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.

What do couple relationships have to do with children’s academic achievement?

SUMMARY

- Research shows that the quality of the relationship between a child’s parents has an impact on children’s academic attainment.
- Authoritative parenting (characterised by parental encouragement and warmth) is associated with better language ability and communication skills.
- Authoritarian parenting (characterised by harshness and limit-setting but lacking in warmth and responsiveness) and permissive parenting (characterised by warmth but lacking in structure and limit-setting) are associated with poorer academic outcomes and social competence.
- Marital conflict and ongoing, acrimonious exchanges between parents are associated with poorer academic outcomes in children.

Factors associated with children’s academic achievement

While family income and level of parental education have consistently been shown to be associated with children’s language development and reading ability (Dollaghan, 1999) (Hart, 1985) (Hoff, 2003) (Arima, 1998) (Christian, 1998), other factors have also been identified as playing a role in these aspects of child development, including parental vocabulary, word exposure and joint reading.

While these have received relatively widespread attention, this briefing focuses on two drivers of children’s academic achievement – parental relationship quality and quality of parenting – which are arguably under-researched and under-acknowledged. As Harold et al. observe, “few studies have considered the role of the inter-parental relationship as a source of influence on children’s academic attainment and fewer still have considered the joint interplay between family problems (inter-parental and parent-child conflict), child behaviour problems and academic well being” (Harold et al., 2007).

Regarding the quality of the relationship between a child’s parents and that child’s scholastic achievement, research finds:

- links between relationship conflict, attention difficulties and school problems (Davies, 2008)
- marital conflict to be linked with children’s sleep problems which are themselves associated with children’s behavioural, emotional, and academic difficulties, including maths, language, verbal and nonverbal achievement (El-Sheikh, 2007a; Mannering, Harold et al., 2011)
- exposure to ongoing, acrimonious exchanges to be linked to signs of emotional and behavioural distress in children between the ages of 6 and 17 years (Harold, 2001)
- exposure to ongoing, acrimonious discord to be associated with deficits in academic attainment (as well as increased anxiety, depression, aggression, hostility, anti-social behaviour and criminality) (Harold, 2007; Harold et al., 2013)
- parental separation (i.e. divorce and post-cohabitation separation) to be associated with lower levels of academic attainment (among a host of negative outcomes), leading the authors of this meta-analysis to conclude that “the argument that parental divorce presents few problems for children’s long-term development is simply inconsistent with the literature on this topic” (Amato, 1991; Harold and Murch 2005).

Regarding particular aspects of parenting behaviour and children’s academic achievement, research shows:

- parental (particularly maternal) sensitivity, i.e. encouragement, warmth and emotional support, to predict:
  - language ability at 15 to 36 months (NICHD, 1999)
Social policy in the UK has focused almost exclusively on readiness for learning and academic parenting (and particularly between parents) play in children’s achievement and development, greater competency in relationships with peers, and fewer problem behaviors than peers whose parents have authoritarian or permissive parenting styles (Conger, 1994; Cowan, 1998; Parke, 1998; Steinberg, 2001 referenced in Cowan, 2005).

“Parents who are authoritarian, punitive, and harsh (structured and limit-setting without warmth and responsiveness) or permissive (warm but laissez-faire),” these authors continue, “tend to have offspring who are less academically and socially competent and more likely to have behavior problems – as described by teachers, parents, peers, or the children and adolescents themselves in different studies” (Cowan, 2005).

Policy implications

While research implicates both the quality of the parental relationship and parenting behaviour as factors in children’s academic achievement, it is the latter which has enjoyed more sway in influencing UK family policy in recent years. Relatively little acknowledged in policy circles here is the link between parenting style and the quality of the relationship between parents. And yet almost every study examining associations between parental relationships and parenting has found that the quality of the relationship between parent and child to be linked to the quality of the relationship between the parents (Lindahl, 1997).

For, as Professors Carolyn and Philip Cowan observe: “In families with authoritative parents (i.e. those in which parents are warm and responsive, structure tasks, and set reasonable limits for their children’s behavior), and at the same time grant the child age-appropriate autonomy (Baumrind, 1980), young children and adolescents show more advanced academic achievement, greater competence in relationships with peers, and fewer problem behaviors than peers whose parents have authoritarian or permissive parenting styles (Conger, 1994; Cowan, 1998; Parke, 1998; Steinberg, 2001 referenced in Cowan, 2005).”

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