

# New knowledge about parental break-up and conflicts

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Do maternal couple relationships change throughout the child-rearing years and can the likelihood of parental break-up be predicted? A new doctoral study from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health has investigated these questions.

Psychologist Maren Sand Helland and her colleagues at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the University of Oslo used information from the TOPP study "Tracking Opportunities and Changes." In the study, more than 500 mothers were interviewed using regular questionnaires over a 17-year period after their [children](#) reached 18 months old.

"The findings of the study emphasise the importance of supporting [parents](#) who are struggling to care for their children or who have difficulties in their relationship at an early stage," says Helland. Almost 40 per cent of Norwegian children experience parental break-ups before they reach 18 years and about one in four mothers in the TOPP study reported that they had problems in their relationship.

## Early break-up signs

The results showed that the early signs that parents would break-up were slightly different for parents who parted when the children were small and those who parted just before or during their children's teenage period.

"We examined the relationship between what mothers reported about their lives when the children were 18 months and the likelihood that the parents would part during the next 17 years. It was remarkable how factors from early parenthood could help to predict who was going to break-up several years later," says Helland.

## **Too much criticism**

Mothers who reported that they exchanged much criticism with their partners had an increased risk of parting before the children were eight years old. These early breakups were also related to low maternal age, poor economy and other burdens related to housing, employment and health.

"These factors have often been found to be related to break-ups in studies of couples over shorter time periods. What is new in this study is that we have also investigated what is related to break-ups over a longer term," says Helland.

Persistent strain related to child care when the children were 18-months-old was associated with break-ups more than seven years later when the children were between eight and 18 years old. Experiencing little support from a partner was associated with break-ups throughout the entire period.

## **Conflicts and parents of teens**

Helland also examined levels of conflict between parents while the children were in their teens. The results showed that the average levels of conflict between parents who remained together throughout the period were stable from when the children were eight to 18-years-old. Yet it was not unusual to have changes in conflict level throughout the period

for groups of parents. Having teenagers was not associated with increased conflict for most of the parents.

However, conflicts increased for a small group of parents who were characterised by higher levels of conflict even before the children became teenagers. This suggests that parents with elevated levels of conflict when the children are younger may have a special need for guidance and assistance to cope with challenges when the children reach their teens.

Helland emphasises that the findings say nothing about the reasons why parents part or why conflicts arise. Even so, knowledge is valuable since it can help to identify [mothers](#) who might experience difficulties later in their relationship at an [early stage](#) in parenthood.

"By studying families over a long time, we can find out more about the typical challenges of being parents of children of different ages, and how these challenges affect relationships over time. Such knowledge is important for recognising parents who may need extra support," says Helland.

**More information:** "Long shadows: a prospective study of predictors of relationship dissolution over 17 child-rearing years." *BMC Psychology* 2014 2:40.

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