



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime

Acrimonious Separation

The Impact on Children





Introduction

Barnardos provides services across 56 service locations in the country, working with over 35,000 children last year, over 5,000 through targeted support services.

At Barnardos, we believe that all children deserve the best start in life. Our services aim to transform the lives of vulnerable children because childhood lasts a lifetime. One of the most important ways of providing children experiencing disadvantage the best opportunity for positive wellbeing and development is to make sure they live in a safe, consistent and secure environment with loving adults who can parent positively.

Unfortunately, there are adversities that can make that more challenging. This briefing focuses on one of those issues, inter-parental conflict and acrimonious separation. We are working with more and more families where this is an issue and are witnessing a greater impact on the children in those households. This report outlines the prevalence of the issue across the country, the impact on children and actions that could be taken to reduce the resulting childhood trauma and harm.

Methodology

In developing this report, we commissioned Amárach Research to carry out a nationally representative survey of 654 parents across the country. This was carried out in Summer 2025. Additionally, we carried out 12 detailed one-to-one interviews with parents who have separated from their child's other parent and are supported in Barnardos services. Finally, we spoke to staff across our services to get their views on inter-parental conflict and the impact it has on children they support.

Outline of inter-parental conflict and acrimonious separation

Entrenched inter-parental conflict can involve verbal aggression, blaming and/or



disparagement of the other, silent treatment, threats, distrust and a lack of empathy for the other person. Often it is marked by an inability to reach a compromise and resolution, with both parties seeking to 'win' and conflicts remaining unresolved.

It is associated with failures to reach agreements about a child's residence, financial support and co-parenting strategies. Children are often placed in the middle or caught up in entrenched inter-parental conflict as disagreements can be about parenting practices, activities children take part in and financial support for children and contact arrangements.

It is important to distinguish between destructive versus constructive conflict. Destructive conflict can be overt, avoidant and covert and can include physical violence, shouting, criticisms, belittling, insulting and manipulation. While covert and avoidant conflict can include passive-aggressive behaviours, withdrawal, conflict avoidance (e.g. the silent treatment) and triangulation (e.g. co-opting children into the conflict). Destructive conflict, overall, involves a lack of warmth, respect and affection.

Constructive inter-parental conflict on the other hand, is characterised by regulated, emotionally modulated communication, respect, regulated communication and positive affection during disagreement. This kind of adaptive engagement is more likely to result in conflict resolution and, in turn, promote positive family and child outcomes.

Often when there is inter-parental conflict present, there may be current or previous domestic violence and or coercive control. However, while there may be overlap, they are not the same thing. Entrenched inter-parental conflict involves verbal aggression, ongoing tensions and failures to reach agreement on decisions with arguments remaining unresolved. Domestic violence and coercive control are about exerting power over another person using fear and intimidation, restricting the other person's liberty and causing harm to the other person.

Across our services there is significant overlap between the two. Where there is overlap, resolving the conflict can be more difficult and will require additional



supports to first and foremost make everyone safe from all forms of harm and stop the perpetrator from continuing and holding them to account for their actions.

Prevalence of Acrimonious Separation

Last year just under one half (44%) of the children we supported in our targeted services had experienced parental separation, or almost 2,000 children. One quarter (24%) of children we supported had experienced inter-parental conflict, over 1,000 children.

According to the 2016 Census, 1 in 4 families with children in Ireland is a one-parent family. Of those approximately 30% are post separation. Growing up in Ireland research shows that by age nine about 15% of children had experienced a separation between their parents and from the age 9 to 13 just over 6% experienced parental separation/divorce¹.

In order to get more recent data that combines both separation and conflict, we commissioned Amárach Research to carry out a nationally representative survey of parents. Just under one in five parents (19%) said that they had experienced separation from their children's other parent (out of 634 parents).

These parents were asked on a scale of one to ten, with ten being worst and zero being best, what level of communication difficulty and acrimony was present at point of separation. Over half (51%) said that they were at least 8 on the scale. Extrapolated that means roughly 10% of parents overall said they had experienced significant conflict at the point of separation.

One third (34%) of parents who separated said that at the time of separation the level was a ten, meaning that communication was extremely difficult or not possible demonstrating considerable conflict.

It is clear from the results that a significant percentage of parents separate with substantial conflict and acrimony. Therefore, a large number of children across

¹ [New research finds that family separation more than doubles the risk of economic vulnerability in families with young children](#)



Ireland are exposed to the issue and the resulting potential harms, including trauma and damaging their emotional, behavioural and social development, which are explored in more detail below.

3. Impact on Children - Survey Results

Amárach Research survey results found that of the parents who had separated:

- 82% said it affected their parenting.
- One third (35%) said it affected their ability to provide practical care such as continuing with positive routines.
- One quarter (25%) said it affected their confidence in their parenting decisions.
- Almost one in five (18%) said it affected their ability to maintain a close relationship with their child.
- Two thirds said it affected their emotional wellbeing.
- Almost half (43%) said is affected co-parenting dynamics such as consistency in parenting approaches.

The survey then asked parents in what ways the conflict and separation affected their child and found:

- Half of parents (49%) said it affected their child's emotional wellbeing such as around anxiety and behavioural changes.
- Half (48%) also said it affected the child's relationship with them or their other parent.
- Forty percent of parents said it negatively impacted on children's routines and stability.
- Almost two in five (38%) of parents said it created tension or conflict in the home with children.
- Overall 80% of parents said it negatively affected their child in some way.

The survey results show that parents can see that parental conflict and separation negatively impacts both their parenting and themselves, as well as their children and their children's wellbeing.

4. Impact on Children - Interview Results

In addition to the survey, we spoke to parents directly to discuss the impact that inter-parental conflict and acrimonious separation has on children. These parents



all had different degrees of acrimony, with some being in conflict with their partners for long periods before separation, while for others it only became a significant issue just before or immediately after separation.

It is important to stress that for many of the parents we spoke to they discussed not being in a position to immediately see the impact the conflict had on their child. It was only over time and when they had more mental space could they focus more on their child's experience of the separation and conflict and less on their own pain and anger towards the other parent.

A lot of parents discussed not being in a position to look beyond the acrimony for a long period, despite being committed to their children and wanting to do the best for them. We set out what parents described to be the main negative affects their conflict had on their children.

1. Reduced parental attention and emotional engagement

Most parents we interviewed said that it was difficult for them at times to focus as much on their children and their needs. Their own concerns about the separation and anger meant they couldn't support their children through what is an adverse childhood experience. Most would always have tried to focus on the best interests of their child. However, this became more difficult because of the levels of stress and acrimony.

"I was not in a good place when we separated so I was just existing and not focusing on my kids needs."

"I find it hard to concentrate on giving attention to my daughter as I'm worrying about the separation."

Parents discussed the conflict placing a strain on maintaining a stable positive relationship with their children due to their own focus being drawn elsewhere.

"I lost some emotional connection with my child."

"Child doesn't get enough attention or adult time as she would like."



The high level of stress parents experienced during separation was linked to them becoming less responsive to their children's needs at times. Some parents said they "became less warm" towards their child and more withdrawn, in some circumstances harsher in their discipline, a reaction to their increased stress.

Staff stated that the home environment when full of stress, tension and conflict, can be difficult for children. This environment isn't conducive to maintaining or building positive relationships between children and parents, something that is fundamentally important in the development of children.

Conflict compounded by financial concerns and poverty

Parents told us repeatedly that the separation brought substantial financial concerns and difficulties for their family. In many cases, they now needed to pay for two households, if possible. For some families, separation can lead to them being pulled into poverty or further into deprivation, bringing about additional difficulties and leading to further conflict and poorer outcome for children.

In some circumstances, something staff see more and more frequently, parents have separated but have had to remain living together, as they are simply not able to afford paying for two separate properties. In these circumstances the conflict was at times described as "relentless". The potential to decrease tension and pressure was severely reduced leading to "toxic" environments. The impact this can have on children is considerable. They can be exposed to extremely difficult situations for prolonged periods, witnessing "awful conflict" multiple times a day.

For many families, separation brought up the issues of maintenance. However, due to the scope of this piece of work, it is not something explored in detail. Many parents who we spoke to, who were eligible for maintenance, were not receiving it.

2. Increased poor mental health

Parents discussed their separation making their child feel more anxious and less secure. Separation is something that is full of uncertainties, is often complicated, and can be a long drawn out process. Instead of reducing that worry and uncertainty, parents said that due to ongoing conflict and poor communication



with the other parent, they actually increased their child's worry and concerns. Rather than providing their children with reassurance, they unintentionally fueled the opposite. This was through the language they chose to use about the other parent, disclosing inappropriate information to their children for example, as well as their actions.

"It was a very difficult time when I sometimes made the wrong choices. Arguments in front of the young children. I believe that what they witnessed had a direct impact on their low confidence issues now. And their heightened anxiety."

Parents spoke about their children becoming significantly more anxious, due to the uncertainty and because they were constantly worried that there could be an argument, that they had no control over. This anxiety affected all aspects of their children's lives at times.

"My son now struggles with routines and was an anxious toddler, had night terrors and separation anxiety growing up (difficulty going to pre-school)."

"I think it made them anxious and insecure."

"Sense of anxiety and lack of security."

CASE STUDY: Father and mother separated acrimoniously with one ten-year-old son. There had been minimal acrimony before a significant issue led to the separation, which was full of conflict. Mum moved out of the home to somewhere relatively close.

Child became very confused initially, didn't know what was going to happen to him, where he would live, how long his parents would be separated for and why they had separated. He became quite anxious as a result.

There was initial custody agreement arranged. However anytime either parent talked about the other parent in front of their son it was very negative. Every time they met, both parents would end up shouting and almost need to be physically separated. Child's anxiety grew and as their anger always increased when they discussed the other parent and custody, he felt like he was to blame.



After a year of separation, parents began to see impact their continued conflict was having on their son more clearly and sought support.

3. Becoming more insecure and withdrawn

Parents said that the stress of dealing with the conflict and the separation meant they couldn't provide their child with the necessary sense of security that they required. This led to some children losing confidence and becoming more withdrawn, both within the home and outside it with peers, particularly when concerned that they might make the conflict worse. They didn't understand why parents are always fighting and, in many cases, parents said it led to children believing it was their fault.

"They blamed themselves."

This was exacerbated in some circumstances as parents admitted that, at times during the conflict, children were placed in the middle and could be subconsciously used as leverage. Parents admitted they would consciously or subconsciously try and turn their child against the other parent, instead of reassuring them that they were not to blame. The "conflict blinded them" from this for periods.

4. Risk Taking Behaviour

Parents stated that frequent conflict without resolution, in front of their children, led to them having more struggles regulating their emotions and behaviour. Some children would begin acting out more to get attention and because they found routines harder to stick to. This led to difficulties following rules and forming and maintaining relationships.

"Child struggled to regulate and would come home from other house upset."

Benefits of Separation

Research suggests that parents staying together when there is frequent destructive conflict, is actually worse for the child and their future outcomes than



separating. Many parents spoke about some benefits their children experienced from separating. In some instances, it did give them greater clarity and led to reduced exposure to conflict. Some parents felt that their parenting improved because of the separation, as they didn't have to focus as much on the conflict on a day to day basis.

"In other ways the separation made life easier as the day to day conflict eased."

"My parenting improved as I was happier and had more autonomy. His parenting improved to some degree because he had to when the children were with him."

Existing Research and Evidence

Research shows that parental separation leads to poorer outcomes for children across a variety of areas and issues listed in more detail below. However, more research is demonstrating that it is not the separation in and of itself, but the acrimony and inter-parental conflict that is poorly or unresolved that can lead to the negative outcomes. It is the stressful circumstances surrounding the separation and experience of the conflict.²

Inter-parent conflict exists across a continuum of expressed severity. Research suggests that the effect of inter-parental conflict on children depends both upon the way it is expressed, managed and resolved, as well as the extent to which children feel at fault for, or threatened by, their parent's relationship arguments. How parents manage conflict, therefore, may determine children's adjustment to conflict more so than the actual occurrence of conflict (depending on the level of severity)³.

How parents communicate and relate to each other, is increasingly recognised as a *primary* influence on effective parenting practices and children's long-term mental health and future life chances. Parents who engage in frequent, intense and

² Jouries et al, 2016

³ Grych, J. H., Harold, G. T., & Miles, C. J. (2003). A prospective investigation of appraisals as mediators of the link between inter-parental conflict and child adjustment. *Child Development*, 74, 1176–1193



poorly resolved arguments and conflicts, put children's mental health and long-term life chances at risk. Conflict occurring between parents is an expected and normal aspect of family life. The expressed intensity of conflict, frequency, duration, conflict style, content, focus of conflict and resolution, are crucial variables which influence child outcomes⁴.

Research demonstrates, concluding with our own findings above, that inter-parental conflict can lead to more negative parenting practices, such as harsher discipline, rejection, and lower levels of warmth, empathy and involvement⁵. It can impact the quality of parenting and affect the parent-child relationship and in turn, increase the risks to child wellbeing.

Parenting practices, such as withdrawal and parentification, have been found to occur⁶, which were reported by parents we interviewed. This can involve parents seeking support from the child, inappropriate disclosures to the child about the parent/co-parenting relationship, gate-keeping, denigrating the other parent, pressuring the child to take sides or using the child as a go-between and has been associated with increased child adjustment difficulties⁷.

Inter-parental conflict may result in feelings of self-blame, perceived threat, fear, sense of helplessness, guilt, sadness, shame and worry. It can increase children's exposure to stress, lead to a range of problems including sleep disruption, impaired attention and memory, emotional dysregulation, low sense of self-esteem, poor coping mechanisms and interpersonal challenges⁸.

⁴ Finley & Schwartz, 2010. The Divided World of the Child: Divorce and Long-Term Psychosocial Adjustment. *Family Court Review* 48(3):516-527

⁵ Kelly, 2000. Children's Adjustment in Conflicted Marriage and Divorce: A Decade Review of Research

⁶ Van Dijk et al., 2022. Triangulation and child adjustment after parental divorce: Underlying mechanisms and risk factors

⁷ Pires & Martins, 2021 Parenting Styles, Coparenting, and Early Child Adjustment in Separated Families with Child Physical Custody Processes Ongoing in Family Court.

⁸ Harold & Sellers, 2018. Interparental Conflict and Youth Psychopathology: An Evidence Review and Practice Focused Update. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 59 (4)



A review⁹ published recently in the UK, demonstrated that children who frequently experience destructive and poorly resolved inter-parental conflict have been found to have elevated risk of negative outcomes, including early attachment problems^{10, 11}; higher rates of anxiety, depression, and aggression^{12,13}; poor peer relationships¹⁴; reduced academic attainment and employability¹⁵; heightened substance misuse and criminality¹⁶; future relationship breakdown and experience of domestic abuse; poor physical health outcomes¹⁷; adult psychiatric disorders.

Reducing Harm and Barnardos Support

Structured interventions offering parenting support and education have been shown to reduce children's wellbeing issues, in relation to parental separation and acrimony¹⁸. Intervention programmes, that focus on the inter-parental relationship, have the potential to rectify the negative consequences of conflict, family breakdown and stress on children and parents.

⁹ [What works to enhance interparental relationships and improve outcomes for children? | Early Intervention Foundation.](#)

¹⁰ Cummings, E.M., K.J. Koss, and P.T. Davies, Prospective relations between family conflict and adolescent maladjustment: security in the family system as a mediating process. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 2015. 43(3): p. 503–515.

¹¹ Cummings, E.M. and L.E. Miller-Graff, Emotional security theory an emerging theoretical model for youths' psychological and physiological responses across multiple developmental contexts. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2015. 24(3): p. 208–213

¹² Merikangas, K.R. and S.A. Swanson, Comorbidity in Anxiety Disorders. *Behavioral Neurobiology of Anxiety and Its Treatment*, 2010: p. 37-59.

¹³ Kessler, R.C., et al., Age differences in the prevalence and co-morbidity of DSM-IV major depressive episodes: results from the WHO World Mental Health Survey Initiative. *Depression and Anxiety*, 2010. 27(4): p. 351–364.

¹⁴ Finger, B., et al., Marital aggression and child peer competence: a comparison of three conceptual models. *Personal Relationships*, 2010. 17(3): p. 357–376.

¹⁵ Harold, G.T., J.J. Aitken, and K.H. Shelton, Inter-parental conflict and children's academic attainment: a longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 2007. 48(12): p. 1223–1232

¹⁶ Repetti, R.L., S.E. Taylor, and T.E. Seeman, Risky families: family social environments and the mental and physical health of offspring. *Psychological Bulletin*, 2002. 128(2): p. 330–366

¹⁷ El-Sheikh, M., et al., Marital psychological and physical aggression and children's mental and physical health: Direct, mediated, and moderated effects. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 2008. 76(1): p. 138–21.

¹⁸ [Six-Year Follow-up of Preventive Interventions for Children of Divorce: A Randomized Controlled Trial | Adolescent Medicine | JAMA | JAMA Network](#)



Parents we interviewed said that once they were able to regulate themselves, focusing on the best interests of their children and trying to manage the conflict/acrimony, a great deal of harm and distress for children could be prevented. Most parents said that they needed support to be able to achieve this. Without support, they found it extremely difficult to look past the acrimony initially, before and immediately after separation.

Support allowed parents to appreciate the potential harm children were experiencing, by witnessing continual negative conflict and being put in the middle of their parents' arguments. Parents and their children still found elements of the separation difficult, such as negotiating all the day-to-day practicalities, but they could now do that in such a way that they tried to avoid conflict.

CASE STUDY: Parents separated with two young children after a year or so of considerable conflict and acrimony. Mother remained in the house, while father moved somewhere close by. Children were able to keep to usual routines. However, parents could not, for the first year, speak to each other without it ending in significant fighting, often in front of the children. Both parents would become angry before collection times and would be set off at any variances from previous agreements. This was deeply upsetting to the children, who began to struggle in school and each lost several friendships.

Over time, through support, parents could see the hurt their children were experiencing. They developed coping and calming mechanisms that placed them in a better position to regulate and control their emotions. Initially, they began viewing meetings as almost business-like transactions, preventing them from presenting their anger, and over time, this grew to the point they could sit down together in front of children and share a meal.

Barnardos provides support for hundreds of families every year where inter-parental conflict is present, as outlined above. Specific interventions have been developed for this group and offered to them, where and when appropriate. The interventions aim to help parents navigate separation and promote a focus on child needs. It focuses on supporting parents in developing their capacity to provide their children with a sense of safety and positive routines, as well as



constructive co-parenting strategies. One of the aims of the support is to help parents detach themselves from the ongoing conflict and developing constructive communication strategies with the other parents, while identifying self-care and self-calming strategies, in order to strengthen their wellbeing and empower them in their parenting role.

An evaluation of the interventions found that they reduce the frequency of arguments and destructive communication in front of the child and more generally, reduce acrimony and co-parenting conflict. It has been shown to improve parent wellbeing and lead to fewer externalising and internalising behavioural difficulties in their children. Parents report warmer, closer relationships and less conflict with their child after taking part.

The intervention has been able to help parents learn to become more reflective and less reactive when communicating with their ex-partner, adopting a more child-centred perspective and maintaining an understanding of how children may be negatively impacted by conflict. They develop improved skills for managing conflict with their ex-partner, in a constructive and regulated manner.

Overall, intervention helps parents gain better understanding of the impact of parental conflict on child behaviours and wellbeing, and in strengthening tools available to parents to reduce the effects of inter-parental conflict on children.

Recommendation

Over the past few years there have been several policy improvements regarding parental separation within the Department of Justice and the Courts Services, both of which should be commended for some of these positive steps.

The development of the first family justice strategy a few years ago was a huge advancement in and of itself. The first goal in the strategy was particularly welcome “to ensure that the needs of children are at the centre of the family justice system, their voices are heard and considered and that they are supported in their own individual journey through the system.”



There have been improvements regarding the voice of the child in proceedings, with template reports and guidance drawn up, the recent development of a children's court advocate project and the intention to begin a Family Law Reporting Project. Additionally, we will soon see wider role out of family law courts under the Family Courts Act. There has been considerable progress, although slow, for children of parents officially separating through the courts system.

However, more work needs to be done to reduce the number of families coming to court and preventing parents' conflict becoming so entrenched and prolonged within the family home, before and after separation.

Too many children across the country, every year, are being harmed and experiencing trauma as a result of parental acrimony, affecting their immediate wellbeing and future development and outcomes across all aspects of their lives. The longer that a child is exposed to it, the greater likelihood that it will cause them harm, because childhood lasts a lifetime.

There are clear actions that need to be taken to reduce and mitigate the harm children face.

- **Awareness Raising**

An awareness raising campaign should be developed by the Department of Justice for parents across the country, to better inform them of the impact entrenched parental conflict, particularly around separation, has on children and the need to resolve arguments in their presence.

- **Universal Support**

Expand access and provision of universal services, helping parents generally who might be struggling with inter-parental conflict around separation.

- **Targeted Intensive Family Support**

There is currently insufficient support for parents and their children around the issue of inter-parental conflict and separation. This is particularly needed for those dealing with numerous adversities, which may be exacerbated or caused by the stress of separation and conflict surrounding it. There should be increased funding for earlier and more intensive support, to help parents: deescalate conflict earlier, develop coping mechanisms and keep focused on children's best interests; mitigate harm and trauma



children may be experiencing as a result of inter-parental conflict. The Department of Justice should establish a specific funding stream for this work, with an initial pilot fund created.

- **Maintenance**

There have been positive steps taken around the issue of maintenance over the past few years, most recently with the development of specific guidelines. However, still too many children are living in homes where no maintenance is being received, despite agreements and court orders in place. There must be a commitment to set out actions to increase the proportion of maintenance recipients and monitor success.

About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960's, Barnardos works with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support.

Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction.

Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential – regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability'

– Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.



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