

# Relationship Between Parental Conflict And Gender Differences In Social Adjustment Among Adolescents In Murang'a County, Kenya

Muriithi Joel Kiambi

B.ed (University of Nairobi), M.ed (Egerton University),  
PhD–Student (Kenyatta University, Department of Psychology) Postgraduate Student,  
Kenyatta University

*Abstract: Parental conflict is a prevalent problem that threatens the social adjustment of adolescence children both in developed and developing nations. Despite increasing media report of parental conflicts there is paucity of information on the relationship of parental conflict and social adjustment of adolescence especially in Kenya. This study sought to establish the relationship between parental conflict and social adjustment of adolescence children in Murang'a County. The study was guided by interpersonal theories. This study employed a descriptive survey design with a quantitative approach. The study target population was 108,774 secondary school students in Murang'a County. Simple random sampling method was applied to draw a sample size of 400 students. Standardized instruments were used to collect data from the students. The Social Adjustment Scale developed by Reda-Norton was used to measure social adjustment among the students while frequency of parental conflict and type of parental conflict was assessed using Children's Perception of Inter-parental Conflict Scale (CPIC). Data collected was coded and processed using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Quantitative data was analyzed to generate descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages and means. T-test statistics was conducted to establish gender differences in social adjustments of adolescents. The results of the analysis revealed that students' social adjustment mean scores showed that there was gender difference on delinquent behaviours ( $t = -3.384$ ,  $df = 319$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) among the adolescents. The findings of the analysis showed that male adolescents were more likely to show delinquent behaviours compared to female adolescents. However, no difference was found in respect to pro-social and interpersonal offensive behaviours across gender. The study therefore recommends that; schools should strengthen counseling department to help students with social adjustment challenges and teachers and counseling personnel should be appropriately sensitized to identify internalizing or externalizing symptoms and establish the underlying problem with an intention of offering appropriate intervention.*

**Keywords:** Parental Conflict, Social Adjustment, Adolescence, Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviour

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Conflict within the family is a common contemporary phenomenon and greatly impact on the children in homes. According to Acock, Alan and David (2001), parental conflict can be defined as anger that is overtly expressed, hostility and disagreement between husband and wife. A distressed couple is normally characterized by interactions that marked by mutual negativity, physical aggression and escalating anger.

The causes of parental conflict are many and may differ depending on the circumstances of the couples involved. However, Cummings, Davies and Sismpson (2004) explain that incompatibility, role confusion, behavioural contingencies, dissatisfaction and communication are among the most common causes of parental conflicts.

Parental conflicts take various forms depending on how conflicts between married individuals are expressed and managed. Shantz (2002) classify parental conflicts as either destructive or constructive. Davies, Rasi and Stevens (2002) explains that destructive parental conflict include inter-

parental aggression or violence, withdrawal during conflict, non-verbal conflict, inter-parental and parent-child verbal hostility, aggression by members directed towards objects, threats and conflicts about child related themes. On the other hand, constructive conflict exists when parents agree on how conflict can be resolved and how the conflict is not a serious threat and eventually can be worked out (Davies, Rasi & Stevens, 2002).

Grych (2002) postulates that parents who are happily married are characterized as being sensitive, affectionate, warm, and responsive towards their adolescent children; while Davies, Rasi and Stevens (2002), citing the Emotional Security Theory (EST), note that children possess a higher-order goal of the need to feel safe and secure in their families. Therefore, any form of conflict among parents that may threaten this higher-order goal will have a negative effect on a child's social adjustment. When children witness parental conflicts their emotional security is disrupted, and are likely to become distraught, since conflicts disrupt children's internal goals about their families (Wiese and Freund, 2011). More importantly, parents play a critical role in the social adjustment of their children since they have influence in socializing their teenage children through inculcation of values and nurturing self-identity development (Amato, 2003). Parental conflicts are likely to disrupt such parental support resulting to difficulties in adolescent social adjustment.

Destructive parental conflicts can have both direct and indirect effects on the relationships between parents and children and adjustment of the child. Fauchier and Margolin (2004), explains that children respond and adjust to parental conflict by either internalizing or externalizing the effects. Children internalize the effects of conflict through their emotional reactions; they could either show lots of mixed emotions or no emotions at all (showing withdrawal symptoms). According to Davies and Cummings (1998) children's emotional reaction to parental conflicts are understood as the reflections of the child's emotional security regarding their family sub-system. If children interpret the conflict as threatening to the security and stability of themselves and their family they would experience, powerlessness and feelings of hopelessness. A study done by Dunn, O'Connor and Cheng (2005), showed that children normally show genuine concern towards their parent's well-being, and as such, any physical distress can activate a child's empathy and feelings of sorrow for the parents. When children internalize the effects, they often seem to withdraw and adjust poorly to peer (social) relations.

Some children respond, deal with and adjust to the presence of destructive conflict through behavioural means. This form of response to parental conflicts may result to externalizing problems among children, including hostility, aggression and anger (Koblinsky, Kuvalanka & Randolph, 2006). Often there is an increased anger and aggression where the child models the conflict behaviours they experience and observe in the home. The child does not know how to appropriately adjust (respond) to the exposed conflict and therefore simply imitates and models the behaviour. The child could act out through constant fighting, screaming, irritability and violent behaviours towards their parents and peers. According to Cummings, Goeke-Morey and Papp (2003),

children who respond to parental conflict by externalizing their reactions often experience high levels of conduct problems and struggle with social adjustment.

Conversely, in constructive parental conflicts, couples deal with conflicts positively for instance by displaying better communication, intimacy, physical affection, supporting each other and problem solving (Grych, 2002; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold, & Shelton, 2003). Constructive parental conflict is useful in preserving security of the children, as it boosts their confidence that any differences between the parents will be resolved in a way that maintains family harmony and affection (Grych, 2002).

According to Musick and Meier (2010), inter-parental conflicts affect boys directly through their coping behaviour, whereas for girls the outcomes are indirect via threat appraisals and self-blame. The findings of these studies imply that, though the coping strategies used by girls and boys may be similar, the effectiveness of these strategies for children's psychological adaptation may vary by gender. As such, the current study sought to establish the relationship between parental conflict and gender differences in social adjustments among adolescents in Murang'a County, Kenya.

## B. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Murang'a County, public secondary schools students are faced with numerous social adjustment problems. This is despite the fact that they come from families that are expected to act as buffer zones to the development of these problems. However, some students come from families ravaged with marital conflicts while others do not. Social adjustments among these students differ by gender with male learners compared to their female counterparts experiencing social adjustment problems. However, no attempt has been made as of yet to assess the relationship between gender and social adjustment among students coming from families facing parental conflicts creating the need for the current study in Murang'a County, Kenya.

## C. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to establish the relationship between parental conflict and gender differences in social adjustment among adolescents in Murang'a County, Kenya.

## D. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To find out the relationship between parental conflict and gender differences in social adjustment among adolescents in Murang'a County, Kenya.

## E. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

H<sub>0</sub>1: There is no relationship between gender and social adjustments of adolescents from families experiencing parental conflicts

## F. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Findings of this study are beneficial to parents, educators and adolescents as it clearly shows the gender most affected by parental conflict leading to social adjustment problems in Murang'a County public secondary schools. Results may also inform policy decisions in order to improve measures of elimination social adjustment challenges among adolescents in secondary schools.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. INTERPERSONAL THEORY

The Interpersonal theory by Sullivan (1953) is an attempt to explain human development by presenting the process a child goes through while seeking to satisfy his or her needs in a social-cultural world, forming relationships with other people, and learning language within social interactions shaped by the material and cultural conditions of the time and place. According to Sullivan (1953), the deepest and most fundamental learning that an infant experiences occurs as the child is involved in activities with parents or other primary caregivers. It is in such activity situations that basic perceptions of the self, as well as self in relation to others are formed. It is while engaging in activity situations such as feeding that the child learns how to coordinate with others and take part in shared activities, thereby satisfying mutual needs.

Often destructive parental conflicts are characterized by disruptive episodes, unstable and unpredictable life. In such circumstances parents as the primary caregivers hardly engage consistently in activities that facilitate the learning of a child. The disruptive nature of destructive conflicts denies both the child and the parent adequate time and psychological well-being to bond and engage in activities geared towards satisfying mutual needs. This eventually translates to social incompetence where the child is ill equipped to engage in relationships leading to difficulties in social adjustment.

During the adolescence stage social development is closely related to an individual's psychological development, particularly identity formation and the need for intimacy. Sullivan (1953) viewed interpersonal relations as central to one's individual identity. He posited three stages of adolescent development, which are distinguished by different needs and expressions of interpersonal intimacy: preadolescence, early adolescence, and late adolescence. Preadolescence is characterized by the need for intimacy expressed through strong relationships, usually with persons of the same sex.

The stage of early adolescence is ushered in by the physiological changes of puberty with the concomitant appearance of the lust dynamism (Sullivan, 1953). The early adolescence stage is characterized by new integrating dynamism that results in the shift to intimate relations with persons of the opposite sex for most adolescents, patterned, to some degree, after preadolescent same-sex relationships. A person enters late adolescence when he or she "discovers what he or she likes and how to fit it into the rest of life".

As related by the theory each stage of adolescence comes with a set of changes which requires appropriate response to

enable an individual handle the demands that come with the changes. For instance the preadolescence stage requires an individual to develop strong relationship with persons of the same sex. As the theory posits, a child's idea of a relationship is molded after the experience of earlier parent-child relationships. A child witnessing destructive parental conflicts is therefore bound to shun strong relationship with persons of the same sex as required at the preadolescence stage or form relationship with the opposite sex in later stage of adolescent. This theory therefore explains how parental conflicts can affect social adjustment among adolescents hence its adoption in the study.

### B. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF ADOLESCENCE EXPERIENCING PARENTAL CONFLICTS

Cummings et al., (2004) studied preadolescent children's assessments of parental conflict and their coping efficacy as moderators of adjustment across gender. The sample size was consisting of children aged between 9 and 12 years together with their mothers. The findings revealed that inter-parental conflict predicted children's internalizing and externalizing problems. Internal parenting served only as a predictor of boys' externalizing problems, while for girls internal parenting was a predictor of internalizing and total behaviours problems scores.

David and Murphy (2007) sought to determine the moderating roles of temperament and gender in the relationship between inter-parental conflict and preschoolers' peer relations. The sample size was 62 consisting of children aged between 3 and 7 years together with their mothers. The cross-sectional design was used with the respondents being recruited from local preschools. Parental conflict measures were obtained through self-reports by mothers, teachers provided data on children's effort to control, while classroom observations were used to report peer interactions of the children. The findings revealed that, for children who scored low in effort to control, destructive parental conflict had a negative relationship with amount of peer interactions engaged in by the children.

A study carried out in New York by Durell, Lavoie and Mahoney (2001) also showed that there existed strong negative correlation between parental conflict and cohesion within the family. The study also established that there was a relationship between low levels of family cohesion, parental conflict and reported loneliness for female respondents, indicating a strong family environment component. On the other hand, only parental conflict was identified as a significant predictor of loneliness in male respondents.

According to this study by Durell et al. (2001), there exist a relationship between family environment and aspects of personal development and social interactions during adolescence. Though there could potentially be gender differences, low level of family cohesion and high frequency of parental conflict would be expected to lead to a family environment that is predictive of high rates of feelings of loneliness, and this could lead to adolescent social interaction problems such as social anxiety and social avoidance. The findings of this study are related to researcher's study because

family environment are closely associated with characteristics of adolescents' personal development and social interactions which influence adolescence socio adjustment.

In other studies, Hetherington, Bridges and Insabella (1998) showed gender differences in how adolescents respond to parental conflict, with boys exhibiting more conduct disorders while girls exhibited increased depression. In a study carried out in Utah in United States, on the effects of parental conflict, results revealed an association between girls' intervention and internalizing symptoms, whereas there was an association between avoidance coping and a decrease in these symptoms. Among boys on the other hand, the opposite pattern was revealed, whereby the intervention was correlated with low internalizing and externalizing problems while avoidance was associated with internalizing symptoms (Kerig, 1996).

A research conducted by Kim et al. (2009) sought to find out the effect of parental conflict on aggressive behaviours in South Korean children with child maltreatment as the moderator. The study had a sample of 349 who met the criteria for aggressive behaviours as measured using the Child Behaviours Checklist. The findings of this study revealed that mothers' maltreatment fully served as a mediator in the impact of parental conflicts on aggressive behaviours among children.

A study by Ngozi et al., (2013) determined the influence of parental conflict on adolescents' psychosocial adjustment Nigeria. The study utilized a sample of senior secondary two students (N=150) who were selected using stratified random sampling technique from 5 secondary schools in Lagos. Results of the study revealed a significant influence of parental conflict on adolescents' psychosocial adjustment. The study however did not find any gender differences in adolescents' psychosocial adjustments. Therefore, it appears that male and female adolescents are affected differently during parental conflict, leading to gender differences in social adjustment. As such, gender will be taken as a moderating variable, that is, it will moderate the relationship of parental conflicts and social adjustment of adolescent children.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### A. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design with a quantitative approach. The descriptive survey is commonly used to explore the existing status of two or more variables under scrutiny, by enabling the researcher to collect original data for the purpose of describing a population which is large to observe directly (Kombo and Tromp, 2006).

#### B. TARGET POPULATION

This study targeted the adolescents in public secondary schools in Murang'a County. The County has 249 schools with 108,774 students among them 58,523 boys and 50,251 girls (Murang'a District Strategic Plan, 2005 – 2010).

#### C. SAMPLE SIZE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

Simple random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 400 from three students from 28 public secondary schools to participate in the study.

#### D. DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data was collected from the field using structured questionnaires, this was then coded and processed using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. The statistics used to analyze data included frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. T- test statistics was also used to establish gender differences in social adjustments of adolescents.

### IV. STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### A. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL ADJUSTMENTS OF ADOLESCENTS

To establish the gender difference in social adjustments, the differences between male and female behaviours in respect to pro-social, offensive interpersonal and delinquency behaviours was assessed. The assessment was conducted through a t-test for the respondents' social adjustment mean scores. The mean difference in the social adjustment score obtained by the respondents was computed and the results were as shown in Table 1

Adolescent social adjustment	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pro-social behaviours score	Female	148	15.18	4.02
	Male	180	15.21	4.12
Offensive interpersonal behaviours score	Female	148	8.44	4.88
	Male	170	9.09	4.75
Delinquency behaviours scores	Female	144	3.95	3.06
	Male	177	5.46	3.84

Table 1: Mean Gender Difference in Adolescent Social Adjustment Scores

Table 1 illustrates that there was a difference in mean scores obtained by male and female adolescents on aspects (Pro-social behaviours, offensive interpersonal behaviours and delinquency behaviours) measuring their social adjustments. The results show that male adolescents obtained higher mean scores in all aspects compared to female adolescents. On delinquency behaviours, males obtained a mean score of 5.46 while female obtained a mean score of 3.95, on offensive interpersonal behaviours, male obtained a mean score of 9.09 while female obtained a mean score of 8.44 and finally on pro-social, male scored 15.21 and female scored 15.18. This means that males than females were more likely to show offensive interpersonal and delinquent behaviours in response to experienced parental conflicts. To find out whether these differences were significant across gender, the researcher

carried out an independent sample t-test and the result of the analysis are shown in Table 2.

Independent Sample t-test		T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pro-social behaviour score	Equal variances assumed	-.066	326	.947
Offensive interpersonal behaviour score	Equal variances assumed	-1.211	316	.227
Delinquency behaviour scores	Equal variances assumed	-3.834	319	.000*

Table 2: Independent Sample t-test for Gender Differences in Adolescent Social Adjustment Mean Scores

From Table 2, the gender differences in pro-social behaviour mean scores ( $t = -0.066$ ,  $df = 326$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ) and offensive interpersonal behaviour mean scores ( $t = -1.211$ ,  $df = 316$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ) were not significant. This implies that although males were found to have a higher mean than females in pro-social behaviours, this difference can be attributed to chance and it can be said that both males and females show pro-social behaviours equally. However, gender differences in delinquency behaviour mean scores was significant ( $t = -3.384$ ,  $df = 319$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). This means that males were more likely to show delinquent behaviours compared to female adolescents. In agreement with the findings, Koblinsky et al., (2006) found that social adjustment by children exposed to parental conflicts was indeed different between male and female. The study showed that male children were more likely to portray externalizing behavioural tendencies as a response to parental conflicts such as displaying anger, aggression and hostility. Similarly, Hetherington et al., (1998) study, further clarifies the differences between male and female in respect to externalizing behavioural tendencies. The study found that, adolescent boys' exhibit more conduct disorders at the time of parental conflict while adolescent girls experience an increase in depression.

The comparatively low offensive interpersonal and delinquency behaviours among parental conflicts experienced in female secondary school students in Murang'a County, was also inferred in the same study by Hetherington et al., (1998), the study found out that girls' intervention due to the effect of parental conflicts was associated with internalizing symptoms.

A further confirmation of gender differences in social adjustment as found among the secondary school students in Murang'a County was by Formosa et al., (2000) findings, that girls from conflictual households exhibited lower levels of conduct problems while boys in the same familial environment exhibited higher levels of conduct problems such as verbal aggression and physical aggression.

## V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### A. GENDER AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF ADOLESCENTS FROM FAMILIES FACING MARITAL CONFLICTS

Based on the study findings, the study concludes that a male student experiencing parental conflicts was more likely to portray delinquent behaviours as compared to female students under similar circumstances. As such, care should be exercised in dealing with the varied behaviour changes across gender. The study recommends that; teachers and counseling personnel should be appropriately sensitized to identify internalizing or externalizing symptoms and establish the underlying problem with an intention of offering appropriate intervention. This study also suggests that a further research should be conducted to explore other possible consequences apart from social adjustment challenges as a result of exposure of children to destructive parental conflicts.

### B. CONCLUSIONS

There was evidence that, there existed gender differences in social adjustment among adolescents in Murang'a County. The difference was only in respect to offensive interpersonal and delinquent behaviours. However, there existed no gender difference in respect to pro-social behaviours. A male student experiencing parental conflicts was more likely to portray offensive interpersonal and/or delinquent behaviours as compared to female students under similar circumstances. Care should be exercised in dealing with the varied behaviour changes across gender that is as a result of parental conflicts as from the findings it is clear that the effects of these will manifest differently in either gender.

### C. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Schools and families need to work together to reduce the levels at which male students develop social adjustment problems among public secondary school students. This is because this study shows that male learners are more susceptible to social adjustment problems compared to female counterparts coming from families experiencing parental conflicts.

### D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The researcher also recommends that further studies are needed on the following areas;

- ✓ A study is needed on individual characteristics of male and female students that predisposes them to social adjustment problems as a result of parental conflict
- ✓ A study on measures to mitigate gender factors predisposing learners to social adjustment problems as a result of parental conflict

REFERENCES

- [1] Acock, A.C. & David, H. D. (2001). Dimensions of family conflict and their influence on child and adolescent adjustment. *Sociological Inquiry*, 69; 641-658.
- [2] Amato, P.R. (2005). The impact of the family formation change on the Cognitive, social and emotional well-being of the next generation. *The future of the children*, 15; 75-96.
- [3] Cummings E.M., Goeke-Morey, M.C. & Papp, L.M. (2003). Children's responses to everyday parental conflict tactics in the home. *Child Development*, 74; 1918-1929.
- [4] Cummings, E.M., Davies, P.T. & Simpson, K.S. (2004). Parental conflict, gender, and children's appraisals and coping efficacy as mediators of child adjustment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 8; 141-149.
- [5] David, K. M. & Murphy, B.C. (2007). Inter-parental conflict and pre-schoolers' peer relations: The moderating roles of temperament and gender. *Social Development*, 16; 1-23.
- [6] Davies E.M., Rasi, J.A. & Stevens, K.I. (2002). Assessing emotional security the inter-parental relationship: The security in the inter-parental subsystem scales. *Child Development*, 73; 544-562.
- [7] Davies, P. T., & Cummings, E. M. (1998). Exploring children's emotional security as a mediator of the link between parental relations and child adjustment. *Child Development*, 69; 124-139.
- [8] Dunn, J., O'Connor, T.G. & Cheng, H. (2005). Children's responses to conflict between their different parents: Mothers, stepfathers, nonresident fathers, and nonresident stepmothers. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 34; 223-234.
- [9] Durrell, H.J., Lavoie, J.C. & Mahoney, M. (2001). *Inter-parental Conflict and Family*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- [10] Fauchier, A. & Margolin, G. (2004). Affection and conflict in parental and parent-child relationships. *Journal of Parental & Family Therapy*, 30; 197-211.
- [11] Goeke-Morey, M. C., Cummings, E. M., Harold, G. T. & Shelton, K. H. (2003). Categories and continua of destructive and constructive parental conflict tactics from the perspective of U.S. and Welsh children. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 17; 327-338.
- [12] Grych, J. H. (2002). Marital relationships and parenting. In M.H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- [13] Hetherington, E. M., Bridges, M. & Insabella, G. M. (1998). What matters? What does not? Five perspectives on the association between parental transitions and children's adjustment. *American Psychologist*, 53(2); 167-184.
- [14] Kerig, P. K. (1996). Assessing the links between inter-parental conflict and Child adjustment: The conflicts and problem-solving scales. *Journal of family Psychology*, 10; 454-473.
- [15] Kim, K. L., Jackson, Y., Hunter, H. L. & Conrad, S. M. (2009). Inter-parental Conflict and Adolescent Dating Relationships: The Role of Perceived Threat and Self-Blame Appraisals. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24(5); 844-956.
- [16] Koblinsky, S.A., Kuvalanka, K.A. & Randolph, S.M. (2006). Social skills and Behaviour problems of urban, African American preschoolers: Role of parenting practices, family conflict, and maternal depression. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76 (4); 554 - 563.
- [17] Kombo, D. K. & Tromp, D. L. A. (2006). *Proposal and Thesis Writing: An Introduction*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 5; 814-30.
- [18] Musick, K. & Meier, A. (2010). Are both parents always better than one? Parental conflict and young adult well-being. *Social Science Resource*.
- [19] Ngozi, O., Nwadinigwe, P. & Anyama, S. (2013). The Impact of Parental Conflicts on the Psychosocial Adjustment of Adolescents in Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 4(2): 320-326
- [20] Shantz, C. U. (2002). Social cognition. In J. Flavell & E. Markman (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology, Cognitive development*. New York: Wiley.
- [21] Wiese, B. S., & Freund, A. M. (2011). Parents as role models: Parental Behaviour affects adolescents' plans for work involvement. *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 35(3); 218-224.