

Parental Conflict

What You Have *Always* Wanted To Know But Were Afraid To
Ask!

Sue Larter. Eldon Grove Academy.

How to Argue Better.

Knowing how to react and how best to support families where there is parental conflict can be really difficult. We may feel that children are feeling the effects of this but worry that we could make things worse by “interfering”. We have all probably felt like this at some point. However, completing the “How to Argue Better” training has given me the confidence to have open and honest conversations with some of our families about Parental Conflict and the effects this is having on their children. This has helped them to consider what they could change to make things better, not just for the children, but for themselves also.

Case Study

A teacher has noticed that one of the children in their class seems to have become very withdrawn and anxious. The child has told her teacher that her Mam and Dad do not live together anymore and that they shout at each other when Dad comes to collect her and her sister.

Discuss with your group:

- What impact you feel this is having on this student.
- What support you could offer to reduce the parental conflict.

Ideas

What did we do?

In this scenario the first thing I did was contact the child's Mam and shared with her the changes which the teacher had noticed and what her child had shared. Mam was not surprised to hear that her child was showing signs of anxiety in school and shared what has been happening in the family home recently. That Dad had left the family home and now had a new partner with children of her own. She said that contact was sporadic now because she did not want the children meeting Dad's new partner until she felt that they were ready. She said that this has caused arguments between her and Dad but she had not realised that the children were aware of this. Mam asked if I could speak to her daughter to reassure her that everything was ok. I suggested to Mam that, with her consent, I complete some work with her around Parental Conflict. Mam was happy for this to happen.

Mum and Dad Glue

The first thing I did was to read “Mum and Dad Glue” by Kes Gray. This broke the ice with the child and encouraged her to speak about how she felt the boy in the story felt and related it back to her own feelings. She talked about everything feeling different now and said that she was upset because her Mam and Dad shouted at each other before and after contact. She said that she worried that it was because of something she had done. We talked about this and reassurance was given that this was not her fault and, although her parents were not getting on at the moment, they both still loved her.

Family Portraits

During the next session together we drew pictures of our family. The child's pictures was of herself, her sister, her Mam, her cat and her rabbits. Dad was not on the picture. We talked about this and she said that she was not sure if her Dad was still in her family any more because he did not live with her and lived with his new family instead. We then talked about other people who do not live with us but are still part of our family.

Houses We Like to Visit.

Our next session was around houses we visit. The child drew a lovely picture of her home and talked about her bedroom and what toys she has. The next house she drew was of her Aunty's house. In this picture she included pictures of the people who live there. Finally, she drew a picture of her Grandma's house and talked about who lives there. On the roof of the house she wrote "NOT DAD". I asked why she had written that and she said that her Daddy was not allowed to go there now because he made her Mammy sad. We then talked about Dad's house and I asked if she wanted to draw it. She said that she wanted to but could not because she did not know what it looked like. She said that she was not allowed to go to see her Dad because he had a new family now and her Mam did not want her to see them. She talked about missing her Dad and finding it hard not knowing when she will see him again.

Speaking to the Parents.

At this point I spoke to both parents and invited them to come into school to discuss what had been shared. Both parents were happy to come in but came at different times. When it was shared with them what their child had shared during our sessions they were both visibly moved. They admitted that they had argued but had not realised that the children could hear. We talked about the impact this was having on their children and what we could offer to help the family. Both parents agreed that they would benefit from some mediation. I offered to complete a referral form for them, which they said they would think about and get back in touch.

Things to Look Forward to.

During our last session before the summer we drew a timeline and on it drew things which we have enjoyed doing in the past, things we were enjoying at the moment and what we were looking forward to in the future. We talked about how difficult things may feel sometimes but that these can pass and we still have lovely things to look forward to. The child talked happily about the summer holidays and holidays she was going to be going on.

What Happened Next?

After the holidays I got in touch with both parents again. They both talked about how difficult it had been to hear how their child was feeling and had agreed to arrange their own mediation. They had arranged set days and times for the children to see their Dad and Mam had arranged to meet Dad's new partner with the children. Since then the children had been away on holiday them and had enjoyed visits to other family members. They admitted that it could still be difficult but felt that they had come a long way and were planning to continue moving forward for the children.

Our Final Session.

My final session with this pupil was very different to the ones which had had previously. We drew a picture showing what we did over the holidays and the child filled her page with a picture of going on holiday with Dad. She said that they had seen lots of animals and had been on really fast rides. She said that they all had lots of fun and everybody was happy. She said that she now knew which days she was going to see her Dad and said that her Mam and Dad weren't angry with each other anymore. She appeared to very happy and said that she did not think that she needed to come to see me anymore.

What impact do you think this intervention had
on the whole family?
