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IMPACTS OF MARITAL CONFLICTS ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

A child continues to learn from his environment throughout his life since his birth. More than everything, he learns from his parents and their relationship. Being affected by the surrounding culture, he undergoes various physical, psychological, social, and emotional changes throughout his life. These changes could be positive or negative depending upon the nature of the culture. The literature review has been conducted to identify and highlight the causes of conflicts, the effects on various stages of child development, and some of the recommendations to improve the problem. Various databases and search engines, ranging from 1994 to 2015, have been used to conduct a detailed analysis of the problem. Various studies illustrate the negative impacts of marital conflicts at each stage of a child's development, i.e., from infancy till adulthood. During infancy, exposure to distress results in hampered physical growth and psycho-social withdrawal (Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, 2009). Similarly, during childhood, it results in diminished self-concept and social incompetence (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997). Conflicts during adolescence result in isolation, risk-taking behaviors, and hostility in future relationships (Arshat, 2013). Likewise, during adulthood, it leads to increased risks of divorce. Various socio-cultural, and economic, or sometimes the mixture of these are responsible behind this issue. Therefore, a multi-dimensional approach is required to resolve the problem. Children, being the most vulnerable population, require immediate interventions to prevent the adverse consequences. A collaborative effort of health professionals, society and governmental organizations is required to control these existing trends.

Keywords: Marital Conflicts, Child Development, Assertive Instruction Methods.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a bond of love and respect. It is stabilized by the contribution of affection from both partners. If any of the partner's contribution decreases, the bond loses its stability; giving rise to conflicts. Marital conflicts are usually arguments, disharmonies, and disagreements that occur between partners in a matrimonial relationship (Mallers, n.d.). These conflicts not only affect the partners, but also their children's development (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997). (Rhoades, et al., 2012) say that parents act as role models for their children by setting examples through their attitudes, actions and behaviors, within and outside the family. Thus, marital relations can improve and deteriorate a child's well-being. The aim of this literature review is to bring this to parents' attention that their attitudes and behaviors have direct impacts on their child's well-being.

This paper will discuss the causes of marital conflicts, their impacts on a child's development, and strategies to resolve them.

The event which brought my attention towards this topic was a 14 year old boy, brought to a hospital, for having two simultaneous panic attacks of anxiety. He developed major depression 2 months prior and once, tried to self-harm by taking sleeping pills. He was also weak in his studies. The history revealed some ongoing marital conflicts between his parents for past 12 years, to be its cause. I believe, marital conflict is a worldwide issue. (Ali & Gavino, 2008) state, throughout the globe, one in every three women undergo violence in her marriage. These violence and conflicts include physical, mental, and verbal abuse. They further add that around 70-90% of women experience domestic violence in their marriage which negatively affects their

children's growth. Looking at the increasing incidences of marital discord, and its consequences on a child's development, the authors chose to discuss this topic and take initiative for its resolution.

Several factors can contribute to marital discords. (Ali, et al., 2011) led a cross sectional research, where they classified and discussed these factors on the basis of gender, sociological, and family system theories. Gender theory highlights that cultural and social inferior status of women, and symbolic dominant and authoritative status of men in society, are directly associated with marital conflicts. According to (WHO, 2009), gender inequalities increase the risk of familial conflicts. Wives are forced to please their husbands; failing to do so results in marital conflicts. Moreover, in a couple, both individuals have their own set of opinions and priorities (Eugster, 2007), and inconsistencies between the ideas also blow-up clashes. Lower levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and decreased expressive behaviors between couples lead to marital dissatisfaction (Ross, 2009). Poor problem solving skills, and distorted interaction patterns between couples are some other significant reasons which are also highlighted by the family system theory. Furthermore, sociological theory stresses that low education status, financial crisis within a family, decreased social welfare, unequally distributed household chores, extra-marital relationships, disobeying in-laws, (Ali et al., 2011), little dowry and husband's drug addiction, all contribute to conflicts (Ali & Bustamante-Gavino, 2006).

Effects on Child's Developmental Stages

Marital conflicts negatively influence all areas of a child's development, which include physical, emotional, psychological, social, behavioral, cognitive development, etc. This could in turn alter his functioning in many essential aspects of his life. The authors discuss these effects in the light of the Erikson's theory. According to the psychosocial theory of development, each developmental stage is provided with a developmental task. The successful resolution of the developmental tasks increases the probability of accomplishing the following tasks. Hence, the successful achievement of all the tasks lead to a child's psychosocial development.

The first stage of psychosocial development is the 'infancy', which is characterized by trust versus mistrust relationship. Emphasizing the parent-child relationship at this stage, the theory states that a child doesn't know anybody, but his mother, so he views her as a representation of the entire world. If the child gets adequate attention and love from his parents, particularly the mother, he starts to trust on world, and develops hope that his fervent wishes can be achieved (Taylor, 1994). In contrast, lack of parental attention due to conflicts, results in anxiety and mistrust in the world. Thus, it also negatively affects the development of future trusting relationships. Moreover, increased maternal depression, and inadequate attention result in a malnourished and withdrawn child (Rahman, et al., 2004). Furthermore, according to the (Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, 2009), increased crying, and elevated heart rates, exhibited in response to distress, result in reduced sleep hence, hampering the physical growth (Thokala, 2009).

Likewise, 'early childhood' is characterized by autonomy versus shame. A child learns to exert control over his self. He also learns language, acquires communication skills, starts walking, develops self-esteem, tries to do new things, distinguishes sex and identifies with the parent of his opposite sex (Flemings, 2004). During this stage, if the child is treated with respect as a unique individual, he develops an autonomous attitude and strives to acquire the new skills (Taylor, 1994). This helps him to develop his will-power whilst make his own choices. On the other hand, matrimonial conflicts make it difficult for the child to accomplish the tasks or acquire these developmental milestones. The continuous exposure to distress also leads to increased anxiety and panic attacks (Thokala, 2009), which were evident in the above mentioned scenario. Besides, constant conflicts can also irritate parents, and if a child makes some mistake in trying something new, he becomes a victim of frustration, and gets punished (Taylor, 1994). This may lead to diminished self-concept and self-esteem resulting in the feelings of shame and doubt. He may also find trouble in learning a language; hence, would either talk less or use offensive language to which he was exposed. Additionally, since a child also identifies with his parents, he may model their arguing behavior in the rest of

his life (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

Similarly, the 'later childhood' is characterized by increased curiosity. A child takes initiatives in pursuit for knowledge, becomes capable to solve problems, tries to gain competency in new skills, makes friends, and incorporates others' opinions (Townsend, 2011). Persistent conflicts might result in decreased motivation from parents, leading to social incompetency, increased emotional, and behavioral problems (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997), increased risk for difficulty in academic achievement as evidenced in the scenario, increased adjustment problems, and decreased interactions with friends and siblings (Thokala, 2009). Besides, it also increases feelings of insecurity due to a constant threatening environment, hence; troubling him to absorb new knowledge and skills.

'Adolescence' is one of the important stages of the child's life which is characterized by pubertal changes, and re-emergence of the sexual impulses. (Taylor, 1994) asserts that an adolescent child establishes his identity by emancipating from his parents. He makes decisions about familial, occupational, and social roles of his parental support. He also confronts family's norms and morals while making decisions (Taylor, 1994). If the child gets adequate support, he accepts and grounds those values into self-identity. However, marital conflicts lead to unsuccessful mastery of this stage. The child presents with depression, somatic complaints, self-criticism, social withdrawal (Velleman & Reuber, 2007), difficulty in academic life, and adjustment problems (Thokala, 2009). Moreover, increased family discord is also a studied predictor of delinquency, hyperactivity, and suicidal behaviors among adolescents (Arshat, 2013). Depression and suicidal attempts were also evident in the scenario. It is reported that adolescents, exposed to marital discords, also use alcohol and cannabis to reduce stress (Velleman & Reuber, 2007). Plus, boys show increased verbal and physical aggression in their romantic relationships (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004), and girls experience early menarche due to brimming stress (Thokala, 2009). They also engage into violent offenses, i.e., physical coercion, assault and fights (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997). Besides, harsh parent-child communication can also lead to separation of child from parents.

After adolescents, the stage of 'young adulthood' starts. (Taylor, 1994) says that in this stage, the individual continues to make decisions, chooses a life partner, and enjoys intimate relationship. Only a person with a strong sense of identity can establish such relations. (Taylor, 1994) further says that a person accepts the responsibility of safeguarding and rearing his children, only if he has had successfully passed through previous stages of development. It also depends upon his own experiences of being a child in his family. A person exposed to conflicts in previous stages might not develop trust and love in his own intimate relationship; hence would get isolated. This is manifested by markedly increased rates of divorce (Taylor, 1994). The child may model the same behavior, he was exposed to, in his previous life by his parents. Additionally, (Buehler & Gerard, 2002) says that parents who were exposed to conflicts and hostility in their early lives, teach children to resolve their own issues by arguing with people rather solving them through negotiations.

After young adulthood, an individual enters into 'adulthood' which is referred as pro-creation (Taylor, 1994). The successful accomplishment of all previous stages lead to an emotionally healthy individual. He gets involved in activities which aid in the community's betterment (Taylor, 1994). He transfers his learnt values to the next generation. For example, parents who resolve conflicts by apologizing and negotiating, transmit these values to their next generation. Moreover, during adulthood, an individual also develops wisdom, and feels worthy and valued, and accepts death, without being afraid, as the termination of life. In contrast, the person who developed isolation previously, due to conflicts, goes into stagnation and self-indulgence (Townsend, 2011), and becomes self-absorbed. His preoccupied self-concerns might lead him to be least bothered about others' welfare. (Taylor, 1994) says, it becomes difficult for such individual to make life adjustments with grace, and dignity. As a result, he develops self-contempt at the way his life proceeded (Townsend, 2011), and feels afraid of death. It is because he views the left-over time to be very short to undo or re-do his life.

Recommendations

Marital conflicts significantly affect the child development.

Therefore, their resolution becomes extremely necessary. Partners should resolve these conflicts in a desirable way of repressing anger, without dis-respecting each other (Ross, 2009). Following are some strategies which might aid in resolving matrimonial conflicts without hampering children's development. The foremost step for conflict resolution is to accept and understand each other as unique individuals who have equal rights. According to (Ross, 2009), equity is associated with higher levels of marital contentment. Secondly, it has been observed that asserting power and dominance also escalate conflicts. Therefore, behavior of exerting power, and winning at any cost should be avoided. The partners should support each other in problems and should find mutually agreeable solutions (Ross, 2009). Besides, during discords, assertive interaction methods, like negotiation and calm discussion, should be practiced rather than shouting at each other. In this way, the child will also internalize these qualities and will behave in the same manner on encountering any conflicting situation in future. One should also avoid actions which upset or trigger the other. (Ross, 2009) proposes a direct relation between matrimonial satisfaction and attitudes of forgiveness and compromise. Parents can also be counseled to resolve conflicts constructively, or delay their arguments in the presence of their children. They should also avoid asking their child to favor any one of them since it creates resentment which could lead to the child's separation from his parents (Thokala, 2009).

Conclusion

Marital relations play an important role not only in couples' lives, but also in their child's life. Matrimonial conflicts are widely spread in Pakistan. The reasons of these conflicts can be identified in the light of family, gender, and sociological theories. Marital relations possess several impacts on each stage of a child's development. In infancy, child might develop mistrust as a result of decreased parental attention. In early childhood, he might develop shame and coercion. Likewise, exposure to conflicts in later childhood and adolescence, might lead to inferiority and identity-confusion, respectively. Then, in young adulthood, it could result in self-isolation. Finally, in adulthood, rejection and disdain could occur. Chronically exposed child lags

behind in all areas of development, including cognitive, social, and behavioral development. In contrast, constructive and stable marital relationship influences a child's development positively. It helps him to make easy transitions across each stage. Therefore, it is important that the conflicts should be tackled carefully. The above discussed strategies can help to resolve these marital discords and promote a child's development.

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