



**Joint meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Groups on Strengthening Couple Relationships,
Sure Start Children's Centres, and Conception to Age 2 – The First 1001 Days**

Tuesday 11th March 2014

Summary

Opening Remarks

Andrea Leadsom MP (Chair of the *APPG on Sure Start Children's Centres* and the *APPG on Conception to Age 2 – The First 1001 Days*) opened the session by noting that strong couple relationships were vital to enabling children to achieve the best outcomes. She stated that her passion was for Children's Centres to be the pivotal point for providing support for the very earliest period in a baby's life, and that her focus with both APPGs was ensuring that help was in place to enable secure attachment between parent their child.

Andrew Selous MP (Chair of the *APPG on Strengthening Couple Relationships*) added his initial remarks, saying it was great to see the three APPGs working together – it was important for all parties to work together to strengthen family relationships, as happened in other countries such as Australia and the US. He also noted that the Government was putting £30m into marriage and relationship support over four years, and there had been positive evaluations of these programmes by the DfE, with some figures showing an £11.50 return for every £1 spent.

Anne Longfield (AL), 4Children

AL delivered an introductory speech to start the session, explaining that 4Children been administering the *APPG on Sure Start Children's Centres* since its inception, and welcoming the opportunity to have a strong debate about support for families and relationships. 4Children's most recent "Children's Centre Census" had found that over a million families were now using Children's Centres, including around two-thirds of vulnerable families, and Centres represented a major piece of infrastructure for reaching families. Indeed, at the last meeting of the *APPG on Sure Start Children's Centres* the Minister for Education and Childcare, Elizabeth Truss MP, had described Centres as "a key part of what it means to be a parent and a child in this country". AL emphasised that the Centre network was now there to be built on, and will be what we make it.

AL said that Centres represent a key mechanism for enabling all kinds of professionals to come together and support families in a joined-up way. She also referred to the Government's response to the Education Select Committee's report on Sure Start [published the previous day

on Monday 10th March], saying this brought welcome support for Children's Centres and their role in the new infrastructure, but urging everyone to be bold in their ambitions for Centres. Returning to 4Children's Census figures, AL added that over a quarter of Centres said that they will be involved in the provision of relationship support services over the coming year, which was really important building block for this sort of provision. She also noted that 4Children is now involved in a kite-mark scheme for support to help parents collaborate after separation.

AL said that when couple relationships go wrong it has a very negative effect on the children involved – in some areas, around 80% of families targeted by the “Troubled Families” programme have encountered relationship difficulties, which sometimes ran over into domestic violence. She suggested that early intervention was an important theme for discussion, and that Children's Centres had a key ongoing role in this regard, but there was also an opportunity work with older children to drive intergenerational change. Some of 4Children's Centres had also been able to develop their role, and act as a hub for wider support within the community – there was real potential to co-ordinate and bring different services together to help families in a much more integrated way. AL argued that we are still in the early stages of our journey with Children's Centres, with many still in the first decade of provision. We therefore have a real opportunity to shape the form that Centres take and the extent of their services. AL concluded by saying that as with other issues that the *APPG on Sure Start Children's Centres* had looked at, couple relationships were a vital area that families were crying out for support on.

Honor Rhodes (HR), Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR)

HR began her presentation by emphasising that we shouldn't approach a discussion about relationship support and families as being an “either/or” conversation, and we can think about issues like early attachment and couple relationships at the same time. HR explained that TCCR had been involved in training lots of Children's Centre managers, and found that they receive very little support to think about the nature of the parents' relationship. HR had been looking at a number of parenting strategies in local authorities, and that very few talked about supporting the couple's relationship at home. Very few had a Common Assessment Framework form that asked for any information about the parental couple, and it was the same for “home-grown” assessment forms devised by Children's Centres themselves. HR recognised that there were many reasons for this, some very sensible, but some were because we are deeply reluctant to begin this sort of conversation. Therefore, when training Centre managers, TCCR's job was to get people to start thinking about these issues differently. HR added that this can be very difficult, particularly if you are working with a woman in extreme distress, but that you don't make this situation better by avoiding it – you make it better by enabling someone to have a thoughtful and constructive conversation about what can be made better.

HR said that every single group TCCR had trained had listened politely to these points and then say “yes, but”. Therefore, it was important to think about all the things that are in their minds about why they shouldn't discuss a couple's relationship. HR argued that Centre staff should feel perfectly comfortable asking about these things – it is an important piece of information, as the parent relationship represents both the richest resource and the seat of the greatest risk. HR found a lot of workers who said “it is just too personal, and I wouldn't know how to go

about it” but emphasised that while these were reasonable points, they shouldn’t be a reason for not discussing such issues, and we need to encourage people to have the wit and skill to do so, and use the available research so they know why it’s important. Equally, there were those who said “I’d like to ask but I think it’s very dangerous, it will open up a can of worms” – in such cases, HR believes it was always better to bring these issues out into the open rather than leaving them to fester. Some workers might also simply say “I just don’t think it’s important”, to which HR responds by showing them the research, which she said would convince the hardest of hearts about the significance of the couple relationship. HR added that TCCR continually find workers who just don’t believe or see themselves as working with a couple – her challenge back was that if you think like that you are only dealing with 50% of a child’s resource, and why would you let the other 50% of a child’s parenting resource wander off and be unknown to that child. There were lots of men around who wish they could be more involved with their children and are not. Indeed, there were some cases that TCCR had encountered where fathers’ relationships with their children were actively policed, to the extent that dads said “this is the first time I have spent any real time with my child”, which can’t be right.

Turning to the issue of marriage, which some believed TCCR held strong views on, HR emphasised that they were in fact “absolutely agnostic” about this. In their view the couple’s relationship, in whatever form it presents itself, is the one that you will work with, and what TCCR wanted to do was help people to make the best choices they can about their relationship.

HR then discussed a case study of a boy called Aaron who initially had no contact with his father, something which caused him a great deal of distress (he would continually draw pictures of an imagined father). HR said that it was through the work of a very skilled Children’s Centre manager that Aaron’s mother had been persuaded to allow Aaron quality supervised contact with his father, while keeping herself safe and secure. This changed Aaron’s life. HR added that research suggests that involved fathers are the people who make the biggest difference to their children’s lives – that was not to say that children who are growing up on their own with their mother aren’t very well looked after, but that in HR’s view we should do all we can to involve the father, as children derive a range of behavioural, educational and emotional benefits from this. Ultimately, this always turned on the quality of the father’s relationship with the mother. HR stressed that they did not have to love each other or live together, but they do need to be able to co-parent, and our future challenge is to help people co-parent after divorce and separation, or if they’ve never lived together. HR referred to a graph (Hirschberger, Srivastava, Marsh, Cowan, & Cowan (2009)) which showed how the quality of marital satisfaction declines as their children get older: the truth is that having children takes a significant toll on a couple’s relationship. The key, in HR’s view, is to help parents understand that while they are parents they are also a couple and co-parents, and that is the part of the relationship that needs attending to as that’s what keeps parents going on down the road.

HR concluded with her call to action, which is for Children's Centres to think about themselves more as family resource Centres, and understand the research about the importance of the couple – she added that, ideally, she would like everyone to have this as part of their Continuous Professional Development. HR noted that we can actually measure the effect of the quality of the couple relationship on children's lives, and on outcomes for children generally, and should do this as a matter of course. It would be important for everyone to understand that if we make an intervention, we must consider the couple relationship. This is crucial to improving outcomes for the child, and reducing the costs of family breakdown for us all.

Bev Miller (BM), Relate

BM began with an overview of her work. Her Relate Centre covers Derby, South Derbyshire and some of Staffordshire, and last year helped over 3,000 people. The Centre conducts outreach activities through a range of local services, including Children's Centres, although due to funding constraints delivery had been scaled back in recent years despite increased demand. BM added that services are delivered through a number of different channels, including face-to-face, by phone and via email and webchat. People often accessed these either from work, or from their local Children's Centre. Relate services include family counselling and children's counselling, and a local service called "Safe Speak" for children from the age of 5 upwards. Relate is also the largest provider of school-based counselling in the country, and last year worked with over 12,000 children and young people – in Derby specifically the figure was over 730. BM said she has seen a consistent rise in demand for services in Children's Centres, and increasingly the individuals and families she works with present a number of issues. Such families often have a large number of children, and are struggling to cope with complex, long-term issues including domestic abuse, substance misuse, depression and chaotic lifestyles. BM added that she would like to see funding allocated in future to support early intervention work, as she recognised the importance of supporting new parents to manage the change in their relationship and develop positive parenting skills.

BM said that co-location of Relate services in Children's Centres offered a number of important benefits. As a result, Relate could offer services within the community that were fully accessible to local residents. The venues were often ideal for Relate's service delivery, as the fact that Centres were a hub for local activities meant that they could easily raise awareness of the Relate services on offer. Co-location also enabled Relate to work from a location where other services and professionals were located, as this allowed more networking and conversations to take place so that cases could be managed more effectively. BM added that Relate had always found Children's Centres very supportive of their work, and that they proactively encouraged delivery through the Centre. They knew from experience that the majority of clients attending a counselling session through a Children's Centre would have been highly unlikely to self-refer into the general services at a Relate Centre. This might be because they simply cannot afford to pay for a service even if they wanted to, but it could also be because they cannot afford to travel outside their local community or to an unfamiliar location. They had often built up a rapport with the workers at the Children's Centre, and so were more trusting and more likely to engage with other services that might be offered.

BM concluded by saying that the challenges that all Relate Centres face at this point in time were clear – how to deliver more services to those that most need support, at a time when resources are diminishing. Children’s Centres were having to rationalise costs, which meant a reduction in opening times in some locations. In this context, Relate were finding it increasingly challenging to find locations with sufficient space at times when children and clients can attend. The lack of accommodation in Children’s Centres had a knock-on effect on the range of services that can be delivered through them. BM added that if there was a desire for services such as Relate to make a difference, they needed to be adequately resourced. Working in co-located spaces such as Children’s Centres added value to their services and also helped professionals, and feedback from surveys showed that effective provision really does change lives.

Dr Samantha Callan (SC), Centre for Social Justice

SC began by noting how exciting it was that the three APPGs had come together, suggesting there was “a real synergy” in what they were all trying to achieve. She added that it was thrilling to be able to talk about the overlap between the issues around couple relationships and the early years, and encouraged early years enthusiasts in the room (of which she counted herself as one) to see adult relationships as “another lever that politicians can use”. Couple relationships were absolutely central to all our efforts to improve outcomes for children. SC said that she had previously chaired an Early Years Commission, which examined research showing that as early as 12 weeks into an infant’s life, the child not only responds to their own interactions with their parents, but to what is going on between the mother and the father. Therefore, from a very early stage, children were enmeshed in the dynamics of their parents’ relationship. The Commission had also heard from Professor Lynn Murray, who had told them that 89% of securely attached one-year olds went on to show insecure attachment at 18 if their parents split up – essentially, if you wanted to build on good attachment in the early years then the couple relationship was absolutely vital. Considering contributing factors to relationship breakdown, SC noted that the anxiety which many parents experience is heightened when they have seen their own parents separate earlier in life, as they are effectively experiencing this all over again. Ultimately, this was significant as infants were greatly impacted by seeing their parents experience high anxiety and stress – their own physiology, heart-rate, immune system etc are all impacted by what is going on in their parents’ lives.

SC then referred to annual YouGov polling which found that 96% of UK adults thought that the relationship between the mother and father was very or fairly important for a child under 3, and that over half of lone mothers thought it was important that a child grows up with both parents. There was also support from across the social spectrum for Government to take a strong lead on this issue. SC added that two-thirds of children from in the poorest 20% of society were not growing up with both parents, and on average less than half of children were growing up without both parents, so it was a significant issue.

SC emphasised that while it was important to “think baby”, it was also very important to “think couple” and “think family”. She added that there was a real opportunity to realise this within practice (for example, half of all health visitors were currently in training, so there was an opportunity to teach them about these issues). It was vital for health visitors, Children’s Centres

and other professionals to understand how to support parents to maintain stable relationships – connected to this was a need to support ante-natal provision wherever possible, so that it was not allowed to “wither on the vine”. Concluding, SC referred to the work of a Children’s Centre in Greenwich that she had visited whilst working for the Conservative Policy Unit before the last election which did a great deal of work to involve fathers in their children’s lives, and reiterated the vital importance of points made in the earlier presentation by HR in this regard.

Jeszemma Garratt (JG), Fatherhood Institute

JG’s presentation focused on programme called Family Foundations, which supports couple relationships. Family Foundations is a well evidenced and widely used programme in the US, which the Fatherhood Institute were very interested in as it engages both parties within the couple, so it’s intrinsically “father inclusive” and sets this standard before the baby is born. In the UK version, four sessions are delivered before birth, and three sessions after birth but before the baby is one. JG stated that this time limit is in place as the first year after a birth is a very vulnerable time for families, when “taking care of our relationship” comes a long way down the priority list. However, it was important to get parents to keep saying that “if we look after each other, everything else will fall into place”, and this is what Family Foundations does.

Family Foundations trained over 100 early years and health professional in 12 local authorities during the pilot period, which ended in March 2013. First quantitative data had just come back, which will be published in April, while qualitative data is available online. JG said that we know that the birth of a couple’s first baby (Family Foundations focuses specifically on couples expecting their first baby together) is an immense change – it’s also not a smooth change, but “an absolute crash” into parenthood. Couples were telling them that this is not addressed by ante-natal services; nor was the role of the father, so Family Foundations was exactly the sort of thing that parents said they wanted. Family Foundations sessions last for about an hour and a half. Parents were taught how to relax (e.g. breathing techniques) to get through the first two years of birth and reduce levels of conflict. Indeed, parental conflict and what this looks like was discussed every week – JG noted that after birth, households argue most about household share and who does what with the baby. If it feels unlevelled there will be conflict, so it was vital to sort this out beforehand, by teaching parents to communicate and calm things down, about what working together looks like, and about understanding their baby’s emotions (this is something fathers are particularly interested in). Managing stress, handling difficult situations and supporting the other parent are all essential, as well as the division of labour.

Evaluation found out that couples were desperate for this information. Fathers were seeking information during pregnancy and around the time of birth, but not getting any. Indeed, JG emphasised that our systems reinforce this – we address mothers and expect them to pass information on to fathers, something which gives mothers an overwhelming sense of power that they may not actually want. During the pregnancy, mothers and fathers expect equal share of who does what, but there’s no conversation about that. Evaluation also found out that facilitators who were trained to deliver programmes to mothers and fathers in fact lacked confidence about engaging fathers, and also about understanding couple dynamics. JG added that engaging fathers is something that Children’s Centres have struggled with for far too long,

and this now needs to be embedded. She noted that Family Foundations is unique in that it gives fathers an equal voice to mothers, and supports co-parenting from the very start. Families who came on to Family Foundations were more often than not self-referrals. All the marketing and promotions were father inclusive, and local authorities said that a significant number of referrals in fact came through dads. JG added that recruitment to the programme was the most difficult part because there was a lack of strategic relationships between health and Children's Centres – in far too many local authorities these partnerships were not in place. Early indications from quantitative data showed a slight increase in relationship stability – couples were more likely to share household tasks evenly, and were less likely to say they were growing apart after the birth of their baby. Referring back to HR's graph from her earlier presentation, JG noted that only a relatively small number of couples said their relationship improved after the birth of a baby, and the rest of them experienced a fall in marital satisfaction. That's why early intervention at the earliest possible stage, during pregnancy (when we can support the creation of a parenting team), is so important.

JG concluded by saying that if she were to wave a flag, this would be about the need to catch up with what is happening in families – we need to be out there supporting couple relationships because that is what families want. There needed to be a collaborative approach to work between early years services and health to ensure all expectant couples receive appropriate information regarding parenting support. Services should become more confident in engaging fathers, and there should be an attitudinal shift that fathers and mothers are no longer engaged in separate silos. JG stressed that there is absolutely no reason for this: couples don't parent like this at home, and it is us who separates them. Therefore, we need to really buy-into the couple relationship, and work with that so that even if they do split up, they can still be a parenting team once separated.

Question and Answer

George Hosking (WAVE Trust) asked JG, in light of research conducted by Vivette Glover into the epigenetic effects of domestic violence on the child, whether the Family Foundations programme has found any effects on domestic violence?

JG said that there was data on this from the US version of the programme – figures showed a reduction in the amount of families experiencing domestic abuse during pregnancy.

Baroness Armstrong then spoke about domestic violence, pointing out that Louise Casey's Troubled Families team had found that violence is overwhelming in a way that is shocking. In many cases, the best thing is for those men to be out of the way. She cautioned that while she very much agreed with what the panel was trying to promote, there was a need to be careful. She also recommended that we should start to intervene earlier, referring to a programme run in Greenwich when she was Minister for Social Exclusion called "Teens and Toddlers" where young people at potential risk of teen pregnancy worked with toddlers in an early years setting. The outcomes were fantastic – in Greenwich they had run the programme eight years ago and to date none of those young people had become parents. They had also worked out that parenting was tough, that you needed to be in a stable relationship, have a job and a house etc

– this was a great start, and better than starting later. She also added that it was important not to demonise families where there is separation (there could be very good reasons for this, such as if one parent was in the armed forces abroad); instead, we should help the families to handle this effectively, and build resilience within the children. She advocated having parenting classes in every school, for every adolescent, so that pupils can begin to think about their parenting before they are in that position.

Andrew Selous MP responded, saying he very much agreed with Baroness Armstrong's points, and recognised that the way of talking about these issues was very important. He also invited HR to respond, who referred to a recent presentation to TCCR by Professors Phil and Carolyn Cowan, which included a slide saying "some men are violent, but most aren't". HR said that our challenge is to work out who we are working with and protect them from harm, but agreed that we need to approach this with a great deal of sensitivity. The WAVE Trust, HR added, had done a lot of good work on this and she urged attendees to look at their website. Moreover, the Early Intervention Foundation were just about to launch an Evidence Review, looking at what evidence currently exists in this area. In her view there were a variety of programmes with a sufficiently robust evidence-base to make a difference to violence in relationships, such as the "Parents as Partners" programme. It is our job, HR reiterated, to intervene early, and she stated that managing conflict between parents is a "teachable skill". Both Family Foundations and Parents as Partners had solid evidence behind them and could make a difference.

Earl Listowel then spoke, referring to OECD figures which suggested that other countries seemed to be better at enabling parents to stay together than the UK, and evidence which showed clearly that both boys and girls who grew up without fathers had very poor outcomes. He also discussed a seminar on Early Years that he had attended prior to the meeting, which had suggested a long-term goal of universal free childcare – this, he argued, was a very attractive model to aim for in the long-term, but the barrier seemed to be a reluctance by the public to recognise the need to do something for under-5s, so there was a need to make the case for the importance of taxpayer investment in the early years.

SC responded to the point on universal childcare, noting that this came with a very high price tag in Sweden, and very high taxes as a result. That was not to say that we should not invest in early years, but that when politicians say that "all parents want universal childcare" it wasn't necessarily true, as some mums and dads wanted the choice of being able to stay at home.

Janet Fyle, a midwife, then picked up on comments about the need for couples to stay together, saying that while families should stay together wherever possible, this should not be at all costs, particularly when the woman is at risk. She suggested that there was a need to reflect on this, as otherwise we might be forcing couples together who do not want to be together.

*In the final contribution of the session, **Graham Allen MP** thanked Andrew Selous MP and Andrea Leadsom MP for pulling the meeting together, demonstrating cross-party work in practice. He reiterated the importance of Baroness Armstrong's comments about the need for everyone to be prepared before pregnancy, and stressed the need for PSHE and life skills to be in*

*every classroom, an objective he hoped all parties would share. This was pretty cheap to do, especially compared to when things go wrong, and would be a “tiny investment for a massive return”. Regarding domestic violence, he added that as HR had pointed out, the Early Intervention Foundation were launching an Evidence Review. He noted that all men, indeed all people, have a propensity to violence, but the important thing was what we do as they grow to get rid of that, and put layers of functionality in place. **The meeting was then closed.***