

# Kids lose hope when parents fight

About 20 percent of separating couples have been in constant battle and see it as the cause of their marital split. The hidden fallout for this 20 percent of couples who are generally locked in high conflict lies is their inability to find workable solutions and move on with their lives.

Many of these will have a severe distrust of the former partner's capacity to care for their children.

In some cases, one or both parents may have a psychological disorder that makes them unable to separate their partner issues from the dispute over children. This includes psychiatric disorders, substance abuse or long-standing patterns of violence.

These people tend to need a court system to help them with their separation and to protect their children's rights.

With these families, there are usually lots of anger and distrust and often an inability to resolve issues. Often there is no communication except for many court applications and the breaking of court orders. The Department of Human Services may get involved.

If there has been an allegation about whether or not a child is safe with the other parent, there may need to be supervision over contact through a child contact centre. At these centres a parent can have contact with the child with supervision by professional staff.

If there are continuing concerns about conflict erupting when picking up or returning a child, the child contact centres can be used as a handover point, with one parent dropping a child off and the other parent picking up the child from the centre.

If parents recognise they are in this high-conflict group and want to find a better way, there are programs that can help. Relationships Australia has a program in which counsellors and mediators work with a family for six months to try to alter the entrenched conflict.

The program is for the whole family, including the children, and if there is a child representative for the children's interest, such as a lawyer, they can be included.

Families may be ordered by the courts to undertake this program.

The intention is not only to get an agreement between warring parties but to change some of the conditions that lead to disputes. Families are helped to find a new way through disputes rather than fighting eternally.

A great motivation for a high-conflict couple is what the fighting does to their children, whom they usually love passionately.

When conflict is high, everywhere children turn there are problems and they don't feel safe and secure. And if children grow up without security, they learn they can't really influence their own world, which can lead to pessimism and depression.

A child is like a seed: if you put it in bad soil and leave it unattended, it won't grow well. Some plants can survive life's buffeting, but others will be knocked down by the first storm.

Secure kids who don't live with conflict grow up with optimism and a resilient attitude to life. Those constantly faced with parental conflict learn to feel helpless and don't develop resilience.

Children deserve the birthright of security and resilience, not the damaging experience of being caught in the crossfire of two constantly warring parents.

We should remember that most children with parents who avoid all-out war by using common sense when handling disputes will survive and thrive.

## Survival tips

- **High-conflict couples need to be aware of what their dispute is doing to their children**
- **Child contact centres may be helpful as pick-up and drop-off points when disputes are raging**
- **Consider doing a family intervention program such as those run by Relationships Australia.**