

# Workshop B

## What does the evidence tell us?

### Inter-parental relationships and outcomes for children



Dr Daniel Acquah, Evidence Analyst, Early Intervention Foundation (Chair)

Professor Gordon Harold, Professor of Psychology, University of Sussex



# What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children?

Dr Daniel Acquah,  
Evidence Analyst,  
Early Intervention Foundation

#EIFEarlyYears  
@theEIFoundation  
[eif.org.uk](http://eif.org.uk)



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# Overview of the review

- 1) Evidence on the importance of the inter-parental relationship for children's outcomes
- 2) A review of the international evidence base on programmes to support inter-parental relationship.
- 3) Assessment of the evidence for UK programmes to support inter-parental relationships.

Professor Gordon Harold,  
Andrew and Virginia Rudd  
Professor of Psychology,  
University of Sussex



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# **How the Inter-Parental Relationship Affects Children's Mental Health: Evidence and Implications for Intervention**

Professor Gordon Harold  
Andrew and Virginia Rudd Professor of Psychology  
University of Sussex

Early Years, Parenting and Family Relationships. Early Intervention  
Foundation Conference, Birmingham, July 12th 2016.

# Family Factors and Child Mental Health

## ➤ Depression

- Leading cause of Global (UK) disease burden (2020 DALYs)
- Substance misuse, school failure, self-harm, delinquency, conduct problems, suicide



## ➤ Conduct problems/disorder

- Conduct disorder (5-15 years) = 30% of all crime (UK) at a cost of £22 billion/year
- Substance misuse, psychosis, violent crime, future criminality



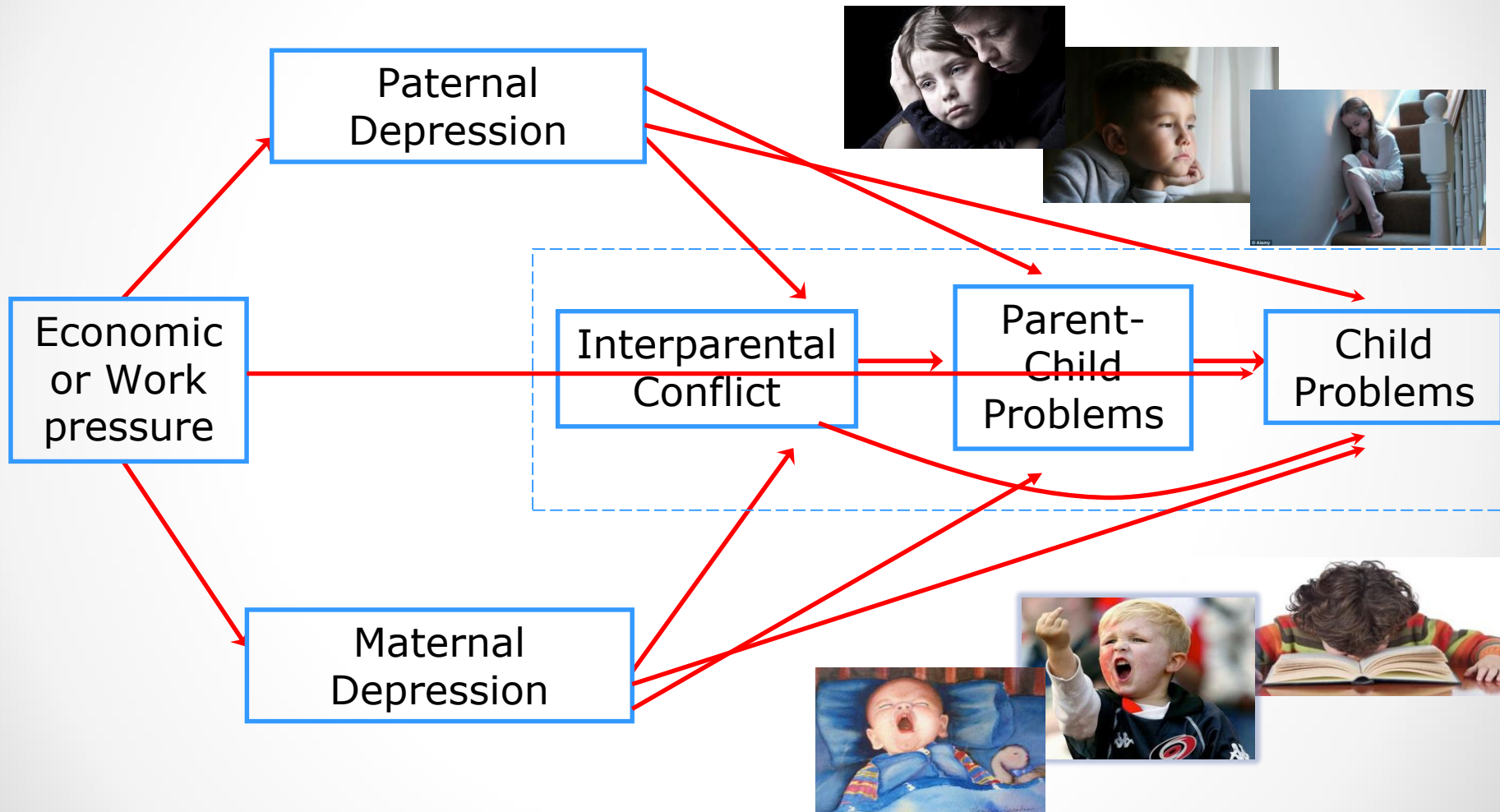
## ➤ Family Factors

- Economic stress/pressure
- Parent mental health
- Parenting practices
- Parental Separation/Divorce
- Inter-parental conflict
  - Silence to violence





# A Process Model of Family Relationship Influences on Child Mental Health



# Challenges for Past Research

- **Salience of the family environment ?**
  - Predominantly conducted with biologically related parents-children
  - Limited examination of maternal versus paternal parenting influences on children
- **What if it is all in the genes?**
  - Associations between parental behaviour (e.g. parenting) and child behaviour is BECAUSE children share genes with their parents??
    - Passive/evocative genetic effects
- **Disentangling genetic factors from rearing environment factors**
  - Relevance of intervention/prevention
  - What we target, when and how?



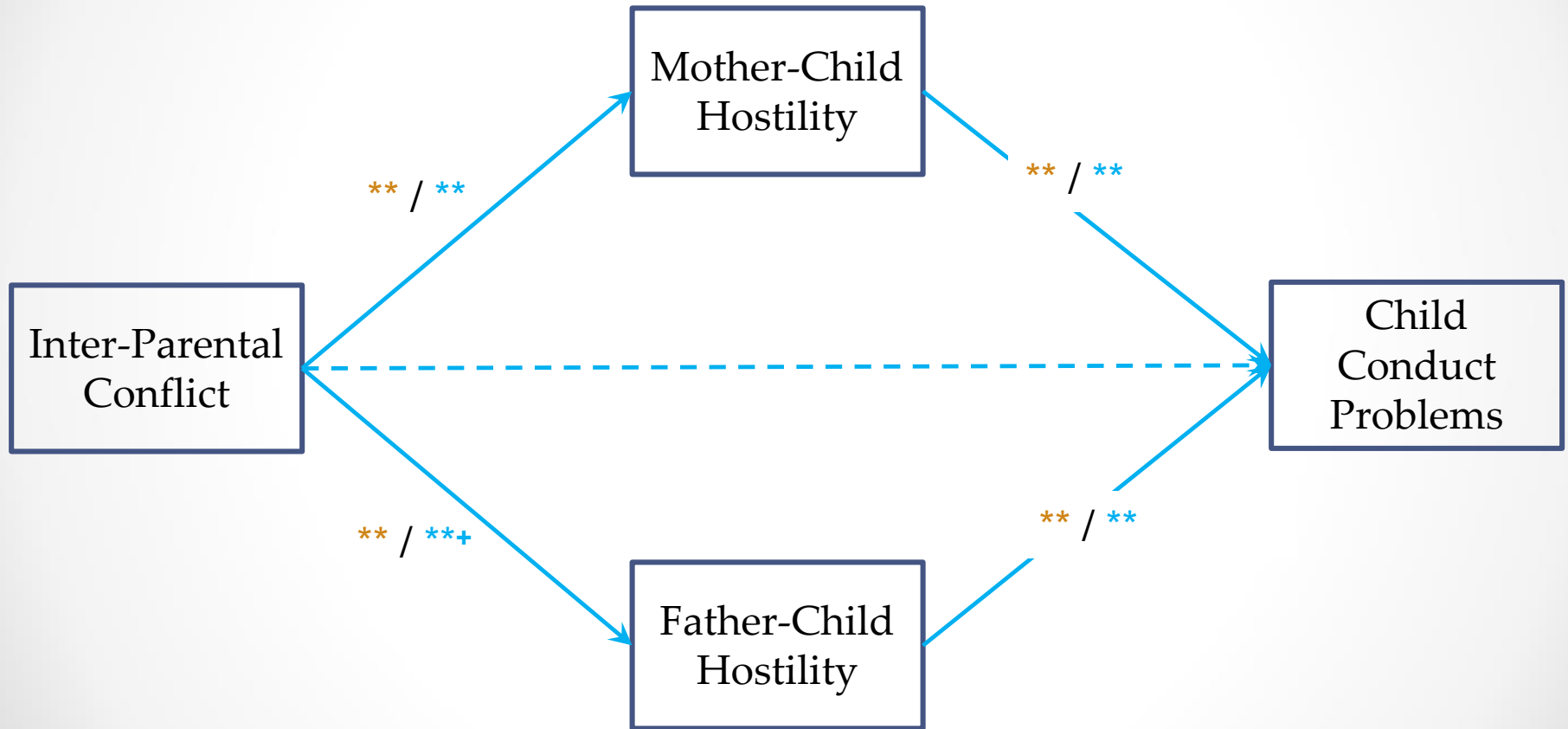


# Recent Research Evidence

- Two novel research designs
  - Early Growth and Development Study (US)
    - Longitudinal adoption-at-birth study (>500 children, biological and adoptive parents, 2004+)
  - Cardiff *In vitro* fertilisation Study (UK)
    - Adoption at conception study (genetically unrelated mothers and fathers; >1000 children, parents, 2006+)
- Bottom line benefits of research designs
  - Associations between parental behaviour (e.g. inter-parental, parent-child conflict) and child behaviour CANNOT be due to common genes shared between rearing parents and children
  - **IMPORTANCE** of the rearing environment



# Family Experiences Really Matter (UK-IVF / US-EGDS)



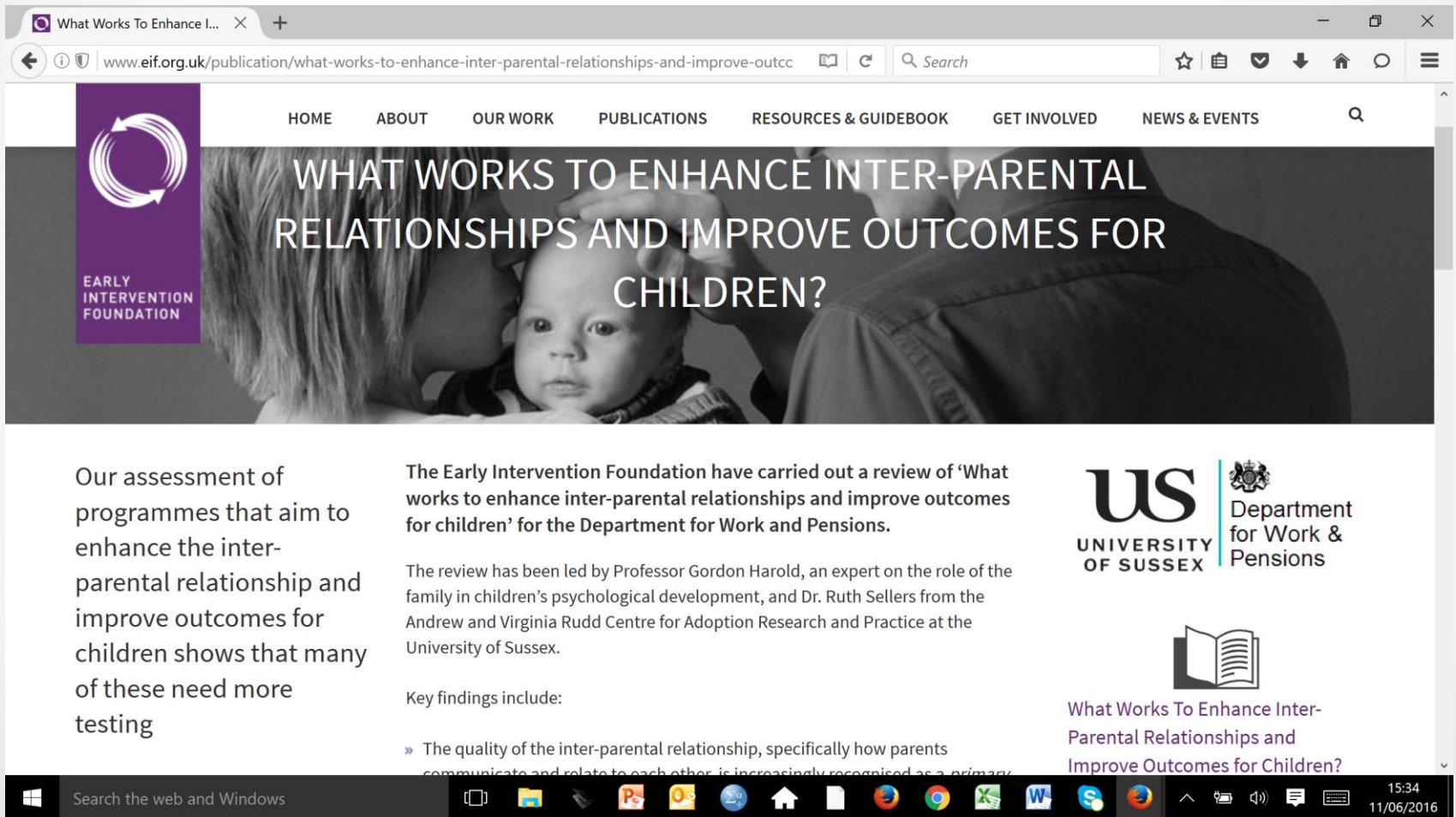
\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

Harold et al., *Journal of Family Psychology*, 2013.

# Summary and Bottom Line

- Family relationship influences on children's mental health
  - Children of all ages (6 months to 16 years) are affected by acrimonious inter-parental and parent-child relationships (silence to violence continuum)
    - Family relationship experiences AFFECT children's mental health
  - Serious mental health problems
    - Depression, conduct problems, self-harm, substance misuse, psychosis, suicidality (and others)
- Targeting solutions
  - A move away from outcome focused research and dialogue
    - A focus on mechanism/processes ('causes')
  - Target early causes (research evidence) to affect later outcomes
    - Intervening when and where it actually matters for children
  - A shift in focus from late intervention to early intervention/prevention
    - An issue of public health (inter-parental relationship effects on children)
- Turning Negatives into Positives (A Long-Game Approach)
  - Helping parents → Improves outcomes for children → Reduces costs (depression, conduct problems) → Improves future relationship quality → Reduces future rates of family breakdown → Improves future child outcomes
  - Promoting positive intergenerational cycles through the promotion of positive relationship support (IPR → Parenting → Child outcomes (future parents))
  - International intervention evidence (transitions), some UK evidence (more work)

# Longitudinal Evidence to 'Life Chances'



The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) website. The browser's address bar shows the URL [www.eif.org.uk/publication/what-works-to-enhance-inter-parental-relationships-and-improve-outcomes](http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/what-works-to-enhance-inter-parental-relationships-and-improve-outcomes). The website has a purple header with the EIF logo and navigation links: HOME, ABOUT, OUR WORK, PUBLICATIONS, RESOURCES & GUIDEBOOK, GET INVOLVED, and NEWS & EVENTS. The main banner features a black and white photo of a family with the text "WHAT WORKS TO ENHANCE INTER-PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS AND IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN?". Below this, the left column contains the text: "Our assessment of programmes that aim to enhance the inter-parental relationship and improve outcomes for children shows that many of these need more testing". The middle column states: "The Early Intervention Foundation have carried out a review of 'What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children' for the Department for Work and Pensions." and "The review has been led by Professor Gordon Harold, an expert on the role of the family in children's psychological development, and Dr. Ruth Sellers from the Andrew and Virginia Rudd Centre for Adoption Research and Practice at the University of Sussex." It then lists "Key findings include:" followed by a bullet point: "» The quality of the inter-parental relationship, specifically how parents communicate and relate to each other, is increasingly recognised as a primary...". The right column features the logos of the University of Sussex and the Department for Work & Pensions, along with a book icon and the title "What Works To Enhance Inter-Parental Relationships and Improve Outcomes for Children?". The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the time as 15:34 on 11/06/2016.

What Works To Enhance Inter-Parental Relationships and Improve Outcomes for Children?

Our assessment of programmes that aim to enhance the inter-parental relationship and improve outcomes for children shows that many of these need more testing

The Early Intervention Foundation have carried out a review of 'What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children' for the Department for Work and Pensions.

The review has been led by Professor Gordon Harold, an expert on the role of the family in children's psychological development, and Dr. Ruth Sellers from the Andrew and Virginia Rudd Centre for Adoption Research and Practice at the University of Sussex.

Key findings include:

- » The quality of the inter-parental relationship, specifically how parents communicate and relate to each other, is increasingly recognised as a primary...

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# Group discussion

- How much influence does and should research evidence have on practice in this transformation area?
- What are the implications of the new evidence for service commissioning and delivery?
- What can evidence be designed to better inform local practice?



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# Questions and comments from the floor with

Dr Daniel Acquah, Evidence Analyst, Early Intervention Foundation (Chair)

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