

Inter-parental conflict, parenting, and child development in Australian families: Fact sheet

To examine the impact of domestic and family violence on parenting and child development, this research¹ analysed data from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC), Australia's leading source of data on children's development and wellbeing. LSAC collects data every 2 years on "inter-parental conflict": mothers' experiences of conflict with their domestic partner, a broad set of behaviours that may include domestic and family violence for some families. While the focus on inter-parental conflict means that we cannot isolate the impact of domestic violence, this research nonetheless provides some of the only longitudinal data on childhood development and also provides critical information on a broader set of behaviours and dynamics, of which domestic violence is a subset.

"**Inter-parental conflict**" refers to interactions that are frequently tense or angry between two people who are jointly raising a child, resulting in arguments or physical conflict.

While such conflict is likely to be high in couples experiencing domestic and family violence, it may also exist without being part of a pattern of abusive behaviour in which one parent seeks to exert power and control.

Inter-parental conflict is common: experienced by one in three Australian families with school-age children. Data from LSAC show that over an 8-year period:

- **One in four** mothers² report some periods of inter-parental conflict in the past or currently, but not both.
- **One in twelve** mothers report persistent inter-parental conflict that has occurred both in the past and currently.

Mothers who report experiencing inter-parental conflict have poorer mental health and parenting relative to other mothers. These difficulties are more common when the conflict has been persistent over time and were evident for mothers of preschool, primary school, and pre-adolescent children.

Elevated symptoms of anxiety, depression, or stress³ were found for:

12-15% of mothers experiencing **past or emerging** conflict

24-33% of mothers experiencing **persistent** conflict

compared to:

6-7% of mothers not experiencing conflict

Impaired parenting was observed across three domains: low efficacy, high irritability, and low consistency.⁴ Each of these difficulties were more common for mothers who reported conflict, and most common when the conflict was persistent.

Low parenting efficacy was reported by:

13-21% of mothers experiencing **past or emerging** conflict

25-27% of mothers experiencing **persistent** conflict

compared to:

9-13% of mothers not experiencing conflict

¹ This research was undertaken as part of the *Domestic and family violence and parenting: Mixed-method insights into impact and support needs project*.

² Inter-parental conflict was measured by mothers' reports only. Fathers' data could not be examined due to the large proportion with missing data at one or more time points.

³ Measured using a broadband screener that indicates an individual is at possible risk of mental health disorder.

⁴ The three parenting measures were classified as "poor" when scores were in the poorest 15 percent of the distribution. Efficacy refers to a parent's confidence in his or her parenting skills; irritability refers to parental feelings of anger or frustration towards the child; and consistency refers to the setting and application of age-appropriate rules and expectations for the child.

High irritability in parenting

was reported by:

17-19% of mothers experiencing **past or emerging** conflict

24-27% of mothers experiencing **persistent** conflict

compared to:

11-12% of mothers not experiencing conflict

Parents' mental health and daily parenting behaviours are critical in shaping children's development and wellbeing. Children whose mothers reported persistent conflict showed poorer physical health and development than children not exposed. These patterns were evident across all ages examined, with some associations stronger for pre-teens compared to preschool and primary school aged children.

Low consistency in parenting

was reported by:

21-23% of mothers experiencing **past or emerging** conflict

32-35% of mothers experiencing **persistent** conflict

compared to:

12-13% of mothers not experiencing conflict

Poor physical health

was reported by mothers for:

20-32% of children experiencing **persistent** inter-parental conflict

compared to:

11-14% of children not experiencing inter-parental conflict

Poor vocabulary skills and lack of skills required for school

was identified by direct assessment for:

23-24% of children experiencing **persistent** inter-parental conflict

compared to:

13-14% of children not experiencing inter-parental conflict

These statistics suggest that inter-parental conflict is related to poorer health and wellbeing for mothers and children. The pattern of differences between those who experienced conflict at some time, compared to those who had experienced persistent conflict, indicates that escape from conflict may lead to a recovery in at least some aspects of maternal and child functioning. More research is needed to confirm this.

Poor academic performance in maths and literacy

was reported by classroom teachers for:

21-25% of children experiencing **persistent** inter-parental conflict

compared to:

13% of children not experiencing inter-parental conflict

Overall, these results suggest the importance of a broad focus on the early reduction of family conflict as a key plank in health and social policies that seek to improve the wellbeing and life chances of Australian women and children.

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For more information on this project, see: <https://anrows.org.au/domestic-and-family-violence-and-parenting-mixed-method-insights-impact-and-support-needs>

Acknowledgement of Country

ANROWS acknowledges the traditional owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders past, present and future; and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and knowledge.

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