

Review

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Review

Parental Triangulation in Separated and Divorced Families: Causes and Impact on the Intergenerational Parent-Child Conflict

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Abstract: The triangulation process represents a violation of the boundary between parental and child relational subsystems which, in turn, affects family dynamics and relationships. The paper, with distinct reference to marital conflict and divorced couples, describes the main causes of the triangulation process and its impact on children (and adolescents) as significant third participants within the parental conflict. Besides, it focuses on long-term consequences associated with triangulation process to parental conflict exposure, that can adversely affect the well-being of children during their life-cycle, and even into adulthood. A data-search was carried out for articles to be included in the review and articles were retrieved from different electronic databases (first: Scopus and Web of Science, then: PsychINFO, Google Scholar, EBSCO and ScienceDirect,). After having initially considered 152 articles, 58 studies were selected for this research. A qualitative analysis was conducted on selected studies, focusing on: (1) different types of triangulation commonly used in intergenerational family relationships; (2) an updated summary of the research around the impact of triangulation on the well-being of children and the parent-child conflict; and (3) the main characteristics of successful intervention of preventative and psychotherapeutic treatments. In conclusion, the results, examining the long-term effects of the triangulation process, highlight the developmental paths of children that are more exposed and at risk, and focuses on the importance of preventing the intergenerational transmission of marital conflict, as a way to reduce mental health costs and to improve the well-being of children and families who are all involved in these conflicting and destructive dynamics.

Keywords: parental triangulation; marital conflict; coparenting; adolescent; intergenerational family bond; divorced couples

1. Introduction

The ability to dissolve the marital relationship at any time, on a legislative and non-legislative level, has profoundly changed the perception and value of the family today. Consequently, the idea of parental responsibility as well as the actual act of parenting itself has evolved too [1]. Frequent marital breakups have led, over time, to an increase in conflict between partners, regarding not only the period of the couple's union and separation, but above all the phases following it. In other words, separation and divorce are not just about moving away from each other as partners, but rather involving and disrupting a much wider "community of subjects", including children and family members [2].

It is significant considering how the physical and psychological environment of the family system, even the extended one, is deeply modified in terms of emotions, feelings, habits, lifestyle and routine, as well as personal and financial well-being [3]. Particularly for children, a parental separation represents a moment of significant desperation, because it involves an inevitable change in the relationship with their primary reference figures; as well as a re-organisation of the mental representation of these same figures, linked to the new relational dynamics that are created within

the family. However, research and longitudinal studies have led several Authors to agree that the most destructive consequences for children are not so much related to the separation itself, but rather to the incessant conflict that involves an increase in psychological and behavioural problems, somatic and psychosomatic symptoms, poor academic performance and low self-esteem [4–6].

Predominantly, adequate support and constant reassurance allow children of separated couples to return to an adequate development model. Specifically, there are two factors that appear to have a crucial influence on children's adaptation to their parents' separation: firstly, continuous and positive contact with the non-custodial parent and, secondly, a good level of communication between the child and both his parents [7]. In the event that these two factors are not present, it is easy and recurrent that one or both of the ex partners, failing to use adequate maturity and awareness of their marital dynamics, put the children against each other parent, thus allowing "male versus female" pathological alliances to be created, or "a mother versus her son, against the father and her daughter" [8]. These pathological alliances can accentuate the suffering and discomfort of children who, sometimes, tend to feed a pathological vicious circle of aggression, anger and instability within the family and social environment. In the long term, this vicious circle could become increasingly destructive and uncontrollable [8].

By virtue of this, this literature review also aims to identify what links the dysfunctional configurations of triangulation in the context of conflict between spouses and hostile separations, and with the conflict between parents and children as a direct effect of the first [9].

From a longitudinal perspective that is based on what has just been stated, it is plausible, therefore, to think that generations born of hostile separations and divorces, whose sense of innate stability with respect to the marriage has been deeply damaged by family experience, will be influenced by all this conflict in the creation of their future relationships to the point of making them fragile and evanescent [10].

In conclusion, we can say that hostile separations represent a potentially pathogenic factor for the life of families, which could affect the mental health of their members. The well-being of families appears to be influenced by separations and/or divorces in relation to three factors: the level of conflict, the triangulation of children and the individual vulnerability of all family members [11]. Prevention programs to reduce conflict, divorce education, mediation and family therapy are identified as successful interventions, able to stimulate the bringing into play of important protective factors which enable families to go through painful and conflicting separation processes, without irreparably damaging the life cycle of the families themselves and, above all, the developmental paths that await the children of separated couples.

2. Method

2.1. Sources and Search Procedure

A data-search was carried out in different electronic databases (Scopus and Web of Science, plus: PsychINFO, Google Scholar, EBSCO and ScienceDirect,) for articles to be included in the review.

The search terms were «parental triangulation» in the title, or in the abstract or in the keywords; «marital conflict», «parenting and coparenting in adolescence», «divorced couples», «intergenerational family bond» in the keywords. Search terms were linked with the Boolean operators "AND, OR" to properly identify articles.

We did not use publishing date limiters, so the search results ranged from the earliest relevant papers; more specifically the first article was published in 1973 and the last one that we revised was published in 2021, so that the publication dates of the articles ranged from 1973 to 2021. The searches began 10th June 2021 and finish 16th December 2021.

The search produced a total of 152 articles, of which 134 items were returned by Scopus and 18 by Web of Science.

2.2. Eligibility Criteria and Selection Process

To be eligible for inclusion in this review, the articles had to be: (1) published in peer-reviewed journals; (2) published in the English language; (3) studies that analysed the phenomenon of parental triangulation and different variables involved in marital conflict; (4) studies with a focus on children and early adolescents' well being in divorced families and the impact of marital conflict; (5) studies with focus on prevention programs to reduce conflict, improving divorce mediation and family therapy as successful interventions. In particular, these last two criteria have been chosen because there is a wide agreement on a higher tendency to examine the impact of parental triangulation in children and especially during adolescence (and young adulthood), than during adult life; as a consequence, children and adolescents are more vulnerable to parental conflict exposure and may show higher risk for negative outcomes. Moreover, since children and adolescents are still developing they may be considered as having less protective factors than adults, especially toward relational behaviours and to self-representation; the long-term effects of the triangulation process, besides, highlight the developmental paths of children as they are more exposed and at risk, and focuses on the importance of preventing the intergenerational transmission of conflict, as a way to reduce mental health costs and to improve the well-being of children and families who are all involved in these conflicting dynamics.

All the articles were exported to the bibliographic manager – we relied on the Mendeley tool – and duplicates were eliminated. The data were then gathered in an Excel file, reporting for each publication the following: authors, year of publication, title, journal, and DOIs; we also performed an initial screening. After the elimination of duplicates, 152 abstracts were screened. We excluded records if the main topic was not in line with the aims of this review.

The first selection was carried out by reading the titles and abstracts and then choosing the studies that seemed potentially interesting. On the basis of these criteria, articles not in English (26) and articles published in peer-reviewed journals (34) were excluded. From the remaining 92 articles, theoretical work, reviews and meta-analytical studies have been eliminated (24), reducing to 68 empirical research articles. These excluded the methodological and intervention proposals (10), which nevertheless served as a basis for drawing up the conclusions of this review, which refer to the intervention programmes considered most effective. Subsequently, 58 research articles were retained for full-text screening. The review of the full texts, applying our exclusion and inclusion criteria, supported the decision to retain 26 articles, included in the first part of the review, in order to investigate the relationship between marital conflict and the adaptation of children, also on the basis of emotional distress symptoms (19) and defer the data according to the age of the children and the specific type of marital conflict (7). Moreover, for the second part of the review, 32 articles were evaluated, 10 of which were included to analyse the relationship between the combined effects of triangulation and attachment and the presence of internalizing problems, during child development.

3. Results

3.1. Styles of Conflict: Constructive and Destructive Marital Conflict

When we talk about conflict and its implications and consequences, within family systems and relationships and especially between couples and between parents and children, it is useful to distinguish first of all between *constructive* conflict and *destructive conflict*. In the first case, we refer to a process of negotiation, almost of collaboration, in which the two partners verbalise and define their position on something, with the mutual aim of opposing the other; in most cases, a constructive conflict, especially in its resolution, turns out to be satisfactory to both sides. What differentiates this type of conflict from the destructive one pertains to the level of attitudes and feelings: the process of destructive conflict is in fact often characterised by coercion and physical and/or verbal threats that can degenerate to the point of going beyond the problem of the here and now, and accentuate or generalise other issues for the couple; in this case, and for the most part, not only is a resolution not reached, but at the end the result will be unsatisfactory for both partners ([12] See Figure 1).

As already mentioned, the exposure to marital conflict has significant implications especially for children who can more often show developmental difficulties and a high risk of adaptation problems, including impulsivity and anger, behaviour disorders, and anxiety and depressive symptoms [13–15]. Traditionally, researchers have focused on the relationship between the frequency of marital conflict and the adaptation of children [16].

More recently, however, several studies started to highlight how the parental conflict also plays a key role in determining the emotional and behavioural reactions of children, considering that previous research has been unable to determine how parental marital conflict, divorce, and children's long-term outcomes are related and in particular that the consequences of parental divorce depend on parental marital conflict prior to divorce. [4–6,8,12,17]. In line with these results, inside high-conflict families, children have higher levels of well-being as young adults if their parents divorced than if they stayed together. But in low-conflict families, children have higher levels of well-being if their parents stayed together than if they divorced. In marriages that do not end in divorce, parental marital conflict is negatively associated with the well-being of offspring. Specifically, the constructive conflict arouses positive emotional reactions in children; on the contrary, destructive conflict brings out dysregulated emotions and behaviours, such as: anger and sadness [18]. In addition, the observation of a constructive marital conflict on the part of children enables them to learn adequate problem-solving skills, effective ways of communicating and greater positivity in social relationships [19,20].

Constructive and Destructive Marital Conflict

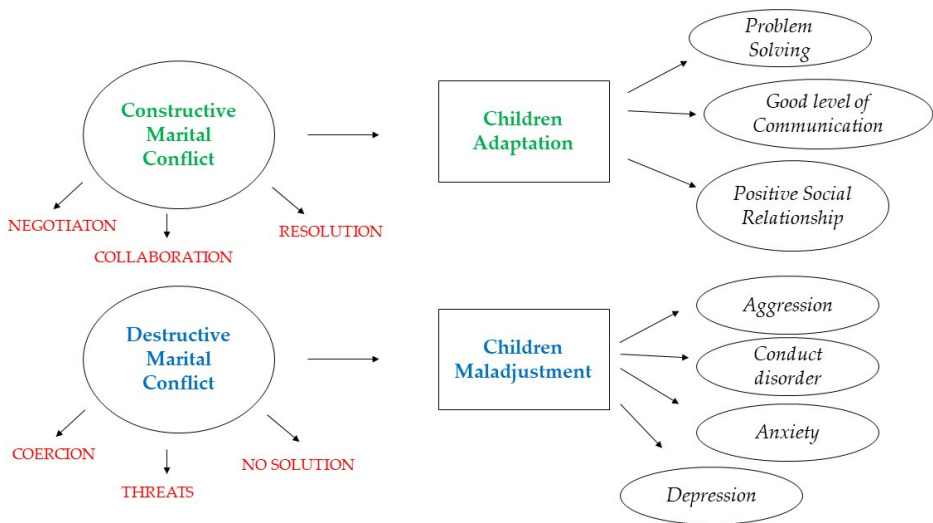


Figure 1. Relationship between Costructive and Desstructive Marital Conflict and Children's Adaptation.

3.2. Relationship between Constructive and Destructive Marital Conflict and Children and Adolescents' Adaptation

In line with these results, Buehler and Welsh [21] also pointed out that passively witnessing marital conflict poses a high risk for adolescents and children in the development of dysfunctional and psychologically destructive beliefs, such as defining themselves as the cause of the conflict itself, with serious consequences for guilt. It seems that taking a direct part in the parental conflict has a positive meaning for adolescent children, as when they participate they act as mediators which in turn helps with the reduction of externalising symptoms. Moreover, those partners who appear to be satisfied with the couple's relationship and who, despite the conflict, feel they are receiving support from the partner, tend to be more available and sensitive to their children ([22] see Figure 1). On the

contrary, those couples who are unhappy and suffering from destructive conflict tend to lack emotional availability and are less sensitive to their children's needs [23].

In a study by Davies, Myes and Cummings [24] based on the conflicting interactions between marital parties and the emotional tone characterising the latter, we wanted to investigate how much and what had changed, specifically with respect to the perception and emotional activation of children. A sample of 48 children, divided into two different age groups (7-9 years and 13-15 years) and equally distributed according to sex, were shown several scenarios and resolutions of marital conflict. The results of their study allowed us to understand how, regardless of age, an adult's ability to resolve conflict and to make peace is reflected in the most positive behaviours in children, and based on emotional security. A failure to resolve the conflict, on the other hand, produced more negative responses in terms of insecurity, fear, anger and sadness. Moreover, if in this second case the general tendency of the children was to want to intervene in the conflict to help the adult to resolve it, in the first case this tendency to get involved or to propose solutions turned out to be almost completely curbed. Particularly noteworthy is also an implication regarding the adolescent subgroup of this study: during adolescence, a more sophisticated understanding of the psychological causes and consequences of conflict is observed, compared to younger children, as adolescents have reported slightly greater impulses to intervene in adult problems, making intergenerational coalitions with and against one parent. Finally, with regard to gender differences, it emerged that boys are generally more likely than girls to propose instrumental strategies aimed at repairing conflict [24].

A further difference between the emotional reactions to marital conflict by younger children and adolescents is their assessment and interpretation of the conflict itself. In this regard, Grych and Fincham [25] have highlighted how younger children tend to make an initial conflict assessment from what they see when witnessing the parental conflict, focusing on how dangerous or threatening this may be to them. When, at this assessment, the conflict turns out to be "harmless" to them, they turn their attention elsewhere; conversely, a second evaluation process starts to determine the causes and responsibilities of the conflict, trying to deal with it personally. The tendency of younger children is, in fact, also to consider themselves responsible for the conflict between parents, and this interpretation can undermine their self-esteem. The case of the adolescent is different, as adolescents are better able to understand the causal role of their parents and the effects of conflict between them.

In this regard, Franke's study [26] highlights the significant sense of guilt experienced by school-age children towards "less successful parent", within the dynamic of conflict. In this case, in fact, the child held himself responsible for the possible separation of parents and attributed the causes of this separation in particular to his filial and childish qualities. At a later stage of development, the same Author [26] refers instead to reactions of sadness, anger, false maturity and denial. Finally, from the age of 12 and above, preteens and adolescents would tend to take on adult roles or reach a premature level of empowerment that would lead to an early departure from home. Furthermore, at this stage of development, children would be loyal to one or both parents, offering them emotional support or striving to protect younger siblings [26].

3.3. Relationship between 5 different processes of Conflict and Children and Adolescents' Adaptation

In addition to the distinction between the two types of constructive and destructive conflict, the literature analyses five styles or processes of conflict: explicit or overt, hidden, cooperative, avoidant and withdrawn [27,28]. Considering the aims of this paper, it's important to give particular consideration to the first two processes. The explicit or overt conflict is characterised by behaviour of contempt, screams, insults, threats and sometimes even physical violence. The hidden conflict, on the other hand, has to do with a level of emotionality and hostile behaviour that is reflected in a passive-aggressive manner, and in the implementation of triangulation mechanisms towards children. A study by Bradford, LaToya and Barber [9], which starts with the hypothesis of the existence of a direct relationship between the overt or hidden marital conflict, and with the conflict between parents and children and the appearance of a symptomatology in the latter, especially in adolescence, has highlighted a correlation between overt marital conflict and the presence of externalising behaviours

both in adolescents and children. This association can be justified by the fact that young people, when observing the conflict between parents, can imitate their maladaptive and aggressive behaviours, exposing themselves to the risk of antisocial behaviour. These findings are already confirmed in another study [28] that shows a strong link between interparental conflict, substance use and adolescent academic performance. It has been shown that the perception of feeling constantly threatened and unsafe within the home, due to conflict between parents, exposes adolescent children to a high risk of alcohol and cigarette consumption from 12 years of age and, given the precocity, this can turn into substance abuse in the following years. McCauley's study [28] showed that high levels of marital conflict put adolescents at risk of declining academic achievement and poorer overall academic adaptation. In this regard, numerous research projects [29–31] have already focused on the correlation between marital conflict and low levels of student achievement. The sense of perceived threat by the adolescent can undermine the functioning of these domains: maintaining attention and commitment to schoolwork, the sense of social belonging with teachers and peers, and academic performance in general [31–33]. Furthermore, when explicit conflict becomes the recurrent and normative process, adolescents can become aggressive with their peers or younger siblings [34] or, consistent with the authors' assumptions [9], also with their parents. Similarly, children who witness hidden conflict between their parents are more likely to develop internalised behaviours, mainly linked to depressive symptoms [21]. The latter suggests how much emotional tension within the home is reflected in high levels of guilt and emotional distress in adolescents [35]. Hidden conflict between two partners, in turn, is also a symptom of high levels of marital dissatisfaction and, consequently, depressive symptoms in adolescents or children [36]. The study [9] also highlighted that antisocial behaviour was more common in adolescent males, while depressive symptoms were more common in female adolescents. In other words, the significant correlation between the marital conflict and the parent-child conflict highlights how the conflict between the two partners compromises their ability to be sensitive to the needs of their children, and easily triggers more frequent disputes with them [9].

Another recent study [37] has clarified and demonstrated the relationship between triangulation as a consequence of marital conflict and depressive symptoms during early adolescence, although this is mediated by certain protective factors that reduce their occurrence, such as [37]: self-acceptance or positive self-evaluation; satisfaction in relationships with peers or with other significant adults beyond parents; personal growth, or a continuity in the development of one's identity as a person.

Even the DSM-5 [38] introduced, in the section on "Other conditions that may be the subject of clinical attention", the Child affected by Parental Relationship Distress" (CAPRD), with the aim of considering the possibility of children developing behavioural, cognitive, affective and physical symptoms in relation to the distress experienced in observing high levels of parental conflict [39]. Consistent with the above, several studies [40] dedicated to the development of mental health problems in children and adolescents have confirmed how these are influenced by the so-called Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), that include exposure to interparental conflict and parental divorce.

Canevelli and Lucardi [41] focused their attention on the connection between the different types of marital conflict, regarding the antecedent, contemporary and consequent period of separation, and the behaviours and roles that children are "forced" to assume. In these different situations, the parents, who are unaware and focusing on dealing with their own pain, anger and suffering, are unable to provide support, empathy and appropriately respond to the needs of their children. Consequently, the children tend to experience a sense of abandonment and loss of a "safe base", whilst trying to protect themselves and their parents, assuming particular behaviours as the only way to express the needs they are not able to translate into words [42,43]. Among the roles that children tend to play, we can find: the messenger, or intermediary in communications between parents; the peacemaker, who reports to each of the parents what the other one wants to hear; the active decision-maker, who takes the place of the parents in assuming responsibility for difficult decisions; the substitute partner or substitute parent, even towards younger siblings; and the judge, especially when he is encouraged to accuse one of the two parents [39]. These roles, within triangular-relational

dynamics that involve the mother, father and children, if prolonged over time, tend to trigger dysfunctional processes like those Haley and Hoffman [44] called “perverted triangle” and Minuchin [45] called the “rigid triad”. In the first configuration of the coalition, one of the parents allies with the child against the other parent; in the triangulation, the child is in between two parents who are both trying to force the child to side with each of them; and, finally, in the deviation, children can express their discomfort related to the parental conflict through symptomatic manifestations. The common denominator of these dysfunctional relational dynamics is none other than the violation of confinement and interparental subsystems, which, consequently leads to a confusion of roles in which the characteristics of the child and his psychological differentiation from the parent are denied. These dynamics trigger not only conditions of *entanglement* but also reversal, when the expected parenting roles break down and the child is elevated into an adult-like role and charged with meeting the parent’s needs [46].

In the context of separations and/or hostile divorces, therefore, a dynamic is frequently observed, according to which the child establishes a more intense connection with one parent, at the expense of the other, who feels the relationship with his son is hindered. They, thus, develop real coalitions between a favourite parent and the child, as an union between two individuals at the expense of a third [47]. By increasing the conflict, intense conflicts of loyalty are generated in the child, who feels the weight of the parental dispute feeling responsible: while perceiving a sort of symbiotic bond with one of the two parents, at the same time, it fears that approaching the latter may result in the betrayal of the other [48]. A triangulated child is, therefore, a child placed at the centre of a parental conflict in which he finds himself swinging like a pendulum, now towards one, now towards the other parent [45]. On the parent’s side, triangulation represents a form of “instrumentalisation” in which the child is used as an “instrument” or form of extension, replacing the needs of the parent with those of the child [48].

The case of infantilisation is different: when an adult is being treated like a child, even though nothing about their mental, physical, social or intellectual wellbeing warrants such treatment. This third dynamic can be created within the alienated parent-child dyad, characterised by the inability of the parent to tolerate the growth of the child, who is striving for healthy and functional independence. In the context of marital conflict, children will feel in charge of their parents well-being, using infantilisation to meet the needs of their parents [46].

Cigoli, Galimberti and Mombelli [49] spoke of a *desperate bond* with regard to the maintenance of the relationship between partners who cannot process their separation when in conflict with each other. In such cases, parental functions are compromised and cause conflict between the two partners, with disastrous consequences for the children [50,51]. In the eighties, Gardner [52] introduced Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS). Today, however, at the centre of scientific debates that challenge the problematic nature of the definition, leading scholars prefer to exclude the term “syndrome” and simply call this “Parental Alienation.” PAS is based on the setting of a dysfunctional relational system that brings into play manipulative dynamics by an alienating parent against an alienated child, to the detriment of the “target parent”. The more the relationship with the alienating parent is consolidated, the more the child will risk becoming trapped in a role that will lead him to internalise parental manipulation, as a result of his own autonomous thinking, and develop a False Self based on the satisfaction of the desires of others [53,54]. All this has an impact on the conflicts of loyalty with parents and, therefore, on the fear of disappointing their expectations or betraying them [55,56]. Such dysfunctional relational experiences teach children, especially adolescents, problematic ways of interacting with significant people that can potentially compromise their relationships with peers [57]. A longitudinal study [58], which observed 416 families during the adolescence phase of the children, showed how children tend first of all to report aspects of the parental conflict to their peers and, at the same time, how much they perceive a sense of rejection or total avoidance on their part.

3.4. Relationship between Marital Conflict, Triangulation and Attachment

A substantial part of literature and research links marital conflict and triangulation dynamics to attachment theory [58–61]. It is also assumed that the representation of attachment in the child and adolescent is formed on the basis of the relationship with each parent and the relationship between the parents that the child observes and experiences. Specifically, since the processes of attachment and triangulation begin in the early years of life, the Authors [61] believe that the combined effects of both processes continue throughout the life cycle and that these unfold particularly during adolescence. In this period, indeed, a specific personality structure is formed that remains relatively stable throughout life and that determines not only the level of differentiation of the teenager from the parent, but also the process of intergenerational transmission of the conflict, of triangulation and attachment. Of particular note is the observation that high levels of triangulation within the family of origin reinforce an insecure attachment style and preach the same style in adulthood. High levels of triangulation and an anxious-ambivalent attachment style also positively correlate with symptoms of anxiety, emotional dysregulation, instability of self, guilt and/or shame ([61]; See Figure 2).

Relationship between Marital Conflict, Triangulation and Attachment

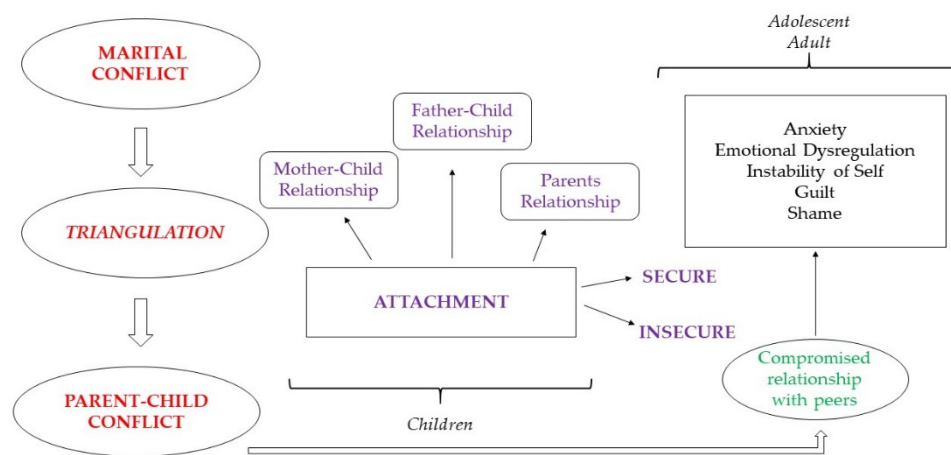


Figure 2. Marital Conflict is a cause of Triangulation. The combined effects of Triangulation and Attachment during Childhood compromise the relationship with peer and cause Internalizing Problems in Adolescence and Adulthood.

4. Discussion

With regard to the parental conflict, it is possible to make some considerations about the risk that intergenerational transmission of the conflict entails for the adaptation of children.

The impact of conflict on the adaptation of adolescents and, later, of those who have become adults, is mediated by three variables or different types of assessment that children make whilst witnessing the conflict between parents: perceived risk, ability to do something for the parents or to do something to stop any conflict and guilt [62]. These variables, as already mentioned, are also linked to the externalising and internalising of problems in children [63]. Moreover, where interparental conflict involves triangulation dynamics, this could damage the adolescent's relationships with peers and other significant adults [62]. But, a fundamental aspect is that conflict can be the cause, in turn, of high levels of conflict between parents and children [64–66]. In this regard, the research reports quite divergent results, as well as presenting a basic limitation: in fact, in most cases, the connection between the parental conflict and the quality of the parent-child relationship has been examined, taking into account young adults from divorced families, without including those from intact families [67–69]. Moreover, while some studies have found significant adverse effects of conflict on the relationship between children and both parents [70–72], others have identified adverse effects only in relation to the father-child relationship [65,73–75].

Finally, looking at the specifics of intergenerational transmission, a longitudinal study by Amato and Booth [76] highlighted the following: high levels of conflict between the two parents predict hostile relationships and marital discord for offspring that have become adults. Therefore, exposure to conflict between parents and the subsequent psychological processing of this, lead children to replicate the same behaviour in their marriages. It appears there is no connection between the hostile parent-child relationship and the intergenerational transmission of marital quality.

5. Conclusions

Research on parental conflict has several implications for the development of prevention programmes for children of separated or divorced couples [77]. With regard to these programmes, it appears that exposure to parental conflict does not necessarily put children at risk of developing adaptation problems, but rather we need to give due consideration to the ways in which conflict is managed in the family. Therefore, the effectiveness of preventive programs that aim to teach parents how to properly manage their conflict is evaluated, so as to reduce stress factors for children and to support a good parent-child relationship. Moreover, since parenting is an important mediator of the impact of parental conflict on divorced families, improving the parent-child relationship can reduce the negative effects of the conflict itself. Since triangulation and conflict experienced by children are a source of concern in this area, these programs are aimed at supporting couples to find a way to put the needs of their children first, whilst improving the relationship between parents and children, and with the other parent [77].

Goodman and coll. [78] examined and assessed the effectiveness of these programmes by analysing the results of many studies that met methodological quality standards. Among these, worthy of note are the Children in the Middle and the Parenting Together programmes. Both these intervention programmes seek to reduce the exposure of children to destructive conflict, preventing them from being triangulated in parental disputes, with a view of collaborating and coparenting. Those who took part in this programme reported better communication with their former spouse and confirmed that they kept their children out of marital disagreements to a greater extent [79,80]. Another well-known programme is New Beginnings, which is based on the adaptation of children to parental divorce and focuses on improving the parent-child relationship [81]. The results of these intervention programmes show a reduction in externalising behaviours in adolescents [82].

Finally, it is believed that a therapeutic support based on the systemic-relational perspective can be considered the treatment of choice to support families facing separation and/or divorce. In this regard, Lebow [83] uncovers *Multilevel Integrative Family Therapy*. This model was created to deal with disputes concerning the custody of children, and visits in divorce rulings, but then it has most certainly been used to help deal with parental conflict, the triangulation of children and the relationship between parents and children in these cases. The working model suggests, first of all, the need to have a therapeutic contract with the family, also in written form, as a way to avoid bringing any chaos and any family conflict into the therapeutic process. It is important that the therapist chooses the correct formats for the therapeutic sessions, deciding to dedicate a specific and particular time to the various subsystems, also seen separately, in order to build alliances with all parts of the family system. Realistic objectives should be set, such as: reducing disputes and creating respectful disengagement between parents; establishing new methods of communication based on specific rules and coordination; anger management interventions; psycho-education, mediation and negotiation and finally, the re-activation technique to create new narratives that describe events without them becoming full of guilt or destructive [83].

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