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# INTER-PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS, CONFLICT AND THE IMPACTS OF POVERTY

An overview

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The aim of this report is to support policymakers, 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.

## 1. Introduction

This overview summarises outputs from the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) about why action to tackle inter-parental conflict matters for children and families who are in or at risk of poverty.

There is a growing body of evidence on the impact of persistent and unresolved conflict between parents on children's mental health and future life-chances. In 2016, our report *What works to enhance interparental relationship and improve outcomes for children*, produced in collaboration with Professor Gordon Harold (University of Sussex) and commissioned by the Department of Work and Pensions, set out the scientific evidence on the impact of parental conflict on children and the evidence for 15 interventions available in the UK which seek to address that conflict.<sup>1</sup>

New EIF work<sup>2</sup> has looked specifically at the implications for parental relationships in families experiencing poverty and disadvantage. DWP analysis shows that 28% of all children living in workless couple-parent families, live with parents who report having a distressed relationship. This is almost three times greater than is reported where both parents are working.<sup>3</sup>

There is growing interest in tackling parental conflict and supporting parental relationships. In January 2016, the government doubled funding for relationship support to £70 million. Since 2015, 12 local authorities have been exploring ways to embed support for parental relationships within their 'Local Family Offer'.<sup>4</sup> Most recently, the *Improving lives: Helping workless families* policy paper puts forward a set of proposals to address parental conflict as a key component of supporting disadvantaged families.<sup>5</sup>

EIF supports this direction of travel. This overview summarises the key findings and implications from three recent EIF reports:

- *Inter-parental conflict and outcomes for children in the context of poverty and disadvantage*, by Daniel Acquah, Laura Stock (EIF), Ruth Sellers and Gordon Harold (University of Sussex).<sup>6</sup> This report summarises the latest scientific research about the links between poverty, economic pressure, family processes and outcomes for children. It uses systematic methods to examine the evidence on the effectiveness of interventions implemented in the UK and internationally which aim to improve the interparental relationship and outcomes for children in or at risk of poverty.
- *Exploring parental relationship support: A qualitative study*, by Meg Callanan, Ruth Hudson, Fatima Husain and Ellie Roberts (all NatCen Social Research), ed Laura Stock and Tom McBride (EIF).<sup>7</sup> This report explores the availability

1 Available at: <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/what-works-to-enhance-inter-parental-relationships-and-improve-outcomes-for-children-3/>

2 This work is the outcome of a partnership between the EIF and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) which aims to explore the contribution that tackling and reducing parental conflict can make in improving the life-chances of families and children in or at risk of poverty.

3 Understanding Society survey, 2013–14 (UK), as quoted in [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/605989/analysis-research-pack-improving-lives-helping-workless-families-web-version.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/605989/analysis-research-pack-improving-lives-helping-workless-families-web-version.pdf)

4 See DWP (2015) *2010 to 2015 government policy: poverty and social justice*, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-poverty-and-social-justice>

5 See DWP (2017) *Improving lives: Helping workless families*, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families>

6 Available at: <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/inter-parental-conflict-and-outcomes-for-children-in-the-contexts-of-poverty-and-economic-pressure>

7 Available at: <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/exploring-parental-relationship-support-a-qualitative-study>

of services to support inter-parental relationships in families in or at risk of poverty in five case-study areas. This included how services are currently commissioned and provided, the perceived aims of existing relationship support, the range of provision available, and perceived gaps in and levels of take-up of support.

- *Interparental relationship support services available in the UK: Rapid review of the evidence*, by Lara Doubell, Laura Stock and Daniel Acquah, ed Tom McBride (all EIF).<sup>8</sup> This small-scale limited review of key studies attempts to map the landscape of research on relationship services in the UK. It has a particular focus on the extent to which services were available to families in or at risk of poverty, as well as the extent to which services consider or focus on child outcomes.

### KEY TERMS

- **Inter-parental relationship quality** is a relevant concept to both intact and separated couples with children. EIF has focused on the relationship behaviours (for example, levels of communication and conflict management) rather than relationship status (married, divorced).
- **Inter-parental conflict** is defined as conflicts that occur between parents/carers that are frequent, intense and poorly resolved.

## 2. What did we know already?

EIF's 2016 'What works' review found that:

- There is strong evidence that the inter-parental relationship has a *primary* influence on effective parenting, children's long-term mental health and future life chances.
- Children's mental health and long-term life chances are at risk if they are growing up in a family where parents engage in frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict (irrespective of whether the parents are together or separated).
- Children of all ages can be affected by destructive inter-parental conflict. Children who witness or are aware of conflicts between parents are affected to a greater extent.
- Inter-parental conflict can adversely affect parenting, with evidence suggesting it may have a greater negative impact on the father-child relationship than the mother-child relationship.
- Just focusing on the parent-child relationship in the context of ongoing inter-parental conflict means that some parenting programmes are not effective and so do not lead to sustained positive outcomes for children.
- The UK evidence is still at a relatively early stage: out of 15 programmes assessed, one programme was found to have evidence of improving child outcomes.

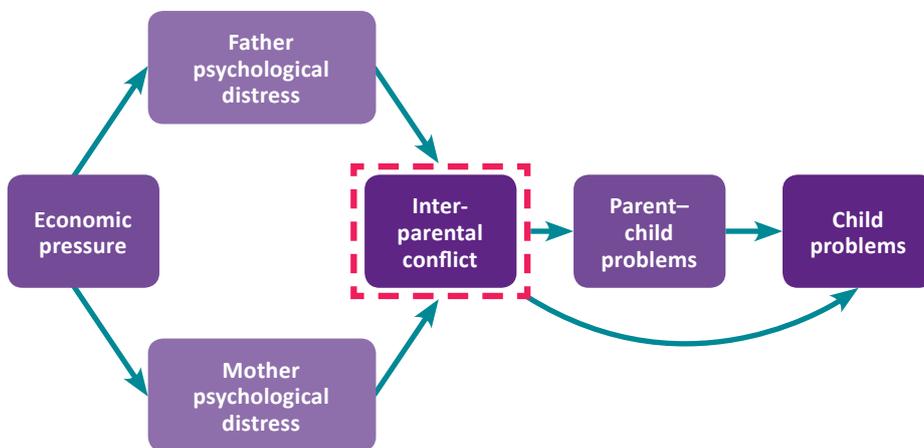
8 Available at: <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/inter-parental-relationship-support-services-available-in-the-uk-rapid-review-of-evidence/>

### 3. What does EIF's new review of evidence tell us?

#### Poverty and economic stress affect the quality of inter-parental relationships, and this in turn impacts on child outcomes

The family stress model shows how different factors can influence problems in families. Longitudinal evidence shows that parents in poverty or under economic pressure are more likely to experience relationship conflict, which can affect outcomes for children. Economic pressure impacts on parents' mental health, which can cause relationship problems and difficulties with parenting. These difficulties can include reduced parental sensitivity and time spent interacting with their child, and can lead to harsher parenting practices, which are linked to future difficulties for children and adolescents. These difficulties include externalising and internalising problems,<sup>9</sup> academic and physical health difficulties, and social and interpersonal relationship problems.

FIGURE 1: FAMILY STRESS MODEL



There are a range of factors which are associated with resilience to relationship and parenting difficulties in low income families. These include maternal social support, effective coping strategies, communication and problem-solving, community and neighbourhood support.

#### There are interventions to address inter-parental conflict for families in or at risk of poverty which are effective, but the UK evidence needs to develop further

The UK evidence of effective programmes to address inter-parental conflict to improve child outcomes is at a relatively early stage. Interventions that have robust evidence are mainly those tested overseas. In this latest report, EIF looked at 13 interventions, which fall into two broad categories:

- those which focus on the **couple** and addressing problems between the parents, which in turn impact on the children in the family
- those with a primary focus on the **parent-child** relationship, with an additional component to support the couple.

<sup>9</sup> **Externalising problems** are characterised by behavioural difficulties such as aggression, hostility, noncompliant and disruptive behaviours, verbal and physical violence, anti-social behaviour, conduct disorder, delinquency and vandalism. **Internalising problems** are characterised by symptoms of withdrawal, inhibition, fearfulness and sadness, shyness, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and, in the extreme, suicidality.

Of the 13 interventions, eight fall into the couple-focused category and five into the parent-focused category.

#### EXAMPLE OF A COUPLE-FOCUSED INTERVENTION: **FRAME (FATHERHOOD, RELATIONSHIP AND MARRIAGE EDUCATION)**

FRAME is a targeted psychoeducational intervention developed specifically to strengthen the ability of low-income mothers and fathers to reduce conflict, cope with stress and co-parent effectively. It has been developed and evaluated in the US.

The intervention consists of around 14 hours of content which has three main components:

- **Relationship education:** teaches couples about both positive and negative communication styles alongside techniques for conflict resolution.
- **Stress and coping skill training:** teaches couples how to identify stressors in their lives (with a focus on financial stressors) and techniques to deal with these, including progressive muscle relaxation techniques, the importance of giving and receiving social support and acceptance and cognitive restructuring.
- **Child-centered parent training:** teaches parents to set developmentally appropriate expectations for their children, how to use positive reinforcement to build pro-social child behaviours, and introduces the idea of natural consequences and alternatives to corporal punishment, such as time-out.

FRAME is underpinned by a single randomised control trial. The programme was found to have resulted in reductions in financial stress, reductions in coping with stress by disengaging and improvements in problem-solving. Changes in stress and coping were associated with reductions over time in symptoms of depression. Improvements in parent depression and parent-child interactions predicted reductions in child internalising and externalising symptoms.

#### EXAMPLE OF A PARENT-FOCUSED INTERVENTION: **INCREDIBLE YEARS SCHOOL AGED (BASIC AND ADVANCED)**

Incredible Years School Aged is a psychoeducation programme delivered to parents of children (age 8–16 years) at risk of conduct problems and antisocial behaviour. It is delivered over 17–18 weeks in two-hour sessions. The Advanced programme includes dealing with adult relationship difficulties and problem-solving.

It has been evaluated in the US and the UK using pre-post study and quasi-experimental design. The interventions show improvements in child behaviour and improvements in parent depression and parenting skills.

Through an initial assessment,<sup>10</sup> eight of the 13 programmes were found to have had positive impacts on child outcomes, and showed positive impacts for children in poverty or economic pressure. This is either because they have been implemented with disadvantaged families and shown positive results, or because the authors have demonstrated that results from a universal implementation are not affected by income.

Programmes have a range of impacts, including reduced relationship conflict and disagreements, reduced depression and anxiety for parents, and improved child behaviours and mental health. All of the interventions were developed internationally, but two (Parents as Partners and Incredible Years School Age BASIC and ADVANCED) have been tested and evaluated in the UK.

It is important that relationship support interventions are implemented and evaluated alongside other approaches to reducing poverty and its effects. For example, there is evidence that children living in poverty benefit from school- and community-based interventions designed to improve social and emotional skills directly.

Although we have not yet done empirical analysis of the ‘active ingredients’ of the interventions, one implication of the longitudinal evidence and intervention research is that multi-component interventions (for example: stress and coping skills training, conflict resolution and communication skills training alongside training on parenting) may be the most effective way to respond to the often-complex and multiple problems faced by some families in poverty.

#### 4. What does EIF’s new qualitative research on UK service provision tell us?

The new qualitative research reinforces previous findings that support for relationships is not easily available within existing family services. Respondents describe a patchwork of largely uncoordinated relationship support provision across the country, which appears to be inconsistent in level and availability.

The qualitative work also highlights barriers to increasing the focus on early intervention to support parental relationships within family services.

- Families in or at risk of poverty experience are felt to be less likely to take up relationship support and experience significant barriers to accessing these services.
- The perceived stigma attached to seeking help for relationship issues and the limited availability of affordable support are seen as key barriers for parents.
- There is also a lack of consistent understanding as to what is meant by relationship support services. Current provision takes different forms, ranging from formal relationship support services, such as counselling and mediation, usually offered by specialist organisations, to more generic early help provided by family support workers or health visitors, which may touch on relationship issues.
- Respondents clearly identify a link between the quality of parental relationships and child outcomes, but are not able to provide evidence of relationship support services being currently commissioned with the primary aim of improving child outcomes.

<sup>10</sup> These programmes were not formally assessed against EIF’s standards of evidence – see: <http://guidebook.eif.org.uk/eif-evidence-standards>

Information on how best to deliver relationship support services is felt to be currently under-developed, and this is seen to inhibit more concerted action on this issue.

- Local stakeholders recognise that relationship support is a means to improve outcomes for children. However, they feel that it is challenging to act upon this message, given that child outcomes are not usually measured and the research evidence in this area is limited.
- The lack of clarity about how to measure parental relationship distress and measure the impact of services makes it difficult for commissioners to make the case locally for investment in this agenda. For example, the link between parental relationship conflict and outcome frameworks used for children and family services is not clear. It is felt that the link between these things needs to be developed in order to incentivise commissioners to focus on this area.
- More clarity on what we know about what has been shown to be effective for specific groups or types of family problems is felt to be crucial to increasing local action on parental relationship support.

A important final point is that current funding pressures in local areas are felt to be leading to a narrow focus on meeting statutory duties, which means that relationship support is not close to being seen as a priority for local investment. The fact that there is no natural 'home' or service area to take responsibility for parental conflict and relationship support locally is also seen to be a barrier to increasing the focus in this area.

## 5. Supporting parent relationships, tackling conflict and improving outcomes for children

These findings reinforce earlier research that tackling couple conflict and the quality of parental relationships is an important focus for early intervention activity.

This work suggests that families who may benefit *most* from this support may be *least* likely to receive it for a range of reasons to do with service availability, cost and barriers such as perceived stigma.

This is an area that needs greater focus, as the evidence suggests that supporting parental relationships and tackling conflict for families who are under economic stress has the potential to improve outcomes for children.

Relationship support services in the UK are currently under-developed. The voluntary sector is the current main provider of services, but has operated in an unstable funding environment for many years. There is a clear need to grow and invest in UK relationship support provision and embed a focus on parental relationships in local systems and services.

There are interventions which have evidence of effectiveness linked to inter-parental relationship issues and parenting in the context of poverty which could be delivered more widely. Embedding relationship support in mainstream services, such as children's centres and health visiting, or within wider multi-agency early intervention systems offers the potential to overcome access barriers and reach families early. Targeting transition points – such as new parenthood, separation, a child's transition into school or when parents risk falling into poverty – offers opportunities to reach families before relationship difficulties escalate.

Poverty is a multi-faceted issue and living in poverty places families at risk of multiple adverse outcomes. Multi-faceted interventions – which support

parental relationships alongside supporting parenting and development of, for example, coping skills or techniques for dealing with stress – also have potential in relation to this group of families and wider efforts to reduce poverty and tackle worklessness.

### What needs to happen now?

Future action on this agenda should focus on the following priorities:

- **Supporting local areas to prioritise this as part of their overall service delivery to children, young people and families, with a strong focus on outcomes**
  - This means supporting a greater focus on inter-parental relationships and tackling parental conflict within family services.
  - This might include developing some of the tools practitioners need to identify and assess dimensions of relationship distress, to match family need to appropriate interventions, and to capture outcomes (including child outcomes).
  - It also includes the development of specialist relationship support and a focus on improving access for families in poverty and other vulnerable groups that are less likely to access help.
- **Developing and communicating the UK evidence in relation to improving child outcomes in families facing poverty and disadvantage**
  - The UK evidence-base on ‘what works’ needs to be grown through investment in the design and evaluation of programmes developed in the UK and trialling effective programmes from abroad.
  - This includes further testing of interventions for families in or at risk of poverty, as well as other disadvantaged groups, such as separated families and minority groups, in order to better understand what works for whom and in what circumstances, including how to reach disadvantaged groups.
  - This work has highlighted a number of promising programmes which have good evidence and need to be invested in and tested in the UK.

### Shifting the debate on effective family policy

EIF’s new research helps to shift the debate about effective family policy away from a focus on family stability or structure (whether parents are married, divorced or separated) and towards more important questions about the *quality* of the relationship between parents and the role this has in driving outcomes for children.

It points to the need to address parental conflict as part of wider early intervention efforts, where a focus on the parent–child relationship by itself is often insufficient. It pinpoints the greater psychological stress which can be experienced by families under economic stress or in poverty, and the impact that this has on how children fare later in life. In combination with other policies to address family’s access to work and income, addressing parental conflict is a critical component of improving outcomes for these children and their life-chances – and ultimately those of their own children.

The recent attention given by government to these issues is encouraging. The 12 Local Family Offer areas show that there is real appetite for developing services to tackle parental conflict locally and to embed this in the existing family system. A sustained focus on parental conflict support in response to this evidence is now needed to ensure we are responding to what is a key signal of risk in relation to children’s life-chances.