IMMERSE
A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

PARENTS

Parents Who Fight, Kids Who Hurt

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How many of us say—or communicate without actually speaking—something like that to students about our youth ministries? Sometimes as youth workers we carry a false sense that we can create a youth ministry environment in which all of the stuff that happens "out there" doesn't matter; instead, it's "all about Jesus" in the youth room.

The Myth of the Sterile Youth Room

The reality, of course, is that all of that "stuff" matters immensely to the kids who cram into your ministry's gathering space week after week. It's their primary reality, which begs the question: *Will the Jesus we teach and encourage them to follow have anything to say to their 24/7 reality, or just our 90-minute temporary one? And what does that Jesus look like for kids who hate—and maybe fear—going home after youth group?*

While youth workers can't fix all of the problems in kids' lives, we have a responsibility to become more aware of ways that issues such as parents' high-conflict marriages impact the daily lives of our students. For kids like Caroline and Justin, it may be the most important issue we can understand.

Caroline and Justin are siblings who spent time in one of our youth groups. Their parents experienced what researchers call "chronic conflict"—they fought every day, with a lot of intensity and sometimes violence. Eventually this conflict manifested itself in Caroline's struggle with eating disorders and Justin's academic plunge and serious bout with substance abuse. Both kids were making desperate attempts to either gain some sense of control over—or check out of—a situation that was not only destroying their parents, but destroying them, too. And despite our myth of the sterile youth room, they brought their pain with them to youth group week in and week out. At Fuller's Center for Youth and Family Ministry, we are recognizing youth workers' need for a better understanding of how marital conflict impacts kids and how we can respond.

All Conflict is Not Equal

Contrary to what we might expect, not all conflict in marriage is bad. According to research by Fuller psychology faculty member Mari Clements, kids actually feel more secure when they have role models for resolving conflict well. Parents who can have a "good fight" and work to resolve it actually promote healthy problem-solving skills and relationship expectations in their kids.

But marital conflict certainly has its ugly side. Psychological researchers have identified five factors of parental conflict that increase its negative impact on kids:[i]

1. Frequency: How often do parents fight? Is it every now and then, every week, or several times each day?
2. Intensity: When they fight, how heavy does it get? Do they talk loudly or scream? Do they fight for a few minutes or for hours at a time? Do their fights stay focused on issues or do they involve harsh personal attacks?
3. Physicality: How often and to what extent do fights get physical—involving abuse, throwing objects, or self-harm?
4. Child-Focused: To what extent is parental conflict centered around the kids themselves? How much of that conflict about the kids happens in front of the kids?
5. Unresolved: This one's a biggie—when the child doesn't see the resolution of a fight, even if it's later resolved in private, it remains unresolved in the child's mind and increases his or her anxiety.

The greater the presence (and interaction) of these five factors in parental conflict, the more likely that conflict will lead to harmful outcomes for kids.

Conflict and Divorce

Conflict researchers say that while divorce has a huge impact on kids, it's not the only issue. Research shows that chronic conflict can actually be worse than divorce in terms of harmful impact on kids. While more than one

million kids annually experience the divorce of their parents—approximately half of all kids will go through it—countless others live in homes that are filled with conflict, putting kids at risk physically, emotionally, academically, and socially. Divorced or not, the "quality" of the repeated conflict (as determined by the list of five characteristics noted previously) makes the most difference in the life of children and adolescents.

The worst outcomes seem to be connected with two primary scenarios: the first is chronic conflict that continues with or without divorce; the second is actually a no-conflict divorce. When divorce happens "out of nowhere" for the kids, and when there is no apparent conflict or reason for parents' divorce, that surprise can be more damaging than when students witnessed their parents fighting.[ii]

Student Responses

Young people respond in different ways to parental conflict based on their age and developmental stage. Tragically, while kids tend to get used to most other stressors over time, marital conflict actually has the opposite effect. Young people don't become more adjusted to conflict, but rather they become more reactive as the conflict continues.[iii]

Preschoolers tend to directly intervene when their parents fight—and often it works! Parents usually stop fighting when preschoolers ask. This leads to a sense of omnipotence for kids when they hit school age. They perceive that they have the power—and responsibility—to stop their parents' fighting. By the time they hit adolescence, however, kids start to feel helpless when they see that they're not actually able to control their parents' conflict. To cope, teenagers seek social support outside the family. Unfortunately many of these teenagers also seek negative coping behaviors, and these kids statistically have higher rates of sexual promiscuity and alcohol use.[iv]

What Kids DON'T Need from Us

While we love make a difference in students' lives, there are a few things we are tempted to do in response to parental conflict that can actually make matters worse. Clements suggests the following list of DON'TS:

- *Don't be the kid's—or the parents'—therapist.* If you're not trained as a therapist, just don't do it. Know when you're out of your depth and be willing to refer your students and their parents to a good professional in your community.
- *Don't attempt to fix it.* It's not your job, and you probably can't do it.
- *Don't take sides.* Parent versus parent, church versus parents, or kids versus parents. Nothing good can come of any of those scenarios. Beware of parents who try to win you to their sides in marital conflict, and keep in mind that there are always two (or three or four) sides to every story. Also be very cautious about allowing parents who are in

the middle of deep conflict or divorce to begin getting involved in youth ministry. One of us actually had both parents in the middle of a divorce separately approach us to become ministry volunteers, each in an attempt to be "the parent who was involved in their child's favorite thing." Without stigmatizing those dealing with conflict and/or divorce, we have to protect the parents, their kids, and others in the ministry from the potentially harmful impact of parental involvement that stems from such motivation.

The Help We CAN Provide

While avoiding the latter list of "don'ts," there are a few steps we can take to help students whose parents chronically fight:

- *DO model healthy conflict.* The importance of positive adult role models has been affirmed by research with kids whose parents fight.[v] Students in your ministry need to see adults who can model effective and consistent listening and conflict resolution in their own relationships. That means that the healthier your marriage or significant relationships, the better for the students you influence. Not that your relationships have to be conflict-free (that would actually not be helpful for them), but that you offer a healthy example of resolving relationship conflict. With appropriate boundaries, there's something significant about letting students see the side of us that has to work through the not-so-superpastor stuff. Further, modeling healthy response to conflict within the group (between kids and between leaders, and between kids and leaders) can be incredibly helpful.
- *DO offer them safe relationships with adults.* Kids need to experience positive relationships, and your ministry can be a place where that happens. *What adults in your church can they get connected with? Who can be relational (and sometimes physical) safe places?* We need to think outside the typical youth ministry boundaries on this one: *Who could be spiritual grandparents or aunts and uncles in the family of God for kids who desperately need stability and safety? How could you help build bridges to some of these resource people?*
- *DO teach about conflict.* You can also help by giving attention to relationship issues in your teaching and training. Students need us to overtly teach them about healthy relationships and ways to work through conflict, even as we model these and find other adults who can do the same.
- *DO pray.* We can't underestimate the importance of prayer—on behalf of and with kids, and even with parents when appropriate.

Back to the Youth Room

Truth is, our youth rooms are far from sterile sanctuaries. But part of our role is to create holy spaces where students can bring all of their real-life

baggage and still feel safe. One of the ways we can do this is by creating room for doubt in our ministry. As kids deal with chronic parental conflict, is our ministry somewhere they can express their spiritual questions and doubts?[6] What can we do to make it one of the primary places where they feel able to honestly reveal their pain?

One of our important roles as youth workers is resourcer—connecting kids with resources to help them survive and perhaps even thrive in the midst of a rocky home life. We can't be all of the resources kids need, but we can learn how to identify the gaps and point kids toward help and hope.

And along the way we can be catalysts for healing where kids—and hopefully even their parents—begin to let Christ touch their deep places of brokenness with his loving hand.

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[i] E. M. Cummings and P. Davies, *Children and marital conflict: The impact of family dispute and resolution* (New York: Guildford, 1994); P. Davies and E. M. Cummings, "Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis," *Psychological Bulletin,* 116 387-411; and J. H. Grych and F. D. Fincham, "Marital conflict and children's adjustment: A cognitive-contextual framework," *Psychological Bulletin* 108, 267-290.

[ii] See P. R. Amato and R. D. Afifi, "Feeling caught between parents: Adult children's relations with parents and subjective well-being," *Journal of Marriage and Family, 68* (2006), 222-235*;* P. R. Amato, L. S. Loomis, and A. Booth, "Parental divorce, marital conflict, and offspring well-being during early childhood," *Social Forces, 73* (1995), 895-915; and E. M. Hetherington, "Social support and the adjustment of children in divorced and remarried families," *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research, 10,* (2003), 217-236.

[iii] P. Davies and E. M. Cummings, "Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis," *Psychological Bulletin,* 116 387-411.

[iv] See K. Covell and R. Abramovich, "Children's understanding of maternal anger: Age and source of anger differences," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 34* (1988), 353-368; K. Covell and B. Miles, "Children's beliefs about strategies to reduce parental anger," *Child Development, 63* (1992), 381-390; and L. A. Kurdek and R. J. Sinclair, "Adjustment of young adolescents in two-parent nuclear, stepfather, and mother-custody families," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 56,* (1988), 91-95.

[v] E. M. Hetherington, "Coping with family transitions: Winners, losers, and survivors, *Child Development, 60* (1989), 1-14.

[vi] CYFM's research with college students is revealing that those who feel like their youth groups are a safe place to express doubt and struggles seem better-prepared to handle the doubts and struggles that face them in college. See http://www.cyfm.net/College_Transition_Project_Intro.php for more on this research.