

# This Week's Citation Classic

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Emery R E. Interparental conflict and the children of discord and divorce.  
*Psychol. Bull.* 92:310-30, 1982. [University of Virginia, Charlottesville, V A]

Research on the psychological health of children living with unhappily married or divorced parents is reviewed, and it is concluded that interparental conflict accounts for many of the emotional difficulties found among children living in both circumstances. Hypotheses based on attachment theory, modeling, inconsistent discipline, psychosocial stress, family systems theory, and child effects are evaluated as alternative explanations for the empirical findings. Numerous methodological refinements are suggested for future research, but it is concluded that interparental conflict is a risk factor for children. Various strategies for containing conflict are discussed, including family therapy and divorce mediation. [The SSC<sup>®</sup> and the SC<sup>®</sup> indicate that this paper has been cited in more than 320 publications.]

changing the procedures. I thought that I had done quite a good job, but my committee of three flunked me. Naturally, I was crushed, and found little solace in one committee member's suggestion (not O'Leary) that perhaps I did not have the "right stuff."

I cannot say whether the committee missed the boat, whether I needed their advice, or whether my determination to prove them wrong was responsible for the success of my paper. In any case, a thoroughly revised paper was approved some months later, but it was shelved for a year during my subsequent clinical internship. I returned to the paper when I moved to the University of Virginia and thereby learned the value of letting ideas incubate for some time. After several further revisions, the paper was accepted by *Psychological Bulletin*, much to my delight.

The paper was one of my first, and I did not realize that the number of reprint requests I received was so unusual—I distributed over 500 copies of the paper in the year after publication. I would guess that there are several reasons why the paper received so much initial attention and why it has continued to be highly cited. First, the paper is on a topic of undeniable social importance, yet it focused attention on the specific and controllable issue of parental conflict rather than the vague and seemingly uncontrollable issues of divorce and unhappy marriages. Second, the paper pays great attention to methodology and cautious interpretation in reviewing a topic whose discussion is often based on personal beliefs and sweeping generalizations. Third, the paper is dense with ideas, as it had to be after all of those rewrites. In fact, as I have pursued a career studying children and families,<sup>1</sup> I am distressed to note that many of my "new" ideas are contained in this *Psychological Bulletin* paper. The paper set an agenda for a decade of my own research, and I am grateful to note that it has influenced the research of other psychologists as well.

## A Decade of Interparental Conflict

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It is especially rewarding to see this paper honored as a *Citation Classic*<sup>®</sup>, because in one of its earlier incarnations, it nearly caused me to abandon my career plans. In 1979 I was a third year graduate student in clinical psychology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and I was faced with the prospect of taking the standard written and oral comprehensive exam. I thought the exam was a waste, since it bore little relation to professional activities (and because I was terrified of taking it). I approached my advisor, Dan O'Leary, about writing a paper instead. With some trepidation, he agreed that a paper could substitute for the written portion of the exam, but an oral exam on the paper would still be required.

I worked very hard on the paper, because I found the topic fascinating, and because I had gone out on a limb by

1. Emery R E. *Marriage, divorce, and children's adjustment*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988. 160 p. (Cited 75 times.)

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