

FAMILY • MENTAL HEALTH

Parents! Look, Think Before You Fight

Violent disagreements between fathers and mothers can have a negative impact on children, warns Psychiatrist Dr. N. Kumaranayake

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“Children exposed to a high level of conflict may even become anti-social personalities... It is like a circle; when they grow up and become parents, they may display the same kind of behaviour as their parents.”

— Dr. N. Kumaranayake, Psychiatrist, Base Hospital, Kiribathgoda

The Horana Incident: A Wake-Up Call

An incident was reported in Horana recently where a 14-year-old girl tried to commit suicide because she couldn't bear the constant fights and violent altercations between her parents. Luckily her life was saved — but it raised a haunting question: what serious and long-term damage do such conflicts inflict on children?

Parental fights are common in many Sri Lankan families, and all too often, children are the innocent victims. Dr. N. Kumaranayake, Psychiatrist at the Base Hospital, Kiribathgoda, delivers a clear message: parents should not fight in front of children.

The Vicious Circle of Violence

Dr. Kumaranayake warns that the damage runs deep. Children exposed to high levels of conflict may develop into anti-social personalities. But perhaps even more troubling is the cyclical nature of the trauma — the future family lives of these children may also be affected. When they grow up and become parents themselves, they may unconsciously repeat the same destructive patterns they witnessed.

Why Do Parents Lose Control?

It is crucial to understand why parents lose control when domestic problems arise. Dr. Kumaranayake identifies the main culprits:

Factor	Impact
Situational Stress	Emotional changes and reactive aggression

Inability to Control Emotions	Escalation of minor disputes into violent confrontations
Alcoholism	Physiological conditions like delusional disorders and extreme suspicion

These situations are especially prevalent in Sri Lanka's rural community, which comprises about 80% of the total population. Alarmingly, 33% of these families have to deal with alcoholism. In today's hectic world, depression has also emerged as a silent destroyer of family life.

A CASE IN POINT

Dr. Kumaranayake related the case of a father of two who had been a workaholic, spending less and less time with his family. Work stress led to depression, sleep deprivation, irritability, and fits of extreme anger — sparking frequent fights with his wife. Alcoholism can also trigger delusional disorders, such as extreme suspicion of one's partner, which inevitably leads to explosive conflicts.

How Children Suffer: Two Dangerous Paths

Children react to parental conflict in profoundly damaging ways. Dr. Kumaranayake outlines two primary responses:

Path 1 — Acting Out

- Violence and aggression
- Delinquency
- Gang involvement

Path 2 — Turning Inward

- Depression
- Psychosomatic symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, ulcers)
- Substance abuse

REAL CASE

A 14-year-old boy brought to Dr. Kumaranayake showed poor academic performance, was stealing from home, and was addicted to marijuana. The root cause? An alcoholic father whose behaviour created relentless parental conflict.

The Science of Scars

Research by psychiatrist Martin Teicher confirms that children exposed to parental conflict struggle to interact with others, develop very poor social skills, suffer from low self-esteem, and form poor relationships as adults.

The effects also show up in school: truancy, impaired thinking (problem-solving, abstract reasoning, and memory are affected), and symptoms that mimic Attention Deficit Disorder.

“There is a significant impact on the brain of a child.”

— Dr. N. Kumaranayake

Breaking the Cycle: What Can Be Done?

Dr. Kumaranayake offers a roadmap for healing:

- 1 Emotional Control**
Parents must practise proper control of emotions and resolve disputes in a civilized manner.
- 2 Professional Help**
Seeking a professional counsellor is strongly advised.
- 3 “Emotional Ventilation Time”**
Reserve a special time where family members, including children, can openly discuss problems and issues. This builds trust and strong relationships.
- 4 School Awareness Programmes**
Awareness programmes should be conducted for children and teachers to acknowledge the effects of parental conflicts.
- 5 Teacher Training**
Teachers must be trained to identify students with emotional disorders and support children exposed to conflict at home.

***“Children are not spectators to their parents' battles — they are casualties.
The home should be a sanctuary, not a battlefield.”***

THINK BEFORE YOU FIGHT. THEIR FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT.

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