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# Effects of Family Conflict on Children's Behavioural Development: Aggression, Social Withdrawal and School Adjustment among Primary School Pupils in Msangani Ward, Kibaha District, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examined the effects of family conflict on the behavioural development of primary school children in Msangani Ward, Kibaha District, Tanzania, focusing on aggression, social withdrawal and school adjustment. Methods: A mixed-methods, descriptive correlational design was used, guided by Social Learning Theory. Of 154 respondents, 140 were pupils (simple random sampling) and 14 were teachers and parents or guardians (purposive sampling). Data came from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observation and document review, and were analysed descriptively (SPSS 25) and thematically. Results: Between 50.0% and 60.7% of pupils agreed with each indicator of family conflict. Half (50.0%) reported easily getting angry or fighting, 46.4% preferred being alone, 52.9% felt sad or worried and 53.6% found it hard to concentrate in class, while 75.0% reported good relationships with classmates. Teachers and parents described irritability, quietness, worry and reduced classroom engagement among affected children. Conclusion: Family conflict is an important context for understanding aggression, withdrawal and school adjustment difficulties, although the descriptive design supports association, not causation. Peaceful conflict resolution at home, school-based counselling and parent–teacher collaboration is recommended.

**KEYWORDS:** Family conflict; behavioural development; aggression; social withdrawal; school adjustment; primary school children; Tanzania.

## 1. Introduction

Family conflict refers to disagreements, tension or disputes between family members, from everyday quarrels to hostile exchanges (Morelli et al., 2022). Children's behavioural development is the process through which they acquire, express and regulate social, emotional and cognitive behaviours, including peer interaction, anger management and attention in school. Exposure to family conflict raises children's risk of anxiety and mood problems (Morelli et al., 2022), early marital conflict has lasting implications for development (Craft et al., 2021), and interparental conflict has been linked to aggression (Olatunji & Idemudia, 2021), social withdrawal and anxiety (Thompson et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2023), emotional and behavioural problems (Yang et al., 2022) and peer difficulties (Hess, 2022).

Social Learning Theory explains that children copy behaviour they observe in caregivers (Bandura, 1977), while emotional security theory proposes that unresolved conflict undermines children's sense of safety and heightens reactivity, with consequences for school adjustment (Davies et al., 2022, 2023). In Tanzania, over 90% of secondary students reported violent discipline from a parent in the past year (Nkuba et al., 2018), and interparental violence has been linked to poor classroom concentration among 312 secondary students in Chamwino, Dodoma (Ambakisye, 2021). Peri-urban communities such as Msangani Ward combine rural and urban features, diverse household structures and economic pressure, yet little is known about how family conflict relates to the behaviour of primary school pupils there. Teachers and community members report that children from conflict-affected homes struggle to concentrate, behave aggressively or isolate themselves, but no systematic evidence exists.

### *1.1 Objective of the Study*

The objective was to examine the effects of family conflicts on children's behavioural development, including aggression, social withdrawal and school adjustment, among primary school pupils in Msangani Ward, Kibaha District.

### *1.2 Theoretical Framework*

The study was guided by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which holds that children learn mainly by observing and imitating parents and caregivers, including vicariously: a child who sees disputes settled by shouting may adopt such responses with siblings and classmates. The theory also treats withdrawal and distress as learned responses to chronic exposure to tension and fear. It therefore justified treating aggression, social withdrawal and school adjustment as behavioural outcomes of family conflict.

## 2. Methods

A mixed-methods, descriptive correlational design was used (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), so findings are interpreted as associations rather than proof of cause. The study was conducted in Msangani Ward, a peri-urban area of Kibaha District. The target population was about 250 pupils, teachers and parents or guardians. Using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 5% margin of error, 154 respondents were sampled: 140 pupils selected by simple random sampling and 14 teachers and parents or guardians selected purposively as key informants (Etikan et al., 2016).

Pupils completed a structured questionnaire on exposure to family conflict (five statements) and behavioural outcomes (five statements: anger and fighting, preference for being alone, sadness or worry, difficulty concentrating, relationships with classmates), rated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). Key informants were interviewed using semi-structured guides, and an observation checklist and school records supplemented these sources. Questionnaires were pilot-tested outside the ward, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 or higher regarded as acceptable (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). Questionnaire data were analysed in SPSS version 25 using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations; means were read against the midpoint of 2.5, and the positively worded peer-relationship item was read in the opposite direction. Interviews were analysed thematically and triangulated with the questionnaire results; credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability were addressed following Shenton (2004).

Permission was obtained from school administrations and education authorities. Adults gave informed consent, and children participated with parental or guardian consent and their own assent. Participation was voluntary, codes replaced names, and referral procedures were considered for any child at risk.

## 3. Results

### *3.1 Respondents and Exposure to Family Conflict*

The 140 pupils came from all seven grades; 75.0% were aged 9–12 years, 51.4% were boys and 48.6% girls, and 60.7% lived with both parents (21.4% mother only, 8.6% father only, 3.6% in an orphanage, 5.7% other). Table 1 shows that more than half of pupils reported parental arguments in front of them (57.1%), tension or stress at home (60.7%, the highest mean), disagreement over rules or discipline (53.6%) and discomfort because of conflict (57.1%). Reports of shouting or fighting were evenly split (50.0%).

**Table 1: Pupils' exposure to family conflict (n = 140)**

| Statement | Strongly Disagree F (%) | Disagree F (%) | Agree F (%) | Strongly Agree F (%) | Agree + Strongly Agree (%) | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| My parents/guardians often argue in front of me. | 25 (17.9) | 35 (25.0) | 50 (35.7) | 30 (21.4) | 57.1 | 2.61 | 1.02 |
| There is a lot of shouting or fighting at home. | 30 (21.4) | 40 (28.6) | 45 (32.1) | 25 (17.9) | 50.0 | 2.46 | 1.02 |
| I feel tension or stress when I am at home. | 20 (14.3) | 35 (25.0) | 50 (35.7) | 35 (25.0) | 60.7 | 2.71 | 1.00 |
| My parents/guardians disagree on rules or discipline. | 28 (20.0) | 37 (26.4) | 48 (34.3) | 27 (19.3) | 53.6 | 2.53 | 1.02 |
| I feel uncomfortable because of conflicts at home. | 22 (15.7) | 38 (27.1) | 48 (34.3) | 32 (22.9) | 57.1 | 2.64 | 1.00 |

*Source: Field Data, 2026. Scale 1–4; midpoint 2.5. SD computed from reported frequencies.*

### *3.2 Effects on Behavioural Development*

Table 2 summarises pupils' responses on the five behavioural indicators and Table 3 the themes from teacher and parent interviews.

**Table 2: Pupils' behavioural development: aggression, social withdrawal and school adjustment (n = 140)**

| Statement | Strongly Disagree F (%) | Disagree F (%) | Agree F (%) | Strongly Agree F (%) | Agree + Strongly Agree (%) | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I easily get angry or fight with others. | 28 (20.0) | 42 (30.0) | 45 (32.1) | 25 (17.9) | 50.0 | 2.48 | 1.01 |
| I prefer to stay alone rather than play with others. | 35 (25.0) | 40 (28.6) | 38 (27.1) | 27 (19.3) | 46.4 | 2.41 | 1.07 |
| I feel sad or worried most of the time. | 30 (21.4) | 36 (25.7) | 44 (31.4) | 30 (21.4) | 52.9 | 2.53 | 1.06 |
| I find it difficult to concentrate in class. | 25 (17.9) | 40 (28.6) | 45 (32.1) | 30 (21.4) | 53.6 | 2.57 | 1.02 |
| I have good relationships with my classmates. | 15 (10.7) | 20 (14.3) | 55 (39.3) | 50 (35.7) | 75.0 | 3.00 | 0.97 |

*Source: Field Data, 2026. Scale 1–4; midpoint 2.5. The last item is positively worded: a higher mean indicates better peer relationships.*

Aggression. Half of the pupils (50.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that they easily got angry or fought with others (M = 2.48), a mean marginally below the midpoint. One teacher observed that some children "become easily irritated, quarrel with their classmates, or react aggressively when minor disagreements occur," and a parent noted that children may "become angry over small things" when arguments at home are frequent.

Social withdrawal and distress. Fewer than half (46.4%) preferred to stay alone (M = 2.41), but 52.9% felt sad or worried most of the time (M = 2.53). A teacher described children who "become quiet and prefer to stay alone," and a parent said some children "do not talk about what is troubling them, but their behavior shows that something may be bothering them."

School adjustment. More than half (53.6%) found it difficult to concentrate in class (M = 2.57). A parent explained that children "may carry their worries to school instead of concentrating on their studies," and a teacher added that affected pupils need support "rather than immediately assuming that they are lazy or undisciplined." In contrast, 75.0% reported good relationships with classmates, the highest mean of all indicators (M = 3.00).

**Table 3: Behavioural effects of family conflict described by teachers and parents**

| Domain | Theme | Key insights from interviews | Participants |
|---|---|---|---|
| Aggression | Anger, irritability, fighting | Quarrelling with classmates, aggressive reactions to minor disagreements, rude answers to adults, fighting with siblings; some children imitate adults' hostile communication. | Teacher, Parent |
| Social withdrawal | Quietness, staying alone | Previously cheerful children become quiet, avoid group activities and keep feelings to themselves. | Teacher, Parent |
| Emotional distress | Worry and sadness | Children appear worried and lose interest in classroom activities. | Teacher, Parent |
| School adjustment | Concentration, participation | Poor concentration, incomplete assignments, reluctance to answer questions or join group work; some are disruptive. | Teacher, Parent |

*Source: Field Data, 2026.*

## 4. Discussion

The finding that half of pupils reported anger or fighting, and that informants described irritability and rude responses, is consistent with the positive association between interparental conflict and aggression reported by Olatunji and Idemudia (2021) and with the modelling process described by Bandura (1977). The parent's remark that children imitate adult aggression illustrates this mechanism, although informants also noted that aggression can have other causes.

Withdrawal and distress echo longitudinal findings that cautious responses to parental conflict predict later withdrawal and separation anxiety (Thompson et al., 2022), and that everyday conflict is associated with anxious and withdrawn-depressed symptoms (Morelli et al., 2022). Informants' accounts that children conceal their feelings suggest distress may be easy for adults to miss. Concentration difficulties parallel Ambakisye's (2021) Tanzanian findings among secondary students and evidence that interparental conflict affects attention and memory (Zemp et al., 2021), suggesting that worry carried from home competes with learning.

The high rating of peer relationships contrasts with studies linking conflict to peer problems (Hess, 2022). Friendships may protect many children, but the single self-report item may also miss the quality of interaction or reflect social desirability, so this finding should not be read as showing that conflict has no social consequences. Overall, the results fit Social Learning Theory and emotional security theory (Davies et al., 2023): hostile or avoidant responses and distress are learned or provoked in the home and carried into school.

Limitations. The design shows co-occurrence, not causation, and the questionnaire data do not show whether pupils reporting more conflict are those reporting more difficulty. Indicators were single self-report items, the study covered selected schools in one ward, and the 14 informants offer illustrative rather than exhaustive views. The moderating roles of parenting and school support were not analysed here.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Family conflict is an important factor to consider in understanding the behavioural development of primary school children in Msangani Ward. Many pupils reported conflict at home, and anger and fighting, withdrawal, sadness or worry and poor concentration were common and were described by teachers and parents as typical of affected children, with possible consequences for relationships, learning and school adjustment. Most pupils nonetheless reported good peer relationships, and children respond differently.

Parents and guardians should resolve disagreements peacefully and keep children out of adult disputes. Schools should watch for behavioural change, offer safe spaces for children to talk and refer serious cases, and education authorities should strengthen guidance, counselling and child protection services and train teachers accordingly. Community leaders and schools should raise awareness and strengthen parent–teacher communication so that difficulties are identified early. Future studies should cover other districts, use longitudinal designs and inferential analyses (including moderation by parenting and school support), and combine child self-reports with validated multi-informant measures.

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