

## THE LASTING EFFECTS OF FAMILY CONFLICT

“Tell us what happens when parents get mad at each other.”

“There’s a lot of blood.”

So said one child participating in a research study by Dr. John Grych, Marquette professor and director of the Center for Psychological Services in the Department of Psychology. For the past 20 years, he has studied the impact of family conflict and violence on children’s development. His research shows that children absorb violence more than we know.

“When children see their parents fighting, they’re actively trying to make sense of it: ‘Why is this happening? What does this mean for me? What does this mean for my family?’ Their appraisals affect their level of comfort, security and anxiety and predict which kids are likely to develop depression, anxiety and aggression down the road,” says Grych, who was one of the first in the field to make a connection between children’s perceptions of conflict and violence and their psychological adjustment.

Children’s experiences with violence also shape their views of other relationships. In one study, Grych and his graduate students found that 4- to 7-year-olds residing in a domestic violence shelter were more likely to perceive mothers — generally the ones being abused — as “ineffectual and not very powerful.” That’s because they don’t have the capacity to understand the dynamics that lead to abuse. Take for example a young child watching a father enraged with a mother about the fact that he came home and dinner hadn’t been made.

“Children’s efforts to make sense of that is based on what they know, which is that people who get into trouble get yelled at and maybe get spanked,” says Grych, who publishes frequently in the *Journal of Family Psychology* and *Journal of Marriage and Family*, among others. It makes sense in these children’s minds that mothers who are physically or emotionally abused by fathers have done something to deserve it.

As these children age, they’re more physically aggressive toward others and are more likely to be the victims of aggression, as well, Grych says. When they reach adolescence, they’re more likely to be abusive toward their dating partners, something Grych’s lab is in the early stages of researching.

“The more conflict these kids witness, the more aggression they witness ... the more sensitized they get, the more reactive they get to it and the more likely they are to perpetuate it in their own relationships,” he says. — BDJ



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