adult
- Buffers from the conflict
- Siblings
- Warmth
- Affection
- Counselling
- Appropriate peer support
- Activities in which they can find mastery



What Parents Can Do



What Parents Can Do

- Communicate with the children and explain the divorce in an age appropriate manner.
- Give children a voice but do not burden them with the choice.
- Lead the children through the process in a respectful manner.
- Endorse and support the attachment between the children and both parents.
- Allow children to grieve and express their emotions.
- Set up effective co-parenting communication that takes the children out of the middle.

What can the Professionals do?

- Address the family system, not just the parents or the children in isolation.
- Operate from the guiding principle of the best interests of the children.
- Educate parents on the high cost of conflict to their children
- Build resiliency in children.
- Build resiliency in parents (if possible).
- Help build healthy social connections and community engagement.
- Provide buffers from the conflict.
- Assist in setting up boundaries that minimize negative parental interaction in front of the children.

Professional Interventions

- Set up conflict management structures and containment strategies
- Parent Coordination (PC)
- Collaborative Divorce
- Divorce Coaching
- Mediation
- Custody and access evaluations
- Coordinated counselling and team treatment approaches
- Intervention programs that are family focused
- Child advocacy in divorce process

Building resiliency (AcesConnection.com)

1. Make sure the basic needs of the child are being met.
2. Build resiliency in the parents (as much as possible).
3. Parent education for parents (educate on developmental psychology, parenting skills and educate on the cost of conflict and how this effects the developing brain).
4. Attachment training for parents (aka attachment boot camp).
5. Build alternate social connections for the child.
6. Build social and emotional skills in the child to the best of your ability.

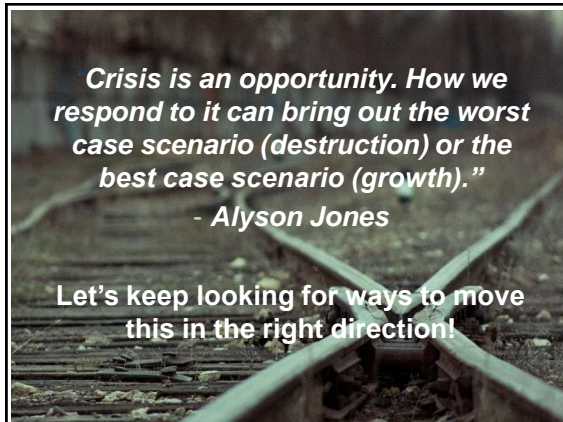
Guide the Adults in Dealing with the Adult Issues

- Creating a space in which the adults can deal with the adult issues is one of the most effective ways of reducing the collateral damage of adult conflict on children.
- Containment
- Respect
- Boundaries
- Accountability
- Education
- Compassion
- Direction

Why Professionals are Important

- They implement strategies to contain conflict.
- Parents have often lost perspective- professions can provide perspective again.
- Some parents will continue the fight no matter the costs.
- By managing the conflict, we can make a difference in the development and well being of a child.
- As professionals involved with these families we can make a direct difference to the child by assisting with conflict management and containment.

The Level of Conflict,
and the parent's ability to manage
that conflict,
directly effects the mental health
and well being of their children.



Contact



ALYSON JONES
& ASSOCIATES

Alyson Jones & Associates

- Alyson Jones, MA, RCC
- 113-2419 Bellevue Avenue, West Vancouver, V7V 4T4
- (604)926-6665
- info@alysonjones.ca
- www.alysonjones.ca

References and Resources

- L.M. Baker, L.M. Williams, M.S. Korgaonkar, R.A. Cohen, J.M. Heaps, R.H. Paul. Impact of early vs. late childhood early life stress on brain morphometrics. *Brain Imaging Behav.*, 7 (2013), pp. 196–203
- Strauch, Barbara. What the new discoveries about the teenage brain tell us about our kids, New York Anchor Books (2003)
- Anita Thapar, Gordon Harold, Frances Rice, Kate Langley, Michael O'Donovan. **The contribution of gene–environment interaction to psychopathology.** *Development and Psychopathology*, 2007; 19 (04) DOI:
- Cummings, E. M., & Davies, P. T. (1994). *Children and marital conflict: The impact of family dispute and resolution.* Guilford series on social and emotional development. NewYork, NY, US: Guilford Press.
- Cummings, E., & Davies, P. T. (2010). *Marital conflict and children: An emotional security perspective.* New York: Guilford.
- Cummings, E. M., Ballard, M., El-Sheikh, M., & Lake, M. (1991). Resolution and children's responses to interadult anger. *Developmental Psychology*, 27, 462–470.
- Davies, P. T., & Cummings, E. M. (1994). Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis.
- Katz, L.F., & Gottman, J.M. (1993). Patterns of marital conflict predict children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. *Developmental Psychology*, 29, 940-950.
- Kelly, J. B. (1982). Divorce: The adult experience. In B. Wolman and G. Stricker(Eds.), *Handbook of developmental psychology.* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Kelly, J. B. (2000). *Children's adjustment in conflicted marriage and divorce: A decade*