

# EIF Commissioner Guide

## Reducing the impact of interparental conflict on children

EARLY INTERVENTION FOUNDATION  
UPDATED MARCH 2018

- *What do I need to know about the impact of parental conflict on children?*
- *How can I measure the impact of parental conflict and understand local need?*
- *How can I reduce the impact of parental conflict on children in my area?*



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Inclusion or discussion within the guide does not indicate EIF endorsement of any particular intervention or programme. Where EIF has assessed the effectiveness of an intervention or programme, this is described in [section 4.3: Summary of programmes that target the couple relationship](#)

# 1. What is this guide about and who is it for?

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This Guide is a practical planning tool to support local commissioners and leaders of services for children and families to reduce the impact of conflict between parents on children. This resource builds on our innovative reviews of research conducted by the Early Intervention Foundation in collaboration with Professor Gordon Harold at the University of Sussex, highlighting the latest scientific and intervention evidence on how the interparental relationship affects multiple outcomes for children, including emotional, behavioural, social and academic development.

The Guide is designed to be modular and interactive – while we encourage you to read the whole guide, each section is written to stand alone, to directly address the questions that you want an answer to, whether that is to develop your understanding of the evidence, to find ways to measure the impact of what you are doing, or something else. Each question also has links to further detail, and tools and resources that can help you.

You don't need to be an expert in conflict between parents to use this Guide, but it is specifically written for public sector leaders and commissioners with responsibility for family services. It is intended to support them to use the best available research and practice evidence on parental conflict in their work to get the best outcomes for children.

In the design of this Guide we have taken our What Works reviews and sought to translate these for practical use by commissioners. However, commissioning services on parental conflict is not simple. While there is strong and consistent scientific evidence that conflict between parents can impact on children's long-term mental health and life chances, this is a new policy area in the UK. Few services are commissioned locally and evidence on what works to support families is at an early stage.

This Guide is designed to grow and develop. Please let us have your views about the content, and your examples of tools and case studies, which will help others to tackle how conflict between parents affects children.

# 1. What is this guide about and who is it for?

***“The Guide takes you on a logical journey from understanding the evidence base through to assessing the needs of your local area and then on to how you can impact on the reduction of parental conflict for families in your area. It is easy to navigate, with intelligent links to other sources of information. No two people will use this guide in the same way. But that doesn’t matter because the content is strong and its application far-reaching.”***

*Lucy Johns, Commissioning Manager, Dorset Children’s Services*

## 2. What do I need to know about the impact of parental conflict on children?

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**This section gives a brief introduction to the issue of relationship quality and conflict between parents and the impact on children.**

**It defines some of the key terms and uses the latest UK and international evidence to explain when parental conflict that impacts on child outcomes is most likely to happen. It also describes the relevant UK policy and service landscape.**

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## 2.1 What does 'parental conflict' mean?

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Conflict between parents is a normal part of relationships and family life. Not all conflict is damaging, but the way conflict manifests – its frequency, intensity, and how it is resolved – can negatively affect children.

At EIF, we have published pioneering What Works reviews with Professor Harold at the University of Sussex on the links between parental conflict and child outcomes. We found that there is a large body of robust research evidence which indicates that the quality of the relationship between parents, specifically how they communicate and relate to each other, has a significant influence on effective parenting and children's long-term mental health and future life chances.

Where conflict between parents is **frequent, intense** and **poorly resolved**, it can harm children's outcomes – regardless of whether parents are together or separated. This includes family contexts not usually regarded as 'high-risk', not just where parents have separated or divorced or where there is domestic violence.

Conflict can affect children in all types of parental relationships, which includes:

- Parents who are in a relationship with each other, whether married or not
- Parents who have separated or divorced
- Biological and 'step' parents
- Foster and adoptive parents
- Gay and lesbian parents.

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## 2.1 What does 'parental conflict' mean?



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Conflict can range across a continuum of severity, from constructive to destructive conflict, to domestic violence and abuse in its most extreme form. Destructive conflict behaviours which put children's mental health and long-term life chances at risk include aggression, non-verbal conflict or 'the silent treatment'. By contrast, constructive conflict – where there continues to be respect and emotional control, and conflict is resolved or explained – is linked to lower risks of child distress. This suggests conflict resolution skills are an important focus for intervention to improve child outcomes.



Although destructive conflict can include domestic violence and abuse, the focus of this Guide is on non-violent conflict between parents.

There are a range of difficulties that can influence parental conflict and its impact on children. These are explored in more detail in other sections, but can include parents' mental health, disability, substance misuse, family transitions and economic pressure.

### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [What works to enhance interparental relationships and improve outcomes for children](#)   
2016 report with Professor Harold providing a more detailed description of the impact of parental conflict on outcomes for children.
- Relationships Alliance: [Couple relationships and work; work and couple relationships](#)   
Briefing sets out what research says about the impact of work on family life.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Online hub: [Reducing parental conflict](#)   
Repository of reports and resources from EIF and other organisations on understanding and reducing parental conflict, produced to support DWP's national programme.
- Animation: [Reducing parental conflict: why it matters to children and why it matters to services](#) 

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## 2.2 How does parental conflict impact on children?

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There is a large body of evidence that shows that conflict between parents can have a negative impact on children's long-term mental health and future life chances.

**When conflict between parents is frequent, intense and poorly resolved, it puts children's mental health and long-term outcomes at risk.**

Children of all ages can be affected by destructive parental conflict, from infancy to adulthood, but they may be affected in different ways. Children as young as six months show symptoms of distress when exposed to parental conflict, infants up to the age of five display symptoms such as crying or acting out, and children in middle childhood (six to 12 years) and adolescents show emotional and behavioural distress. Children who witness or are aware of conflict between parents, or who blame themselves, are affected to a greater extent. This suggests that child perceptions of parental conflict could be an important focus for interventions.

Children who witness severe and ongoing parental conflict can display:

- externalising problems (such as behavioural difficulties, antisocial behavior, conduct disorder)
- internalising problems (such as low self-esteem, depression and anxiety)
- academic problems
- physical health problems
- social and interpersonal relationship problems.

In the long term, the above poor child outcomes are associated with: mental health difficulties, poorer academic outcomes, negative peer relationships, substance misuse, poor future relationship chances, low employability, and heightened interpersonal violence. The impact of parental conflict on children can therefore be varied and long-lasting, as well as the risk that relationship behaviours and problems are repeated



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## 2.2 How does parental conflict impact on children?

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across the generations, as evidence suggests these children can go on to experience destructive conflict in their own future relationships.

A key finding of our What Works reviews is that **parental conflict is a primary influence or central mechanism through which family stress (such as economic pressure) impacts both parenting and children's long-term outcomes**. The family stress model shows how economic pressure impacts on parents' mental health, which can increase parental conflict. Parental conflict is then in turn a precursor to poor parenting practices (such as insensitivity, low quality and quantity of time spent together, harsh parenting or over-controlling behaviours) and also negative child outcomes. Parents who are in a hostile and distressed couple relationship are typically more hostile and aggressive towards their children, and less sensitive and emotionally responsive to their children's needs. This then affects the parent-child relationship.

Evidence suggests that parental conflict may have more of a negative impact on the father-child relationship than the mother-child relationship. Fathers are more likely to respond to parental conflict by withdrawing from their children or being hostile towards them. In addition, parental separation can lead to reduced and inconsistent contact between children and non-resident parents, who are typically fathers, further disrupting the father-child relationship. For these reasons, including fathers in family-focused interventions is an important future direction for both practice and research.

### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [What works to enhance interparental relationships and improve outcomes for children](#) 

Chapter 2 of our What Works review with Professor Harold sets out the evidence on how destructive parental conflict affects child outcomes.

- Relationships Alliance: [Relationships and mental health](#) 


Briefing explores the research on the bi-directionality of the link between mental health disorders (for both parents and children) and relationship distress.

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## 2.2 How does parental conflict impact on children?

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### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Infographic: [Family stress model](#)   
Illustrates the links between poverty, economic pressure, psychological distress in parents, parental conflict, disrupted parenting, and child wellbeing.
- Case study: [How parental conflict impacts children](#)
- Case study: [How economic pressure can affect parental relationships](#)

# Family case study: How parental conflict impacts children

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Conflict between parents is a normal part of family life, but there are times when it becomes destructive and can impact negatively on children. Marriage Care specialises in helping couples build strong and healthy relationships, and in providing support in times of relationship difficulty. This case-study tells the story of Rachel and her partner who came for counselling at Marriage Care's centre in Portsmouth.

*"I was depressed due to my job and having suffered from cancer a number of times over the past few years. We were both very unhappy in each other's company for much of the time. We couldn't agree on matters which were important to us and every time they came up yet another argument started.*

*"Our children were telling us that we argued a lot, and occasionally asked if we were going to get a divorce. Our disagreements made dealing with a teenage daughter even harder and our patience with her was very short. I felt that our arguing and shouting was giving her an entitlement to also shout and argue. I felt that we were a really bad example to our children and didn't want them to think that this sort of behaviour was ok.*

*"For a long time I felt too embarrassed to discuss my personal life with a counsellor but in the end I knew we couldn't sort out our problems on our own so out of desperation, I eventually contacted Marriage Care and made an appointment."*

## How counselling helped

*"The counselling enabled us both to be able to make our point without the other interrupting. At times during the sessions I was able to laugh about some things, at other times I found them quite challenging, uncomfortable or frustrating.*

*"We now try to spend more quality time together, my husband watches a little less TV and I have given up relying on social media. I try not to shout anymore which has helped to stop things escalating out of control. Some of the things which caused us problems are still there but now I can see more constructive ways of dealing with our differences.*

*"It reached a point when we felt it was time to stop the counselling and try to take what we had learned and make a go of things ourselves. I began to realise that although it was very necessary to have the support of someone else for a while, it was important we didn't come to rely on a third party long term. In a way I found it very soothing to have someone to listen to me without making judgments, but eventually that person must really be my husband. We have to do it ourselves eventually."*

Rachel's story is typical of many of those in crisis who seek out relationship counselling with Marriage Care. Fortunately Rachel and her husband realised their conflict was having a negative impact on their children and eventually found the courage to ask for help. But many do not, as the stigma in asking for help with intimate relationships remains an issue, and many couples convince themselves their children are unaware of any conflict.

**SOURCE: MARRIAGE CARE**

# Family case study: How economic pressure can affect parental relationships

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Poverty and economic pressure can put couple and family relationships under considerable stress. Last year, Relate conducted research into the links between debt problems and relationship issues. Families they spoke to who had experienced debt problems and relationship issues spoke of the enormous strain that financial pressure caused on relationships.

*“There is constant stress between me and my wife. It feels like we are constantly down each other's throats ... We seem to be just two people sharing a house rather than a married couple.”*

*“It has made us argue more, both of us are very stressed and worried.”*

*“It has become a living nightmare. The shame and guilt has become a part of daily life, fear of spending money has become a constant worry, arguments are regular at present, it is just not a good life at the moment.”*

## How parental conflict affects children

Many families also explained how this pressure on the parental relationship impacted upon children too.

*“The children are suffering as we have no spare money for them and their school activities. I'm constantly stressed out and have a short fuse so I seem to always be shouting at them! I avoid talking to my husband as I worry that the talk will turn to money and end in an argument.”*

*“I was stressed, angry, depressed which has a massive impact on relationships with children and family. We're not able to enjoy family time.”*

*“It has created a critical breakdown in our relationship and every day we struggle to be civilised with each other, it's just not a nice life at the moment, and it affects the whole family, there is a lot of accusations as to where and who the blame lies with, this situation is just not constructive.”*

## Support for families

Relate provides relationship counselling services that can help parents whose relationships come under stress, including where there are financial difficulties. Their counsellors provide a caring and supportive environment to help people find a way through any problems they may be facing in their relationship. People often come to Relate for help with issues surrounding finances and debt. The counsellor will be non-judgmental and won't take sides or tell clients what to do – they'll simply listen and try to help to find a way back to working together as a couple.

Relationship counselling is not currently widely funded, and most clients pay a fee. Wherever possible, however, Relate offers sliding scales according to income, and free or subsidised counselling for those on lower incomes, where they are able to bring in funding for this.

**SOURCE: RELATE**

## 2.3 Why does parental conflict affect some children more than others?

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Some children may be more vulnerable to parental conflict or may respond to the same levels of conflict in different ways. To begin to understand this, we need to look at risk and protective factors that affect how parental conflict affects children. While EIF has not carried out a specific review on who may be more vulnerable to parental conflict and so cannot say which risk factors are predictive, our work has highlighted important factors that may influence how conflict affects children, based on associations observed in multiple studies.

### Characteristics of the family

- **Experience of poverty and economic pressure:** for families where there is economic pressure, parents are at an increased risk of emotional distress, including anxiety and depression. Parents' emotional distress can in turn lead to an increase in parental conflict, which leads to an increase in harsh or inconsistent parenting practices. These harsh parenting practices can result in an increased risk of a range of negative outcomes for children, including internalising problems (such as anxiety or depression), externalising problems (such as aggression or conduct problems), a decrease in social competence, and lower cognitive outcomes. Parental conflict is increasingly seen as a precursor to parenting problems and poor child outcomes (see Tools & resources: Family stress model).

### Wider family problems

- **Parent alcohol and substance misuse** has been associated with increased parental conflict, higher frequencies of physical violence and poor parenting that damages child outcomes.
- **Poor parental mental health** is both a cause and a consequence of parental conflict and is a significant risk factor for negative child outcomes.
- **Wider family functioning:** negative parenting practices such as harsh parenting and parent–child hostility increases the risk that parental conflict negatively affects children.

## 2.3 Why does parental conflict affect some children more than others?

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- **Parent gender:** parental conflict affects parenting differently in mothers and fathers. Fathers are more likely to withdraw or to be hostile with their children, which means the father–child relationship is more likely to be negatively affected by parental conflict.

### Characteristics of the child





- **Child age:** children of all ages can be affected by parental conflict, but younger children are more likely to blame themselves for conflict, whereas older children are more likely to display behaviour problems and, as they are exposed to conflict for a longer period, they may be more negatively affected.
- **Child temperament:** children with a more positive attitude to life, and the ability to regulate emotions, behaviour and attention may be more protected from the impacts of parental conflict.
- **Child gender:** evidence suggests the effects of parental conflict are equally damaging for boys and girls but that they may react in different ways. Girls may be more likely to feel caught in the middle of conflict, internalise the conflict or see it as a threat to the harmony of the family, whereas boys are more likely to see conflict as a threat to themselves and experience externalising problems (such as behaviour difficulties).
- **Child physiological responses:** a child's nervous system (such as levels of stress hormones) may determine how resilient a child is to parental conflict.
- **Peer relations and child social support:** there is evidence that social support, such as peer friendships or a supportive adult outside the family can protect children from the negative effects of parental conflict.

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## 2.3 Why does parental conflict affect some children more than others?

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### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [What works to enhance interparental relationships and improve outcomes for children](#)   
Chapter 2 of our What Works review with Professor Harold explores risk factors in greater detail.
- EIF: [Interparental conflict and outcomes for children in the contexts of poverty and economic pressure](#)   
What Works review with Professor Harold examines how families in or at risk of poverty are at an increased risk of experiencing couple conflict.
- EIF: [Interparental relationship support services available in the UK: Rapid review of evidence](#)   
Report explores the types of relationship support services available in the UK, their target populations and barriers to access.
- EIF: [Factors affecting how interparental conflict influences children](#)   
Briefing outlines four areas of moderating influence that have implications for whether a child will be negatively affected when they witness hostile interparental relations.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Infographic: [Family stress model](#)   
Illustrates the links between poverty, economic pressure, psychological distress in parents, parental conflict, disrupted parenting, and child wellbeing.

## 2.4 What do we know about parental conflict at crucial points in family life?

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Families can be particularly vulnerable to stress and parental conflict at key transition points in family life. This includes:

- **Poverty and economic pressure:** being in or at risk of poverty and economic pressure (such as worklessness or ill-health) increases parental stress and mental health difficulties. This in turn increases the risk of parental conflict and poor parenting, which impacts negatively on child outcomes.
- **Becoming a new parent or having a baby:** the birth of the first child and the transition to parenthood can put strain on relationships, cause a decrease in relationship satisfaction and increase parental conflict.
- **Children starting primary or secondary school:** children's performance at school can be negatively affected by parental conflict. Targeting a child's transition into school can be a key moment at which to intervene early and identify relationship difficulties between parents.
- **Parental separation or divorce:** separation between parents represents a specific risk for children, as a context where ongoing conflict may be taking place. Sustaining positive relationships between separated parents during and after separation helps children adapt. Programmes that target the interparental relationship in high-risk contexts (such as divorce) suggest improved outcomes for children (with implications for reducing the intergenerational transmission of negative family conflict processes and future relationship violence).

These key life-course transition points for families are predictable stressors and so provide an opportunity to intervene in a more preventative way.






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## 2.4 What do we know about parental conflict at crucial points in family life?

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### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [What works to enhance interparental relationships and improve outcomes for children](#)   
Chapter 3 of our What Works review with Professor Harold explores the impact of interventions at key life transition points.
- EIF: [Interparental conflict and outcomes for children in the contexts of poverty and economic pressure](#)   
Chapter 2 of our What Works review with Professor Harold examines poverty and economic stress as a unique point of vulnerability that may increase the risk of parental conflict.
- EIF: [Interparental relationship support services available in the UK: Rapid review of evidence](#)   
Report highlights different services that are available for couples depending on where they are in the lifecycle of their relationship.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Infographic: [Four key moments for extra support](#)   
Recognising the extra pressures around key transition moments in family life.
- Blog: [Parental relationships: how we weather family life, or not](#)   
Honor Rhodes of Tavistock Relationships talks about the importance of sustaining and supporting family relationships with the power to weather the pressures of life.

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## 2.5 What sorts of services seek to address the impact of parental conflict on children?

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Services that support parental relationships take many different forms. This includes interventions that are specifically designed to improve child and parent outcomes where there is parental conflict. Section 4 gives information on the evidence-based interventions we have identified to date in our What Works reviews and EIF Guidebook as being effective for child outcomes.

As highlighted in our mapping studies of relationship support services in the UK, there are also wider services that are specifically designed to improve the quality of the relationship between parents. These services may have a focus on improving child outcomes in their design and/or they may focus on the parent/couple relationship:

- Relationship counselling and therapy
- Marriage and relationship education, including new parenthood programmes
- Family mediation and legal support, including in-court conciliation and Cafcass
- Online information and advice.

There are also services that, while not explicitly defined as relationship support services, focus more broadly on supporting families and supporting the relationship between parents alongside other aspects of family life:

- Child and family support services, such as early help, social care, children's centres and Troubled Families teams.
- Parenting programmes, where they have a specific component that looks to improve child outcomes in the context of parental conflict (see section 4)
- Health services, including GPs and practice nurses, midwives or health visitors, and mental health services, including such as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT)
- Schools, through sex and relationships education or school counselling.

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## 2.5 What sorts of services seek to address the impact of parental conflict on children?

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Some of this support involves practitioners working face-to-face with families, but other services are delivered over the phone or through video chat. There are also many online services that provide information and advice to parents with issues in their relationship, allowing them to 'self help' without the involvement of a practitioner.

Some services are designed for parents at different stages in their relationship, including key transition points such as marriage, new parenthood, and separation or divorce. These can be tailored to particular family demographics or child characteristics. There are also specialist services for domestic violence and abuse; however, the focus of this guide is on non-violent conflict between parents.

There are many services that aim to train practitioners to effectively spot and address relationship difficulties. This includes in-work training, such as online or face-to-face courses for practitioners, or formal education programmes to train people to become relationship support practitioners or counsellors.

While there is strong scientific evidence of the link between parental conflict and poor child outcomes, the UK evidence about the effectiveness of many of these services is currently at an early stage, which means we don't yet know what impact they are having on family outcomes – and child outcomes in particular. There is often a lack of relationship support services at a local level, and a lack of research to map the specific nature and extent of relationship support provision. Much of the current provision is delivered by charities and voluntary sector organisations and so has been vulnerable to public service funding reductions.

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## 2.5 What sorts of services seek to address the impact of parental conflict on children?

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### SEE ALSO IN THIS GUIDE

- 4.3 What interventions can reduce parental conflict and improve child outcomes?

### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [Exploring parental relationship support: A qualitative study](#)   
Report provides qualitative research on relationship support, mapping current provision and how it is provided.
- EIF: [Interparental relationship support services available in the UK: Rapid review of evidence](#)   
Report highlights different services that are available for couples depending on where they are in the lifecycle of their relationship.
- EIF: [Types of relationship support services](#)   
Briefing sets out categories and sub-categories of services with examples.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Blog: [What's good for the goose is good for the gosling: Providing support services that work for both adults and children](#)   
Richard Meier of Tavistock Relationships talks about the importance of services that work across the divide between adults' and children's services.

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## 2.6 What is the national and local context for work on parental conflict?

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Tackling parental conflict and supporting family relationships has become increasingly prominent in national policy in recent years, led by the Home Office, Department for Education and most recently the Department for Work and Pensions. Over this period, the focus has evolved from an emphasis on stability – *‘strong stable relationships are the bedrock of our society’* (2010 ‘Support for all the family and relationships’ green paper) – to an emphasis on reducing parental conflict, regardless of family structure – *‘children’s chances in life are strongly influenced by their parents’ relationship, whether they are together or separated’* (2017 ‘Improving Lives’ policy paper) – and on good mental health – *‘children who are exposed to persistent and unresolved parental conflict are at a greater risk of early emotional and behavioural problems, antisocial behaviour as an adolescent and later mental health problems as they transition into adulthood’* (2017, Transforming Children & Young People’s Mental Health Provision: a Green Paper). There is also a new focus on relationship support for vulnerable families, such as those that are workless or face economic strain.

Locally, we know that supporting parental relationships is recognised as a significant issue by those working with families, yet is not something many existing family services address. In polling EIF carried out in 2016, 86% of respondents said supporting parental relationships should be a high priority, but only 21% thought it was a high priority. Many local authorities recognise that parental conflict is a significant driver of demands on a wide range of services, but there is a lack of clarity about how best to support relationship quality in existing family services.

The Department for Work and Pensions is seeking to increase effective provision to tackle parental conflict. They have funded 12 areas to pioneer approaches to increasing support for family relationships through the Local Family Offer programme since 2015. A new Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Programme, announced in 2017, invests £39 million until 2021 to support both the supply and demand for evidence-based interventions at a local level.

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## 2.6 What is the national and local context for work on parental conflict?

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The RPC Programme is built around the following components:

- face-to-face interventions for workless families, delivered through four regional contracts in the South West, London, East of England and the North East
- training for the relationship support workforce, to increase the supply of evidence-based help
- exploring the potential of digitally delivered support, particularly around key life events known to increase the risk of conflict
- training and guidance for the frontline workforce, to improve identification and effective refer-ral to appropriate support
- regional support to embed addressing parental conflict, from needs assessment to delivery
- a ‘what works’ function to ensure that local commissioners understand why addressing paren-tal conflict is important and how to do it
- evaluation to continue building the evidence base.

### MORE INFORMATION

- DWP: [Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families](#)   
Government policy paper on tackling parental conflict and supporting family relationships.
- EIF: [Interparental relationships survey results](#)   
2016 polling explores the extent to which local family services prioritise supporting parental relationships.
- Innovation Unit / OnePlusOne: [Creating A Local Family Offer](#)   
Lessons from local authority pioneers on developing local systems of support to improve interparental relationships.

## 2.7 What are the implications of parental conflict for local family services?

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The robust evidence about the impact of parental conflict on outcomes for children suggests that tackling family conflict should be a focus for early intervention. Local family services often focus on the parent–child relationship, and particularly the mother–child relationship. The quality of the relationship between parents is often not well attended to in mainstream maternity, children’s and family services. The impact of this is felt in various ways:

- Interventions for families which focus solely on supporting the parent–child relationship in the context of ongoing parental conflict are unlikely to be effective or improve outcomes for children. Policy-makers and commissioners should consider interventions to support both the couple and the parenting relationship, and focus on the father–child relationship as well as the mother–child relationship.
- Frontline practitioners in, for example, health, schools and social care services lack the tools and knowledge to identify, assess, support and refer families experiencing parental conflict. They need greater help to equip them to play this role, including training in how parental conflict impacts on child outcomes; how to use the tools to spot signals of risk on parental conflict; how to overcome access barriers with families (such as the stigma associated with discussing relationship difficulties); understanding what support different workforces can provide; and how to refer families appropriately.
- Support for parental relationships is limited in many local areas. The voluntary sector is the main provider but has suffered funding instability. Practitioners report that there are gaps in support for parents in poverty and in support tailored to the needs of vulnerable groups. Many providers of relationship support services do provide subsidised or free services in order to reach low-income families. But this is challenging, given limited funding. And even when these services do exist, there is a lack of awareness among both parents and practitioners about what is available. There is a need in many areas for local commissioners to map what local relationship support services are available, particularly those offering low-cost support.
- Relationship difficulties are seen as a private matter, and couples tend to only seek help when they are in crisis or at the point of relationship breakdown.

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## 2.7 What are the implications of parental conflict for local family services?

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EIF is developing a new self-assessment tool to help measure how advanced a local area is in creating a local system to reduce the impact of parental conflict on children and young people, and to guide planning to make this local system more effective. This is one of a suite of early intervention matrices developed by EIF, and is produced as part of DWP's Reducing Parental Conflict Programme.



### SEE ALSO IN THIS GUIDE

- 4.1 How ready for change is my workforce and how can I mobilise them?

### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [Stakeholder views of effective relationship support](#)   
Provides a summary of the key findings from our qualitative study of relationship services.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Animation: [Reducing parental conflict: why it matters to children and why it matters to services](#) 
- Example service directory: [Working it out for the kids](#), Gateshead 
- Coming soon: EIF Maturity Matrix on Reducing Parental Conflict  
A self-assessment tool to measure progress in delivering a system-wide approach to reducing the impact of conflict between parents on their children.



## 2.8 Which parts of the workforce can have an impact on parental conflict?

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Parents are at greater risk of relationship conflict at key transition points in family life, such as having a baby, children starting school, or relationship breakdown. Experiencing poverty and economic stress, including loss of employment or housing, are also key times of risk.

Responding to parental conflict is not the responsibility of any single agency or workforce. Rather, because people need relationship support at different points in their family life, any practitioner or volunteer who works with families can have an impact. Universal, targeted and specialist services for children, young people and families all have a role in the prevention and treatment of parental conflict:

- Schools can reinforce healthy relationships through the provision of relationships and sex education (now statutory), having a role in identifying children and families affected by parental conflict, signposting to other services or supporting children through school counselling initiatives.
- GPs, midwives and health visitors are well placed to discuss how becoming a parent, or the arrival of a new baby, can affect relationships and identify families who are at risk of or experiencing difficulties early, and provide support. Many health visitors in particular have specialised in developing their skills to work with parents who find relationships difficult and are adept at using their relationship with parents to develop sensitivity to the needs of others. These are families who are the least likely to attend appointments or groups and who have a history of problems relating to others.
- Family support and early help services in both public and voluntary sectors, from children's centres to local Troubled Families services, can identify and provide support to parents experiencing relationship difficulties.
- Statutory services such as police, housing services, children's social work services and Cafcass have significant contact with parents on low incomes experiencing relationship stress, so could play a role in identifying and referring or signposting couples who would benefit from relationship support.

EIF Commissioner Guide > 2. What do I need to know about the impact of parental conflict on children?

## 2.8 Which parts of the workforce can have an impact on parental conflict?

PAGE 2 OF 3

- Mental health and emotional wellbeing services for both children and adults can take account of relationship stress, and tailor the support they provide. Children and young people's mental health services are already routinely seeing children negatively affected by family relationship difficulties: according to the Child Outcomes Research Consortium, among 42,798 cases of children using Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services, the most common presenting problem was family relationship difficulties.
- There are organisations specifically focused on delivering relationship support services and interventions (see section 2.9), often in the voluntary sector. Other practitioners (such as GPs and teachers) who have identified couples in need of relationship support services may be able to signpost couples to these organisations.

This wider 'family workforce' doesn't always recognise the role that they can play in reducing parental conflict. Some services which do seek to improve the parental relationship are often not explicitly defined as 'relationship support', such as couple and individual counselling delivered by the NHS. There is an urgent need to build workforce capability and develop tools and training to enable different workforces to effectively spot, assess and refer families with high levels of parental conflict.

The Local Family Offer areas (12 local authorities funded by the Department of Work and Pensions to pilot new approaches to reducing parental conflict) have focused on raising awareness, confidence and capability around supporting parental relationships in different ways. They have stressed the importance of thinking broadly about who needs to be equipped with knowledge about the importance of parental relationships.

***"Don't just think about how to reach professionals: there are lots of other roles for whom it is important to be aware of relationships. Our colleagues in housing, for example, are very well placed to pick up the early signs of things going wrong in families."***





LUTON FLYING START PROGRAMME MANAGER (SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER RESOURCE PACK, DWP/IU/OPO)

EIF Commissioner Guide > 2. What do I need to know about the impact of parental conflict on children?

## 2.8 Which parts of the workforce can have an impact on parental conflict?

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### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [Interparental relationship support services available in the UK: Rapid review of evidence](#)   
Report uses a sample of key studies to sketch out the landscape of relationship support services available in the UK.
- EIF: [Exploring parental relationship support: A qualitative study](#)   
Report shares insights into current provision from stakeholders and relationship support providers in five local areas.
- OnePlusOne: [Supporting couple relationships: Guidance for health visitors](#) 
- Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships: [What do couple relationships have to do with public health?](#) 

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- EIF sector briefing: [Why parental conflict matters for the NHS](#) 
- Case study: [Relationship support navigator, Dorset](#)  
Building awareness, skills and confidence in Dorset's schools.

## Case study: Relationship support navigator, Dorset

PAGE 1 OF 1

Dorset created a Relationship Support Navigator role, whose main aim is to advise a range of practitioners in directing parents to the appropriate level of support. The post is co-funded by the local authority and the Chesil Education Partnership.

The Navigator's role is to raise awareness in school staff about the importance of providing support to parents around relationships, to build their skills and confidence in responding to issues and knowing where to refer people for more help.

*"Teachers are busy people. Looking after the emotional health and wellbeing of parents is not the only thing they have to do. This role has made it possible for professionals to work more as a team, and it has strengthened trust between teachers and parents." (Relationships Navigator, Chesil Education Partnership)*

### Sustaining and embedding change

As part of her role, the Navigator developed CPD training sessions on relationships for school staff. She also created drop-in sessions on relationships for parents and adapted the content to be suitable for secondary school pupils.

Recruiting to the Navigator post was challenging due to the unique skill set required. In the end, a trained counsellor with a teaching background was seconded from Relate into the role.

To establish this as a sustainable service the Navigator is embedded in the wellbeing team with other frontline practitioners (including family support workers, an educational psychologist, and a social worker). She is also training teachers and head teachers to grow their awareness and skills in supporting relationships.

*"One impact of the work has been building trust between different layers of support (ie, teachers and counsellors) and making better connections between them."*

### Working with families

Initially the role was to be limited to providing advice and signposting for practitioners and did not include any direct work with families. However, as some of the families that were referred to counselling services didn't follow up, the Navigator started having initial meetings with some parents to discuss their situation and outline possible support available.

This made clear that working directly with some families was extremely helpful. The Navigator, who is a trained family counsellor was able to take on a small caseload of parents to whom she offers counselling. This helps to ensure that the service does not 'lose' the most vulnerable people due to the delays in referral, or through having to establish a relationship with a different professional.

*"In the beginning it was hard to turn down direct referrals for families. When you introduce delay you lose some families and these may be ones that really need the support. We have now flexed the role to address this. I can only hold a small caseload, but being able to directly offer more intensive support and continuity in the relationship makes a very big difference for some people."*

The role has evolved flexibly during the course of the project to respond to emergent learning. The plan is for this to be a two day per week post, with one and a half days spent on support and advice to professionals and supported conversations with families and half a day on direct counselling.

**SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER GUIDE, DWP/IU/OPO**

EIF Commissioner Guide > 2. What do I need to know about the impact of parental conflict on children?

## 2.9 Which organisations have specialist knowledge about parental conflict?

PAGE 1 OF 3

Although support for the interparental relationship is not yet consistently available to families across the UK, there are strong champions and experts whose knowledge is important to the development of this agenda.

### Evidence & research

- The [Early Intervention Foundation](#) has published a series of reviews on interparental relationships.
  - EIF assesses programmes for their strength of evidence, with results published on the [EIF Guidebook](#).
  - EIF also maintains an online repository of reports and resources at the [Reducing Parental Conflict Hub](#).
- [Professor Gordon Harold](#) and his team at the University of Sussex are a leading source of expertise on child development and the role of the family in children's psychological development.
- Key academics on our steering group for interparental relationships include **Professor Yulia Kovas**, an expert in genetics and psychology at Goldsmiths College; **Professor Stephen Morris**, a specialist in evaluation and prevention science at the Policy Evaluation Research Unit; and **Leslie Leve**, senior fellow scientist at Oregon Social Learning Centre and visiting fellow at the University of Sussex.

### Relationship support specialists

- The Relationship Alliance is a collaboration between four national relationship support organisations designed to help develop and support strong relationships:
  - [Marriage Care](#) provides marriage preparation, counselling and relationship education across over 50 centres and around 100 counselling locations across England, Wales and Gibraltar.
  - [OnePlusOne](#) undertakes research and evaluation, and provides a wide range of digital services to support people with their relationships as well as training for frontline practitioners.

## 2.9 Which organisations have specialist knowledge about parental conflict?

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- [Relate](#) provides face-to-face counselling and mediation services, online information, phone, email and live chat counselling and support, and also undertakes research and campaigning.
- [Tavistock Relationships](#) provides relationship counselling and therapy, policy and research, service development, education programmes, and practitioner training in therapeutic and psycho-educational approaches to supporting couples.
- There are also other services that have a core focus on relationships, or on supporting families' relationships in the context of other issues such as parenting, mental health, family law and practical advice, including [Care for the Family](#), [Gingerbread](#), [Working with Men](#), [Fatherhood Institute](#) and [Mind](#), among others.

### Local areas

- Twelve local authorities have been funded by DWP as Local Family Offer sites, to make relationship support a part of their local arrangements for family support. These sites also have a role as ambassadors to support the wider development of interparental relationship support.

### Government



- There is cross-departmental support for action on couple relationships, across the Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Communities and Local Government, Department for Education and Ministry of Justice. DWP is taking a lead role, as set out in the 'Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families' policy paper, and is the commissioner of the Local Family Offer and a national contract of targeted support for couples in conflict.
- As part of the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme, DWP has created a team of regional advisers to support and challenge local leaders and commissioners to address parental conflict.

EIF Commissioner Guide > 2. What do I need to know about the impact of parental conflict on children?


## 2.9 Which organisations have specialist knowledge about parental conflict?

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### MORE INFORMATION

- DWP: [Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families](#)   
Government policy paper on tackling parental conflict and supporting family relationships.
- EIF: [Local Family Offer areas](#)   
Information about the sites funded by DWP to lead work on reducing the impact of parental conflict on children, and details of the support they offer to other commissioners.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Online hub: [Reducing parental conflict](#)   
Repository of reports and resources from EIF and other organisations on understanding and reducing parental conflict, produced to support DWP's national programme.
- Coming soon: EIF Maturity Matrix on Reducing Parental Conflict  
A self-assessment tool to measure progress in delivering a system-wide approach to reducing the impact of conflict between parents on their children.

## **3. How can I measure the impact of parental conflict and understand local need?**

PAGE 1 OF 1

**This section gives advice on the data and measurement tools that local commissioners can use to better understand the need for relationship support, and the impact of relationship support services on child outcomes.**

**Measurement is one of the most challenging areas identified by commissioners, and there are currently gaps in the readily available data at both national and local levels. We will regularly update this Guide with more tailored tools and advice as further details become available.**



EIF Commissioner Guide > 3. How can I measure parental conflict and understand local need?

## 3.1 What data can I use to understand local needs relating to parental conflict?

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There is a lack of data on the levels of relationship distress at national and local levels. For example, data on separation and divorce does not capture relationship distress in intact couples or those going through separation. Also, measurement of relationship distress needs to consider multiple domains (such as parental relationship quality, parent mental health and parenting) and data on this is not currently available. EIF's view is that there is a need for further research on the risk factors which are predictive of parental conflict and its impact on children, and for these to inform data collection and commissioning.

### National data

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has recently undertaken new analysis as part of its Improving Lives strategy on the levels of couple conflict in England and Wales.

- In its most recent estimates, for 2013/14, the proportion of children living in couple-parent families whose parents had 'distressed relationships' was 11.4%.
- 46.8% of children in separated families did not see their non-resident parent regularly (at least fortnightly).
- 28% of all children living in workless families live with parents in a distressed relationship. This is almost three times higher than for children where both parents are working (10%).

The charity Relate has also estimated that the proportion of intact couples in relationship distress across the UK as around 18% (for 2013/14) via its Relationship Distress Monitor.

## 3.1 What data can I use to understand local needs relating to parental conflict?

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### Local data

There is a lack of data about levels of parental conflict at a local level. This is partly because there is no agreed way of measuring or prioritising aspects of parental relationship distress.

DWP is currently in the process of developing local versions of their indicators, although this will not provide the specifics needed for commissioning purposes. However the analysis by DWP for its Improving Lives strategy highlights other factors that are highly correlated with couple conflict and locally available, so which can be used as proxy measures:

- Poor parental mental health
- Low household income
- Worklessness
- Longstanding illness and/or disability
- Problem debt.

Areas with a high concentration of these factors are likely to have higher levels of relationship distress. You can use this local data to assess the levels of overall risk among your population. You can also use this data to identify and target particular groups within your local population that may be particularly vulnerable.

Local areas can also use data on family breakdown or divorce, and single-parent birth registrations. However, it is important to note the limitations on using these as a proxy for parental conflict, as conflict can damage child outcomes in both intact and separated families.



EIF Commissioner Guide > 3. How can I measure parental conflict and understand local need?

## 3.1 What data can I use to understand local needs relating to parental conflict?




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If parental conflict is to become a more visible issue at a local level, measures and proxies of parental distress and conflict need to become embedded within the tools used to monitor performance and develop local strategy. This means including headline measures of parental relationships within the joint strategic needs assessment, analysing what is known about families and communities that are most vulnerable to destructive parental conflict in the local area. It also means routinely monitoring data on service outputs and target population outcomes as part of local performance and outcome frameworks. This should combine implementation measurement (such as training reach, customer satisfaction rates, practitioner awareness and confidence rates, service capacity, or take-up and drop-out rates) with impact measurement (such as population measures or reduction in prevalence at higher thresholds).

### MORE INFORMATION

- **Relate: [Relationship Distress Monitor](#)**   
Report uses data from the Understanding Society survey to estimate the proportion and number of people nationally who are in distressed relationships.
- **DWP: [Improving lives: Helping Workless Families, Analysis and Research Pack](#)**   
Research pack includes DWP's use of indicators to track the prevalence of parental disadvantages, including parental conflict.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- **Checklist: [Sources for national and local data](#)**   
Source list for national and local data on prevalence of relationship distress indicators, and national data on prevalence of family separation.
- **Data: [Recent national data on prevalence of relationships needs](#)** 
- **Data: [Recent national data on prevalence of family breakdown](#)** 
- **Case study: [Using data to drive a whole family approach, Dorset](#)**

# Case study: Using data to drive a whole family approach, Dorset

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## The local context

When analysing their data, Dorset identified Weymouth and Portland as areas with the highest level of variation in outcomes compared to the rest of the county. Moreover, the rates of children who have additional needs and rates of pupils with behavioural and emotional issues, and the data on teenage pregnancy, ill health and homelessness suggested that families in these areas were experiencing stressors that put significant pressure on couple and co-parenting relationships.

## Working in partnership

Dorset chose to focus the pilot on a specific high-need area, so that they could see clearly the impact of the work and draw out learning for replicating and spreading the approach more widely.

The partnership that was formed to support the pilot included: schools, provider health services, parent carer council, the local authority and the local voluntary and community sector. From their different perspectives, the partners shared a clear understanding that, in order to maximise the impact they each were trying to have on children's outcomes, they needed to work with parents and that the quality of interparental relationships was a very important piece of the jigsaw.

*"We are acutely aware of the fact that negative co-parenting negates the effectiveness of the work of schools. We need to use all of our collective resources to the best effect - and working together creates more value." (Chair, Chesil Education Partnership)*

**SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER GUIDE, DWP/IU/OPO**

## 3.2 What approach should I take to evaluation?

PAGE 1 OF 2

Evaluation should be factored in to any plans to develop or commission services on interparental relationships. Without a suitable evaluation you won't really know if or why new services have worked or had an impact.

This is particularly important in work on interparental relationships because it is a new policy field, and future funding will follow the evidence. Thinking about evaluation before services are actually commissioned is crucial, as you often need to collect data before delivery starts in order to see later if it has had an impact (comparing with the 'pre-delivery baseline') or to adjust how the service is provided so that you can create comparison groups.

The best place to start is to clarify the purpose of your evaluation so that you end up with something that is practical and relevant for your needs. It is unlikely you can evaluate everything so you need to decide:

- **What questions do you want your evaluation to answer?** Are you more interested in the impact a service on families, the process of how it worked, or whether it was value for money?
- **Who is your audience for the evaluation?** Is your evaluation for national policy-makers, senior management in your local authority, or practitioners delivering services on the ground?
- **How will the evaluation be used?** Is the learning to improve your service as it develops, or for accountability to confirm that the funding was put to good use?
- **Over what time period will your evaluation be conducted?** Are the results of the evaluation linked to a short-term schedule for key funding decisions, or can the evaluation run over a longer period and collect different kinds of impact data as a result?
- **What resources do you have for the evaluation work?** Are your resources proportionate to the kind of evaluation you want to do, and is your evaluation cost proportionate to the importance of the service? Will you commission out or self-evaluate? Will pooling resources or staff help to keep costs low? Will you need to allow resources to support intervention providers to collect child outcome data?

EIF Commissioner Guide > 3. How can I measure parental conflict and understand local need?

## 3.2 What approach should I take to evaluation?

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### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [Early intervention into action: Innovation and evaluation](#)   
Includes case studies of local places which have put in place formal evaluation of their early intervention innovations.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Checklist: [Sources of evaluation support](#) 

## 3.3 How can I measure parental conflict and its impact at a family level?

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### What to measure

Measuring how families are affected by local services is essential to determine if they are working for the people they are designed to help. Given the link between couple conflict and child outcomes, it is important to ensure that you are measuring changes for children as well as parents.

It can be challenging to measure interparental relationship distress in families because there are multiple levels: the couple, the individuals (children and parents) and wider family functioning. For example, to understand parent relationships, you may need to measure:

- Parental relationship quality
- Couple conflict and parenting stress
- Parenting and co-parenting
- Mental health for both children and parents.

There are different tools which allow us to measure changes to the above that can determine the progress and success of an intervention. These tools vary from measuring very specific outcomes (such as conflict tactics or hostility in front of children) through to broader outcomes (such as relationship satisfaction). Some measure more than one outcome.

## 3.3 How can I measure parental conflict and its impact at a family level?

### How to measure

Choosing the right measurement tools needs careful thought. Many of the tools currently used with families are chosen because they are free or low-cost, and quick and easy to administer. However, they tend to have weaker psychometric properties, which means they are less valid and reliable, and are not standardised.

- **Standardised measures** allow you to compare your results with typical population scores, or ‘population standards’.
- **Valid measures** are those which have been tested to show that they accurately measure what they are intended to measure.
- **Reliable measures** are those which have been tested to show that they have ‘repeatability’ or consistency, even if used at a different time or by a different person.

The best way to check how things change for families is to use standardised, valid and reliable measurement tools that are also practical, relevant and designed for the specific target users and outcomes you want to assess. They also need to be suitable for the way you collect the data, be this face-to-face, over the phone or by self-completion.

It is also important that the methods are acceptable to your participants. The more tools you use and the longer you use them for, the more robust your data will generally be – but the less likely families are to complete them. Some measures can use unfamiliar language or be too negative, which can be a barrier to families completing them.

Many instruments must be purchased and require licences and training. Those that are free may have conditions attached.

EIF does not currently recommend particular measurement tools, but we plan to develop specific guidance in due course.




EIF Commissioner Guide > 3. How can I measure parental conflict and understand local need?



## 3.3 How can I measure parental conflict and its impact at a family level?

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### MORE INFORMATION

- Family & Parenting Institute: [Knowing what you do works](#)   
A short guide to measuring your own effectiveness with families, parents and children.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Advice: [Selecting measures for different purposes](#) 
- Examples: [Validated measures for parent and child outcomes](#)   
Validated measures used in evaluations of interparental relationship programmes that EIF has assessed and found to be 'evidence-based'.

EIF Commissioner Guide >

## 4. How can I reduce the impact of parental conflict on children in my area?

PAGE 1 OF 1

**This section gives practical information about the steps that commissioners should take to secure evidence-based interventions and workforce support.**

EIF Commissioner Guide > 4. How can I reduce the impact of parental conflict on children in my area?

## 4.1 How can I mobilise my workforce?

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### Ready for change

Relationship support for parents is commonly described as fragmented and largely uncoordinated at a local level, with limited workforce understanding of how seriously parental conflict can affect children or what to do about it.

Making change happen at a local level depends on an interaction between individual, professional and organisational factors which can accelerate or hinder the implementation of a new way of working. You may find it helpful to use one of the tools developed in the field of implementation science to judge readiness for change (see Tools & downloads: Example readiness framework).

### Developing tools and workforce training

An essential first step to setting up new services and interventions to support couple relationships is developing tools and training to help workforces to spot and assess risk on inter-parental conflict. This means that practitioners can then refer families appropriately to the right type of intervention to match their needs. This is an urgent area of future research as the tools and training for workforces are not yet currently available, however the Local Family Offer sites have been piloting innovative ways to build workforce capability. For more details see section 3.3 'How can I measure parental conflict and its impact at a family level' and our summary of training provided by UK services in the Tools & downloads section below.

EIF Commissioner Guide > 4. How can I reduce the impact of parental conflict on children in my area?

## 4.1 How can I mobilise my workforce?

PAGE 2 OF 3

### Mobilising the workforce

Local Family Offer sites have focused on building understanding and confidence among the practitioners who work directly with families, so that they can ask the right questions about relationships.

*“When staff received the training it resonated with them immediately. They were saying that they’d known the couple relationship was important for years. The programme gave staff the opportunity to engage with dads and talk to both partners rather than focusing just on the mum. The workforce have always seen the value of talking about the couple relationship but now they have been given the tools and knowledge to do that; to make changes in how they work. This was not just another training session.”*

FAMILY INTERVENTION TEAM MANAGER, GATESHEAD COUNCIL (SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER RESOURCE PACK, DWP/IU/OPO)

Through our research, EIF identified 19 relationship training services delivered by six different voluntary sector organisations (see Tools & downloads: Training provided by UK services).

*“It was very useful ... To talk about people’s relationships can be quite difficult. But [the training] gave us tools so if they do, you know, if parents are sort of talking that there is an issue, that we don’t just say, “Oh well, you know, I’m sure it’ll work itself out”, you know? Actually we do need to explore that further, and help parents ... I think it definitely changed my approach and my thought processes.”*



HEALTH VISITOR, TRAINED USING ONEPLUSONE BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

EIF Commissioner Guide > 4. How can I reduce the impact of parental conflict on children in my area?





## 4.1 How can I mobilise my workforce?

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### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [Interparental relationship support services available in the UK: Rapid review of evidence](#)   
Report uses a sample of key studies to sketch out the landscape of relationship support services available in the UK.
- EIF: [Exploring parental relationship support: A qualitative study](#)   
Report provides qualitative research on relationship support, mapping current provision and how it is provided.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- EIF sector briefing: [Why parental conflict matters for the NHS](#) 
- Example readiness framework: [EIF](#) 
- Example practitioner toolkit: [Better relationships, better parenting](#), Hertfordshire 
- Summary: [Training provided by UK services](#)   
Based on EIF research in 'Exploring parental relationship support'
- Case study: [Workforce training, Gateshead](#)
- Case study: [Relationship support navigator, Dorset](#)
- Case study: [Training frontline practitioners](#)

## Case study: Workforce training, Gateshead

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Gateshead describe their approach to workforce training as ‘incremental’. They commissioned Tavistock Relationships to provide introductory training to the workforce and more specialist training to a group of specialist practitioners.

### Raising awareness

Think Couple training was delivered to 57 practitioners from the family intervention team, health visiting, safeguarding & care planning, youth offending team, family group conference service, Children’s Centres and the Positive Pathways team. The one-day relationship awareness raising training helps participants to develop their knowledge about family relationships, including conflict and attachment, and introduces them to ways of identifying and responding to relationship problems.

The majority of participants reported increased knowledge about relationship issues and greater confidence in working effectively with couples following the training. They were keen to look at how they could use the training in their everyday work with families. Practitioners were aware that their work tended to be focussed around mothers; they wanted to challenge this and become more inclusive of fathers. Just over half of respondents were hoping to use what they had learnt in their teaching or supervisory practice, ensuring that they used their learning in supporting their staff. The majority of staff felt they would benefit from greater skills development to complement the knowledge base they had acquired.

### Couple conflict training

Training on ‘Couple Conflict’ was delivered to a small group of more specialist practitioners, over half of whom work in specialist domestic violence and abuse services. The course is designed to help practitioners to develop their capacity to think relationally about couple conflict, intimate partner violence and abuse. The course was deliberately designed to challenge practitioners to think about working differently with couples involved in domestic violence and abuse and adopt more relational approaches where appropriate and safe. Gateshead report seeing a change in the culture of working with some of their higher need families. This has also generated greater debate among Local Authority leads and workforce about approaches to domestic violence.

*“We see more practitioners working with couples not on the basis of how the practitioner wants things to be but on the basis of what the family wants, assessing the relationship dynamics in depth, enabling and encouraging couples to be open and honest about the nature of their relationship and work with them as a couple rather than just separating them” (Team Manager, Family Intervention Team, Gateshead Council).*

### Looking ahead

Gateshead plan to build on the significant progress they have made with workforce development and train staff in Parents as Partners (individual family approach), Incredible Years (baby care) and Standard Teen Triple P (parenting teenagers). They will also develop the skills of management staff through training in supervising and and developing ‘relational practitioners’.

**SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER GUIDE, DWP/IU/OPO**

## Case study: Relationship support navigator, Dorset

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Dorset created a Relationship Support Navigator role, whose main aim is to advise a range of practitioners in directing parents to the appropriate level of support. The post is co-funded by the local authority and the Chesil Education Partnership.

The Navigator's role is to raise awareness in school staff about the importance of providing support to parents around relationships, to build their skills and confidence in responding to issues and knowing where to refer people for more help.

*"Teachers are busy people. Looking after the emotional health and wellbeing of parents is not the only thing they have to do. This role has made it possible for professionals to work more as a team, and it has strengthened trust between teachers and parents."* (Relationships Navigator, Chesil Education Partnership)

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Recruiting to the Navigator post was challenging due to the unique skill set required. In the end, a trained counsellor with a teaching background was seconded from Relate into the role.

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*"One impact of the work has been building trust between different layers of support (ie, teachers and counsellors) and making better connections between them."*

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This made clear that working directly with some families was extremely helpful. The Navigator, who is a trained family counsellor was able to take on a small caseload of parents to whom she offers counselling. This helps to ensure that the service does not 'lose' the most vulnerable people due to the delays in referral, or through having to establish a relationship with a different professional.

*"In the beginning it was hard to turn down direct referrals for families. When you introduce delay you lose some families and these may be ones that really need the support. We have now flexed the role to address this. I can only hold a small caseload, but being able to directly offer more intensive support and continuity in the relationship makes a very big difference for some people."*

The role has evolved flexibly during the course of the project to respond to emergent learning. The plan is for this to be a two day per week post, with one and a half days spent on support and advice to professionals and supported conversations with families and half a day on direct counselling.

**SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER GUIDE, DWP/IU/OPO**

## Case study: Training frontline practitioners

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Many practitioners lack the confidence and skills to spot and respond to relationship difficulties between parents. To help parents develop a more constructive way of managing their conflict, OnePlusOne has developed several training programmes for frontline practitioners.

The training aims to equip practitioners to help raise parents' awareness of the impact of conflict on children and help them to understand how to reduce these potentially harmful effects.

### Difficulties for families

Frontline practitioners often come into contact with parents struggling with their relationship:

*'We have several families with issues around their relationship ... Problems with finances, housing etc are adding pressure for couples, and we're seeing more and more couples coming with problems around relationship issues.'* (Family Support Worker)

*'Mum is a single parent, Dad lives locally. The split remains acrimonious between the parents, with the children often being drawn into conflicts and expected to take a position against the other parent. Resentments are now surfacing in the relationship between mother and daughter ... and the daughter is becoming more closed to her.'* (Family Worker)

### Training practitioners

A one-day training course, Brief Encounters®, helps practitioners to recognise when people are experiencing relationship difficulties, how to respond effectively, and review the need for further support.

*'I think it's helped me to feel more confident in addressing it, asking how they are, how's their relationship, and having the skills for doing that sensitively.'* (Family Support Worker)

*'I'm more and more aware now that if we want to support children, we have to support their parents and their relationship issues. I think the course gave me more confidence and a few*

*more strategies ... with a little bit of understanding you can signpost people to different services.'* (Family Support worker)

Another one-day training programme, How to Argue Better, focuses on helping parents to manage their conflict better through a 'Stop', 'Talk it out' and 'Work it out' approach. It uses behaviour modelling videos of family scenarios to show how conflict can be destructive and how these same situations can be resolved more constructively.

*'One activity I found particularly useful in my practice in working with parent-to-parent conflict is the hidden issues. Reflecting on what maybe going on, under the surface ... and restricting your response to open the way to try new approaches.'* (Family Worker)

### How this helps families

Practitioners used the training and accompanying resources to help parents adopt solution-focused approaches to parental conflict and to practise new ways of managing their differences. They shared examples of where parents benefitted from their increased learning and confidence with relationship difficulties:

*'It helped Mum to reflect upon and understand the pressures facing her daughter [around her parents' separation] ... and left her open to explore ways to change her approach to communicating with her. We have planned further sessions so that Mum can explore her conflict style.'* (Family Worker)

*'I got to talk to [the practitioner] on a couple of occasions when I felt there really was no way forward ... I was able to see things better from my partner's point of view, without the heated discussion. It made things seem clearer and I definitely felt more supported.'* (Parent)

**SOURCE: ONEPLUSONE**



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## 4.2 How can I choose evidence-based interventions to match my local needs?

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Introducing evidence-based interventions into a new context is not straightforward – it takes time and careful planning. Just because an intervention has reported evidence that it has worked elsewhere doesn't mean that it will be a good fit with your local context, or that it will be easy to implement. Some programmes have been developed in other parts of the world, and there may be no expertise and support available in the UK. The training on which the intervention depends may only be available in another country.

So, rather than starting with a list of programmes which have previously shown somewhere else that they can improve couple relationships and child outcomes, you should start with a detailed understanding of your local place.

- **Focus on the people you are seeking to help:** Who are they? What do you know about their needs? Why are they vulnerable? How many of them are there? Where do they live?
- **Identify how you currently interact with them:** What kind of public services do they already receive? Do public services find them hard to reach? Do public services currently work well together with these families, use common processes, and manage change well?
- **Review the current pathway of support available to support the interparental relationship, at different levels of need:** How do you currently identify and support parents who are vulnerable to parental conflict? Is that support sufficient and specific to the needs that you have identified? Do you have hard data on how much difference the current steps in the pathway make for families? Does your pathway offer alternatives to widen reach? Do you have gaps or weaknesses?

Only then will you be ready to look at evidence-based programmes and interventions, and whether they match up well with what you need.

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## 4.2 How can I choose evidence-based interventions to match my local needs?

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### Universal versus targeted

EIF uses the following classifications to group interventions that are assessed for the Guidebook and in its published reviews:

- **Universal:** Refers to interventions that are available to all children or families. These activities may take place alongside or as part of other universal services, including health visiting, schools or children's centres.
- **Targeted selective:** Applies to services that target or 'select' children or families that may be at greater risk of experiencing problems. For example, selected children or families may include those struggling with economic hardship, single parents, young parents or ethnic minorities.
- **Targeted indicated:** Refers to a smaller percentage of the population of families with a child or parent with a pre-identified issue or diagnosed problem requiring more intensive support.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- EIF evidence assessments of programmes with a focus on interparental relationships: [EIF Guidebook](#) 

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## 4.3 What interventions can reduce parental conflict and improve child outcomes?

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There is strong evidence that interparental relationships are crucial to children's outcomes and development. Despite this, the evidence about interventions and what works to improve parental relationships is still at an early stage. The majority of interventions which have robust evidence come from outside the UK, and many lack of evidence of how they improve child (rather than parent or couple) outcomes. There are, however, a growing number of interventions that have shown that they can be effective in improving relationship quality and child outcomes.

### **Interventions identified in EIF What Works reviews (but not yet assessed against EIF evidence standards)**

EIF's reviews have identified a range of interventions in the UK or internationally (see Tools & downloads: Summary of programmes). Our 2016 review identified 28 international interventions that target the couple relationship, many of which were underpinned by robust evidence using randomised control trials (RCTs), including:

- 8 interventions targeting intact families
- 5 interventions targeting intact families at key transition points, such as new parenthood
- 8 interventions targeting parent separation or divorce
- 3 couple interventions with an additional component on parenting skills or vice versa
- 1 intervention targeting the effects of domestic violence on children
- 3 interventions that were prevention-based, targeting couples who were not yet experiencing any relationship problems.

Our 2017 review on interparental relationships in the context of poverty and economic pressure identified 13 relevant programmes. Many of these were underpinned by RCTs, and almost all were international interventions, with only one having an established UK evidence-base.

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## 4.3 What interventions can reduce parental conflict and improve child outcomes?

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They include:

- 8 interventions that focus directly on the couple relationship in contexts of economic pressure. Couple-focused interventions work directly with couples to improve the quality of the relationship.
- 5 parenting interventions with a couple component, in contexts of economic pressure. Parenting programmes with a couple component are primarily concerned with improving the quality of parenting, but include a component focusing on improving the couple relationship.

It is important to note that while our What Works review identified that many of the international interventions appear to have undergone robust evaluation, we have not yet formally assessed their strength of evidence against EIF's standards and therefore cannot comment on their effectiveness.

Also, some of the above interventions only have evidence of improving couple or adult outcomes and do not yet have evidence concerning outcomes for children. This does not necessarily mean that these interventions do not improve child outcomes, but that they may be in the early stages of developing their evidence.

### Interventions assessed against EIF's evidence standards

We have assessed a smaller number of programmes against EIF's evidence standards. Six of these are included in the EIF Guidebook because they have demonstrated an impact on child outcomes (meeting the threshold for an EIF evidence rating of 2 or higher), including reduced couple conflict and improved parental wellbeing, child behaviour and attachment. Of these six programmes, one focuses directly on the couple relationship and five are parenting programmes with a couple component.

As part of EIF's 2016 review, 15 UK interventions on interparental relationships went through the EIF programme assessment process, of which 14 were not found to meet the threshold for EIF level 2 for child outcomes. In many cases, this was because they had not yet been evaluated for impact on child outcomes, even though some had evidence of impact on couple or adult outcomes.

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## 4.3 What interventions can reduce parental conflict and improve child outcomes?



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### Considerations for commissioners



Evidence that a programme has worked in the past is important but not sufficient to guarantee similar results in a different location. Commissioners have to balance the strength of evidence with consideration of other factors such as implementation capability, fit with local context, cost–benefit analysis, and an understanding of your local population needs (see section 4.2). Interventions that are yet to collect robust evidence that they have a positive causal impact on parents and children may nonetheless be an important part of a local support pathway where there is an appropriate evaluation in place.

EIF reviews have predominately looked at non-violent conflict between parents and recommended programmes suitable for this context. We have not reviewed the evidence for interventions appropriate for use in high-risk contexts where the relationship is violent or abusive.

### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [Standards of evidence](#)   
Find out more about the evidence ratings at the heart of EIF's assessments.
- EIF: [What is 'good evidence'?](#)   
Briefing sets out the characteristics of rigorous evidence.

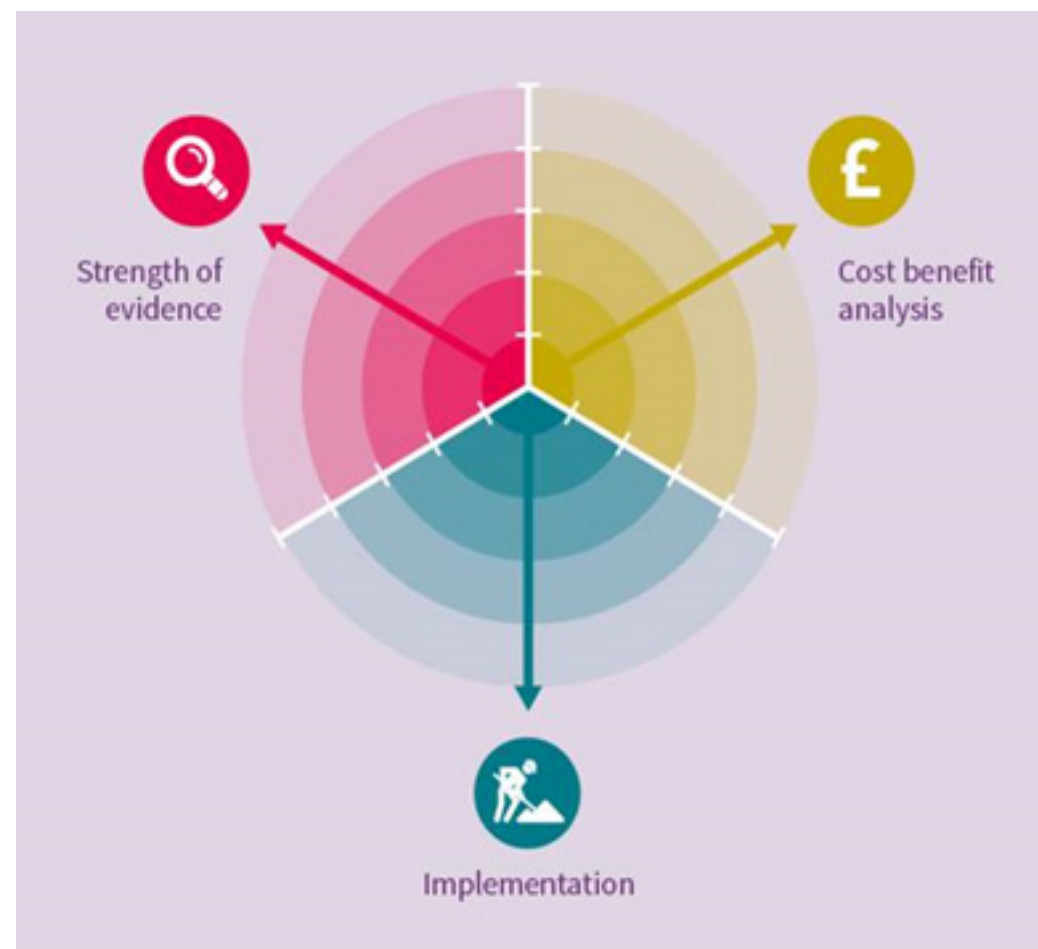
### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Programme assessments: [EIF Guidebook](#) 
- Infographic: [Three aspects of strategic commissioning](#)  
Balancing evidence, implementation and value for money.
- Summary: [Programmes that target the couple relationship](#) 

## Infographic: Three aspects of strategic commissioning

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- 1. Strength of evidence** provides insight as to whether a programme has previously been found to improve outcomes for children.
- 2. Implementation** concerns both the extent to which a programme's implementation requirements are clearly specified by the programme developer, and the readiness for change of local partners.
- 3. Cost-benefit analysis** of local implementation and impact assesses whether the likely results for families are sufficient to meet the local community need and justify the investment cost required.



## 4.4 How do I match an intervention with my local context?

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Evidence can show that an intervention has worked previously, but is no guarantee that it will work in the future in a different place with a different population. As a commissioner you will have to judge whether a particular intervention is a good match for your local context and therefore likely to work for your population.

### 10 things to consider

1. How well will the intervention synchronise with current local pathways of parenting, relationships and family support? For example, if you are already using Triple P or Incredible Years with families, it may be more practical to extend the use of these to focus more strongly on parental conflict than to introduce a new intervention which feels separate and different both for families and practitioners.

*“Evidence-based interventions are only a part of the local offer – a mixed offer is required to ensure the right support is provided to customers.”*

LOCAL FAMILY OFFER NETWORK

2. Is the intervention sufficiently different to existing support available and so likely to add value? Are you clear about what you are trying to achieve and the gap that this intervention will plug?
3. Does the intervention use a language and tone which translates well to your context and families? Does it feel culturally appropriate to the families for whom it is needed?
4. Does the methodology for delivering the intervention work well in your context? For example if the intervention is delivered through an network of community centres do you have appropriate facilities and are families likely to travel to these? Or is an intervention which can be embedded in the practice of a home visiting service more likely to reach your target population because of distance and public transport issues?

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## 4.4 How do I match an intervention with my local context?

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5. Are your current screening, assessment and referral processes sufficiently robust to identify the families who are the target population for this intervention?

*“Requires quality referrals, not just a tick list – this means practitioners having sufficient time to refer effectively and appropriately.”*

LOCAL FAMILY OFFER NETWORK

6. Given the stigma in seeking help for relationship conflict, is there a culture of trust between the families you want to target and public services or do you need a step before the intervention to build trust and confidence?

*“Support before and after intervention so people are not left cold after gaining support.”*

LOCAL FAMILY OFFER NETWORK

7. Does your workforce currently have the skills and capacity to deliver this intervention with training, or are you generally able to recruit to the roles required for this intervention?

*“Identify the right people to train and think about a sustained career development pathway to reduce natural wastage of people trained.”*

LOCAL FAMILY OFFER NETWORK

8. How important is fidelity for this intervention? If there a history locally of adapting interventions (for example, by broadening or changing the target population or adapting the content around local skills and interests) this could undermine an intervention that requires a high level of fidelity. Some approaches permit a greater degree of local adaptation than others.

*“Is there any flexibility around delivery in the local context without losing the credibility of the intervention?”*

LOCAL FAMILY OFFER NETWORK



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## 4.4 How do I match an intervention with my local context?

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9. If the intervention is less well evidenced, it will require more investment in evaluation to test and learn at a local level. Is this kind of evaluation infrastructure in place locally, or would it make more sense to invest in a more established and evidence based intervention?
10. Some interventions can be complex and time consuming to implement, and expensive to sustain. Do you know what capacity and resources you will need for successful implementation? Do you have what you will need? How thorough, straightforward and easy to access is developer implementation support for this intervention? Do you have the resources to sustain delivery of this intervention?

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Case study: [Adapting delivery, Newcastle](#)

## Case study: Adapting delivery, Newcastle

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Newcastle paid particular attention to the conditions that enable families to access support quickly once their need has been identified. They learned that, in order to access the support available, some families need a considerable amount of help.

*“Just getting mum to attend her appointment with a counsellor required a lot of work. We had to help her deal with her anxiety and supporting her to access the service became the priority. It is of no use having a great service if for whatever reason people are not going to be able to access it.”*  
(Family Support Worker, Newcastle)

They made a concerted effort to fit their service offer around families who have multiple and complex needs, often involved with multiple services and often in crisis. In practice, this meant anything from ensuring that conversations could take place in the most appropriate spaces to arranging transport and childcare, from sending reminder texts to timing interventions to fit with family commitments.

*“Making that pathway work has been a priority. We have been constantly refining and honing the service, responding to families’ needs to make it as smooth as possible. This means complex logistics: from transport, to childcare, timing and communication around the interactions.”*  
(CEO, Relate Newcastle)

When asked about top learning and tips on ensuring that pathways to support are as smooth as possible, they mentioned:

- Getting the practical logistical processes right.  
*“The smallest omission can mean precious support resource is wasted. Transport and childcare cut down attrition and barriers to a family taking up support”.*
- Some handholding for families from a practitioner they know as part of assessment and review makes it much more likely that families will take up support.
- Training for frontline practitioners should enable them to provide some support and to refer when necessary, as opposed to systematically defaulting to referrals.
- Good communication between teams is key to smooth and effective referrals and integrated support.
- A steering group can play a very important role in leading the development and adaptation of the service in response to emergent learning.

**SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER GUIDE, DWP/IU/OPO**

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## 4.5 How can I persuade my stakeholders to engage on interparental relationships?

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Those involved in delivering family services often instinctively recognise the importance of parental relationships to outcomes for children, but this has not led to the issue being prioritised in family services. Twelve local areas funded by DWP to deliver a Local Family Offer have explored how to persuade stakeholders to engage.

**1. Use the evidence:** The evidence about the impact on children of the quality of their parents' relationship is compelling.

*"The evidence on interparental relationships dropped like a very large penny. Before, if you had asked 'Do you think it's a good idea for parents to shout and swear at each other in front of their children?' most people would have answered 'no'. But their answer would have been based on ideas of common decency rather than on science. Now we have clear evidence that this is actually damaging to child development. It means we can say for example to GPs 'doing something about parental conflict is your business as much as tackling smoking in the household is. Its impact on children is as harmful, both in terms of direct outcomes and in terms of learnt behaviour."*

DIRECTOR OF TRANSFORMATION, NEWCASTLE COUNCIL (SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER RESOURCE PACK, DWP/IU/OPO)

**2. Use your data:** Local data as part of a local needs assessment helps to make the evidence story feel very specific to a local place, and demonstrate the practical relationship between parental conflict and local demand for family support, mental health and social care services.

*"We are having conversations with partner schools that are informed by this data - these are feedback rather than performance management conversations. Professionals tell us that having access to this information helps them work better in partnership with other agencies. They say they now know what they need to do and don't need to refer to other professionals. They are talking together rather than referring to each other."*

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE MANAGER, DORSET COUNTY COUNCIL (SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER RESOURCE PACK, DWP/IU/OPO)

**3. Make the fiscal case:** The budgetary cost of acute 'late intervention' associated with the impact of parental conflict can be a powerful advocacy tool (see More information below), particularly as the burden falls across the whole public sector, from schools and the NHS to local authorities and the police. Cost-benefit analysis of specific interventions can also demonstrate the financial potential of intervening early to resolve parental conflict.

## 4.5 How can I persuade my stakeholders to engage on interparental relationships?

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- 4. Make it real:** Simple and clear messages about the real family impact of parental conflict are hugely powerful. Audiences from strategic leaders to families themselves are more likely to commit to action if they can see practical and real examples, family stories, case studies, and scenarios that they recognise from their experience.
- 5. Focus on leaders:** Parental conflict should be an issue of strategic importance at a local level, which means making the case for change to strategic leaders through partnership bodies like the health and wellbeing boards, schools forums, local authority elected member committees and safeguarding boards, and getting senior leaders in turn to champion and lead this agenda.

*“Somebody at the strategic level has to want it, they have to be persuaded that this is the answer to many of the problems they need to solve.”*

DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT, TAVISTOCK RELATIONSHIPS (SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER RESOURCE PACK, DWP/IU/OPO)

- 6. Use contracting levers:** Local authority and clinical commissioning group commissioners should use procurement levers to raise the profile of interparental relationships, for example establishing expectations about workforce knowledge, reporting requirements or use of specific assessment processes in contracts for midwifery, health visiting, children’s centres, wider adult and child emotional wellbeing services and parenting support services.
- 7. Embed in wider strategic planning:** Parental conflict has a wide impact on the health and wellbeing of children and families, and so must be embedded across the local service transformation agenda, showing local links with agendas like Troubled Families, safeguarding, mental health, maternity transformation, and health and social care integration.

*“We sited the programme of work in a strategy that has a lot of energy and focus from the top strategic level right down to the operational level.”*



LUTON FLYING START PROGRAMME MANAGER (SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER RESOURCE PACK, DWP/IU/OPO)

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## 4.5 How can I persuade my stakeholders to engage on interparental relationships?

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### MORE INFORMATION

- EIF: [The cost of late intervention: EIF analysis 2016](#)   
Report highlights high cost of late intervention and distribution of costs across services and departments.
- EIF: [Making an early intervention business case: Checklist and recommendations for cost–benefit analysis](#)   
Guidance document provides criteria to help local commissioners and finance leads assess the robustness of their early intervention cost–benefit analysis.

### TOOLS & DOWNLOADS

- Video: [Parental conflict: The impact on children and how local authorities can help](#)   
This short film by the Innovation Unit sets out the evidence around parental conflict and shares the experiences of two of the pilot places in the Local Family Offer programme.
- Slide deck: [Parental conflict: The impact on children](#)   
This ‘case for change’ slide deck is part of the resource pack provided by the Innovation Unit for creating a Local Family Offer.
- [Opportunity Assessment Tool](#)   
Innovation Unit resource used by Local Family Offer sites to engage with their local data and make sense of the local case for change.
- Case study: [Using data to target services, Croydon](#)

## Case study: Using data to target services, Croydon

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Croydon's Opportunity Assessment highlighted high levels of unemployment, low pay and homelessness. Mindful of the evidence that links relationship conflict and financial or housing stress, Croydon saw the potential to identify families most at risk of relationship difficulties through their Gateway service.

Gateway is Croydon's one-stop shop delivering housing, welfare, employment and debt support services via the council's 'front door'.

With the help of their data analysis team Croydon were able to identify the number of families in contact with Gateway who may be at risk of relationship difficulties as a result of financial and housing pressures and made a strong case for including relationships in their assessment of family needs as part of Gateway's 'brief'.

They found that out of the 10,000 families known to Gateway in 2015/2016 (which includes just under 20,000 children) 2,676 families were in receipt of income related benefits such as income support, employment support allowance or jobseekers allowance.

A further 900 families were in arrears to the council and more than 800 households containing over 1,800 children were expected to be affected by the benefit cap. 1,680 households approach the council as homeless annually. Croydon's experience highlighted how families in temporary accommodation were also often involved in social care and vulnerable to family instability.

Identifying a clear target group also meant Croydon could build effective monitoring processes into its systems to assess the impact of its LFO programme on families making use of Gateway's service.

*"We want to create opportunities for our services to come together and provide support around a family rather than from separate perspectives. We are working towards a whole system approach, where all parts of the system work effectively together with the family at the heart of services."* (Director for Gateway and Welfare, Croydon Council)

**SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER GUIDE, DWP/IU/OPO**