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INTER-PARENTAL RELATIONSHIP SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE IN THE UK SUMMARY

RAPID REVIEW OF EVIDENCE

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The aim of this report is to support policy-makers, practitioners and commissioners to make informed choices. We have reviewed data from authoritative sources but this analysis must be seen as supplement to, rather than a substitute for, professional judgment. The What Works Network is not responsible for, and cannot guarantee the accuracy of, any analysis produced or cited herein.

Executive Summary

Introduction

In our recent [What Works](#) review published in March 2016, we identified the inter-parental relationship (IPR)¹ as having a primary influence on children's life chances. In particular, frequent, intense and unresolved inter-parental conflict was highlighted as a key factor affecting children's long-term health and wellbeing while also adversely affecting wider aspects of family functioning including parenting quality.

Our aim for this review was to establish how much had already been done to map the nature and extent of relationship support provision in the UK, by conducting a rapid evidence assessment of the available literature. Particular attention was paid to:

- the types of relationship support services available in the UK
- the profile of providers and service users
- barriers to the implementation of support.

Our review had a particular focus on families in or at risk of poverty, as well as the extent to which current provision focuses on child outcomes.

Review findings

Studies mapping the provision of UK relationship support services

- After conducting a rapid evidence review using systematic methods, only 15 studies were found to meet the inclusion criteria for this review.
- The studies differed in the methodologies used, the range of services covered, and the extent to which they attempted to profile service providers and users.
- This review aimed to be an initial step to better understand the types and nature of relationship support provision.
- Due to the limited scope of this study, it was not possible to comprehensively map all current UK relationship support provision.
- Further research is needed to fully understand the nature of existing services, including primary research, the analysis of unpublished monitoring data, and research on effective implementation and practice.

Types of provision and targeting

- The types of services identified across the 15 studies included:
 - **Traditional relationship support** services such as relationship education, couple counselling and mediation.

¹ Refer to glossary for definition

- **Services not explicitly defined as relationship support**, such as health services, Improving Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) and school counselling.
 - **Specialist provision** such as for domestic violence, or groups such as fathers, disabled or minority parents.
 - **Multi-agency systems** to support couple/parent relationships.
 - **Generic self-help services** including relationship helplines, print media (books/magazines), websites, and online services.
- Services often target parents and couples at specific transition points such as becoming a parent, getting married, or getting separated/divorced.
- Other points of transition were targeted less frequently, including a child's transition to school, adolescence, or when families risk falling into poverty (such as unemployment or ill-health).

Delivery

- There is a lack of literature to map current UK relationship support provision. The studies identified were either old, focused on particular pilot services, or target specific groups such as separated families or fathers. Further primary research is needed.
- Across the studies included in this review relationship support services were found to be predominantly delivered through the voluntary sector, which is often operating in a difficult funding environment. Statutory provision was found to be limited and underdeveloped.
- Relationship support was fragmented and dispersed across different statutory agencies, with a wide range of services potentially having contact with parents experiencing relationship difficulties, including health, schools, children centres, parenting programmes, social services, police, housing and advice services.
- Statutory services that supported the parental relationship were often not explicitly defined as 'relationship support', such as Improving Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) counselling or health visitors.
- Few relationship support services explicitly aimed to measure child outcomes; instead they saw improvements in the couple relationship as the primary focus.

Services for vulnerable groups

- Only a small number of the included studies (five) attempted to capture the characteristics of the service users accessing relationship support.
- In these studies, the users of relationship services were mainly from middle-income groups and tended to be in employment. Families in or at risk of poverty appeared largely underserved with few services directly targeting this group.
- However, this study did not undertake an analysis of unpublished monitoring data or qualitative research with providers, meaning that the extent to which services work with disadvantaged groups may not have been fully captured.

- Families on low-incomes tended to access relationship support via referrals from other services, compared to middle-income families that tended to self-refer.
- In one study, low-income families experiencing relationship breakdown first sought help for practical issues (e.g. benefits, housing) rather than disclosing relationship difficulties and a need for emotional support.
- In the studies identified other key groups may also be underserved by relationship support services, including black and minority ethnic (BME) couples, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) couples, refugees, step-families, separated and single parents, disabled parents and fathers. Further primary research is needed to explore this.
- Strategies to improve the configuration of services to the specific needs of these groups, include outreach activity or the funding and commissioning of targeted services. However, services tailored to the needs of vulnerable groups are often more resource intensive.

Barriers to successful delivery

- Barriers to the delivery of relationship support services were broadly grouped into three categories:
 - **Acceptability** – stigma in disclosing relationship difficulties was frequently identified as a significant barrier to help-seeking, with couples tending to only seek help in crisis and at the point of relationship breakdown;
 - **Availability** – relationship support provision available in the UK, particularly in the statutory sector, appeared to be fragmented and families are often not aware of what services that are available.
 - **Accessibility** – barriers such as the cost of services, childcare and lack of out-of-hours provision were commonly highlighted and likely to disproportionately affect lower income families.

Overcoming barriers to service delivery

National and local government, statutory and voluntary services could look to adopt several strategies to increase the reach of relationship support, including:

- Developing multi-agency referral systems to increase the access referrals of low-income parents to inter-parental support services.
- Targeting services on vulnerable groups with an understanding of their unique needs was found to be a successful strategy. However, this is resource intensive activity.
- Further developing capacity for early identification of relationship difficulties by healthcare professionals and frontline practitioners in wider family services.
- Provision of online services could provide an opportunity to reach low-income families at a low cost to both providers and service users.
- Free or subsidised services for low income families is an important means of assisting families who cannot afford to pay for relationship support. Relationship support providers would however require long

term investment to continue to be able to offer these low-cost alternatives to service users.

Implications for policy and practice

Key areas where policy-makers, commissioners, statutory and voluntary providers could look to develop relationship support include:

Availability of evidence based services

- Relationship support provision is patchy in the UK, and the evidence-base on the effectiveness of interventions is still largely underdeveloped. This is exacerbated in a tight funding climate.
- There is a substantive need to grow UK relationship support provision with a focus on child outcomes, embed a focus on parental relationships in local systems, improve the evidence on 'home-grown' UK programmes, and trial evidence-based interventions tested outside the UK.

Delivery of services

- Mainstream family services such as health services and parenting support services could help engage families early to prevent relationship difficulties and screen for signals of risk.
- Schools could also have a greater role in identifying children and families affected by parental conflict, signposting to other services or supporting children through school counselling initiatives.
- Whilst existing these interventions tend to target key transition points in the couple relationship, such as marriage, new parenthood, separation/divorce, there is also a need to target a wider range of transition points including children's transition to school, or when parents risk falling into poverty.

Services for vulnerable groups

- Partnership working could be a critical way to engage low-income families, including developing multi-agency systems, embedding relationship support in mainstream services, single points of referral, and practitioner training.
- Free, subsidised, or donations-only services are an important means of accessing families on low-incomes, as are free initial appointments for all service users. These types of services are already provided by some voluntary relationship support organisations and others. However, more work is needed to make families aware of these low-cost services that are available.
- Statutory services such as the police, housing services, social services and Cafcass often have significant contact with parents on low-incomes experiencing relationship breakdown, so could play a role in identifying couples who would benefit from relationship support
- Targeted services specifically designed to engage and meet the needs of minority groups (LGBT, BME, fathers) were found to be successful in improving their access to relationship support.
- There is a need to capture and disseminate learning of effective practice being undertaken by current relationship support organisations and services.

Implications for research

The evidence base for relationship services in the UK is underdeveloped and there are a range of areas where new research would support the design and delivery of programmes.

- Robust and well-resourced evaluation needs to be embedded into existing and future activity at a national and local level. This includes trials of new evidenced-based programmes, the Local Family Offer, service providers and future government relationship support initiatives.
- There is a lack of research to map the nature and extent of current relationship support provision in general, and in particular support for parents in or at risk of poverty and disadvantaged groups. There is a particular need for primary qualitative research in this area, alongside the analysis of unpublished monitoring data; our forthcoming case studies of local authority provision will start to contribute to addressing this gap.
- There is little research into the impact of relationship support on children: commissioners, evaluators and providers need support in collecting data on the impact of their interventions on child outcomes.
- Further research is needed to draw lessons on the effective delivery and implementation of relationship support, from existing literature and through primary research. This includes:
 - How to identify/screen for signals of risk
 - How to overcome access barriers
 - Staff skills and workforce development
 - Partnership working and referral pathways

Embedding robust evaluation in future initiatives nationally and locally is key to addressing these gaps, as well as future EIF research activity.

Methodology

- This was a rapid evidence assessment, which adopted systematic review techniques in order to identify relevant literature.
- The search strategy included a combination of searching academic databases using predefined search terms, contacting experts within the field of relationship support, and a search of grey literature including websites of relevant provider organisations.
- However, the review had limitations: for example, it did not involve primary research, had tight inclusion criteria, and did not look at individual impact evaluations as part of understanding current provision.
- The detailed description of our methodological approach and the relative strengths and weaknesses can be found in appendix 1 of the full report.

To download the full report, visit <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/inter-parental-relationship-support-services-available-in-the-uk-rapid-review-of-evidence>