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High Conflict Families

All families have conflicts. It's human nature to disagree and argue. Opinions differ. Parents feud, children don't always get along or get their way, and teenagers rebel. Conflict is beneficial when it's done respectfully and produces good results. Some families go beyond ordinary conflicts. Their conflicts are intense and perpetual. They are called high conflict families. Family members are angry and confrontational. They live with constant tension and discord. Conflicts revolve around numerous problems and issues. Resolution attempts fail. These families are stuck in a raging war, always arguing and fighting. Everyone is frustrated and angry. They pray for peace but it never comes. Mistrust prevails. High conflict families have significant emotional pain underlying their conflicts. A great number of high conflict families are blended or have parents in the process of divorce. Family life is extremely difficult. Relationships are strained by anger, resentment, and unforgiveness.

Issues and Dynamics

Several factors contribute to making high conflict families. Individual factors include problems with depression, anger, personality disorders, substance abuse, etc. Interpersonal factors involve relationship issues. This includes breaches in trust, disappointment, unfaithfulness, broken promises, harshness, lying, manipulation, poor or troubled relationships between parents, children, or both. Negative interactions listed above contribute significantly to making high conflict families. Disasters, crises, death and especially divorce contribute to the development of high conflict families.

High and unremitting conflict in families is always bad for kids, even if the parents are married. Research on divorce reveals that this dramatic



change in family structure adversely affects families. Divorce can inflict long standing effects on the father-child bond (Barbara Defoe, Christianity Today Nov. 17, 1997). Divorce tears families apart, everyone has to cope with a death that never dies. Children are changed forever. This change creates internal and external conflicts. Divorce brings on a multitude of problems.

Blended families usually come from divorces. They run a great risk for becoming high conflict families. One teenager described her feelings about her parents divorce (Christianity Today 1994-2003). She said, "I am angry; I'm terrified; I'm feeling guilty; I'm ashamed; I'm frustrated; I'm

lonely; I feel stupid; I am worried; I want my family back; I'm tired; I'm scared; and I feel so burned and betrayed." Divorce increases the risk of interpersonal problems in children. There is evidence that many of these problems are long lasting. In fact, they may even become worse in adulthood. One study concludes that children are better off if their parents stay together and work out their problems than if they divorce (Popenoe 2002). The evidence suggests that stepfamilies are no improvement over single-parent families, even though typically income levels are higher and there is a father figure in the home. Stepfamilies have their own problems including interpersonal conflicts with new parent figures. These families are greatly at risk for breaking up.

High conflict families are locked into negative cyclical arguments. Unresolved hurt blocks effective communication and problem solving. Problems usually start from the top. Parents' poor communication and troubled marriages negatively affect their kids. The children act out at home and school. Many high conflict marriages and families come to counseling with an array of presenting problems (surface issues) like jealousy, money, sex, communication, relatives, careers, religion, children, alcohol, etc. They usually struggle with hidden issues of caring,

Profiles/Problems

- Blended Families
- Pre and Post Divorce Families
- Serious Marriage Problems
- Infidelity
- Conflicted Ex-Spouse Relationships
- Custody Issues/Court Problems
- Single Parent Families
- Troubled Family Relationships
- Personality Clashes
- Father Absence

- Uninvolved Fathers
- Conflicted Father Child Relationships
- Boundary Violations/Enmeshment
- Considerable Teenage Rebellion
- Children Acting Out
- Poor Communication Skills
- Poor Conflict Resolution Skills
- Anger Problems
- Controlling Parents
- Alcohol and/or Drug Abuse

- Financial Struggles
- Severe Family Stress
- Disconnected from God
- Resentment/Unforgiveness
- Losses
- Physical and/or Sexual Abuse
- Unresolved individual problems.
- Unresolved relationship problems



acceptance, control, integrity, and commitment (Gourley, 2003). Ultimately, strained relationships with God account for these problems.

The anger is really hurt and fear (Gourley, 2003). Couples and family members explode in anger toward each other because they hurt inside. They have been injured and can't take the pain anymore. They are fearful too. They lash out against one another to protect themselves from getting hurt. Tension rises, explosions occur, people withdraw, guilt and resentment remains, sometimes apologies, promises, then the cycle repeats. High conflict families battle over the slightest provocation. Most of the time the precipitating event (perceived offense) is minor and forgotten. The animosity and pain continues. Harmful words are spoken and spirits are crushed.

Solutions

Establish a new format for handling conflicts.

1. Take a time out. Everyone back off a few hours from arguing.
2. Come back at a preset time a few hours later and hold a family meeting.
3. One person at a time speaks at the meeting: state the problem, your feelings, and your recommendation. Offer a solution.
4. One person, preferably the father or mother, moderate the meeting. Reiterate each person's complaint to the whole family after that person has spoken.
5. Go through the same process with each family member. After everyone has spoken, review the problems, feelings, proposed solutions, and expected outcomes.
6. The parents should decide on the most appropriate solution. It may become obvious that certain people in the family need to work on their relationships. Outline how

this will be done. Time spent together, activities to do, etc.

Critical Objectives

- Commit to success for the whole family.
- Commit the process and outcome to Christ.
- Do the things that build trust with one another.
- Look at yourself. What are your struggles and issues?
- Review previous and present relationships.
- Address old hurts.
- Don't hold grudges. Resentments always hinder progress.
- The main goal is forgiveness.
- Listen to each other.
- Understand how everyone feels.
- Work toward healing.



- Keep talking. Watch your words, they bring harm or healing.
- Be patient with one another.
- Parents, commit to a Godly marriage.
- Don't divorce. Commit to working it out. Get help!
- Fathers, stay connected with your children.
- Mothers, encourage your children to have good relationships with their father.
- For those remarrying; Go slow in blending your families.
- Build cooperative relationships with ex-spouses.
- Divorced families - work very hard to mend and prevent more hardships.

Do all of the above before prayer and end in prayer. Do everything in love, honoring and obeying the Lord. Meet as a group a few days later to review progress. If the animosity, anger, and tempers still flare, seek professional help! Some families cannot carry out the recommendations for addressing conflicts due to their volatility. If this is the case, seek professional help immediately. Many high conflict families have serious problems that cannot be resolved effectively without intervention. Conflict resolution and relationship repair are the primary objectives. Good professional help enables the whole family to: connect on an emotional level and understand one another's feelings; resolve and manage the crisis: develop healthy problem solving skills; heal the pain: build communication skills: and develop a preventive maintenance plan. None of the above will really occur without Christ. Christ



centered therapy focuses on anger resolution and real forgiveness.

Healthy Families

Healthy families handle conflict well. They respect one another. Healthy families have parents committed to God and each other. They know that God honors them when they love and obey Him. They strive to resolve conflicts quickly and effectively. Most importantly, these families have healthy relationships. Love binds them together. They are Christ-centered. These families know that real healing and growth come with resolution, reconciliation, and forgiveness. They are motivated to live Christ-like lives. Healthy families also have fathers who are connected and involved with their children. These fathers are Godly men who keep their promises and go the distance with their families. They value their relationships with their families more than money, power, or prestige. Promise keeping fathers set the standard for Godly behavior in their homes. Nothing is impossible with God. Review your own life and commit to changing any negative patterns. Repair your broken and strained relationships. Step out in faith, pray for God's help in accomplishing these tasks. Pass the blessing onto your children.

F.Y.I.

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