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Parents who fight constantly push children's stress to damaging levels, says psychiatrist Dr. Jean Clinton.

Conflict affects kids' brains

Constant fighting boosts stress and interferes with learning, memory

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High conflict between parents can affect children's brain development and interfere with their ability to learn, a leading child psychiatrist warned Thursday.

The trauma caused by duelling adults can boost stress to such high levels that it affects the area of the brain responsible for learning and memory, Dr. Jean Clinton, a clinical psychiatrist and professor at McMaster University in Hamilton, told a forum on high conflict and emotional harm.

"Childhood experiences build the brain and build the reactivity of the stress system, and the damaging impact of that may not be shown for many, many years," said Clinton, who has worked with children and families for 25 years.

Without intervention, it can contribute to problems later in life, ranging from depression and anxiety to heart disease.

Clinton was speaking to about 350 professionals who work with families across Ontario at the annual High Conflict Forum hosted by Jewish Family and Child Service of Greater Toronto.

The Children's Aid Society, alarmed by the growing number of nasty separation and divorce fights between parents, launched the event seven years ago. The goal was to help social workers, psychologists, lawyers, judges and child welfare agencies collaborate to better protect kids living in high-conflict situations.

While some amount of stress is part of everyday life, Clinton said it's crucial that everyone involved understand the long-term affect of toxic stress associated with intense, frequent, unresolved fighting.

"It's the conflict that's the issue," she said. "It's not divorce that's the issue; it's all the inter-parental stuff that happens before that."

In its simplest terms, high stress triggers the emotional reaction centre of the brain and the "fight or flight" mode that boosts heart rate, adrenalin and releases cortisol.

One of the brain areas most sensitive to high cortisol is the hippocampus, which plays a critical role in new learning and memory. So being in a perpetual state of high alert diverts energy and interferes with activity in that learning centre.

"When the cortisol is up and stays up, new learning cannot happen," said Clinton. She noted research has found that academic problems in children may precede their parents' divorce by four to 12 years.

In infants, stress may play out in other ways. They may be difficult to soothe and become more irritable with any change of environment, because their systems have not learned to make adjustments.

Adolescents under prolonged stress may act out with aggression, impulsiveness or risky behaviour. The prefrontal cortex, which regulates judgment, impulse control and decision-making, and continues evolving until the mid-20s.