

- the Early Intervention Foundation, the Education Endowment Foundation and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence should recognise in their publications and guidance the impact which the quality of parental or co-parenting relationships has on children's outcomes; such a recognition would be of great significance in helping to cement the importance of the parental couple relationship in early years approaches;
- Commissioners of Early Years services and Children's Centres should include, specifically within contracts, a requirement that work within such settings includes the capacity to work effectively with the parental or co-parenting couple and that such work is measured as to its effectiveness with a standardised, reliable measure such as the Parenting Alliance Measure or equivalent.

The role of children's centres in supporting parental relationships

- The Relationships Alliance believes that strong and stable couple, family and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society.
- Relationship health is an essential part of the UK's economic recovery – relationship breakdown will cost the UK £46 billion this year alone, an unsustainable figure.
- Good quality personal and social relationships are central to our health and well-being.
- The quality of people's relationships is an important 'social asset', yet one that is often ignored or undermined by public policy.

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SUMMARY

- The Relationships Alliance believes that strong and stable couple, family and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society.
- Relationship health is an essential part of the UK's economic recovery – relationship breakdown will cost the UK £46 billion this year alone, an unsustainable figure.
- Good quality personal and social relationships are central to our health and well-being.
- The quality of people's relationships is an important 'social asset', yet one that is often ignored or undermined by public policy.

Background

In July 2013, the Government consulted on its proposals to introduce “a new core purpose for children's centres” which would entail “a stronger focus on school readiness and supporting families”. This new core purpose was to include:

- Child development and school readiness - supporting communication, emotional, physical and social development so children start school confident and able to learn.
- Parenting aspirations and parenting skills - helping parents to maximise their skills and give their children the best start.
- Child and family health and life chances - promoting good physical and mental health for children and their parents, including addressing risk factors early on.

In December 2013 the Education Committee stated in a report that it considered the proposed core new purpose to be “too vague and broadly worded and should be reviewed to focus on achievable outcomes for children and families and to recognise the difference between centres. This should include reaching clarity on who centres are for—children or parents—and what their priority should be” (Education Committee, 2013).

It is clear therefore that there has been, and remains, some disagreement and disquiet in policy circles about what children's centres should focus on (indeed the Education Committee were sufficiently unhappy with the Government's response to its report that it recalled the Minister to provide fresh evidence).

It is against this backdrop that the Relationships Alliance is publishing this briefing on an aspect of children's centre

work which neither the Government nor the Education Committee has paid sufficient attention to, that of the importance of couple relationships to children's outcomes and the role of children's centres in supporting this.

Why should supporting parental couple relationships be a core part of what children's centres do?

In recent years, a number of organisations have argued that parenting approaches need to pay more attention to the quality of the relationship between parents and not just on the individual mother/child or father/child relationship.

For example, the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships has argued that “it is the nature and quality of the relating that takes place between the parental couple which has the most profound effect on the outcomes, behaviour and development of children. Failure either to recognise this, or to tailor programmes to meaningfully address it, means that a great deal of well-intentioned activity is undertaken with parents which is far less beneficial to those parents than they might suspect” (TCCR, 2011); while the Wave Trust has put forward the view that: “It is important to look beyond those studies that focus only on the relationship between mothers and their young children, because these do not cover the whole picture. For example, the strength of the relationship between parents, as well as relationships

between children and their parents, can have a significant impact on young children's development. Studies also identify a number of protective factors that can minimise the effects of children's adjustment to family breakdown. These include competent and warm parenting, parents' good mental health, low parental conflict, cooperative parenting post separation and social support" (Wave Trust, 2013).

In addition, a number of organisations have called for the children centre model to be modified so that it can incorporate a wider, family and relationships-focused remit. For example, the Centre for Social Justice has suggested that children's centres should become family hubs which "focus on the stability and quality of family relationships – including couple and parent-child relationship – to prevent breakdown or minimise the impact of instability, where it occurs, on children's welfare" (Centre for Social Justice, 2014). In a similar vein, the Innovation Unit has suggested that: "Children's centres could be renamed as Centres for Children and Families. Such a change would indicate an increased focus on supporting families to support their children. Staff in the new Centres for Children and Families will need to deepen their engagement with families" (Innovation Unit, 2010).

That children's centres should become entities which might be better described as Family Centres, Family Relationship Centres or Family Hubs is something which the Relationships Alliance supports; indeed, we are encouraged that children's centres in Plymouth, Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire are already starting to move toward this concept.

Core members of the Relationships Alliance have experience, in different ways, of making this more of a reality than simply an aspiration, and brief descriptions of these organisations' experience are provided as case studies below. In addition, an outline of the Australian model is included.

Relationship support as a core function of children's centres – some case studies

1 Relate - Derby and Southern Derbyshire

Relate has been working in children's centres for a number of years, delivering a range of services including relationship counselling, IAPT couple counselling for depression, psychosexual therapy, family counselling, and children and young people's counselling. The families seen by Relate staff working in these centres include those with the most complex of needs, such as those who have a large number of children and who are struggling to cope with significant long term and complex issues – including domestic abuse, substance misuse, depression and chaotic life styles.

Families benefit from the offer of services from children centres in numerous ways, including:

- location (the location of most children's centres means that Relate can offer services within a local community that is fully accessible to the local residents);
- awareness-raising (the fact that the centres are often a hub for local activities means that Relate can easily raise awareness of its services), and
- networking and referrals (informal networking about possible referrals ensures that help can be provided to couples and families more effectively and at the right time for them; furthermore, referrers become more knowledgeable and informed about the counselling services on offer).

The majority of clients who attend counselling at a children's centre would have been highly unlikely to self-refer into Relate's general services at its own centres, often because of lack of funds or a reluctance to travel outside of their local community or to an unfamiliar location.

2 The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships - training frontline staff

TCCR offers a foundation level and an advanced level courses for children centre and early year's leadership staff. These courses are underpinned by a substantial body of evidence demonstrating the importance of the couple relationship on adult and child mental health on children's lifetime outcomes, and on the physical and mental health of patients and their families (Cowan and Cowan, 2002; Harold and Leve, 2012); along with evidence of the increasing risk of anxiety and depression, aggression, hostility and anti-social behaviour from sustained inter-parental conflict (Cummings and Davies, 2002; Harold et al., 2004).

These courses look at:

- Identifying couple distress within family problems
- Teaching the evidence base around family conflict and impacts on children
- Understanding referral pathways
- Father inclusiveness
- Skills training including mentalization approaches
- Tools and measures to demonstrate value and effectiveness
- Maintaining a couple state of mind: holding both partners' points of view and developing an even handed approach
- How to think about partner dissatisfaction and conflict in attachment terms
- The importance of supervision, supervisory triangles (client-worker-supervisor relationships) and how to manage organisational dynamics, demands and requirements.

3 OnePlusOne

The aims of OnePlusOne's 'Relationship support: an Early Intervention' training programme are to enable frontline practitioners to:

- Recognise relationship difficulties,
- Respond using active listening skills and solution focused techniques in a time managed way, and
- Review the need for further support.

Based on the charity's Brief Encounters® model, this training programme encourages frontline professionals to consider the client's relationship whilst still operating on their initial agenda (whether this is education, health or housing for example). Becoming relationally minded may often help with the presenting problems (such as health, for example) as relationship issues may underlie these.

Research on the Brief Encounters® with health visitors (Simons et al., 2001) has shown a three-fold rise in mothers identified as needing relationship support (21% of the 459 mothers in the intervention sites compared to 5% of the 502 from the control sites), a five-fold increase in the percentage actually offered help (18% versus 3% respectively) and a doubling of the numbers of mothers discussing relationship problems with their health visitor.

A separate randomised control trial of 'Relationship Support: An Early Intervention' with children's centre staff (Coleman et al., 2014) showed this blended (online and face-to-face) training to have had a large and positive impact on how staff responded and how they had handled conversations with parents about their relationship difficulties. Children centre workers who had received the training were more than twice as likely as those in the control group to be confident in knowing both where and how to refer parents on for further support. The training also increased the likelihood of offering equivalent support in the future.

4 Family Relationship Centres - Australia

Australia would appear to offer the UK an interesting model. Its network of 65 centrally-funded family relationship centres provides a source of information and confidential assistance for families at all stages in their lives. The centres have a focus on relationship support, including providing family dispute resolution (mediation) to enable separating families achieve workable parenting arrangements outside the Court system.

These centres aim to assist:

- couples about to be married to get information and referral to pre-marriage education
- families wanting to improve their relationships to get information and referral to other services that can help strengthen relationships
- families having relationship difficulties to get information and referral to other services that can assist them to work through their issues
- separated parents to resolve disputes and reach agreement on parenting arrangements outside the court system where appropriate, through child-focused information, advice and family dispute resolution, as well as referral to other services
- separated parents whose arrangements have broken down or whose court orders have been breached, to resolve the issue outside the court system where possible and appropriate, through information, advice, referral and family dispute resolution
- grandparents and other extended family members affected by a family separation through information, advice, referral or family dispute resolution services, and families to achieve effective resolution of more complex family separation issues through closer linkages with the courts, legal assistance providers and other services within the family law system (DSS, 2011).

Policy recommendations

It was encouraging that the All Party Parliamentary Groups for Sure Start Children's Centres, Strengthening Couple Relationships, and Conception to Age 2: The First 1001 Days held a joint meeting recently at which there was a great deal of support for the concept of embedding relationship support within the work of children's centres.

To make this a reality however, the Relationships Alliance believes that:

- as the Department responsible for both children's centres and relationship support, the Department for Education should play the lead role in making the provision of support for parental and co-parenting relationships a core function of children's centre work;
- the Department for Education should, given the research demonstrating the impact of parental and co-parenting relationship quality on children's outcomes, also explore the case for children's centres being developed into Family Relationships Centres (or similar);
- the training of the early years workforce (including health visitors, children's centre managers and workers) should include a mandatory component covering the impact of the couple relationship on child mental health and on children's lifetime outcomes as well as techniques which the early years workforce can use to 'think couple' and help support the couple and co-parenting relationships of parents they work with; the current state of affairs – whereby frontline workers in children's centres effectively only work with 50% of the parenting resource which a child has – is unacceptable, and the relevant bodies responsible for curriculum planning for these professions should address this as a matter of urgency;