

## **When Couples Become Parents: Keeping Your Marriage Strong For Your Child**

**Karen J. Prager, Ph.D.; A.B.P.P.**

Professor of Psychology and Gender Studies

School of Interdisciplinary Studies & School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences

University of Texas at Dallas HH 30

Richardson, TX 75083-0688

[kprager@utdallas.edu](mailto:kprager@utdallas.edu)

- Divorce vs. Marital Distress and Children
  - Divorce is a crisis and is hard on children, but . . .
  - The effects of marital distress, especially marital conflict, can be worse
  - Happily married parents have the potential to create the best environment for children
  - But unhappily married parents are not the second best environment for children
- Children of distressed parents are more likely to have these problems
  - Depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, sleep disturbances
  - Acting out, defiance, anger management problems, truancy
  - Aggressive behavior with peers, rejection by peers, poor social skill development
  - Poor academic performance
- Direct effects of marital distress on the child come from:
  - Hostile marital conflict
    - Parents who attack each other verbally or physically
    - Parents whose facial expressions, voice tone, bodily posture, or gestures convey belittlement, hostility, disrespect, dismissal of each other
  - How conflicts end
    - Parents who fight without resolving conflicts
    - Parents who never apologize
  - Content of conflict – when parents fight about the children
    - Under these circumstances, children blame themselves
    - They feel guilty and ashamed, believe they are responsible for stopping the conflict
- Indirect effects of marital distress on the child – when marital distress affects parenting
  - Distressed parents are more likely to be intrusive
    - Attempt to manipulate how their children think and feel
    - Pressure child to side with one parent against the other
  - Distressed parents more likely to “parentify” their child
    - Turn to the child for nurturance and guidance
    - Not for the child’s sake but for their own

- Hostile, negative treatment of child as if he/she is the spouse
  - Negative interactions with the spouse spill over into interactions with the child
  - Especially with an opposite sex child
- What parents can do to keep their marriage strong
  - Prevention: if you're not married yet, do a "common values" check with your partner. Differences in basic values spell trouble and possible divorce later on.
  - Cultivate good marital habits
    - Minimize negativity - complaints, criticism, corrections, unsolicited advice, pessimism
    - "Turn toward" – Pay attention when your spouse speaks to you, respond positively
    - Maintain intimacy by sharing your thoughts and feelings with your partner, work together to maintain a sexual relationship, be affectionate with your spouse
    - Work on accepting your differences – listen to and acknowledge your partner's point of view, even if you think it is misguided
    - Fight fair – Listen to a partner's complaint; avoid cross-complaining
      - Focus on the problem, not the person
    - Do not accept abuse: Learn about it, do not live with it. An abusive marriage does not help your child, but instead is bad for your child.
    - Do not attack, belittle, or stonewall
  - Seek marital therapy before it gets too bad or stays too bad for too long
    - Seek it anyway even if it has been bad for a long time

---

*Suggested Reading:*

Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages*

Patricia Evans, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond*

Alan E. Fruzzetti and Marcia Linhan, *The High Conflict Couple: A Dialectical Behavior Therapy Guide to Finding Peace, Intimacy, and Validation*

John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last*

John and Julie Schwartz Gottman, *And Baby Makes Three: The Six-Step Plan for Preserving Marital Intimacy and Rekindling Romance After Baby Arrives*

Mira Kirshenbaum, *Too Good to Leave, Too Bad to Stay: A Step-by-Step Guide to Help You Decide Whether to Stay In or Get Out of Your Relationship*