Mike’s father recently experienced a pay cut at work that has created stress for the whole family. His father’s involvement in the family has become inconsistent and unstable. Arguments between Mike’s parents have escalated.

At Mike’s preschool, a child with whom he has been playing suddenly takes away his toy. Mike begins yelling and chasing the child. He pushes her down to the ground and snatches his toy. His behavior has become a recurring pattern lately and is a concern to his teachers.

In another scenario, Hannah observes an argument starting between two other children. As their voices get louder, Hannah retreats to a corner of the classroom. She does not want to be close to the noisy children. Her teachers have noticed that she often isolates herself and plays alone.

Behaviors like these can be exhibited by children who are experiencing stressful home environments. Early childhood is a period when young children learn how to relate to others through interaction with family members, particularly with parents. When parents neglect or reject their children, it negatively affects them (Berndt 1996). Parental rejection and neglect deprive children of information on how to formulate healthy peer relations. Family life permeated with financial stress and conflict can negatively affect healthy child development (Lamb and Lewis 2010).

In this article, we will look at how a father’s financial stress and parental conflict can affect young children. We make an effort to compensate for the studies that often overlook the unique contributions made by fathers in their children’s lives, or that simply focus on the mother-child interaction.

**Financial stress**

At first glance, financial stress may seem to be most common among lower income men. However, the notion of *relative deprivation* gives us a lens through which we can evaluate financial stress even for high-income fathers.

Fathers with income that is high enough to be considered comfortable can experience financial stress related to three perceptions about their income: It’s less than that of their peers; it’s temporary or unstable; or it’s diminished because of extensive debt. Regardless of the source of financial insecurity, men with high incomes may also experience an increase in conflict.

Therefore, we argue that regardless of actual household income, men with young children and high levels of financial stress will be less likely to express warmth to their children and be supportive of them.
Typically, the amount of household income stands as an objective indicator of a family’s financial situation. More important, the subjective interpretation of one’s financial situation, influencing one’s relationship with others in the family, surpasses the general function of the actual income amount (Papp, Cumming, and Goeke-Morey 2009). The length of a father’s hours in paid employment may directly affect the type of fathering behaviors and the amount of time that he is able to devote to children. Potential negative results on child outcomes due to subjective interpretation of one’s financial situation may lead to decreased involvement with their children, inconsistent discipline, or punitive behaviors.

**Couple conflict**

Conflicts between parents are common in family life, especially when the parents are trying to work through important issues regarding family and marital functioning (Cummings, Merrilees, and George 2010). The conflict may differ in how often disagreements occur, the ways in which anger is expressed, and how severe disagreements are carried out. Unfortunately, a high degree of hostility and anger in parental conflict might reduce the positive relationship among parents and children. Gottman and Declaire (1997) proposed that children in their study tended to get distressed when they witnessed their parents fighting.

Parental conflict is an important predictor of children’s behavioral and emotional adjustment problems (Papp, Cumming, and Goeke-Morey 2009). In the midst of the conflict, children become the attentive witnesses to aggressive adult behaviors. Subsequently, children might become more aggressive with peers and authorities, modeling the negative behaviors of their parents.

**Fathering behaviors**

Research suggests that fathers are more likely to initiate nurturing behaviors when they believe that such behaviors will make a significant difference in the lives of their children (Conger, Conger, and Martin 2010). By and large, supportive fathers do make a positive difference in the lives of young children. Almeida and Galambos (1991) suggested that engaging in activities with children through supportive fathering behaviors might promote healthy emotional development in children. Constant exposure to a non-distressed family environment is linked to emotional well-being in young children who are likely to use their emotional strength when trying to establish other relationships outside the family context. Moreover, the father’s time, his support, and his close relations with children were associated with few problem behaviors in children (Amato and Rivera 1999).

**WHEN PARENTS NEGLECT OR REJECT THEIR CHILDREN, IT NEGATIVELY AFFECTS THEM.**

Strong evidence has been established that children exposed to harsh or hostile fathering behaviors are at a greater risk for a number of negative developmental outcomes including antisocial behavior, poor peer relations, and academic failure (Amato and Rivera 1999; Cummings, Merrilees, and George 2010; Harris, Furstenberg, and Marmer 1998). Unfortunately, some well-intended guidance behaviors used by fathers in the process of discipline, mixed with anger and frustration unrelated to discipline issues, may easily result in harsh punishment, which subsequently generates adverse effects in the development of young children. Moreover, men with high levels of stress may be much more likely to exhibit punitive actions and fathering behaviors that may relate to negative child behaviors (Conger, Conger, and Martin 2010).

Negative fathering behaviors may begin to emerge when marital conflict and economic hardship increase (Lamb and Lewis 2010). As a result, fathers may perceive that their children are difficult and oppositional (Gaunt and Benjamin 2007). Almost all studies in the literature suggest that negative fathering behaviors create detrimental effects on children. Adverse disciplinary behaviors used by distressed fathers are interpreted by young children as silent permission to use aggressive, negative modes of behaviors while interacting with other children. This might lead them to encounter more difficulties with peers who hold a negative view about aggressive behaviors. Specifically, harsh discipline of fathers
was correlated significantly and negatively with conduct problems of children, especially for sons (Hosley and Montemayor 1997). As a direct result, hostility displayed by fathers may raise the tendency for children to act out. Thus, young children will increasingly exhibit maladjustment problems when they experience negative fathering behaviors in a family with financial stress and couple conflict.

The role of teachers
For young children, exposure to inconsistent and harsh parenting behaviors influenced by financial stress and parental conflict frequently results in externalizing behaviors (yelling, hitting, or throwing objects, for example) or internalizing behaviors (sadness, withdrawal, or fear, for example). In such situations, boys tend to display more externalizing behaviors (Cummings, Merrilees, and George 2010).

Teachers play a crucial role in helping children regulate their behaviors and emotions in a loving and empathetic context. Preschoolers need assistance in labeling their feelings, regulating their emotions, and engaging in developmentally appropriate and socially acceptable behaviors. Generally, quick-fix approaches like time out or redirecting the child to another play area fail to offer children the guidance and reflective time that could instill more positive social and emotional skills.

Early care and education professionals can help preschoolers express their emotions in a socially acceptable manner when they offer frequent opportunities for children to interact with each other in active and productive play. According to social learning theory (Berns 2013), successful teachers talk to preschoolers in a calm and positive tone of voice so that the children can behave in developmentally appropriate and socially acceptable ways.

Preschoolers need opportunities to witness how a challenging situation is handled with a caring and empathetic attitude that they can copy in their own interactions.

The power of group time
In certain situations, it may not be feasible to sit down with each child to model positive behaviors through a healthy talk. Experienced teachers often use group time to address behaviors and conflicts. The teachers may also develop experiential activities to enhance knowledge about emotions and behaviors. Activities such as role playing and problem solving can give students practical opportunities to learn within a group setting and have a dialogue about different ways to manage emotions and behaviors.

For example, a teacher may use two stuffed animals (a rabbit and a turtle, for example) to explore the language and action of kindness and care. In addition, teachers may equip an area of the classroom with books, games, and other types of learning tools where students can explore various emotions and behaviors. Children’s picture books can be used to communicate pro-social behaviors. Focus on types of emotions and behaviors can vary in occurrence (weekly or monthly, for example) or change according to students’ needs and interests.

Tips for managing conflict in the classroom
The tips below may help teachers manage or lower conflict in the early childhood or elementary grade classroom. Teachers may model conflict resolution skills and techniques to children beginning in preschool (Hansen 2008). Some techniques may be more effective than others in certain circumstances and with different age groups of children. In all cases, it’s important to maintain a positive tone of voice and approach conflict in a developmentally and age appropriate manner.

Understand the situation. School-age children know how to blame others (“She did it first...”)
when a problem occurs, and adults know that it typically takes more than one child to have a conflict. First, let all the children know you understand their feelings. Next, separate the children who are engaged in the conflict. This allows all parties to calm down and evaluate. Ask children to draw a picture or write about the situation that occurred. This simple exercise gives children the opportunity to express their point of view, and you have redirected their behavior and given them time to cool off (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix, and Trochim 2008).

**Talk about multiple perspectives.** When the children finish their writing or drawing, allow each child to present his or her view of the facts, and actively listen to each side of the story (Smith and Ross 2007). For clarity, repeat what you hear each child say. Once you have a clear picture of the situation, sit down with both children and discuss the conflict without tempers flaring. Help children use *I messages* (Tepeli 2013) to express their feelings in nonjudgmental language. For example, “I felt angry when you took my pencil without asking.”

**Help children label their feelings.** When a child talks about the experience through the writing or drawing, make sure to ask how he or she was feeling when the situation took place. If a child does not have a feeling word, you may need to offer some examples: “Were you feeling angry, sad, or frustrated?” It is possible children in the same situation may display multiple feelings or emotions.

**Recognize children’s desire to talk.** Assure children that it can be challenging to play or work together and agree on certain things. Model positive conflict resolution with your words: “I appreciate that you both chose to talk this out. You can work it out.” Let children know it is OK to disagree.

**Brainstorm possible solutions.** Have children offer ideas on how to settle the conflict fairly. Ask each child what he or she can do when conflicts arise. Encourage each child to offer three or four ways to solve a conflict (shouting at the other child, walking away, or letting an adult know, for example). You may ask each child what the best solution is that would make both of them happy. Both children need to identify a mutually agreed-upon solution. Acknowledge their effort to come up with such a solution.

**Put the solution into action.** When a positive solution is identified by both children, encourage them to give it a try and monitor closely to see how it works. Remember to support and acknowledge their efforts.

Through these steps, teachers demonstrate positive conflict resolution skills that in turn teach children effective ways to handle disagreements. By teaching positive conflict resolution skills, children will develop a solid foundation for healthy peer relations and their ability to think critically.

**Family communication**

In addition to working with children in the classroom, teachers may choose to communicate with children’s families about their enormous influence. Electronic communications via e-mails and texting may be more useful than more traditional forms like printed newsletters and bulletin board notices. And parent-teacher conferences that include fathers should not be overlooked.

**FATHERING BEHAVIORS DO MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG CHILDREN.**

When the role of father functions as a means of emotional support for family members, it tends to promote healthy family relations and encourages positive adjustment for children (Lamb and Lewis 2010). During economic hardship, supportive fathering behaviors can act as a buffer against the development of problem behaviors in children (Conger, Conger, and Martin 2010; Mosley and Thomson 1995). A father’s positive interactions with children at home may include simple activities like reading a book or riding a bicycle. The interactions become even more powerful when the activities are predictable and routine—not a special event.

Teachers need to consider ways in which they can improve fathers’ positive interactions in the classroom. A teacher may encourage fathers to visit the classroom to do activities with their own children and children in the group, like reading a book to the group or organizing a game on the playground.

It’s important to take every opportunity to talk
with families about their children, taking special care to point out specific impacts that a child-father interaction has had. An open communication channel between the family and school as well as the involvement of parents, especially fathers, will foster positive development in young children.

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