

Understanding Family Conflicts in the Indian Context

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Abstract— In a collectivist society like India, family is an integral part of life. Disequilibrium and conflicts at home can have repercussions on different domains of life. The present paper aims to get a better understanding of the sources of family conflicts and the influence it has on individuals. The sample for the study consisted of 341 respondents (114 males & 227 females) between the ages of 18 to 23 years. The questionnaire administered for the study was developed by the researchers and the data was collected online using Google Forms. Additionally, in-depth interviews and analysis of letters written to fathers was carried out in order to get a comprehensive perspective and varied insights. Over half of the participants claimed to have experienced adverse impacts on their mental health & personal life as a result of conflicts at home. Majority of the participants were also found to keep their thoughts and opinions to themselves in order to avoid familial arguments. Some of the major sources of conflicts were seen to be differences in opinions, poor communication, imposed restrictions, high expectations and sibling rivalry. Findings from the paper can allow future researchers to develop interventions aimed at fostering better relations for the betterment of all.

Keywords: Family, Conflicts, Relationships.

I. INTRODUCTION

Family is a social institution that is of great importance because it performs some of the most significant functions for an individual as well as for society. It helps contribute to the overall growth and development of a child. The family serves as the basic unit of a society that exerts a significant influence on an individual as well as a community as a whole. It is the institution responsible for maintaining and building relationships among family members as well as with the community. Likewise, a healthy family relationship is said to greatly influence the emotional intelligence of adolescence/individuals.

In today's modern world, family, the main agent of socialisation is faced with numerous challenges. Family is a source of joy but can also become a turmoil due to conflicts that arise. Not all families have a family climate that permits healthy development as they struggle with conflict. Numerous studies have indicated that adolescents or children who bear witness to familial conflicts might be at a risk to encounter psychological issues as well as poor health outcomes. Family conflicts may include dynamic resistance between any members of the family. This can allude to the contentions or the oppressive way of behaving of parental and/or viciousness between conjugal or other members. When such a family climate does not give appropriate pathways to satisfy the fundamental requirements of independence and capability, people can't fulfil the necessities which are fundamental for their development and prosperity. According to (Edinyang, 2012), family conflicts are the pursuit of inevitable interests and goals by individual members of the family. (Malek, 2013) identifies three types of family conflicts- fighting between husbands and wives, sibling rivalry and parent-child power struggles. Family conflict can happen when family members have differing views that clash. Furthermore, misunderstandings and jumping to conclusions can also cause conflicts. It also refers to the violence between adults in the home as well as child abuse. This has a negative impact on the members who witness such violence or abuse between parents (Nazir et al., 2012). It is important to express one's feelings and opinions in a family and this may lead to disagreements. Hence, conflicts are bound to occur. However, if they are not resolved properly, it can be stressful and damage relationships.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers (Aye et al. 2016) examined the causes, consequences, and strategies in managing family conflicts with the help of a descriptive survey design on a sample of 300 parents in Nigeria. They found that infertility, financial difficulties, poor communication between family members, and lack of sexual satisfaction could lead to conflict in the family. Moreover, family conflicts affect people throughout their lives and hinders their ability to experience their complete potential. It results in insecurity, rejection, fear and guilt, which further leads to ill health, separation/ divorce or death. Similarly, a study by (Smith et al. 2009) revealed that healthy family communication can alter the family's cohesion and flexibility to meet developmental and situational demands, however, a family with poor communication tends to have lower cohesion and flexibility. In research by (Ambhore et al. 2022), regarding parenting style, attitude, and behaviour, it was found that the perceptions, negative emotions and cognitions of adolescents lead to strained relationships with their parents. According to (Nazir et al., 2012) positive interactions between parents and children are linked to positive behaviour between siblings. In this study, it was also found that parental styles were the best predictors of self-esteem as marriages with warm nurturing parents resulted in their children to have a higher self-esteem along with less number of conflicts in the marital partnerships.

Researchers (Nair, et.al 2015) conducted a structured interview and administered the WHO Major (ICD-10) Depression Inventory on 157 suicide attempt survivors in the Duncan Hospital in Bihar, India. It was found that 80% of respondents stated the reason for attempting suicide was due to conflicts within the family. Suicide was frequently considered as the only option for a person wanting to leave a family in conflict. Moreover, the highest incidence was in the age group 16-20 years and females had higher rates in the 21-30 years age group.

According to the results of a qualitative study by (Bhatta, et. al, 2020) on 150 college students in the late adolescence period, there were seven sources of conflict in parent-adolescent relationships. They were lack of warmth, acceptance and understanding, restriction in personal freedom and imposing control, comparison and discrimination, conflicting messages, unduly focus on adolescent's negative behavior, over emphasis on studies and unreasonable aggression/lack of trust.

According to a study (Anagha & Sreevalsan, 2021) on 60 young adolescents (10-19 years), there is a significant negative relationship between stress and parent-child relationship with respect to both, mother and father-child relationships. An unhealthy parent-child relationship can create frictions and conflicts between the two parties, which will further develop stressful conditions.

Family struggle, particularly separation of the parents, can cause troubled behavior, outrage, and uneasiness or anxiety. It is plausible that these kids may go on to deal with especially difficult problems such as utilizing drugs, unsafe sexual practice or lashing out (Lansford, 2009). In another study conducted (Chung, et.al, 2011) an everyday journal strategy was utilized over a 2-week time span which included a sample of ninth graders and twelfth graders in order to evaluate the frequencies of inter parental and parent-child clash on a daily basis across youths from Latin American, Asian, and European areas. This study yielded predictable discoveries with respect to gender in which conflict with mothers was significantly more habitual than struggle with fathers. Adolescent women reported incessant inter parental struggle than their male counterparts. (Greenberger and Chen, 1996) discoveries propose that it might very well be during the school years that ethnic distinctions cause emergence in the degree of conflict.

Furthermore, in more recent situations, the Coronavirus pandemic has brought huge changes in our society and everyday life, which were especially challenging for parents and guardians.

In a study conducted by (Bai et al. 2021) the connection between adolescent emotional well-being and parental mental distress after the pinnacle of the pandemic in China was analyzed. Here, parents/guardians and their children from the ages of 10 to 18 were enrolled for this survey which included an overview of parental mental health, child's psychological symptoms, parent-child and conjugal relationship. It was found that the latter relationship presents as a mediator in both the relationship between the effect of child difficulties and the resulting conflicts that arise as well as the relationship between the weight of child hardships and parent psychological wellness.

In a Canadian study conducted by (Harach & Kuczynski, 2005), 24 parents having a child between the ages 4 to 7 years of age participated in an open-ended interview in which they commented on their relationship with each other and described how they strengthen, damage, or repair the relationship. Here, the parents reported that overuse of power and authority as well as temporary 'freezing out' or non-responsiveness created damage or conflict in the relationship. According to a study by (Wadsworth & Compas, 2003) on young adults from New Britain it was uncovered that family financial strain was connected to hostility/aggression as well as anxiety and depression. This was because of two adjacent stressors, which were recognized financial strain and conflict among relatives or close family members.

III. METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample for the study consisted of 341 respondents, including 114 males and 227 females coming from different family structures across different cities of India. The ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 23 years, with the mean age being 19 years (S.D=1.7).

Table 1. Family Structures of Participants

	Count
<u>Gender</u>	
Male	114
Female	227

Family Structure

Joint Family	96
Nuclear Family	240
Single Parent	5

N=341

Data Collection & Tools

The questionnaire administered for the present study was developed by the researchers and circulated online using Google Forms, the link for which was shared to interested volunteers. Participants were made aware of their voluntary participation in the study and informed consent was obtained. Precautions were taken to respect the confidentiality of the participant and it was ensured that the data collected would not be misused. Furthermore, participants were asked to write letters to their parents by the researchers and the letters were analysed for common themes that arose. Moreover, researchers formulated semi-structured interview questions and interviews were conducted on the participants. A thematic analysis was conducted on the interview responses in order to obtain further insights on family conflicts.

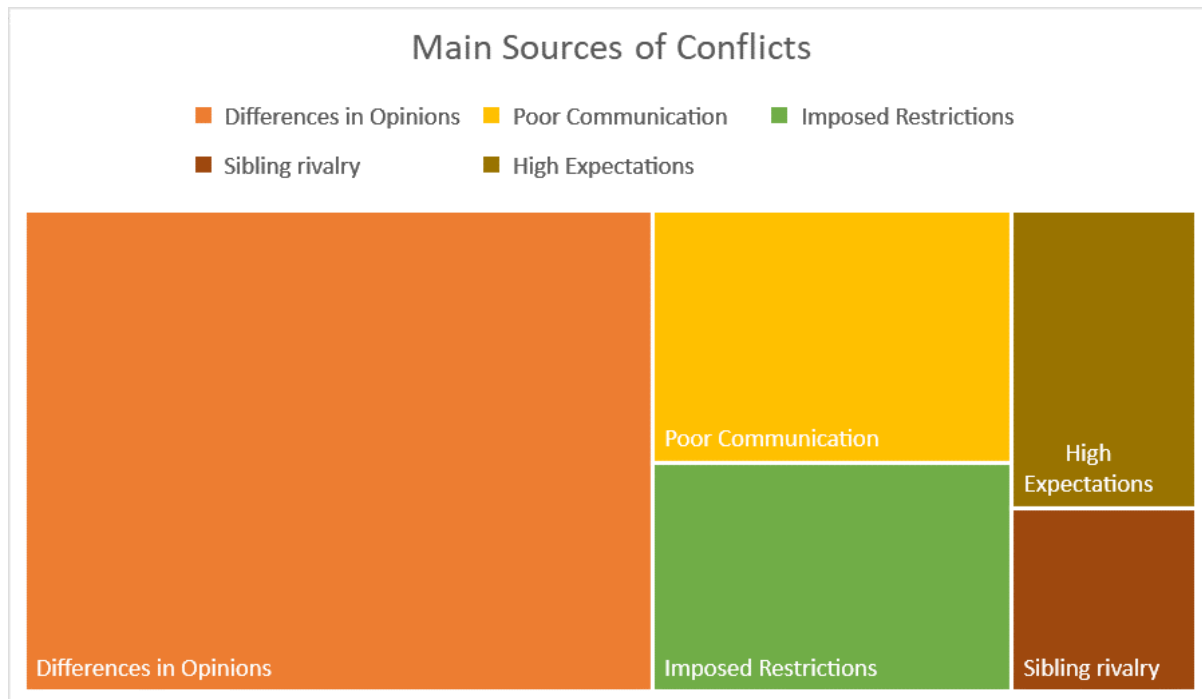
IV. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Findings from the study indicated that 65% of the respondents claimed to keep their opinions and thoughts to themselves in order to avoid arguments or conflicts with their family members.

While a majority of respondents confided in their parents, 27% of the respondents refused to even confide in one parent out of fear.

The root causes of conflicts were seen to be a combination of one or more sources, where differences in opinions was indicated to be one of the major sources followed by poor communication and imposed restrictions. Fig.1 shows the main sources of family conflicts as mentioned by the respondents.

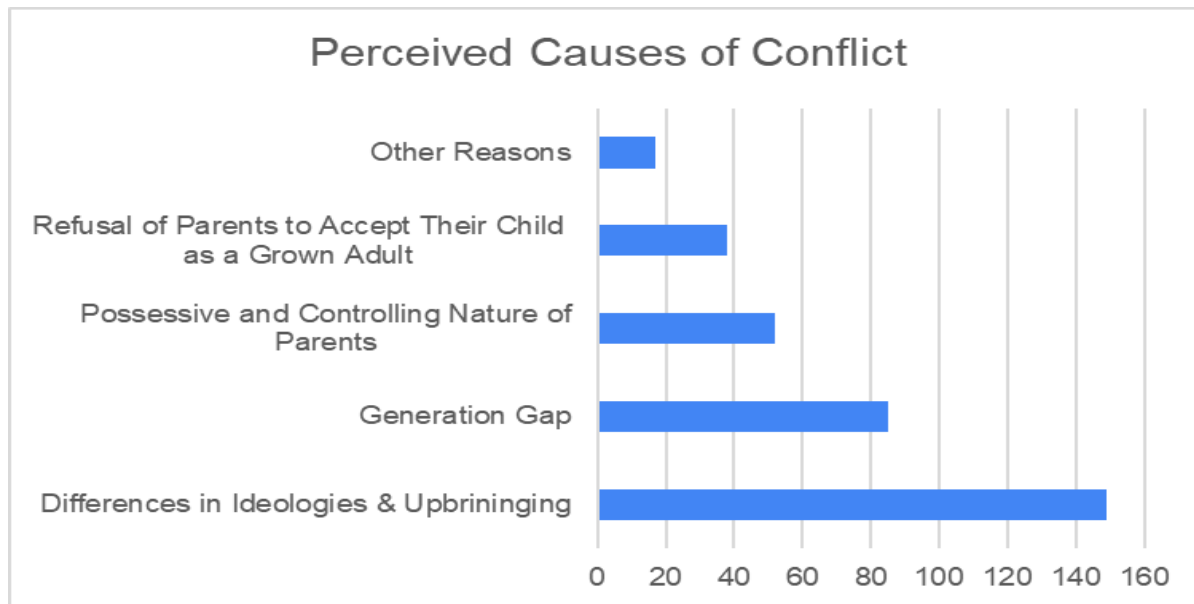
Fig.1 Main Sources of Family Conflicts



Conflicts with family members were seen to have adverse effects as over 50% of the respondents stated that such conflicts at home had negative impacts on their mental health and personal life. Furthermore, 40 % of the respondents felt the need to move out of their homes in order to avoid conflicts with their family members.

Likewise, respondents perceived numerous reasons behind conflicts between them and their parents, as illustrated in Fig.2. It was seen that differences in upbringing was seen to be the most commonly perceived cause by 44% of respondents, followed by generation gap (25%), possessive and controlling nature of parents (15%) and the refusal or unwillingness of parents to accept their child as a grown adult (11%).

Fig.2 Perceived Causes of Conflicts



In the second part of the study, 23 participants were asked to write a letter to their fathers about something they would like to communicate to them. When the letters were analysed, it was found that mostly all the participants expressed gratitude towards their fathers for the sacrifices they have made for their children and for providing them with the necessities of life. They were seen to long for a better relationship with their fathers. They wished to spend more time with their fathers and were upset about the communication gap that exists with their fathers as they are not open and expressive towards each other. Their relationship with their fathers was seen to affect their own mental health as they claimed to feel pressured to make their fathers proud, and this induces them with self-doubt about their own worth. Moreover, most of them yearned to be a “good child” towards their fathers.

Moreover, in order to get better insights into the nature of interaction and family dynamics, semi-structured interviews were conducted for 10 consenting participants (6 females and 4 males). Following are the themes that were identified:-

Lack of Communication

Majority of the participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the current level of communication with their parents. Poor communication was seen to be in the form of keeping things from parents, not being heard and giving each other the silent treatment. Nearly all participants feel the need for improvement in their levels of communication from both ends.

When I'm trying to say something or present my point they would cut me off. I feel like let me atleast say it and then you can tell me where I'm going wrong or what I should and shouldn't be doing. Being a good listener and hearing me out should be something they need to work on... I want communication to improve from both sides. (S2)

There should be more communication. I have adapted this way though.. I don't talk about sensitive topics (with them). (S3)

No. I am not at all satisfied (with the level of communication). They should ..at least talk to me about where I went wrong. (S4)

There are some things which I can not share and some things which I do not feel to tell them such as when something happens or getting less marks (S7)

It is my secrets that I do not tell them such as the things related to my friends.. not much I just keep quiet (after an argument with parents) .. I think maybe if I express myself more they might understand me more (S10)

Generation gap

Majority of the participants stated that one of the main reasons for a conflict arises from the differences perceived between their generations. This included differences in opinions about the way the subject would dress, curfew and overall attitude towards life. For closing the generation gap, the subjects suggest their parents becoming more open minded and accepting.

My father has a lot of restrictions on the type of clothes that I can wear and that kind of pisses me off because I don't like being told what kind of dresses I can wear and I can't. So I think in that area they should be more open and ..They do not have a lot of restrictions when it comes to dating but then they have a lot of restrictions about what I do or when I go out and I think they should be a little more open. (S1)

There are some things which I feel which could be due to a generation gap. I fail to understand that sometimes, like restrictions on who I'm going out with and time restrictions because I'm a daughter. (S2)

Sometimes the age difference or the generation gap is what holds me back from sharing everything with them or approaching them. (S8)

They need to update themselves with how our generation functions a bit more. I don't mean that they are conservative, they're not conservative. I just feel like they don't understand how teenagers now function. (S9)

Disengagement Post- Conflict

One of the common themes respondents described after a conflict had occurred is that both parties, that is the parents and/or the child tend to not speak to each other and give each other 'the silent treatment'. Additionally, there is no clear end to the conflict in real time. It is preferred that one of the parties randomly and naturally start talking to each other again.

So with my parents the best way to resolve an argument is just let them be and let myself be. Let it be a couple of days and then things are normal again. So yeah talking to them about the situation does not help. (S1)

Immediately after an argument we don't talk to each other and that can go on for a day or so. (S6)

They do this cold war after an argument which I do not think is healthy. (S4)

If it's my dad it (silent treatment) goes on for a week or 7- 10 days maximum. If it's my mom maximum 3 to 4 days. Until someone initiates the conversation. (S5)

Quality time

Majority of the participants expressed the superficial ways (such as watching television or eating a meal) in which they spend time with their family members. While most participants did engage in bonding activities like going on trips, talking and going out as a family, some participants expressed their wish to spend more meaningful, quality time with their family.

We usually have Chai. We pull each other's leg a lot. We pick on each other. We go out for dinners a lot. We don't like to watch movies together. But, we do watch stand up comedy together. We like to play board games a lot. Mom, brother and I paint pots and do other creative things together. (S3)

We watch TV and movies. We don't usually go out. Usually at dinner time, we all spend time together. (S5)

We go out. As a family if we want to spend time it doesn't happen at home since everyone is doing their own stuff. (S6)

I would like to go on trips with them, which we don't do as often these days since my dad is busy and so is my mom. Watching movies together at home or outside, sounds like a great idea. (S2)

Most of the time they (parents) are out and I am also out so I do not get a chance to talk or quality time. (S10)

V. DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the present study was to get a better understanding of the sources of family conflicts and the influence it has on individuals. The results obtained in the present study are similar to those obtained in many previous research studies conducted. It was found that the sources of familial conflicts were in a combination of either differences in opinions, poor communication, imposed restrictions, sibling rivalry, high expectations, differences in upbringing, generation gap the possessive and controlling nature of parents and lastly the refusal or unwillingness of parents to accept their child as a grown adult. Ample research has indicated that family conflicts are one of the major contributors to poor mental health and stress (Herrenkohl, et.al, 2012; Prinstein, et.al, 2000; Chen, 2009). Likewise, findings from the present study illustrated that the resulting conflicts had negative impacts on the mental health and personal life of the respondents and that they felt the need to move out of their homes in order to avoid familial conflicts. According to a review done by (Shibeshi, 2015) increased parental conflict is unequivocally connected with diminished warmth and expanded negative and poor communication between parents and their child. This also negatively affects peer relationships and diminishes prosocial conduct in children. In accordance with a study, conducted by (Hess, 2021) results propose that the relationship between interparental struggle/conflict as well as between children is interceded by poor communication and a lack of genuine warmth.

Majority of the respondents hailed from nuclear families. Due to this, individuals may feel isolated and possess over dependence on the validation of the family members. A nuclear family may also tend to create a competitive environment between siblings, especially towards materialistic items and status. On the other hand, those coming from extended families might experience a sense of exhaustion and a stifling environment. There may be very little privacy available and an individual must then be forced into connections with people they would rather not choose in the first place. Hence, individual choice is restricted if not obsolete. In a joint family, the elders play an important role in the decision-making. This is consistent with the findings of (Samanta, 2018), who contends that a strong normative joint family structure and culture of familial interdependence conceals individuality and its dimensions of personal experience and diminishes closeness and familial relations. It is also illustrated that these joint family relations put forth a concept of ambiguity or uncertainty which produces a conflictual environment and emotive area in which family members are offered a temporary 'escape' without confronting the conflict. Due to a difference in upbringing and age, and therefore the existence of a generational gap, there may be differences in opinions, values, and needs between the elder and the younger members of the family. In such instances there may be a high chance of misunderstandings and poor communication leading to a lack of compromise.

Likewise, researchers (Henry & Parthasarathy, 2010) found that a high level of frustration and passive aggression were caused by the inability to face up to, or communicate with, authority figures in the joint family.

As illustrated by (Kornatowska, 2004) a child becomes an object of adoration for the family members and thus all his potential needs, activities, pastime, choice of friends and interests are programmed by the elders of the family as they believe that they know what's best for the child. In this form of over protectiveness, there remains no space for making one's own decisions and any attempts to free oneself from this domination may end in emotional and verbal conflict. This is also consistent with the study conducted by (Bhatta, et.al 2019) where some of the sources of conflict in parent-adolescent relationships were lack of acceptance and understanding, restriction in personal freedom and imposing control.

In the present study, a few respondents also mentioned that they were living in a completely different city than their parents and their hometown. Moving to a new house or country or large travelling distances may add fuel to the sources of conflicts such as poor communication, high expectations and the possessive and controlling nature of parents. As an essential result of this big move, the family structure changes, and there arises a discontinuity of familial bonds, which are now under pressure. There is now a clash between parental-child values, expectations and requests. In an article by (Barth, 2010), it is seen that parental sadness and vulnerable nature majorly about the upcoming separation from the child while he moves out results in an increase in provoking fights as they feel like an innocent victim of the child's newfound unpredictable irritability. The parents have multiple anxieties about their children.

Any contribution or involvement of a so-called 'outsider' in the relationship between immediate family members could strain the same prompting miscommunication, misconception, a clash of each other's considerations, subsequently resulting in a feeling of a generational gap. In a study conducted by (Polenick et.al, 2017) it was revealed that parents utilize more direct strategies such as discussing the problems with their children than their aging parents. In contrast, the same individuals used more passive aggressive strategies, such as avoidance with their own aging parents. Researchers (Aquilino, 1999; Fingerman, 2001), state that the generation gap and intergenerational differences show that the parents are more emotionally invested in the parental-child relationship than children are. The researchers state that the differences arise when parents regard their children as images of themselves, while children have a greater desire to be independent of their parents and are more committed to enhancing the generational differences between them.

In the present study, it was found that after a conflict had occurred, both the parties, i.e., the parents and/or the child tend to not speak to each other and give each other 'the silent treatment'. This shows that the members try to evade the conflict rather than resolve it. After the confrontation phase, they escape from the conflict and rather than finding a workable solution, they pretend everything is normal after the "silent treatment" or "cold war". This is an unhealthy problem-solving strategy. According to researcher (Vuchinich, 1987), this attempt to stop a conflict is referred to as withdrawal, wherein one party leaves the interaction either by going out of the room or by refusing to talk. This leads to negative effects and disrupts the family from being able to transition to other activities. Such findings call for the need to resolve conflicts in a healthier way wherein both parties are able to compromise a little in order to find the middle ground, which can be accepted by all. Furthermore, it was also found that most participants wanted a more meaningful, quality time with their family members rather than the superficial ways (such as watching television or eating a meal) in which they spend time with the members. This can be done by engaging in meaningful and honest conversation and assigning particular time for the same during the day.

Implications of the Study

The current study examines family conflicts and the trends of current family relationships. It helps to capture the perceptions of the family's functioning. In today's world, as family structures are ever changing, it becomes essential to study the sources of conflicts in the family. It can help families understand the areas of conflicts and guide them towards better functioning. The study reveals the areas that need to be improved for a healthy family relationship and environment. This study can be very helpful

as a child's development is based on his/her family. If a child is struggling with an issue or even with academics, the level of support from the family and the family relationships should be investigated. This study will help educators and parents to be aware of the importance of identifying any problem faced by children related to their family and thereby mend them in order to facilitate the child.

Limitations

While the present study can provide valuable insights to professionals and researchers, it is essential to consider some of the limitations of the study.

Firstly, the convenience sampling method was employed for data collection and the majority of the respondents were from urban cities. Likewise, the sample size considered for interviews was small and had a disproportionate number of females and males. This brings forth issues related to generalizability, response and sampling bias. Furthermore, the topic of family relations and conflicts is a sensitive topic and may be prone to socially desirable responses. With the study confined to the urban, English speaking population there is a possibility that some cultural aspects and traditions may not have been fully explored or considered. Future research can take into account rural areas to overcome this limitation and get a more comprehensive picture.

VI. CONCLUSION

As the family structure continues to change, conflicts are bound to happen. However, youngsters can be trained in life skills relating to coping with stress, conflict management and encouraging healthy family relationships. Moreover, parents can engage in strategies to resolve conflicts with their children in the best way possible. Positive interaction between parents and their children during conflict can occur, if the inter-parental conflict is managed correctly. Furthermore, a healthy parent-child relationship will help foster an all-round development of an individual and foster positive outcomes. Thus, it is important to gradually overcome the various sources of family conflicts once they are identified for healthier and adaptive family bonding.

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