THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF MARITAL/INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT ON
CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

A Project

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THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF MARITAL/INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

A Project

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Department of Child Development
Abstract

of

THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF MARITAL/INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

by

Elizabeth A. Barnekoff

Approximately 50% of first US marriages will end in divorce and the percentage increases for second and multiple remarriages. Therefore, approximately 1 million US children are experiencing the process of divorce each year (Amato, 2010; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Divorce is typically preceded by a significant rise in family tension and conflict (Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2003; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Sun & Li, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Studies of marital conflict and divorce indicate that regardless of family marital status, the most significant factor influencing negative outcomes for children is exposure to prolonged destructive marital or interparental conflict (Amato, 2010; McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009). Previous intervention research supports the effectiveness of parent education in reducing marital or interparental conflict leading to improvements in children’s internalizing and externalizing adjustments (Cummings, Faircloth, Mitchell, Cummings, & Schermerhorn, 2008; Faircloth & Cummings, 2008; Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). The current project was designed to deliver empirical research regarding the harmful effects of marital or interparental conflict on children’s development, into a clear and accessible parent
education program, delivered via a series of podcasts. The podcast delivery system is a
convenient and cost effective way to provide educational information for parents. The
podcasts are based on an extensive literature review of several theories and frameworks
used in marital and interparental conflict research as well as parent education and
intervention research (Bowlby, 1988; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Minuchin, 1985). The
results of the podcast surveys revealed that audience members found the content and
delivery method succinct, comprehensible, and beneficial. Recommendations are made
for developing future podcast series. Upon completion and approval of this project the
podcasts will be linked to a website, Developing Parents, to disseminate the information
to a larger audience and provide more resources and links to further research for parents
and families.

Dr. Sheri Hembree

Date
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated in memory of my mother, Virginia G. Gallogly. She faced significant life challenges as a single mother. I am living proof that she did everything “right” as a parent, best friend and mentor to buffer us through those hardships, thank you, Mom.

I would like to thank my beautiful daughters, Karissa Harris Soma, Karly Harris and Kayla Harris. Girls, thank you for having faith in me, for your love and support throughout all of our hardships when our family experienced marital conflict, separation, divorce and remarriage. You were my motivation to become a better parent. It is because of you that I wanted to study this subject matter in order to learn from my mistakes and successes, in hopes of healing all of us and helping other families. I am so blessed to have you in my life.

Thank you to my husband, David Barnekkoff, my “rock!” Throughout our marriage I discovered how a loving and equal partnership can change the course of one’s life and strengthen all family members. As my “stats” coach and biggest fan, I couldn’t have done this without you.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Sheri Hembree, my professor, sponsor, mentor and inspiration throughout my college experience. Going back to college at an older age was a daunting task. Studying under Dr. Sheri Hembree gave me the strength, motivation and courage to persevere and strive to be a better scholar. Thank you, Dr. Hembree, for your guidance throughout this process.

I am very grateful to the faculty of California State University Sacramento’s, Department of Child Development, for an outstanding education. This recent educational experience and degree has provided me with an exceptional job opportunity directly related to my field of study and a self-satisfaction that only this level of educational attainment can provide.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Figures published by the US Department of Health and Human Services, based on 2007 Census data, reveal that 50% of first US marriages will end in divorce. The percentage increases for second and multiple remarriages. Approximately one million US children are experiencing the process of divorce each year (Amato, 2010). These children are at risk for developing a myriad of negative consequences from their exposure to marital conflict and divorce. Children exposed to prolonged interparental conflict tend to suffer from variety of emotional, behavioral and physiological problems that can continue into adulthood (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Grych, 1998; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). This project addresses the negative effects of marital and interparental conflict on children’s development, regardless of family configuration.

Divorce is typically preceded by a significant rise in family tension and conflict (Hetherington, 2003; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Studies of marital conflict and divorce indicate that, regardless of family marital status (e.g., intact, separated, divorced and post-divorced), the most significant factor leading to negative outcomes for children is exposure to prolonged destructive marital or interparental conflict (Amato, 2010; McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009). Exposure to such conflict threatens a child’s emotional security, can negatively affect the parent/child relationship, and can increase a child’s risk of internalizing and externalizing disorders. These negative effects can be long-term (Bing, Nelson, & Wesolowski, 2009).
The negative consequences of parental conflict may be even more dramatic in situations where parents draw children into the conflict. Although the frequency of parental conflict is an important factor in determining its impact on children, research has demonstrated that the manner in which parents handle arguments is more significant in terms of children’s adjustment (Cummings & Davies, 2010). For example, McCoy et al. (2009) determined that parent behaviors characteristic of destructive interparental conflict included (a) incorporation of the child into the conflict, (b) use of a child as a direct target of conflict, (c) conflict in which the child feels caught in the middle of the dispute and is forced to take sides, and (d) conflicts involving any form of abuse.

Although conventional wisdom might assume that these effects would be less pronounced in intact families, Hetherington and Kelly’s (2002) research found that negative consequences of parental conflict were actually lower in children from divorced or remarried families who had been successful in reducing marital conflict. This research suggests that helping families to understand the effects of interparental conflict, as well as the skills necessary to manage marital conflict, regardless of family status, is a critical factor in preventing negative outcomes for children. The current project provided information and supplemental resources for all types of families dealing with marital conflict and the effects on family members, using podcasts as a means to (a) educate parents about marital conflicts and children’s outcomes, (b) present research-based parental strategies to reduce interparental conflict, and (c) provide effective parental strategies to negotiate conflict and improve interparental communication.
Researchers recognize the need for more evidenced-based intervention programs targeting marital conflict (Faircloth & Cummings, 2008; Grych & Fincham, 2001). Cummings and Davies (2010) maintain that, regardless of the extensive research and literature related to marital conflict and children’s outcomes, the results have not been effectively translated into clear and accessible information for parents. The current project addresses the need for evidence-based education programs designed to help parents deal effectively with marital conflict and divorce. Prevention research indicates that early interventions specifically targeting conflict resolution in intact relationships helps to ease family tensions before marital conflict escalates and complications ensue (Faircloth & Cummings, 2008). More empirically based parent education programs are needed that deliver vital information to parents in an effective, cost efficient and timely manner. Such programs can reduce the harmful effects of negative parental conflict on children’s development.

The current project addresses the need to educate families before the negative consequences of marital conflict are irreversible. Specifically, this project addresses: (a) the need to increase parents’ understanding of theory based concepts for improved family functioning. Research indicates that improvement in one family domain benefits the entire family system (Segal, Chen, Gordon, Kacir, & Gylys, 2003); (b) the need to disseminate research based information to a wide population of parents; (c) the need for accessible evidence-based parent training programs, disseminated via an effective, cost efficient and proven delivery method.
Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the current project is to develop a research-based parent education program aimed at ameliorating the negative effects of marital and interparental conflict on children’s development. The project will disseminate this information to parents and/or stepparents, in intact, separated or divorced families, who are struggling with interparental conflict or divorce, via a series of audio/video podcasts. In today’s technological society, most parents, educators and/or resource specialists, have access to the internet via hand held devices or personal computers. Because a podcast format has the potential to reach a wide population of parents and allow them to access information at their convenience, the use of such media has the potential to provide a more effective delivery method as compared to traditional parent education programs (Segal et al., 2003). Based on a review of the literature, the topics for the podcasts were: (a) understanding marital conflict, (b) parental coping strategies and conflict resolution, (c) the child’s perspective when exposed to harsh marital or interparental conflict, (d) the short and long-term consequences for children who suffer from continued parental conflict through the divorce and post-divorce process, and (e) protective factors for children. Each of these topics was addressed through interviews with professionals in the field of marital conflict, divorce and child development. In addition to the visual presentations, PDFs and PowerPoint slides provided parents with additional downloadable resources to assist them in their daily lives.
Methodology

The current project consists of podcasts related to the deleterious effects of marital and interparental conflict on children’s outcomes. The podcast episodes contain empirically based information regarding the significance of marital and interparental conflict on children’s adjustment, as well as the outcomes children experience in various family configurations, i.e., intact, pre-divorced, divorced and post-divorce. Research findings revealing the long-term consequences of divorce are presented to emphasize the importance of parent intervention programs and strategies necessary to ameliorate the negative effects of interparental conflict on children’s developmental trajectories into adulthood.

Target Audience

The target audience for the podcasts is parents and extended family members in families experiencing marital conflict, separation and/or divorce. The podcasts may also be of interest to educators or resource specialists who work with these families.

Development of Podcasts

The researcher developed a series of audio and video podcasts, each running approximately 20-30 minutes in length. The proposed length of each podcast was based on recommendations made by several producers and podcasters in the field (Geoghegan & Klass, 2007; Morris, Tomasi, & Terra, 2008). The content for the podcasts was drawn from two main sources: (a) a review of the theory and research related to marital conflict
and divorce, and (b) a review of prior parent education programs and materials designed
to address these topics. Based on this review, the researcher developed a script for each podcast.

The format of each podcast is similar in nature but the elements of content vary
due to topic. There is a presenter, interviewees e.g., family therapists and researchers.
The scripts look similar to a short paper or outline and include (a) an
introduction/narration for the presenter, (b) questions and answers with professionals and
experts in the field, (c) directors notes that include: camera cues, content and direction of
segments, music cues, and d) PowerPoint presentations, e.g., parenting tips, strategies and
checklists. The outlines to each podcast as well as the supplemental resources for parents
can be found in Appendices A and B.

Program Evaluation

Program evaluation was accomplished through consultation with professional and
social contacts, and included parents as well as professionals who work with children and
families. The participants were given the podcasts and asked to complete a short
evaluation survey. Assessment questions included ratings of statements such as, “My
knowledge of interparental conflict was increased” and “The research based information
was clearly presented and easily accessible,” as well as open-ended questions such as,
“What additional information should be included in the podcast?” (see Appendix C for
survey). Evaluation questions were adapted from, The Consumer Satisfaction
Questionnaire (CSQ; Webster-Stratton, Kolpacoff, & Hollinsworth as cited in Faircloth & Cummings, 2008).

Definition of Terms

Interparental conflict pertains to any opposition or disagreement between two individuals in the marital or partner subsystem, within an organized family context (Parke, 2004). Several researchers measuring outcomes before and after divorce found the most consistent explanation for variance in children’s developmental outcomes was exposure to interparental conflict (Amato, 2010; Cummings & Davies, 2010). In addition, two types of interparental conflict (i.e., constructive and destructive) have been identified as having positive or negative effects on children’s developmental outcomes (McCoy et al., 2009).

Constructive conflict involves any positive behavior (e.g., problem-solving, verbal and physical affection, support and resolution to a disagreement) displayed by conflicted individuals in the parent dyad. Researchers found parents’ who exhibited constructive conflict had children who possessed prosocial behaviors, less aggression, less parental intervention, better coping skills and increased problem-solving abilities (McCoy et al., 2009).

Destructive conflict involves any negative behavior (e.g., hostile, angry, verbal or physical aggression, threats and insults) displayed by conflicted individuals in the parent dyad. Researchers found parents who exhibited destructive conflict had children who
possessed anti-social behaviors, aggression, worry, anxiety/depression, lack of control and were at risk for internalizing and externalizing disorders (McCoy et al., 2009).

The current project uses additional terms to refer to three periods of divorce in order to specifically examine the variables influencing children’s outcomes.

*Pre-divorce* refers to the period preceding divorce. Emotional divorce can long precede legal divorce. Conflict usually begins in the pre-divorce period. Children may be exposed to an increased in stress, tension, and parent withdrawal (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

*Crisis-point* refers to the central impact of divorce on the family members. Typically the child feels their home is disappearing. They feel scared, lonely, and different. Their world has changed and they experience fear of the unknown (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

*Post-divorce* refers to the reconstruction of each parent’s home and their family members following the actually *crisis-point* of divorce. Researchers agree this is the most critical time for children. Children’s well-being depends on what happens to them in the post-divorce period of time (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

*Podcasts* are the development of the podcasting delivery method is a by-product of personal Weblogs, otherwise known as blogs. A podcast is an audio and/or video file, containing information that is accessible by computer or other electronic devices (Morris et al., 2008).
Project Limitations

There are several limitations in the design of this project that may reduce its usefulness. First, even though the selection of a podcast delivery method was intended to reach parents who are unable to attend other types of programs due to constraints of time or cost, the nature of the podcast delivery method makes it difficult for the researcher to monitor audiences’ demographics, participation and access to the podcasts. In addition, the researcher has very little ability to track customer satisfaction with regards to the format and content of the podcasts. The podcasting format is not interactive so parents may have a more difficult time implementing the strategies presented. In order to counter these limitations, the podcasts will be linked and embedded within a website called, Developing Parents, to encourage parent participation in feedback loops, via blogs and other postings. The website provides parents with leads to further resources and research based information, where additional parent questions or needs can be addressed.

Second, the researcher has no controlled means of determining whether any effective change occurred in parents’ behaviors and family conflict and ultimately, outcomes for children. The uncertainty of viewer feedback, via the website blogs, may not represent a majority of the viewing population. Therefore, topics covered in the podcasts may not appeal to the intended target audiences. Future projects of this type may need to include more face-to-face contact with families in order to evaluate program content.
Finally, the podcast episodes were designed to be short in length to address the observed attrition rates of parents in previous intervention research. However, an unforeseen complication due to this shortened allotment of time could be that research based information may be compromised. Prevention researchers that use post-test assessments can more effectively determine when the length of the program produces the desired outcomes. The question that this researcher will not be able to be answered is, “How short is too short to determine positive outcomes for children?”

**Organization of Project**

Chapter 1 presented an introduction and overview of this project on the negative effects of interparental conflict on children’s development. Additionally, the potential effectiveness of a podcast delivery method, for the dissemination of research based information in order to ameliorate the harmful effects of interparental conflict on children’s outcomes was justified. Chapter 2 provides a review of current literature including (a) the underlying child developmental theories that support this project, (b) current marital and divorce research that supports the significance of marital and interparental conflict on children’s development, (c) the long-term developmental trajectories for children suffering from prolonged exposure to destructive interparental conflict, and (d) an overview of the effectiveness of intervention programs at ameliorating the negative effects of interparental conflict on children’s development. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used by the researcher to produce the project. Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the project including recommendations for its use.
Appendices A, B, C, and D include the podcast script outlines, parent evaluation survey, the problem-solving, “Tools and Tips Pages” for parents, and the podcasts.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the current project was to translate empirical research regarding the harmful effects of marital or interparental conflict on children’s development, into a clear and accessible parent education program, delivered via a series of podcasts. The content of each podcast was developed through written scripts based on the substantial review of the literature. This chapter presents an overview of the literature related to marital conflict and divorce research that demonstrates that regardless of family configurations, the most significant factor influencing negative outcomes for children is exposure to prolonged destructive marital or interparental conflicts (Amato, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 2001; McCoy et al., 2009). Several theoretical frameworks used in parental conflict research are also discussed. Destructive and constructive types of interparental conflict are defined to understand which types of conflict produce negative and positive effects in children. In addition, evidence-based parent intervention and education programs designed to help buffer children from the negative effects of parental conflict are explored.

Theoretical Perspectives on Marital Conflict and Children’s Development

Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of family relationships and the effects of interparental conflict on children. The theory assumes that the family functions as the first organized social system for children
(Minuchin, 1985; Parke, 2004). Each family unit is composed of subsystems, e.g., spouse subsystem, parent-child subsystems, and sibling subsystem. Minuchin (1985) explains that within each family context, all family subsystems are governed by specific rules and divided by boundaries. Patterns of behavior are established through interactions within and across boundaries, which directly influence the development of the child and establish a foundation for the child’s emotional stability, intellectual development and societal success. All members within the family system are interdependent and influence one another in a bidirectional manner (Parke, 2004).

A family systems framework assumes that an individual member of the organized family system cannot be fully understood outside the family context (Grych & Fincham, 2001; Stevenson-Hinde, 1990). For instance, in a functioning family system, rules, and patterns within and across subsystems accommodate developmental change and external influences, but retain critical boundaries that offer family members consistency and stability (Minuchin, 1985). In the parent-child subsystem, parent(s) act as the first socializing agents for their children and function as teachers, coaches and supervisors, who assist their children in negotiating developmental challenges. However, in dysfunctional families the challenges of life become increasingly difficult to manage. When parents are unable to manage conflict within their subsystem, boundaries across subsystems may become rigid or violated, “so that children function as mediators or scapegoats” (Minuchin, 1985, p. 291). Negative interparental conflict changes the dynamics of co-parenting which interferes with the formation of healthy attachments.
between parents and children. In the current project a licensed marriage and family therapist, and a psychologist, were interviewed to explain and clarify how interparental conflict interferes with healthy family functioning.

**Attachment Theory and Emotional Security Theory**

Attachment theory can help to explain why children are most vulnerable when interparental conflict interferes with the formation of healthy parent-child relationships. Bowlby’s theory of attachment posits that infants are born biologically ready to form attachments necessary for survival (Bowlby, 1988). Attachment behaviors are characterized as any type of behavior that sustains a close relationship with another individual, “who is conceived as better able to cope with the world (Bowlby, 1988, p. 26). Research indicates secure attachments are created through multiple interactions between parents and children that are sensitive and responsive to meeting the child’s needs (Bowlby, 1988; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Bowlby theorized that the internal motivation to form those attachments was particularly evident in infancy and early childhood. However, he expanded his theory to include any stable, enduring and affectionate relationships, across the life cycle. When secure attachments are formed between a parent and child, parents become the secure base from which children explore the world. Secure attachments provide both physical and emotional security for children (Bowlby, 1988; Stevenson-Hinde, 1990). Secure parent-child attachments enable children to develop a healthy sense of self, regulate emotions and serve as a model for
future relationships (Stevenson-Hinde, 1990). If secure attachments are not formed, children struggle to explore the world, and may appear dependant, detached or insecure. Stevenson-Hinde (1990) has explained that a child’s secure attachment is dependent upon a parent’s sensitive and responsive interactions, especially during times of stress or need. When parents are preoccupied with interparental conflict they can become emotionally unavailable or unresponsive to their children. The lack of parental availability and discord may produce patterns of chaos that alter family functioning. Insecure attachments that produce maladaptive patterns in parent-child interactions have been associated with the most harmful effects on children’s adjustment (Bowlby, 1988; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Parke, 2004).

Cummings and Davies (2010) based their Emotional Security Theory (EST) on Attachment theory, to explain how a lack of parental availability and discord adds to children’s emotional insecurity and maladjustment. Emotional Security Theory (EST) is based on an extensive body of research, describing how children respond to family stresses and challenges and how those responses are related to children’s adjustment overtime (E.M. Cummings, personal communication, February 22, 2012; Cummings & Davies, 2010). EST posits that especially in times of family stress, children have an intrinsic need to protect their emotional security. Emotional Security Theory summarizes Children experience the most favorable developmental outcomes when their emotional security is protected (McCoy et al., 2009). Cummings and Davies (2010) have observed
that when parents are available and responsive to their children, particularly during times of stress, parents help to preserve the child’s sense of emotional security.

Bowlby (1988) made similar observations and noted that an important characteristic of attachment behavior was the intensity of emotions that accompanied an attachment relationship. For example, if attachment is secure, the child experiences positive emotions associated with happiness and security. If attachment is threatened, the child experiences the negative emotions associated with grief, anxiety, depression or anger and insecurity. In addition, Bowlby observed that an individual’s future attachment behaviors were shaped by the family of origin (Bowlby, 1988).

To further explain children’s goal of preserving emotional security, Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, and Cummings (2006) developed a control systems model and to demonstrate the cognitive processes activated when children are faced with parental conflict. According to Cummings et al. (2006), when children observe aggression between parents their sense of security is threatened. Children then often respond with internal negative reactivity and may become over involved in an attempt to mediate the conflict. Children are mentally forced to self-preserve their emotional security through this regulatory process (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003).

Initially, this process may be effective for children. However, the preoccupation and fear children experience from prolonged exposure to marital discord increases their risk for serious internalizing problems and maladjustment (Cummings et al., 2006; Grych
Furthermore, marital conflict can interfere with effective co-parenting by decreasing positive parent-child reciprocal interactions, which, in turn, threatens the formation of secure parent-child attachments (Bowlby, 1988; McCoy et al., 2009).

In the current project, the aforementioned theories are translated from the academic literature into general speech and communicated via a series of podcasts, to parents in the general population. Intervention researchers have observed that effective intervention programs are theoretically based (Borkowski, Smith, & Akai, 2007). Theories relevant to the harmful effects of interparental conflict on children’s development can help parents understand the complex nature of the problem and why certain behaviors should be encouraged or avoided. In addition, theory protects participants from ineffective or harmful interventions that may have developed from untested concepts or popular trends (Borkowski et al., 2007).

Figure 1 shows a model of emotional security theory used in family research that illustrates how marital conflict mediates parenting quality, which in turn negatively influences parent-child attachments (Path 1), interfering with children’s emotional security (Path 2) and producing internalizing and externalizing problems in children (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Bowlby, 1988; Cummings & Davies, 2002, 2010; McCoy et al., 2009; Minuchin, 1985; Parke, 2004; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). The bold arrows represent the indirect-path of destructive marital conflict on parenting processes and the potential negative formation of secure parent-child attachments. The dashed arrows
represent additional significant pathways that link parenting difficulties to children’s adjustment problems (Cummings & Davies, 2010).

Figure 1. Emotional Security Theory, Model of Indirect Pathways. Source: Cummings & Davies, 2010, p. 108

Divorce as a Process

Marital and divorce researchers view divorce as an event producing change in the family system which alters experiences for all members prior to and following the divorce experience (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Strohschein, 2005; Sun & Li, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Researchers examining post-divorce effects discovered diverse pathways that produced varied outcomes for children. As a family struggles with the transitions of divorce, family interactions, and extrafamilial factors
may protect or hinder a child’s well-being (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Strohschein, 2005; Sun & Li, 2002). For example, when interparental conflict creates a damaging home environment, children are exposed to high stress levels, which may lead to feelings of sadness, hopelessness and fear. Therefore, more recent research has examined the process of divorce as a series of stages in order to better understand how children experience diverse developmental trajectories.

Researchers consistently find that children of divorce encounter numerous problems that begin prior to divorce (Amato, 2010, Hetherington, 2003; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Sun & Li, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). While the majority of these children will adjust, many children continue to struggle with emotional, physiological and behavioral problems. Links between parental divorce and poor adjustment can persist into adulthood (Amato, 2010; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). Longitudinal studies conducted by Hetherington (2003) and Wallerstein et al. (2000) have demonstrated that divorce is not a single event, but a process encompassing the stages of pre-divorce, crisis-point, and post-divorce. The current project adopts this perspective in disseminating information about divorce and interparental conflict to families.

**Pre-divorce and “Crisis-Point”**

Divorce is typically preceded by a significant rise in family tension and conflict (Booth & Amato, 2001; Sun, 2001; Sun & Li, 2002). During the pre-divorce period children may be exposed to stress, tension, heightened interparental conflict, and parent
withdrawal. Conflict tends to exist in pre-divorce homes and usually continues until the actual point of divorce. Divorce produces a large amount of changes in a short period of time. Those significant changes can alter children’s living arrangements, family roles, and increase children’s risk for developing an array of problems (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011). Children experiencing parental divorce may struggle with the emotions of guilt and blame, wondering, “why me?” Wallerstein et al. (2000) calls this the “crisis point” of divorce. Researchers note that this is the most vulnerable time for children, requiring the provision of stability and comfort. Unfortunately, children may be exposed to decreased parent availability and prolonged family conflict (Amato et al., 2011; Booth & Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 2003; Strohschein, 2007; Sun & Li, 2002; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Most children start to recover from the transition of divorce within the first several years (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Strohschein, 2005; Sun & Li, 2002). In fact, divorce can provide an escape from tension for children who were exposed to high marital conflict during the pre-divorce period. Children who see their parents’ marriage as high in conflict will fare better in the long run with divorce as the outcome (Booth & Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 2003; Strohschein, 2005). However, if children are continually exposed to high interparental conflict, positive adaptation may not be the case and the consequences of divorce may persist into adulthood (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Bing et al., 2009; Booth & Amato, 2001; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Hetherington, 2003; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007).
**Post-divorce Period**

In this period, there is the need to establish a sense of home and stability for children (Wallerstein, 2005; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). However, continually conflicted parents remain unable to effectively co-parent (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Hetherington, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). Following divorce, it is very common for conflicted parents to lobby children into taking sides and/or become preoccupied with stressful life changes which compromise parenting and put children at risk (Bing et al., 2009; Hetherington, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Sandler et al., 2008; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Children’s adjustment is strongly and negatively linked to the continuation of post-divorce high interparental conflict (Cummings et al., 2006; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). The current project will address the body of literature that supports the need for both parents to provide warm and secure parenting throughout the divorce process. Healthy parent-child relationships, with both parents, can ease a children’s adjustment and improve their well-being, during and after divorce (Amato et al., 2011; Sandler et al., 2008).

**Consequences of Parental Divorce for Children**

Children perceive divorce and remarriage differently from parents and their views of divorce differ as a function of their perceptions of interparental conflict (Amato et al., 2011; Booth & Amato, 2001; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Cummings & Davies, 2010;
Hetherington, 2003; Strohschein, 2005; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Research indicates children often experience diverse psychological, emotional and physical reactions through the process and aftermath of divorce (Amato, 2010; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Wallerstein, 2005). However, if the conflict continues and extends to new households, children’s perceptions of interparental conflict can erode parent/child relationships and lead to child adjustment problems (Grych & Fincham, 2001; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Several studies indicate that parental divorce is associated with long-term adjustment difficulties as well (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Booth & Amato, 2001; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007).

**Short-term Consequences**

Sun and Li (2002) conducted a longitudinal study that investigated adolescent outcomes at four specific time points during the divorce process. The pooled time-series analysis began approximately three years before divorce, and ended three years after divorce. Data were also analyzed at one-year pre-divorce and one-year post-divorce intervals. Data were drawn from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS) and the final sample included 9,524 eighth grade students. The researchers observed that divorced families suffered from depleted social and financial resources at all four time points. Compared to children from continually married parents, children of divorced parents reported lower levels of parental trust and lower academic scores at all four time points. However, children’s social and psychological well-being, which was
ranked low at the three-year pre-divorce time point, leveled out and then increased by the three-year post-divorce time point, revealing a U-shaped pattern that indicated a possible adjustment to the divorce process.

In a similar study, Strohschein (2005) used growth curve models to examine developmental trajectories in a sample of Canadian children from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY). The (NLSCY) originated in 1994 and data are continually added every two years through interviews from the original cohort. Strohschein (2005) compared the mental health trajectories of four to seven-year-old children, from continually married parents, to those children whose parents experienced divorce. Consistent with previous research, Strohschein (2005) found that families reported an increase in family dysfunction, marital dissatisfaction and depleted family financial and psychosocial resources before parental divorce occurred. Compared to children from continually married parents, children whose parents divorced suffered from higher levels of anxiety and depression in the pre-divorce period. In addition, children of divorce displayed higher levels of anti-social behaviors in the pre-divorce period, but those effects did not continue to increase following divorce. However, when different measures were used for determining children’s outcomes, research indicates potential long-term problems.

**Long-term Consequences**

Numerous longitudinal studies exist that document longer-term difficulties associated with marital conflict and divorce. After 25 plus years of data collection,
children from initial studies are now between 35-50 years old (Amato, 2010). Consequently, a second generation of research has identified the long-term consequences of parental divorce into adulthood (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Decades of research demonstrate the relationship between the risk factors of interparental conflict and divorce to adult-children’s psychological and physiological adjustments (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007). Adult children of divorce tend to be less educated, experience problems with psychological well-being, and experience greater risk for divorce themselves. In some longitudinal studies, these differences persist into adulthood and can remain across decades (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Amato and Cheadle (2005) conducted a three-generation study investigating the links between interparental conflict and parent-child relationships with divorce as the outcome. The researchers used data from the Marital Instability over the Life Course Study to examine relationships between generations by correlating and analyzing multiple variables such as; levels of education, divorce, family income, marital discord, parent-child tension, and child well-being. Results demonstrated that divorce between grandparents (generation 1= G1) was linked to an array of challenging outcomes for grandchildren (generation 3= G3). Parental divorce in G1 doubled the chances of divorce in G2. Complications from increased divorce rates and inferior relationships between G1 and G2 were associated with problems in G3. Therefore, G3 experienced greater marital conflict, had poorer parental relationships and lower educational attainment (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). Data from the interviews revealed that continued post-divorce
interparental conflict undermined parent-child relationships, disrupted visitation arrangements, and resulted in reduced father-child interactions. This reduction in father-child interactions was linked to fathers eventually extricating themselves from their children’s lives (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Hetherington, 2003).

Despite the risk of negative short and long-term consequences for divorce, researchers have observed significant variability in children’s responses to divorce. Several factors operate to modify children’s responses to the divorce process. These factors are discussed next.

**Factors that Ameliorate or Magnify Children’s Outcomes**

Several recent studies have explored the processes that mediate or moderate the consequences of marital conflict and divorce on outcomes. A child’s developmental level may act as a moderator of interparental conflict. In addition research indicates that a close relationship with a parent or sibling, positive parenting practices and thoughtful custody arrangements can mediate the relationship between divorce and negative adjustment for children.

**Children’s Development**

The relationship between interparental conflict and children’s developmental trajectories is well established (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Cummings & Davies, 2002, 2010; Strohschein, 2005). Children of different ages respond to and interpret divorce and parent conflict differently, and one must take into account differences in cognitive, social and physical development when discussing interparental conflict (Cummings & Davies,
2010; Grych & Fincham, 2001). Marital conflict can disrupt children from successfully negotiating developmental challenges by increasing a child’s emotional insecurity. In accordance with the Emotional Security Theory, when children are threatened from parental conflict they may become preoccupied with protecting their emotional security and struggle with their ability to resolve developmental challenges (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Previous research has failed to identify a specific age at which children are at greater risk for maladjustment from interparental conflict. Research has identified harmful long-term effects in children as young as six months of age through adolescence (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Marital and divorce researchers agree, the risk for maladjustment from harsh parental conflict varies as a function of developmental period (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

For example, researchers note typical developmental differences in responses when children are confronted with destructive interparental conflict. When infants and toddlers are exposed to conflict they may have trouble forming secure attachments, regulating emotions or maintaining healthy routines. They can develop negative representations of family relationships, which can interfere with exploration, autonomy and social functioning (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Cummings & Davies, 2002, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 2001).

When preschoolers and kindergarteners are exposed to harsh parental conflict they may struggle with implementing prosocial skills at home and at school. Aggressive marital conflict is linked to children’s aggressive and disruptive behavior through direct
and mediated pathways. When children witness aggressive parental conflict they may begin to model that behavior in relationships with others. As children are being socialized into new environments, aggressive behavior typically declines in the early childhood years. However, when children are continually exposed to parental conflict, positive socialization can be disrupted. Children may struggle to construct effective coping strategies with their peers which has been shown to interfere with the formation of healthy peer relationships (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Erath, Bierman, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2006; Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009; Snyder, Cramer, Afrank, & Patterson, 2005; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

Preoccupation with interparental conflict may cause school-age children to struggle with internalizing problems and feel less confident (Cummings & Davies 2002, 2010; Erath et al., 2006; Johnston et al., 2009; McDonald & Grych, 2006; Snyder et al., 2005). Young children may struggle with perceptions of self-blame and fear from exposure to parental conflict. They may have a harder time concentrating at school and may struggle academically. These children may also continue to copy aggressive parental behaviors and transfer their anger to peers.

When adolescents are exposed to harsh parental conflict they may pull away from their parents in an effort to avoid conflict and turn toward their peers for positive or negative support. As children become older they may demonstrate less behavioral responses to adversity and may suffer from internalizing problems such as, depression, anxiety and negative self-judgments (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Amato & Booth,
2001; Cummings et al., 2006; Johnston et al., 2009; McCoy et al., 2009). This developmental model of children’s reactions to interparental conflict is referred to in the current project through several expert interviews. Multiple age groups are referenced in hopes of reaching a larger audience of parents.

**Sibling Relationships**

Positive sibling relationships provide children with healthy interactions that promote social and emotional competence (Conger, Stocker, & McGuire, 2009). In the family context, siblings can provide stability, protection and support to each other at one of the most stressful times in a child’s life (Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004). The process of parental divorce exerts a tremendous amount of pressure on sibling relationships and positive sibling relationships produce optimal mental health outcomes in adult children of divorce (Conger et al., 2009). Siblings often nurture one another in times of conflict or parental absence (Sheehan et al., 2004). However, in adverse cases when siblings are faced with conflict, their sibling relationships can be compromised or threatened (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Sheehan et al. (2004) determined there was a wide variability in the quality of sibling relationships and that such differences may moderate the divorce experience. Sheehan et al. (2004) collected data through self-report questionnaires and structured interviews at two waves of a 12-month longitudinal study. Single siblings in the dyads were assigned as “target” children and all sibling information was primarily based upon their responses. The researchers observed that many siblings in divorced families have
what is referred to as “affect-intense” relationships, meaning that these relationships contain high degrees of nurturance and high degrees of negativity or dominance in order to resolve conflict (Sheehan et al., 2004). Some siblings respond to conflict or anger by increased caregiving and prosocial behaviors. In the current project, the importance of close family relationships in all family subsystems is explained to parents, as another way of protecting the emotional security of children throughout the divorce process.

**Custody Arrangements**

An important means for ameliorating the negative consequences of marital conflict and divorce is the promotion of custody arrangements that best fit the needs of parents and children. Studies reviewing court arrangements suggest that in the face of continued interparental conflict, sole or split custody arrangements may provide more relief to children than the more common joint custody arrangement (Bing et al., 2009; Hawthorne, 2000; Hetherington, 2003). Split custody arrangements appear to have gained more strength in parental post-divorce court ordered agreements (Hawthorne, 2000). Unfortunately, post-divorce living arrangements and split-custody decisions can separate siblings when they are the most vulnerable, revealing split-custody arrangements affect sibling relationships into adulthood (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry, & Charbonneau, 2000). Wallerstein and Lewis (2007) recommended custom designing child custody arrangements to fit the children’s individual needs, since research shows that typical post-divorce living arrangements that are good for some families are not necessarily good for all.
Positive Parenting and Co-parenting

Another factor that can contribute to children’s resiliency in face of hardship, and help to ameliorate the impact of conflict, is positive parenting and co-parenting. Systems models and the attachment theory support the importance of positive parent-child relationships, especially in the face of stressful circumstances. One way to conceptualize positive parenting is through the construct of authoritative parenting. Baumrind (1996) identified authoritative parenting as a type of high quality parenting that can act as a protective buffer for children.

An authoritative parent is responsive to their children’s needs by displaying affection, guidance, emotional and physical support. This type of parent consistently monitors behavior, establishes reasonable rules and consequences of behavior. Numerous research findings confirm that in a variety of custodial configurations both genders developed positively when parents used an authoritative parenting style and actively worked at a co-parenting relationship (Amato et al., 2011; Baumrind, Larzelere, & Owens, 2010).

In one such study, Amato et al. (2011) used data from Wave II and Wave III of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and conducted cluster analyses to determine the effects of three post-divorce parenting types on adolescent and early adult-child outcomes. A total of 944 parent-child dyads from divorced parents were reviewed. The three parenting styles identified and evaluated were (a) cooperative co-parenting, which resembled authoritative parenting, (b) parallel parenting, a style of
parenting that lacked characteristics of the authoritative parenting style and contained moderate levels of parental conflict, and (c) single parenting, in which the non-resident parent had little or no contact with their children. The results of the study indicated that children in the cooperative co-parenting group displayed the fewest behavior problems and reported being closer to their fathers, the majority of which were the non-resident parent. Even though more custody settlements support fathers in their role as resident parent or co-parent; the vast majority of non-resident parents continue to be fathers (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009).

Children benefit from authoritative parenting from both mothers and fathers. For example, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) reviewed 63 studies involving non-resident fathers and children’s outcomes. The meta-analysis showed that fathers made a significant contribution to their children’s well-being when they exhibited parenting practices considered to be authoritative in nature, e.g., establishing rules, helping with everyday tasks, monitoring children, and contributing to their emotional support, etc. In the podcast series developed for the current project, parents are introduced to the authoritative parenting style and will be provided with a Tips and Tools Page, containing information on ways to implement authoritative parenting in various family configurations.
Father Involvement

Paternal involvement is linked to children’s secure attachments, positive social and cognitive functioning, positive educational outcomes and economic status (Flouri, 2005; Lamb, 2004). In turn, a lack of paternal involvement can put a child at risk for negative outcomes, dysfunctional social-cognitive behaviors, educational and economic hardships (Boller et al., 2006; Lamb, 2004; Veneziano, 2003). If harmful post-divorce interparental conflict continues to exist, non-resident father-child relationships can be threatened. For example, interparental conflict that involves disputes over child custody or monetary settlements can last for years. Ongoing unresolved conflict can lead to parent alienation and fluctuations in child support payments (Amato et al., 2009; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007).

Fabricius and Hall (2000) conducted a study of college students’ perceptions of their families’ post-divorce living arrangements and their relationships with their parents. Fabricius (2003) ascertained that most of the participants believed their fathers wanted to see them more often and that their mothers discouraged time with fathers. Most students reported their fathers had maintained relationships with them and contributed to their college expenses. Participants who had lived a significant amount of time with their fathers enjoyed higher-quality relationships with both parents. In a follow-up study, Fabricius and Lueck en (2007) investigated young adults’ long-term relationships with fathers in relation to exposure to interparental conflict, before and after divorce.
Consistent with previous research, the more time children lived with their father post-divorce, the healthier their long-term paternal relationships remained.

Fathers also typically affect children’s financial resources following divorce. Children’s Socioeconomic Status (SES) is linked to the SES of the father (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Paternal financial contributions are associated with children’s positive development and educational attainment (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). Amato et al. (2009) combined data from several national longitudinal surveys, from 1976-2002. They found that non-resident father involvement was positively correlated to child support payments.

Given the research on the importance of father support and involvement post-divorce, this project presents the research that supports father-child relationships, by way of an interview with a professor of child development, which reiterates the research supporting the importance of a father’s involvement before and after divorce. However, it is important to keep in mind that if hostile interparental conflict continues, children may not be benefit from contact with the non-resident parent, as evident in marital and divorce research (Cumming & Davies, 2010; McCoy et al., 2009; Sandler et al., 2008).

**Interparental Conflict**

The most consistent mediator of divorce effects revealed by research is the presence or absence of interparental conflict. Studies have identified a spillover effect from interparental conflict to conflicted parent-child interactions (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Parke, 2004). According to the spillover hypothesis, perpetual interparental
conflict affects the disposition and behaviors of parents within the marital subsystem, which are then transmitted to, and affect, other family subsystems. Longitudinal research reveals that over time, the consequences of marital conflict erode parent-child relationships (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; McCoy et al., 2009; Parke, 2004).

Research suggests that regardless of marital status, when children witness angry, aggressive or unresolved interparental conflict, their perception of threat and selection of coping strategies can alter their developmental psychopathology, resulting in the negative long-term consequences for children (Cumming & Davies, 2002, 2010; Cummings et al., 2006; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Johnston et al., 2009; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). When children’s outcomes were measured before and after divorce, the most consistent explanation for the variance in children’s responses was continued exposure to interparental conflict (Amato, 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

There are strong associations between interparental conflict and the quality of parent-child relationships, with links to long-term emotional and physical health risks for children. For example, Hetherington (2003) summarized key findings from 32 years of studies of children’s outcomes from prolonged interparental conflict after divorce. The original data were collected through the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage (VLSDR), the Hetherington and Clingempeel Study of Divorce and Remarriage and the National Study of Nonshared Environment, involving 1400 families and 2500 children. Hetherington’s report revealed that an increase in interparental
conflict produced the most adverse effects for children. The most damaging kinds of interparental conflict were those that directly involved the child. Specific types of harmful interparental conflict included; (a) incorporation of the child into the conflict, (b) using a child as a direct target of conflict, (c) conflict in which the child is forced to take sides and, (d) conflicts involving any form of abuse.

Several studies have analyzed adult-children’s perspectives and the child-mother-father triad, in post-divorced configurations, to understand adult-children’s outcomes from continued exposure to harmful interparental conflict. Fabricius and Hall (2000) conducted a study of college students’ perceptions of their families’ post-divorce living arrangements and their relationships with their parents, finding that when students experienced undermining behaviors from parents, e.g., interfering or criticizing time spent with the other parent, they became angry and less close to the offending parent, especially mothers. If young adults experienced prolonged interparental conflict they had worse relationships with their fathers and suffered more long-term physical and mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. Furthermore, participants from divorced families demonstrated better developmental outcomes than students from conflicted intact families, confirming that conflict, and not divorce, may be the more important factor (Fabricius & Lueckcn, 2007).

Although close emotional ties with both parents usually contribute positively to children’s development, Sobolewski and Amato (2007) found that in highly conflicted marriages or divorces it may not be advantageous for children to be close to one or even
both parents. These researchers focused on parent-child relationships as an interactive triad. They analyzed data from the Marital Instability over the Life Course study, to examine two aspects of children’s outcomes when exposed to marital conflict and divorce: how close children felt to both parents and how those relationships effected children’s well-being over time. Their research findings indicated (a) children in low-conflict marriages reported feeling closer to both parents, (b) children in highly-conflicted marriages reported feeling close to neither parent, and (c) children in divorced families reported being close to one parent, usually the mother. Children of divorced parents did benefit from one close parent-child relationship and were as well adjusted as the children from two close parent-child relationships. However, children only benefitted from two close parent-child relationships if the marriage or divorce was low in conflict. The authors speculated that highly conflicted parents purposefully or subconsciously used their children as weapons against the other parent. In these scenarios children were caught in the middle and forced to choose sides. When this occurred children experienced emotional distress and suffered from guilt, self-blame, anger and despair. As a result of this pressure children may be better off by alienating themselves from one or both parents (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). In the current podcast series, family therapist, Anne Bucon, talks about the overall resiliency of children and explains how children’s outcomes can be positively influenced by at least one parent when conflict is reduced.
In an effort to help parents reduce conflict and practice positive parenting skills, the current project presents several interviews with psychologists that include research based advice and problem-solving strategies. At the end of each podcast, parents can download PDF PowerPoint’s, Tips and Tools Pages, and Take-home Messages. Those documents contain highlights from the interviews and additional resources for parents, e.g., best parenting practices, co-parenting strategies and conflict resolution techniques.

**Constructive and Destructive Conflict**

Marital conflict studies reveal that not all types of interparental conflict are harmful. McCoy et al. (2009) studied parental arguments in a longitudinal study of 235 families. Results indicated that interparental conflict could be categorized into two types: constructive and destructive conflict. Constructive conflict involved parental interactions containing problem-solving strategies, verbal and physical affection, often resulting in reduced or resolved conflict. In contrast, destructive conflict involved parental interactions containing hostile, angry, verbal and/or physically aggression, that produced threats or insults rarely resulting in parental conflict resolution. Not surprisingly, and consistent with the Emotional Security Theory, destructive conflict most threatened children’s emotional security and produced the most harmful effects. Furthermore, McCoy et al. (2009) found that the frequency of arguments was not as negatively significant for children as was how arguments were handled by parents.

Using separate models to explore constructive and destructive conflict, McCoy et al. (2009) specifically looked for the negative and positive effects of these conflict types.
in family interactions. Constructive conflict allowed children to sustain their emotional security and feel confident in their parents’ ability to safeguard family accord. Therefore, children were less likely to feel the need to self-regulate or mediate the conflict. When parents engage in constructive conflict they model prosocial skills and foster positive social development in their children. In contrast, the destructive conflict model showed a relationship to increased negative internalizing stressors in children, producing harmful results that affected children’s social, emotional and academic performance (Amato, 2010; McCoy et al., 2009). This distinction in destructive and constructive conflict will be used in the current project.

**Qualities of Effective Intervention Programs**

Prevention research indicates that early interventions, specifically targeting conflict resolution in intact relationships, help to ease family tensions before marital conflict escalates and complications ensue (Faircloth & Cummings, 2008; Gottman & Gottman, 1999). Researchers John and Julie Gottman spent 14 years interviewing and observing 670 married couples developing intervention strategies that improved marital quality in conflicted relationships. The Gottmans’ intervention programs, based on their “sound marital house” theory, are based on the idea that successful couples establish a solid foundation in their relationship and build on that base like the floors of a house. The Gottmans’ work is recognized and used in clinical therapy practices, treating high conflict couples, as well as intervention programs targeting the difficult transition to parenthood.
A significant body of research has identified the transition to parenthood as one of the most stressful times in a couples’ marriage. In fact, the first six to seven years of marriage are when divorce rates are at the highest levels (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Reviewing previous intervention research, Shapiro and Gottman (2005) noted that 67% of the wives’ reported a decline in marital quality with the birth of the first baby. The researchers’ observed that even if the couples were college educated, they lacked knowledge in child development education and parenting skills. Therefore, the researchers included preparation for parenthood, infant development education, and parenting tips in an intervention workshop aimed at couples’ transition to parenthood.

“The Bringing Baby Home Workshop,” which incorporated intervention strategies from John and Julie Gottman’s longitudinal research, followed 130 newlywed couples for six years as they transitioned to parenthood. Data was collected at three intervals, before a baby was born, at the three-month mark and when the baby turned one year old. One year post-test evaluations compared the workshop group, to a control group and revealed that in the workshop group (a) marital quality improved for husbands’ and remained stable for wives’, (b) postpartum depression decreased for both husbands’ and wives’, and (c) marital hostility decreased significantly for both husbands’ and wives’ (Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). In support of these research findings, the current project includes an interview with a Gottman certified psychologist. The interview is accompanied by several Tips and Tools Pages, which cover the transition to parenthood.
and several Sound Marital House techniques, found useful in the reduction of marital conflict.

Intervention research reveals a positive correlation between parents’ knowledge of effective parenting practices and their ability to engage in interparental cooperation and conflict resolution (Cummings, Faircloth, Mitchell, Cummings, & Schermerhorn, 2008; Gottman & Gottman, 1999). Specific components of effective parenting programs that promote positive changes in parenting behaviors have been identified in additional research. Effective parenting programs specifically educate parents on the effects of marital/interparental conflict on adults and children, and how conflict impacts the family environment. A second goal of these programs is to provide parents with useful problem-solving skills to incorporate in their day-to-day lives. Third, effective programs provide parent training that will improve negotiation, resolution and management of marital, interparental or family conflict (Faircloth & Cummings, 2008).

Faircloth and Cummings (2008) developed an intervention program focusing on educating parents about types of interparental conflict, the importance of resolution and evidence-based communication skills. Faircloth and Cummings (2008) examined the effects of their intervention program, on 55 couples randomly assigned to a treatment or control group. Results revealed that a significant increase in parents’ implementation of problem-solving skills was negatively correlated with physical aggression and negative parenting at six-month and one-year posttests (Faircloth & Cummings, 2008).
Unfortunately, few empirically based marital intervention programs are available to the larger population. Since half of all divorced children are six years or under when a divorce occurs, large populations of children are growing up in post-divorce families. The intent of the current project is to reach a larger population of parents and increase their knowledge about interparental conflict and children’s outcomes, before marital tensions escalate and complications develop.

Several theory-based intervention programs targeting post-divorce and stepfamily configurations have received empirical support for the positive effects on the family system (Bullard et al., 2010; Cookston & Fung, 2011; Wolchik et al., 2009). Specifically, three university-based intervention programs, New Beginnings (NB), Oregon model of Parent Management Training (PMTO), and The Kid’s Turn program have demonstrated positive long-term effects (Bullard et al., 2010; Cookston & Fung, 2011; Grych, 2005). All three programs possess similar evidence-based intervention goals and the “active ingredients” established in previous research. Specifically, these three programs focus on improving children’s adjustment to divorce by strengthening parent/child relationships, improving problem-solving and communication strategies, advance authoritative parenting skills, establish co-parenting practices, and reduce interparental conflict. The current project shares these characteristics and goals.

Researchers from NB, PMTO and The Kid’s Turn, reported positive long-term effects in post-test evaluations that compared participant outcomes of intervention groups to control groups. For instance, the three studies reported similar distal outcomes for a
significant decrease in interparental conflict, reduced child/parent internalizing disorders, improved mother and father functioning and decreased litigations. Moreover, program effects were observed in participants from the NB program up to six years after completion of the sessions (Grych, 2005). In particular, in both the NB and PMTO programs adolescent participants displayed fewer externalizing and internalizing behavior problems than participants in the control groups (Grych, 2005).

Unfortunately, the drawback to the three aforementioned programs is the length of commitment required by participants in order to achieve the measured level of effectiveness. For example, The Kid’s Turn program required participation in six sessions and the NB program required participation in 11 group sessions, and two individual sessions. Additional problems for those researchers and parents included: (a) high attrition rates due to attendance at multiple sessions, (b) the expense of a multiple session programs that may potentially be passed onto the consumer, and (c) the threat of interrater reliability due to training and consistency among session leaders (Bert, Farris, & Borkowski, 2008; Cookston & Fung, 2011). In order to overcome the inconvenience to parents and families of attending lengthy programs, the current project disseminates researched based information through a variety of podcasting formats. This delivery format provides parents the flexibility to view or listen to the podcasts how, when and where they choose, depending on their busy schedules.

One challenge in providing intervention programs for parents is that the busy schedules and daily demands that make it difficult for parents to find the time to attend
the program. Therefore, researchers have explored alternative methods for structuring intervention programs. For example, Bert et al. (2008) investigated three different delivery methods using the *Adventures in Parenting* program, created by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). The researchers randomly assigned mothers to one of three groups: (a) face-to-face sessions, (b) web-based sessions, or (c) a materials only session. Parents’ knowledge of the subject matter was measured through pre- and post-test assessments. Researchers found that the face-to-face and web-based sessions were equally effective, and both were more effective at educating parents than the booklet alone. Parent participation was slightly higher for web-based sessions. An additional important finding observed in the face-to-face and web-based groups, was the significant increase in knowledge in parents who attended or viewed as little as one session.

Researchers have also developed and tested shorter programs to reduce the high attrition rate experienced in face-to-face or multiple-session intervention programs. Such programs are brief and accessible and require parents to participate in only one session lasting between two to three hours. Segal et al. (2003) designed their computer-based intervention program, *Parenting Adolescents Wisely* (PAW), to be self-administered. They reasoned that computer generated programs could provide a nonjudgmental, accessible and cost effective delivery method to parents. Participants in the study were randomly assigned to one of two groups; interactive multimedia (IM) or noninteractive videotape (NV) group. Both groups viewed the program that contained nine problematic
scenarios followed by additional scenes providing solutions. The program took approximately 1.5 hours for the NV group and 2.5 hours for the IM group to finish. The results from post-tests indicated that 50% of parents from both groups reported a significant improvement in their children’s behavior due to the exposure to program content.

Although thoughtfully designed interventions can lead to positive changes in parenting practices and children’s behavior, over time treatment effects can decline in families who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, who lack other family, financial or social supports, or who suffer from high stress (e.g., abuse, depression, physical abnormalities). Furthermore, individual therapy is expensive or unavailable to the majority of “at risk” families (Shifflet & Cummings, 1999). Providing cost effective parent education programs via the shorter and improved delivery methods established in recent research seems to offer the best method for promoting positive change in families experiencing marital conflict and divorce. The current project was designed to create and implement such a program by (a) providing this series at no cost to viewer/listeners, (b) structuring the podcasts to be divided into a series of short 20-40 min. episodes, (c) providing parents access to a variety of professionals, and (d) providing parents with problem-solving, Tips and Tools Pages, that they can reference in their daily lives.

**Conclusion**

The past decade of research reveals the harmful long-term effects of destructive interparental conflict on children’s development. Although the majority of children
experiencing parental divorce will recover, many children exposed to prolonged
interparental conflict will show poor adjustment outcomes. Fortunately, researchers have
confirmed several factors that mediate or moderate the effects of divorce and
interparental conflict. For example, when parents focus on protecting a child’s emotional
security, and reduce destructive conflict behaviors between themselves and in the home
environment, harmful long-term effects on their child’s development can be decreased
(Cummings & Davies, 2010; Gottman & Gottman, 1999; Minuchin, 1985). Furthermore,
when parents focus on implementing authoritative parenting, maintaining a close
relationship with their child, consider thoughtful custody arrangements, and work to
establish healthy family relationships by practicing constructive conflict behaviors
children will experience more positive developmental outcomes (Amato, 2010;
Hetherington, 2003; McCoy et al., 2009; Sandler et al., 2008). Providing research-based
information about this research is the focus of the current project.

Whether in an intact, divorced, single-parent or blended-family home, ending a
conflictual parental relationship and creating a stable home environment will significantly
increase positive long-term physical and mental outcomes for children. Research
indicates parents and children benefit from intervention programs that reduce
interparental conflict. When a less stressful more stable home environment is created
post-divorce, children of divorce are comparable to children of low conflict intact
families and show improved adjustment, as compared to children coming from highly
conflicted intact families (Hetherington, 2003).
The Current Project

The podcast series in the current project attempts to address the challenges parents face when facing marital conflict and possible divorce. Our country’s recession has depleted family and educational resources making the job of parenting even more stressful. Parents may lack the time or educational background to sit down and read complicated research articles or in-depth child development books that could assist them in their role as parent. Especially in these stressful times, current research needs to make its way to parents’ ears.

Alternative delivery models for parent intervention programs, including technologies such as computers and podcasts, have the potential to increase dissemination of information among a wide range of parents. Podcasts, for example, can deliver free parent/child education rooted in sound developmental research providing knowledge, compassion, assistance, and encouragement to mentor effective parenting and support parents in a rewarding experience. The podcast series used in this project has the potential to empower parents and reduce the stress and guilt of parenting associated with interparental conflict. Furthermore, free and accessible podcasts can reduce the financial burden parents face if they are unable to afford traditional therapy. The research presented in this chapter reveals how the positive and negative effects of parenting are critical to children’s outcomes. A significant benefit to children is the potential of these podcasts to reach parents before conflict escalates and behavioral patterns are established which alter children’s developmental trajectories.
Chapter 3

METHOD

Project Design

The purpose of this project was to translate clinical and empirical research into a clear and accessible parent education program delivered via a series of podcasts. The target audience for the podcast series included parents and/or stepparents, in the general population, in intact, separated or divorced families, who struggle with interparental conflict. The content of each podcast was developed through written scripts based on the substantial review of the literature regarding the harmful effects of marital or interparental conflict on children’s development. The podcast series was also designed to include elements of effective research based intervention programs that were established in marital or interparental conflict research (Bert et al., 2008; Borkowski et al., 2007; Bullard et al., 2010; Cookston & Fung, 2011; Cummings et al., 2008; Faircloth & Cummings, 2008; Grych, 2005; Segal et al., 2003; Shapiro & Gottman, 2005; Webster-Stratton, 1994). In addition to the podcast series, the researcher has begun construction of a website and will provide a link to the website, Developing Parents, in which parents can access a variety of downloadable formats, additional research and supplemental resources.
Podcast Development

Literature Review

As a first step to development of the podcasts, the researcher conducted a review of the relevant scholarly literature. The areas of research included (a) child development and family systems theories, (b) marital, interparental conflict and divorce research, (c) research based parent intervention programs, and (d) podcast formatting and development. An extensive body of research supported that interparental conflict impedes the functional patterns of parent-child interactions and can disrupt children’s developmental trajectories. Furthermore, interparental conflict, and not necessarily divorce itself, was strongly linked to children’s adjustments (Amato, 2010; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Hetherington, 2003). The review of the literature further revealed that developmental theory is used as a foundation and guide for empirically tested intervention programs.

Intervention Programs

The next step in podcast development was to identify theoretically based intervention programs. While some parent education programs are based on trends or opinion, there are several intervention programs that have been rigorously evaluated through posttest assessments and longitudinal studies as providing documented benefits for parents and families. According to Cummings (personal communication, February 22, 2012) some parent education programs can actually be destructive to families instead of helpful, because they are not based in research or tested for effectiveness. Post-test
evaluations confirmed that effective programs provided parents with knowledge on interparental conflict and problem-solving skills that promoted positive parenting, which decreased children’s negative internalizing and externalizing behaviors. The importance of these intervention strategies were outlined in the research presented in Chapter 2 (Bullard et al., 2010; Cookston & Fung, 2011; Cummings et al., 2008; Faircloth & Cummings, 2008; Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, & Prior, 2009). As a result, the podcast series was designed to inform and educate parents about interparental conflict through interviews, PowerPoints and DVDs (see Appendices A & D). This project also provided PDF files called, *Tips and Tools Pages*, which contained problem-solving strategies and *take-home* messages that parents could immediately download and use as a resource in their daily lives (see Appendix B).

**Script Development**

The podcast scripts for the current project were written to present research based child development theories, and elements of successful intervention programs, that have helped researchers understand parent, child and family behaviors and arrive at positive solutions to buffer children from the harmful effects of marital and or interparental conflict. The more formal academic writing used in the research was simplified for access by the general public. The scripts were divided into vignettes, or short speeches. Each vignette contained an introduction to a concept or theory, an interview used to expand on the concept or theory and PowerPoint presentations that parents could
download for their personal use. The podcasts are outlined in Appendix A, including references to empirical research.

Procedures

Settings for Interviews

The podcasts were filmed or recorded in multiple locations. The decision to film the podcasts in a variety of settings was due to (a) the desire to deliver the research based information with the integrity and professionalism that the material deserved, (b) the consideration of the stress level some parents may be under when viewing the information, and (c) where the scheduled interviews were going to take place. For instance, the introduction was filmed on location at the California State University’s Child Development Center. The researcher’s goal was to greet parents in a setting, relevant to the subject matter and to suggest the presence of children to support the child development theme running throughout the podcasts. However, in order to avoid legal issues, children were not actually present. In another example, the first podcast presented the attachment and family systems theory to help parents understand the importance of healthy family functioning, in the home environment. Therefore, portions of that podcast were filmed in an infant/toddler playroom room and in a residential kitchen. Symbolically, a child’s playroom should be a safe and secure location for children to start exploring their world and a kitchen is the location in which the family is nourished and gathers on a regular basis. Once the location was determined, the researcher and an assistant set up the recording equipment.
All settings were chosen in a similar manner throughout the podcast series. This project was filmed in Northern California in various metropolitan and suburban locations. In an effort to present all professional participants with more of an authoritative presence, the researcher felt it was very important to conduct at those interviews in the professional’s or educator’s office. If distance was a problem, as in the case of Dr. E.M. Cummings, professor at Notre Dame University, Indiana, interviews were conducted by phone.

**Contributors**

The contributors to the podcast production included the researcher, a fellow graduate student, and a professional film and editing company, VideoLab Productions. Those actually filmed included (a) the researcher, serving as the host, presenter and interviewer and (b) several professionals, e.g., a family therapist, a clinical psychologist and two professors, who were interviewed to support the content and/or theory presented.

Child, adult and family psychotherapist, Anne Bucon, L.C.S.W. was the first professional presented in a podcast. The video-taped interview was conducted at her office in Cameron Park, California. Dr. Tamar Wishnatzky, Ed. D., a licensed psychologist and a certified Gottman therapist, was the second interviewee. The videotaped interview was conducted at her office in Sacramento, California. The third interviewee was Dr. Sheri Hembree, Ph.D., a professor of child development at California State University, Sacramento. The audio-taped interview was conducted at her office on the University campus. The last professional interview was conducted via a
recorded phone conversation with Dr. Mark Cummings, professor and director of the Family Studies Center at University of Notre Dame, in Indiana. The audio-taped phone interview was conducted at his office on the University campus. Outlines of podcasts are presented in Appendix A.

**Role of the Researcher**

Intervention researchers have noted that the success of a program is dependent on the consistency and reliability of the presented information (Bert et al., 2008, Cummings & Davies, 2011; Havighurst et al., 2009). Therefore, in the current podcast series, the researcher wrote the scripts and served as the host, presenter, narrator and interviewer. In addition to those responsibilities, the researcher took an active role in the technical aspects of the project. The researcher also made decisions about the set locations, set backgrounds and camera angles. The researcher prepared the participants for the interview process by providing them with prepared questions and suggestions on how to dress if they were being video-taped. The researcher also participated in the editing process by combing through hours of film footage to extract the most relevant points to configure the material into specific time frames. Prior to the current academic project and professional career in education, the researcher received a BA in Theatre Arts and Speech from San Jose State University in California. The researcher’s previous experience with speech writing and acting supported her role as a script writer, presenter and researcher in this project.
Podcast Series

The podcast series entitled, Marital/Interparental Conflict and Children, was divided into four parts. Part 1 introduced several child development theories that educated parents on the importance of parent/child attachments and healthy family functioning. Research based explanations and examples were presented to demonstrate parent, child and family interactions in optimal family environments. That information was then followed by what happens to relationships when parental conflict interferes. The presentation was supplemented with slides and an interview with a family therapist.

Part 2 focused on the marital relationship, since parents are the foundation of the family. Dr. John Gottman’s, Sound Marital House Theory, was presented as a tool for parents to refer to as a “roadmap” for a healthy relationship and healthy family functioning. A Gottman certified therapist was interviewed to help convey the information. Additional topics that related to the struggles with the transition to parenthood and the value of parent education to were examined.

Part 3 focused on the child’s perspective when exposed to marital or interparental conflict. The Emotional Security Theory (EST) was presented. An interview was conducted with one of the leading researchers in this area of study, Dr. E. Mark Cummings. Dr. Cummings presented an explanation of the theory, the differences between constructive and destructive conflict and examples of how parents can improve their behaviors to protect their child’s emotional security.
Part 4 dealt with separation or divorce as an outcome for families. Explanations and examples were given of what can happen to children’s development when interparental conflict extends to new households. Examples were presented through an interview with a family therapist. Research indicates that in highly conflicted post-divorce interparental relationships, oftentimes the father will extricate themselves from their children lives (Amato et al., 2009; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). Therefore, an interview was conducted with a professor of child development to address the importance of fathers in children’s lives.

**Website and Supplemental Resources**

The podcast series developed for the current project will be disseminated through a website entitled, *Developing Parents*. The purpose of the website is to (a) provide parents with another method of access to the podcasts, (b) increase exposure to the podcasts and material to a larger audience, (c) contain supplementary information that may be beneficial to parents and families that could not be included in the shortened podcasts, and (d) provide a place where parents can respond and give feedback to the information presented in the podcasts. Several professional website business are under consideration for construction of the website. The podcast researcher has worked with several company designers to create the layout and provide the content for the website. The website will include (a) an introduction to the podcasts, with a link to the entire series on YouTube, (b) links to the research referenced in the podcasts, (c) outlines and highlights from the podcasts, (d) links to the full-length versions of the interviews
conducted by the researcher, (e) links to the problem-solving tips and checklists entitled, Tips and Tools Pages, and (f) links to the interviewee’s websites (with permission) and/or bodies of research, parent organizations, students, childcare consultants, county and state agencies, magazines, childcare facilities, Facebook, Twitter, and parent/family websites, etc. See Appendix B for the website outline and samples of web pages, entitled, Tips and Tools Pages for Parents.

Podcast Evaluation

The nature of this podcast delivery format was not interactive, so this method of delivery limited the researcher in acquiring feedback from an audience and tracking customer satisfaction and usefulness of the podcasts. In an effort to gain feedback, a group of professional and social contacts were asked to view the first podcast and complete a short survey (see Appendix C). This survey provided the researcher with constructive criticism that could improve the quality of the succeeding podcasts.

The podcast assessment contained questions to be answered on a ratings scale from, 1=strongly disagree, to 4=strongly agree. The assessment questions were designed to find out if the components of an effective intervention program were conveyed to the audience. An example of the assessment questions were, “My knowledge of interparental conflict was increased,” and “The parental strategies presented can be easily incorporated into my situation.” As well as open-ended questions such as, “How could this podcast be improved?” The survey format and evaluation questions were adapted from, *The Consumer Satisfaction Questionnaire* (CSQ; Webster-Stratton, Kolpacoff, &
Hollinsworth as cited in Faircloth & Cummings, 2008) (See Appendix C). The outcomes of the assessments are reported in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this project was to deliver research based information to a general population of parents through a series of podcasts that dealt with the potentially harmful effects of marital or interparental conflict on children’s development. According to leading marital and divorce researchers, approximately 69% of married couples struggle with ongoing conflict and 45% of US marriages will end in separation and divorce annually (Amato, 2010; Gottman & Gottman, 1999). Therefore, approximately 1 million children are exposed to various levels of parental conflict, separation, and divorce annually. Over 30 years of study has generated a body of research on the consequences of marital and interparental conflict on children and families. Marital and divorce researchers agree that regardless of marital status or family configuration, the most harmful developmental outcomes for children are linked to the prolong exposure to destructive marital or interparental conflict (Amato, 2010; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Hetherington, 2003; McCoy et al., 2009).

The researcher conducted an extensive review of marital and divorce conflict research and intervention programs. Shapiro and Gottman (2005) have identified that it is not uncommon for parents to lack knowledge and education in child development, which can contribute to marital dissatisfaction. Several intervention programs reveal that when parents in the experimental group were educated in child development and parenting skills, marital satisfaction increased for both husbands and wives and parental
conflict decreased in families (Bullard et al., 2010; Cummings et al., 2008; Faircloth & Cummings, 2008; Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). In order to reflect this research, four podcasts were developed that focused on parent education incorporating child and family developmental theories and empirical research. In addition, interviews with various experts in the field of child development were conducted to supplement this information and to help present parenting strategies and problem-solving techniques that were identified in research to increase parental knowledge, marital satisfaction and decrease conflict (Baumrind et al., 2010; McCoy et al., 2009; Larzelere & Patterson, 1990).

**Podcast Evaluation**

After the completion of the first podcast entitled, Marital/Interparental Conflict and Children, Part 1, the researcher circulated the DVD to the first therapist interviewed, several business acquaintances, a small informal group of parents (4), an educator and an administrator. The podcast evaluation survey consisted of 10 questions using a 4-point Likert-type scale (see Appendix C). The questions included, “The podcast content was relevant to the subject of interparental conflict” and “The “expert” interview information was useful and clearly presented.” Additional information from audience members was encouraged through two short answer questions that addressed, “What additional information should be included in this podcast episode?” and “How could this podcast episode be improved?”

The majority of viewing participants responded positively to the first episode that focused on how parental conflict can interfere with positive parent, child, and family
relationships by responding with “strongly agree” to the first 10 questions on the survey. Those questions dealt with the relevancy and clarity of the podcast content to the subject matter, as well as whether the information increased their knowledge and could be applied to everyday life. The participants’ reactions to podcast 1 were reflected in the short answer responses. One participant wrote that the first podcast “presents the background and effects of conflict effectively.” Another participant wrote, “I thought the information and theory was very easy and clear to follow.” Several participants expressed that they were impressed with the quality of the production and positively commented on the level of professionalism. Other participants enjoyed the interview sections and commented on how those “experts” conveyed concepts and examples well. Several parents expressed that although they did not experience a lot of conflict in their marriages, “it has brought awareness of the potential effects it may have on our children if a controversial topic/debate arises.” Several participants suggested that there might be more examples presented that would reflect how things might look in day-to-day life. The researcher made an effort to include more examples in the future podcasts but the current episode was limited due to time and cost constraints. Future editions will include more of these concrete examples for parents.

At the conclusion of the session, the researcher presented a handout entitled, Tips and Tools Page #1, Reducing Couple Conflict (see Appendix B). That handout is referred to in podcast 1 as the first couples’ strategy in the series. Parents were encouraged to access that strategy and additional resources on the website, Developing
Parents. However, parents were informed that the site would be unavailable until completion of the thesis/project. The majority of the participants responded favorably to the handout which generated further participant interest and conversation. The researcher found that even though some participants verbalized that they were not struggling with destructive parental conflict, they enjoyed watching the podcast and that their awareness of the child’s perspective and child development was increased. The parents who were struggling with conflict were anxious to receive further information and resources to help them in their everyday lives. A few of the participants were very open about discussing personal situations in the intimate group format but several participants stayed after the session to speak with the researcher privately.

Several suggestions can be drawn from interactions with participants during and after the podcast evaluation sessions. First of all, the researcher was reminded of the potential need to offer a period of “debriefing” after viewing this type of emotional subject matter in a group situation. Several parents admitted to struggling with ongoing conflict and were in need of further information and possibly counseling. Future editions of the podcasts will include additional resources for these parents.

The researcher took note to provide a disclaimer to the viewing audience at the beginning of each session announcing that they were not acting as a licensed therapist, nor was this research intended to take the place of licensed marital or family counseling. A future recommendation might be to enlist the services of a licensed therapist to conduct a question and answer session at the end of the viewing period. This research was
intended to bring awareness, education and additional resources to parents in conflict, including when to seek counseling. After this experience, the researcher will make sure this point is also posted on the website.

In empirical research, it is not uncommon that surveys are rewritten to improve the validity and reliability of information collected. The podcast evaluation survey was adopted from reputable intervention research (CSQ as cited in Faircloth & Cummings, 2008). However, this survey was certainly no exception to empirical critique in relation to this project. Two questions should be reviewed to alter or delete a particular line of questioning, depending on the target audience. Question #5, “The parental strategies presented can be easily incorporated into my situation.” This question did not apply to podcast 1. Only one handout is referred to at the end of podcast 1 and parents must go to the website to find it. Parental strategies are not presented until podcast 2. This line of questioning also assumes parents viewing this podcast are experiencing marital conflict. Many parents questioned the need to respond or answer that question. This question should be included or omitted depending on the target audience and the podcast episode under evaluation. Another option is to consider adding an N/A (not applicable) option to the ratings scale, which may address those issues. Another item, “Parental strategies presented in the role-playing scenarios were useful,” may also need to be deleted. The researcher made a decision to not include role-playing scenarios in the podcast series. This was due to several significant factors such as time, expense, and the realization of the professional services needed to complete this project.
Several factors influenced the production of this project, and there were several challenges in its production. Initially, the researcher relied on an amateur videographer to film the series and intended on using amateur actors to deliver role-playing scenarios. Unfortunately, working with an amateur videographer resulted in lengthy filming sessions, poor film quality, which included loss of significant film footage and problems with lighting and sound. That experience resulted in the researcher reevaluating the risk to future thesis/project deadlines by potentially working with amateur actors. The researcher determined that due to time and budget constraints actors would not be used to present problem-solving scenarios. Instead, sections of the scripts were altered and the decision was made to present parent strategies and problem-solving scenarios through interviews with experts and through additional resources called, Tips and Tools Pages (PDFs), that parents could download to incorporate into their lives. To problem-solve filming issues, a professional film crew and editor were hired to meet the next round of deadlines.

Unfortunately, the cost of using a professional film crew and the cost of a professional editor was beyond any initial expectations. The added expense required the researcher to reevaluate how long each scene would take to film. If the presenter is trying to memorize the information, it could require many rounds of filming to account for mistakes. The researcher had previous film and TV courses so she was comfortable on camera. However, the information was so detailed and complex to deliver from
In order to avoid additional filming costs the researcher decided to rent a teleprompter. This improved film time and quality, so the cost was offset.

Issues with time and money are important to consider for any future research involving website or podcast production as an educational delivery method. The researcher is currently looking at grant monies as a funding source to improve the quality and consistency of the film and production process. A sufficient budget that allows the researcher to hire the appropriate professionals will also save time and possibly improve viewer satisfaction.

Not only did the researcher need to consider the length of time to film each podcast, but how long each podcast should run. Intervention research and podcast production recommendations served as a guideline for the researcher to determine the length of each podcast. Web-based parent intervention programs have been proven to be effective at reducing couple conflict in as little as 1.5 hours of participant time (Bert et al., 2008). Podcasters and podcast producers recommend each podcast should run approximately 20-30 minutes in length (Geoghegan & Klass, 2007; Morris et al., 2008). The researcher determined that if the podcasts were divided up into smaller sub-headings under the larger marital/interparental conflict and children heading, the podcasts could be thought of as a series. Each podcast could run approximately 30 minutes long and the entire series would run at least 1.5 hours.

Consistent with the intervention research mentioned herein, the researcher found that it was very difficult to fit the vast amount of important researched based information
into a particular time frame. It was the intent of the researcher to start with some basic child development theories to demonstrate how parental conflict can interfere with a child’s development in any family configuration. The researcher began with intact families and moved through the divorce process to include post-divorce effects. The result of this project indicates it took four podcasts of approximately 20-24 minutes in length to present theory with adequate explanations. The time constraint made it very difficult to provide actual examples and parenting strategies to fit multiple family configurations. The outcome of this project indicates that perhaps the delivery of this subject matter would be more effective if intact and divorce configurations were presented separately and not on a continuum.

Additional limitations make it difficult to generalize these evaluation survey results to a large population. First, the survey was a self-report measure filled out in a group format. The researcher observed several parents who were reluctant to answer some of the questions. Several parents may have been struggling with marital conflict but were understandably not willing to discuss private matters in the group. Second, the evaluation group was small and may not represent parents who actually listen to the podcasts.

Further, when the podcasts are uploaded to the internet, it will be extremely difficult to monitor consumer satisfaction and effectiveness, and without post-test evaluations it would be almost impossible to know if parents would watch all or some of the podcasts and if specific podcasts were more effective than others. In an effort to
address some of these limitations the researcher intends to include on the website, *Developing Parents*, a place for viewers to express their opinions and give feedback about the podcasts through weekly “blogs.” Viewers might also be encouraged to fill out an online survey to help the researcher determine what changes to make to future podcasts and what subjects are of interest for future podcasts. Given the popularity and convenience of the internet and the sensitivity of this topic, future research in this area of podcast delivery methods for parent education is very promising.

**Recommendations**

The positive response from participants indicated that the complicated research based information was conveyed in an easy to follow and yet informative manner. However, the podcasts surveys also indicated that the participants wanted more practical examples of how research, theory and strategies are reflected in day-to-day life. Future podcasts could be more effective with connecting parents to the research by either using professional actors to recreate family scenarios or simply taking the time to add more examples from the host or the interviewee. Thanks to several leading researchers such as, John Gottman and E. Mark Cummings, translational research is becoming an effective tool in general parent intervention programs.

The various parents and professional participants that viewed this podcast series were very complimentary with the overall professional quality of this project. There are many poor quality podcasts and videos on the internet. Participants felt that the subject matter needed to be professionally presented instead of watching a shorter but poorer
quality effort. Some of the professional participants were very interested in using this information on their websites or in their line of work. The researcher recommends that future podcasters should be aware that the quality of podcast projects may require more time and money than expected for optimal results. It was a goal of the researcher to network with other professionals that will use this information to help families and children, etc. The larger investment may reach a larger and more diverse audience.

At present, the researcher is linking this series of podcasts to the website, *Developing Parents* (see Appendix B). The next step in this process is to develop and maintain the website. The intent of this website is to increase exposure and provide parents with additional links to research and resources related to the podcast content. This thesis/project will be used to establish the foundation of the website. The information herein presents a substantial and potentially relevant body of work for a large viewing audience. It is the goal of this researcher to help parents understand the value of research-based information. The website will also contain “blogs” and links to “twitter” and “facebook” for exposure and viewer feedback. The website has the potential to become a trusted place to find sound research based information for parents, educators, researchers and countless other professionals working with children and families.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Topics for Podcasts

Part 1. – Introduction to Marital/Interparental Conflict and Children
- Basic developmental theories presented e.g., attachment and family systems
- The importance of healthy family functioning
- How marital/interparental conflict interferes with healthy parent/child attachments and family relationships
- Interview with family therapist Anne Bucon L.C.S.W.
- Examples of dysfunctional relationships in highly conflicted families
(Amato, 2010; Bowlby, 1988; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Minuchin, 1985; Stevenson-Hinde, 1990)

Part 2. – Marital Coping Strategies and Conflict Resolution
- Sound Marital House theory presented
- Interview with Gottman certified therapist Dr. Tamar Wishnatzky Ed.D
- The Gottman method introduced
- The transition to parenthood and parent education presented
- Staying together or breaking up? When to get help?
(Gottman & Gottman, 1999, 2007; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Shapiro & Gottman, 2005)

Part 3. – The Children’s Perspective
- Emotional Security Theory presented
- Interview with Dr. E. Mark Cummings (University of Notre Dame)
- Constructive and destructive marital conflict explained with examples given
- How to keep communication open and constructive between parents and children
- The importance of managing marital/interparental conflict in any family configuration
(Cummings & Davies, 2010; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Papp, 2007; McCoy et al., 2009; McDonald & Grych, 2006; Sun & Li, 2002)

Part 4. – Marital/Interparental Conflict through the Divorce and Post-divorce Process
- The complexity of establishing a new family configuration
- Children’s disruption and adjustment through the divorce process and beyond
- Interview with family therapist Anne Bucon
- Interview with Dr. Hembree (California State University Sacramento)
- The importance of father involvement post-divorce
- The importance of the reduction of interparental conflict in any family
(Bullard et al., 2010; Cumming & Davies, 2010; Conger et al., 2011; Faircloth & Cummings, 2008; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003)
APPENDIX B

Developing Parents.com

Website Specification

Goal

Uncluttered researched based website which is fast and easy to use for both parents. Although 80-90% of the users of the website will probably be women it should be inviting (Colors/Font) to both men and women.

Basic Functionality Includes...

* Video Podcasts
* Audio Podcasts
* Blog
* Links to other research center links and other related popular sites
* Auto feed to social media e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, YouTube Channel
* Email signup capability for distribution of newsletters, blog and/or website updates
* Users can recommend the site to friends and family thru a prepopulated email

Website Structure

Banner
"Developing Parents"

Under the name of the site is a listing of key words regarding the subjects covered by the site. For a format example but not content structure see www.highspeedboondoggle.com

Curving rainbow subject line
Rainbow crosses screen from the lower left side of the screen to the upper right side of the screen.

Right Side of the Rainbow Curve includes the following tabs...
* Home
* Podcasts
Podcasts Listed by general subject with a pop down of individual podcasts by title. Includes a short summary Podcast with a link to the YouTube Channel for the total Podcast
Pops down to allow user access to
* Video
*Audio (only)  
*Tips & Tools  
*Transcript  
*Research Articles  
*Experts

*BBlog
Blog pops down to allow user to access latest “X” number of Blog Items. User also can access listing of blogs by title. The Blog will also automatically populate Facebook account and other social media accounts

*Research Center Links
Pops down to Research based links listed by general subject with a pop down of individual articles by title. This section also includes a short summary of article with a link to the article either on this website or on another website

*Other Popular Links
Pops down to non-Research based links listed by general subject with a pop down of individual articles by title. Includes a short summary of the article with a link to the article either on this website or another website

*About/Contact
  *About Liz  
  *Contact Information  
  *Simple preformatted Contact Form. See example at http://residentialcareconsultants.com/contact-us/

Left side of the Rainbow Curve includes the following tabs...

*Tips and Tools
Pops down and shows the individual Tips & Tool sheet

*Experts
Pops down and shows information regarding each expert and their interview(s)

*Research papers
Pops down and shows individual articles or links to articles

*Links to social media accounts e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest. Pops down and shows links user may use to access each social media site. This section may use Hootsuite software.

Top Left Corner of Home Page above the Curving Rainbow Subject Line

Picture of Liz with a 2-3 minute video Introduction to the Website
**Body of Home Page below the Curving Rainbow Subject Line**

**Left Side**

Blank at this time

**Center**

Includes a description of the website's content. Description will be 100-150 words in length.

**Right Side**

*Top 2/3’s*

*Rolling Blog of the last several Blogs*

*Bottom 1/3*

*Join the Developing Parents Club*

Includes a box for signing up for email. These email addresses will be used to distribute messages about new additions to the website, newsletter, sponsor ads etc.

*Recommend Web Site*

Includes a box for recommending the website to family and friends. This section also includes a pre-populated informational email.


Tips and Tools Pages for Reducing Couple Conflict

Couples Daily Temperature Reading (Adapted from original checklist by Virginia Satir)
Even if you can’t practice this every day, research indicates 3-5 times a week will help.
This exercise encourages healthy communication that will buffer your relationship during

times of conflict. (Personal note: It can take as little as 15-20 minutes anytime it is
convenient for you! We kept a copy in our nightstand to refer to and it guided us through
some pretty tough spots.)

Couples Daily Temperature Reading (Checklist)
Step 1: Appreciations (2 minutes)
Share five things you appreciate about your partner. (The intention is to stretch a
little here and not just complement each other on obvious things. Examples:
“Thank you for helping me with the dishes the other night, when I didn’t even ask
you to.” “I appreciate how you supported me when we were dealing with the
tantrum that Amy threw at the dinner table.”)
Step 2: News Update (5 minutes)
Share the details of your day and any upcoming appointments or duties. This
helps with continued communications so both of you are connected when heading
off in opposite directions. This provides you both an opportunity to understand
how the other person’s day went.
Step 3: Wishes, Hopes and Dreams (3 minutes)
This can be about anything you are looking forward to doing as a couple, as an
individual, or with the family. Enjoy this section and dream a little! (This is the
opportunity to plan a couple’s get-a-way, a family vacations, or outings.)
Step 4: Puzzle Solving (3 minutes)
What issues or misunderstandings have come up that you both need to address?
What did (s)he mean by that? Try to bring things up before tensions escalate. You
can’t read the other person’s mind!!
Step 5: The Complaint Department (0-7 minutes)
What is the issue or the offense? What effect did it have on you? What is the
desired behavioral change? Keep this part positive, avoid attacking or blaming
statements. Use plenty of “I” statements. (Examples: “I feel so tired from a lack of
sleep because I nurse the baby every night. I need your help! How could you help
me with night time feedings so I can get some sleep?” “When Riley watches TV
instead of doing his homework, I feel like I’m the only parent that gets after him
and does anything about this, what should we do?”)
Additional points to ponder.

- Refer to Dr. Wishnatsky’s interview in Podcast #2, for ways to nurture your relationship.
- Work through “gridlock” and toward the resolution of problems, which can include agreeing to disagree.
- Refrain from blame, insults and attacking statements of your partner.
- Find ways you and your partner can calm down and take a break when feelings escalate.
- Use “I” statements when talking about misunderstandings and expressing your feelings.
- Immediately increase positive actions and behaviors with your marital partner. The rule of thumb; 5 positives for every 1 negative. Keep practicing!!
**Tips and Tools Pages** for Transition to Parenthood

Recommendations based on research findings:

- Enroll in a parent preparation class or infant care class.

  If you didn’t do this before your baby was born, it is never too late. Contact your local hospitals, community services districts, county and state non-profit organizations, pediatrician offices or parent organizations (including parenting magazines) for leads on classes in your area.

- “Communication is the key!”

  Discuss the following questions with each other about your views on child-rearing and the differences you each experienced in your upbringing with your own parents. (The point I’m making here is to avoiding surprises and keep the conflicts manageable.)

  - Reflecting back to your original family, what do you think worked and didn’t work and what improvements would you like to make as a parent?
  - How do you see your roles different from your parents, or similar?
  - How will your work schedules change and how will you manage that change?
  - Will your financial situation change and are you prepared for the impact?
  - Who will be the primary caregiver of the baby, or will that job be spilt 50/50?
  - Will you need childcare if you both go back into the work force?

- Establish a healthy lifestyle during pregnancy.

  According to Jane Brooks (2011), author of, The Process of Parenting, exposure to high levels of stress increase fetal movements, which have been later linked to hyperactivity and irritability in children.
• Father’s get involved!

When father’s become involved at the prenatal level, they feel more valued as a parent and become more involved with the baby.

• Refer to the Tips and Tools Pages, Authoritative Parenting

This style of parenting has been identified in research as the most beneficial for children of all age.

• Continue to listen to these Podcasts

Avoid harmful interparental conflict; it can negatively affect your child.
Tips and Tools Pages for Dr. Wishnatzky’s Exercise for Compromise

1. Be willing to accept influence from each other.

2. Both partners make two lists.
   a. Write down things you are flexible about.
   b. Write down things you are not flexible about.

3. Share your lists with your partner.

4. Find the things you can both compromise on.
Tips and Tools from with Dr. Cummings Interview


- Quote, “Emotional security can be thought of as a bridge between the child and the world,” p.35.

Destructive Conflict Behaviors

Research shows the most harmful types of conflict for children are:

- Physical aggression e.g. hitting, pushing.
- Verbal aggression that include
  - Parental threats to leave or separate
  - Basic threats to the stability of the family

Marital Conflict

Conflict and arguments can occur day to day

- Conflict can be defined as a difference of opinion
- Conflict is not a problem if parents are working things out constructively
- Frequency of parental conflicts is not a good predictor of whether children will be upset by conflict.
- **How** parents fight, not if they fight, is more important for children’s development.
Constructive Conflict

- Increases a child’s sense of security
- Children show positive emotion and say positive things about it.
- Parental behaviors include:
  - Use of problem-solving skills during conflicts
  - Show positive affect (concern) for each other
  - Positively discuss differences of opinion
  - Show support of each other
- Can actually increase a child’s sense of security.

When to Seek Counseling or Intervention Education

- Before serious problems arise.
- When having trouble handling everyday conflicts.
- Seek education as early as possible.
- Escalated conflict is hard to remediate or settle

Main Messages of Dr. Cummings Intervention Research

- Don’t avoid conflict
  - Avoiding conflict by, withdrawal, stonewalling, not acknowledging issues are actually destructive behaviors.
  - Children understand those behaviors are not beneficial to the relationship.
- Emphasis is not on having conflict but handling it more constructively.
- Recognize conflict is going to happen.
- Express your point of view, don’t avoid discussing it.
- During conflict be careful of your partner’s feelings and your own.
- Be constructive e.g., problem-solve, say supportive things, express positive emotions, try to work things out, constructively.
- Be careful about the emotional security of your partner, your child and of yourself, during conflict.
- Keep in mind your child’s emotional security will be influenced by how you handle conflict.
- Handle conflict in ways to increase your child’s sense of security

**Divorce and Post-divorce Message**

Research indicates how parents handle conflict after divorce is really important for the sake of their children

- Increased constructive behaviors are even more important
- Same messages apply as given to intact families.
- Everyone benefits if you handle conflict more constructively!!
Tips and Tools Pages for Positive Parenting

Q: What kind of parenting has been proven in research to be more effective at any age of development and in various family configurations? Why?

A: Dr. Diana Baumrind’s work has influenced parenting for decades. She evaluated parenting behaviors in the amount of parental demandingness, and parental responsiveness across age groups, ethnic groups and family structure, in this country. She identified three types of parenting styles. A brief look at the three types of parenting clarifies the importance of the most effective style, authoritative. (I will use the analogy Wikipedia used from the story of The Three Bears).

*Authoritarian Parents (too hard)* these parents demand children follow harsh and restrictive parenting rules. These parents are all about control and less about supporting their children through problems or developmental challenges. They are characteristically inflexible when rules are broken and tend to use excessive punishment for bad behavior.

*Results seen in children:* unhappy, anxious, withdrawn, socially awkward, lack resourcefulness, skeptical

*Permissive Parents (too soft):* these parents set very few rules and boundaries. They accept their child’s impulsiveness, give far too much freedom and demand very little control over behaviors. These parents often did not express their own anger over their child’s incorrect behaviors appropriately.
Results seen in children: Hard time following rules, trouble accepting authority, lacked independence, self-confidence, social skills, were often thought of as demanding and immature.

Authoritative/Positive Parents (just right): these parents established firm control over their children but encouraged independence. These parents were highly responsive to their children, physically and verbally. They were warm, nurturing and supportive. Their discipline practices were appropriate to the age level and behavior of the child.

Results seen in children: Happy, socially capable, self-reliant, confident and ready to explore their world.

Q: How can I practice being a positive/authoritative parent? What should I do?

A: As a parent you can.

1. Formulate a parenting plan with your partner and any other adults directly responsible for your child’s well-being. Consistency among all involved parents is most beneficial to the child.

2. Based on the age of the child determine:
   - Scheduling of routines like mealtimes, naps, bedtime, etc.
   - Set expectations with homework, extra-curricular activities, friends, TV and video-gaming, use parental controls until agreed upon age.
   - Monitor your child’s routine and make adjustments when needed.
• Volunteer at your child’s school, get to know your child’s teacher and the parents of your child’s friends have your child’s friends over to your house and causally observe their interactions.

• Be responsive to your child’s needs, but set limits!

3. When your co-parenting plan has been established, share your expectations with your child. When they are old enough start talking about bedtimes, etc. Be clear on your expectations and consequences of their behaviors. This creates stability and formulates trust for all of you!

a. Dr. Gottman and his colleagues produced a body of research that showed when parents acted as verbal coaches and helped their children learn how to put their feelings into words, their children were physically and psychologically better off.

b. Gottman called this “Emotion Coaching” Please visit Dr. Gottman’s website, www.gottman.com for more information.

Q: Are there any other Tips and Tools available for parents in post-divorce situations?

A: Yes, there are many books and resources. Here are just a few:

• *The Process of Parenting.* Author, Jane Brooks

• *In the Name of the Child.* Authors, V. Roseby, J. Johnston & K. Kuehnle

• *What About the Kids?* Authors Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee

Please see the website, www.developingparents.com, for updates, future podcasts and more research based information.
APPENDIX C

Program Evaluation Survey
(Adapted from CSQ as cited in Faircloth & Cummings, 2008)

Podcast Episode: _________

Ratings scale: 1- strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- agree, 4- strongly agree

Circle the applicable number after each statement.

1. The podcast content was relevant to the subject of interparental conflict. 1 2 3 4
2. My knowledge of interparental conflict was increased. 1 2 3 4
3. The research based information was clearly presented and easily accessible. 1 2 3 4
4. The material presented was useful to my life and/or career. 1 2 3 4
5. The parental strategies presented, can be easily incorporated into my situation. 1 2 3 4
6. The “expert” interview information was useful and clearly presented. 1 2 3 4
7. The summery checklist/tips at the end of the podcast were useful. 1 2 3 4
8. The podcast format was convenient and more accessible than other forms of information dissemination (e.g., books, in-person lectures or classes). 1 2 3 4
9. The podcast flowed well from segment to segment. 1 2 3 4
10. What additional information should be included in this podcast episode?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

11. How could this podcast episode be improved?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX D

Podcast DVDs

[see back pocket]
REFERENCES


