What’s love got to do with it?

14 ideas for putting relationships at the heart of policy

Edited by David Marjoribanks and Chris Sherwood
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Foreword

Andrew Ketteringham, Chair of Trustees, Relate

Relationships matter. Good quality relationships with partners, families, friends and wider social networks provide meaning to our lives and are central to our identity. But they also hold the keys to our health and wellbeing; to our ability to engage in and progress in education and at work, to our long term life chances and to instilling resilience in individuals. They are also the cornerstone of a thriving economy and society.

As the UK’s largest provider of relationship support, working with thousands of individuals, couples and families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland each year, Relate knows that good quality couple, family and social relationships are a key public policy issue. We also know that supporting relationships delivers substantial return on investment: an independent evaluation of relationship support commissioned by the Department for Education showed that for every £1 spent on Relate’s couple counselling the state accrues £11.40 of benefit.

However, if the evidence is increasingly clear that relationships hold the key to the success of so many policy priorities, and policy makers have started to pay attention to the role of good quality relationships (as well as the costs of poor quality relationships), this has yet to be embedded in policy. What is now required is a bold, cohesive and joined-up focus in policy on the value and role of relationships. We need to take a policy focus on relationships from the margins to mainstream, from periphery to priority. This is not just about government policy; it is the responsibility of individuals, civil society, business, as well as national and local government. But creating the conditions for safe, stable, and nurturing relationships must be a central priority in public policy.

This collection of essays has been brought together to shine a light onto the many and varied ways in which relationships matter for policy, the challenges and changes which relationships undergo, and how relationship support can help. The collection also aims to explore the roles of different actors and agencies in promoting and supporting good quality couple, family and social relationships as the basis of a thriving society.

I would like to thank the contributors to this collection, who have generously offered their time, expertise and insights to inform the debate. We are delighted to have an excellent range of contributors providing varying perspectives on relationships and their importance for policy. We welcome thoughts, comments and wider debate on this collection of essays, and hope that these essays will stimulate new thinking and discussion, and help to ensure that relationships are placed at the heart of public policy over this Parliament and beyond.

“Creating the conditions for safe, stable, and nurturing relationships must be a central priority in public policy.”
**Putting relationships at the heart of public policy**

Dr David Marjoribanks, Senior Policy and Research Officer, Relate

"Man is a knot, a web, a mesh into which relationships are tied"

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Flight to Arras

Couple, family and social relationships are increasingly rising up policy agendas as the realisation grows that the success of so many of the wider objectives of policy makers – supporting good parenting; improving educational attainment; improving mental health and wellbeing; ensuring health and quality of life for people in later life or with long term conditions; tackling health inequalities; – have good quality relationships at their core. However, despite significant positive steps taken over recent years, a relational lens remains to be embedded in public policy and there is still much to do to put support for relationships on a sure and steady footing across the new Parliament – and beyond.

The essays collected here explore the ways in which good quality relationships matter, how they can be supported, and what needs to change. Together these essays constitute a powerful call to action for policy makers to support good quality relationships as a public policy priority.
Growing recognition of relationships

As momentum builds behind wellbeing as an objective of government, couple, family and social relationships and their importance for achieving wellbeing are increasingly occupying a more prominent position in policy. Recent years have seen a shift away from measuring societal success purely by economic growth towards wider measures of progress, such as wellbeing. There is growing international consensus around additional national indicators of social progress to supplement established measures such as Gross Domestic Product – as seen, for example in the 2008 ‘Stiglitz Commission’. Promoting citizens’ wellbeing is increasingly recognised by government as a policy objective. The Prime Minister launched the National Wellbeing Programme to measure the quality of life in 2010 and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) began development of national indicators, and now produces annual statistics on the wellbeing of the UK. It is now accepted that our health service has a responsibility not only to treat disease, but to promote wellbeing, and that health and wellbeing are intimately related. The Department of Health has acknowledged that a policy focus on wellbeing will improve health, and Public Health England identifies wellbeing as a key driver of public health.

This wider policy focus on wellbeing has made way for greater recognition of relationships as means to and core components of wellbeing. When the ONS consulted the nation on things that matter most to our wellbeing, relationships with friends and family were listed top, joint with health (89 per cent). The ONS identifies relationships as a domain which influences wellbeing and includes satisfaction with family life, social life, and the extent to which people have a spouse, family member, or friend to rely on in its national wellbeing measures. The 2014 Commission on Wellbeing and Policy also recognised that across the world, the quality of home life – which is ultimately dependent on family relationships – is a universal ingredient of life satisfaction.

Over the course of the last Parliament, the importance of relationships for wellbeing rose up the policy agenda. The Coalition Government’s Social Justice Strategy highlighted the importance of family relationships for children’s outcomes, recognising that strong and stable families provide children with the best start in life. The Coalition also made positive investments in supporting relationships. The Department for Education invested £30 million in relationship support over 2011-15 to encourage stable couple relationships, improve relationship quality and help couples whose relationships were breaking down. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) put £20 million into information and support for separating parents to help both of them stay involved in their children’s lives and support family-based arrangements post-separation. The Ministry of Justice looked to strengthen the role of mediation in the family justice system to reduce the incidence of conflict between couples. And the Department for Communities and Local Government devised the ‘Troubled Families’ programme with a whole-family focus, highlighting the importance of relationships between families and agencies.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister promised to continue to invest at least £7.5 million annually in relationships support at his speech at the Relationships Summit in August 2014, alongside pilots of relationship support within antenatal classes, and new guidance for Health Visitors. The DWP has begun piloting a local joined-up ‘family offer’, working with Early Intervention Pioneering Place local authorities to integrate services, see what works locally, and showcase and spread best practice. Finally, the ‘Family Test’, introduced in October 2014, requires all new policies across Whitehall to consider the impact they might have on the family.

The manifestos for the May 2015 election also made important pledges to support family life and relationships. The Conservatives committed to continuing to invest at least £7.5 million a year in relationship support to help families stay together and to ‘backing the institution of marriage’ through the transferable tax allowance for married couples, for example. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats committed to encouraging use of mediation by separating couples, expanding Shared Parental Leave, and to introducing statutory Personal Social Health and Economic education including age-appropriate relationships and sex education including requiring schools to teach about respect in relationships and sexual consent.

The Labour Party’s Policy Review also focused on the importance of couple, family and social relationships, highlighting the importance of Paternity Leave and fathers’ involvement as well as relationships and sex education. In 2014, the Review’s Coordinator Jon Cruddas wrote:

> Policy needs to use the power of relationships to help strengthen the resilience of men, women and children to withstand adversity and to facilitate their readiness to take up opportunities. The best way of preventing social problems from developing is to support social, couple, and family relationships.

This was echoed in Labour’s 2015 Manifesto: “Labour recognises the vital importance of the power of people’s relationships to build the capacity for love, care and resilience.”

> “Across the world, the quality of home life is a universal ingredient of life satisfaction.”
Why do good quality relationships matter?

As the UK’s largest provider of relationship support, Relate knows that the quality and strength of our relationships is a fundamental public policy issue. A significant body of research documents the benefits of good quality, stable, supportive relationships across the life course for mental and physical health.20 The quality of our relationships even has a direct effect on mortality: a meta-analytic review of 148 independent studies found that those with stronger social relationships are 50 per cent more likely to survive life-threatening illnesses than those whose relationships are weaker.21 Poor quality relationships, on the other hand, show associations with alcohol misuse,22 depression,23 and poor health. Relationship breakdown can pose a health risk, with a major evidence review finding an ‘unequivocal association’ between relationship breakdown and general adult ill health, as well as more specific conditions such as coronary heart disease and raised blood pressure.24 Additional impacts of relationship breakdown on adults can include depression, stress, financial difficulties, and unemployment.25

Relationships also matter for children’s outcomes. The quality of the couple relationship is a critical factor in the environment in which children grow up and develop,26 and children growing up with parents who have good quality relationships and low parental conflict – whether they are together or not27 – enjoy better physical and mental health,28 better emotional wellbeing,29 higher academic attainment,30 and a lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours.31 Evidence also shows associations between parental relationship breakdown and child poverty, behavioural problems, distress and unhappiness, poorer educational achievement, substance misuse, physical and emotional health problems, teenage pregnancy, and increased risk of children’s own relationships breaking down.32 Parental conflict can affect children’s and adolescents’ wellbeing and adjustment33 and emotional and mental development – resulting in increased anxiety, depression, aggression, hostility and antisocial behaviour and criminality.34 In fact, children’s exposure to frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict may have a more significant impact per se than that of divorce or separation.35 More insidious are the effects of violence growing up: childhood exposure to domestic violence and physical abuse are two of the most powerful predictors of both perpetrating and being a victim of domestic abuse as an adult,36 and both physical and sexual abuse in childhood are strongly associated with becoming a victim in adulthood.37

Following the momentum we have already seen across the last Parliament towards increasing recognition of relationships in policy, with the advent of a new Parliament and Government, it is now an opportune moment to highlight the importance of couple, family and social relationships for policy and to advocate for relationships being at the heart of the new Government’s agenda. Good quality relationships can lead to better outcomes across a wide range of policy areas and right across public services – ultimately reducing pressure on public finances. Relationships not only hold the keys to policies around caring strategies, parenting and family support, mental health and wellbeing, and more, but are also important to the success of less immediately obvious areas such as the rehabilitation of offenders, welfare-to-work, and even productivity at work. The present volume of essays aims to stimulate debate about how couple, family and social relationships can be supported as the basis of a thriving society. Together these essays constitute a powerful call to action, and set out a platform of ideas to take forward to embed a relational lens within public policy.
The essays in this volume are divided into two parts. Part one – *Relationships through the life course* – explores various relationships at different stages: young people’s relationships; adult couple relationships; same sex relationships; new parents; relationships and long term health conditions; wider family relationships; and co-parenting relationships in separated families. The essays examine what we know about these particular relationships and transitions, the challenges, and what support there is – and how this may be improved. The issues range from Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education to prepare young people to form safe, positive relationships into adulthood, to the role of continuing relationship education in adulthood; how services could better address new parents to manage change together, to how we can tackle lingering prejudice towards same sex relationships; how relationships can be impacted on by long term health conditions, to the importance of policy recognising the role that grandparents play in grandchildren’s lives; finishing with the importance of supporting parents to maintain stable, good quality co-parenting relationships with children where relationship breakdown occurs.

The essays in Part two – *Relationships in policy and practice* – move beyond particular relationships, transitions and pressures, to take a broader, structural approach, to think about the role of relationships in policy and practice and the roles of different actors and agencies. These essays address the role of the community and the role of the state and public services in supporting and strengthening relationships; the ways in which relationships and poverty interact; policy responses to abusive and violent relationships; and the links between relationship distress and poor mental health – and how policy and practice can respond.

“Together these essays constitute a powerful call to action, and set out a platform of ideas to take forward to embed a relational lens within public policy.”
Part one

Although the essays examine different relationships and stages of the life course, common themes emerge. Prominent in several essays is the theme of a ‘developmental’ view of couple relationships as something we do rather than things which happen. Ever since Plato’s Symposium, a popular understanding of love has been captured in the language of finding one’s ‘other half’. In this work, Aristophanes, in explicating what he takes to be the nature of love, imagines that long ago, human beings had double bodies, with faces and limbs turned away from each other. But they grew too powerful and threatened the gods, so Zeus cut them in half, separating each into two bodies. Ever since, Aristophanes conceives, people have been looking for their other halves, attempting to recover their original nature. When two people find their other half again, they embrace and never want to be separated – this is what love is: the reunion of two beings always essentially one, artificially divided. This myth has echoes in much of our language around love, and it is the stuff of countless works of art. Yet this pre-ordained vision of love written in the stars is essentially passive; it denudes us of our autonomy, subjecting us to the blind force of fate, invisible to us. It conceives of our relationships as given compatibilities rather than developing capabilities.

Another way of understanding relationships takes a more active, developmental view. On this account, by spending time together, people alter one another in the process – so who they are is in part co-created by the living of the relationship, shared experiences, and habits. They become co-author in each other’s drama, with the result that each is in part constituted by the other; each ‘I’ finds its place within the ‘we’ which not only is constituted by, but also now in part constitutes, each ‘I’. This account highlights activity over passivity: behaviour, habits and skill now substitute blind forces of fate. This means, as Mark Molden highlights in his essay, that good quality relationships do not just happen; they are co-created, by the development of skills, knowledge and habits. If we recognise this, then a clear role for relationship education emerges, in order to prepare us to enjoy long lasting and fulfilling relationships. The evidence indicates, he writes, that adult relationship education can help people to make long term meaningful investments in the quality of their relationships, yet it is often not well understood, and in order to realise its full potential for improving the quality of long term relationships we need to see culture change and increased awareness.

This developmental theme is picked up by Adrienne Burgess’ essay, which notes that love is originally created through changes we make as we get to know each other. But just as changes we make at the beginning create love, major changes which generate stress (e.g. the transition to parenthood) can make it seem that the relationship is ‘on its way out’. Behavioural changes in response to stress may undermine mutual support and lead to a sense of growing apart. But if it is our behaviours and practices which first foster love, and which may also undermine it during times of stress, then acquiring learned behavioural patterns and skills may be the key to lasting good quality relationships. What distinguishes couples who thrive as new parents, she notes, is their learned capacity to operate as a team. Recognising this, there is a clear role for public services to address parents as a team – which means involving fathers. Engaging both parents at their transition to new parenthood may help them to manage change and parent as a team from the earliest opportunity – with potential long term benefits for families as well as society as a whole.

Learning skills and behaviours and tools to build healthy relationships is also important for young people. Relationships education for children and young people in school can prepare them for healthy relationships in adulthood. And yet for many young people, it remains highly inadequate – often confined to an occasional lesson on the biology of sex. Preparing young people to be able to build safe and fulfilling relationships is an essential ingredient of any long term policy strategy to strengthen relationships, and the importance of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is highlighted in several of the essays.

Simon Blake argues that – contrary to the media hype and moral panic which so often surrounds young people and relationships – young people want to get relationships right, but they also need the right support and education to help them to grow and have the confidence to make responsible decisions; have high expectations for themselves and their relationships; gain awareness of exploitation and unhealthy relationships to help them navigate their relationships safely; as well as core relational skills (negotiation, identifying risk and communication). He argues that Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education ought therefore to be a statutory entitlement for all children and young people.

The importance of education to prepare young people
to have the tools and confidence to form positive and healthy relationships is also a central theme of Lord Willis’ essay. He notes that digital technology is having a transformational impact, with opportunities and challenges. However, he argues, not only is there a digital divide in terms of access to this technology, there is also increasing concern about the unequal access to good quality education to prepare young people to be able to navigate it safely. Today’s mass access to the internet brings more opportunities for contact, which also opens up more possibilities for bullying, abuse and accessing explicit material – or even being pressured into producing it. Lord Willis argues that PSHE education – a ‘curriculum for life’ – including RSE is essential to support children and young people to prepare them to be able to form and maintain safe and positive relationships in adulthood.

Matt Horwood similarly identifies a need for compulsory RSE, adding that this must include same sex relationships. He argues that whilst the Marriage (Same sex) Act 2014 marked a significant achievement towards equal status in law for same sex couples, true equality remains to be achieved. Whilst all relationships inevitably face challenges, same sex relationships face particular issues in the remaining prejudice and disapproving attitudes with which they are still too often met. We therefore need to challenge these negative attitudes, he observes, and aspire to a world in which schools provide safe and positive environments for all young people who question their sexuality to explore their feelings without judgment.

Sue Marsh’s essay takes a different approach from the other essays collected here, in the form of a personal reflection on relationships and health from someone who has a long term health condition. Sue has Crohn’s disease, and she offers her personal testimony of the impact this has often had on her relationships – but also of the ways in which, despite considerable adversity, close family relationships have been central to the family’s happiness, and just what these relationships mean to them. She argues that improving the quality of life for people with incurable illnesses and making them easier to live with ought to be a top medical priority. Families often get little support, but sometimes it is relatively small things like cheap, comfortable places for family or friends to stay close to hospitals which could make a difference, she argues.

Sam Smethers looks at family relationships in later life and extends further Adrienne Burgess’ argument – that both parents matter – emphasising that it is not only the parents’ couple relationship which ought to be on policy makers’ radar; grandparents are also very significant family members who are often overlooked. Grandparents are increasingly not only recipients of care but also significant providers of childcare, yet the rising pension age also requires many to work for longer. Policy makers therefore need to think about wider families too, ensuring leave arrangements support grandparents to balance work and care and ensuring support for those who provide kinship care for grandchildren whose parents are unable to look after them (the prevalence of poverty among whom is also noted by Emma Stone in Part two). As our population continues to age, wider families will more and more be expected to step up to the plate as the state does less. Accordingly, she argues, policy must support families to help each other.

In the final essay of Part one, Jan Walker looks at the importance of maintaining close, good quality relationships between parents who no longer live together. She notes that separating is not generally taken lightly, but although it is more common now, breaking up remains hard to do. Accepting that some parents will separate, there is a profound need to assist separating families to sustain constructive relationships to prevent conflict and bitterness from impacting on children. Her essay provides a comprehensive map of the current policy landscape around separated families, and provides policy makers with several important recommendations which would make a difference, including following Australia’s example of creating Family Relationship Centres (also highlighted by Samantha Callan’s essay in Part two) to create partnerships between practitioners around separating families (counsellors, mediators, lawyers, etc.) and ensuring that the voices of children are heard. Given all the evidence on the importance of good quality relationships for children’s wellbeing and development, it is essential that policies are designed to support parents going through separation to work together in the interests of their children and achieve good quality co-parenting relationships.

What comes across strongly throughout Part one is that policy makers need to adopt a life course approach to relationships and to supporting them. Whatever the form or type of relationship, the importance of relationship quality for our wellbeing is clear. Focusing support around the various stages and transitions which our relationships undergo also requires a broad range of relationship support, ranging from universal level preventative provision and awareness raising activity to normalise support, to more targeted provision from counsellors or therapists for those experiencing difficulties. Not all relationships require counselling, but everyone can benefit from support for their relationships, and we ignore these relationships at our cost.

“Not all relationships require counselling, but everyone can benefit from support for their relationships, and we ignore these relationships at our cost.”
Part two

Picking up from Jan Walker’s essay on family separation and children’s wellbeing, Samantha Callan explores the role of public services in strengthening families and supporting stable couple relationships to provide children with the best start in life. The central theme of her essay is one of early intervention: public services have a significant role to play in preventing relationship breakdown as part of a wider approach to improving children’s wellbeing and tackling poverty and disadvantage. Public services, she argues, need to ensure that services and other interventions help parents to provide children with stable family relationships. Her central policy recommendation is that children’s centres become ‘family hubs’ from which all family-related support within the community may be coordinated.

John Glen examines the role of the community and state. He argues that the state has an important role in providing the conditions within which strong relationships flourish. However, it is civil society which ought to be the foundation on which policy is built, and it is family and social relationships which lie behind it – and the voluntary sector is best placed to foster good quality family and social relationships, using its expertise to find local solutions to local problems. He explores what is required in order to achieve the ‘big society’, and argues that government ought to provide financial incentives for relationship education and ensure couple relationship support through the NHS to support stable family relationships.

The centrality of community and civil society – and relationships as their core – is also a prominent theme in Jon Cruddas’ essay. Whilst he and John Glen come from different political perspectives, and each offers a partial critique of the shortcomings of the other’s political membership (Cruddas that conservatism often turns a blind eye to the effects of money and unaccountable power; Glen that the Left has often lacked understanding of community and the family), they nonetheless display agreement in their belief that the purpose of politics is strengthening community and the relationships which constitute it. Both also see in civil society a potential countervailing tendency against the twin dangers of concentration of power in the state and in a free market – both of which may undermine the basis of good quality relationships.

Cruddas argues that policy needs to take a whole-family approach which works with people’s relationships. Whilst politicians rarely speak of love, he argues that it is people’s close relationships which make society, and it is the job of government to create
the conditions for relationships to thrive. He also argues that relationships should be at the heart of the design of public services to build resilience, drawing upon relationships and building citizens’ capacity for relationships to tackle deprivation. Another implication for Cruddas of putting relationships centre-stage is fostering good relationships at work: the value of meaningful work is only realised through reciprocal relationships – within the workforce and between workforce and management.

It is impossible, whilst extolling the virtues of a relational approach to policy and the value of good quality relationships, not to also address their reverse. Polly Neate therefore focuses on their dark mirror-image, presenting the troubling scale of abusive and violent relationships in our society today. She argues that more worrying still is the current response: the failings of the criminal justice system and the lack of any systemic approach to prevention of abuse and violence, earlier intervention to catch abusive behaviours earlier and protect victims, or support for survivors’ recovery and independence. Agencies are left to manage risk rather than prevent abuse, she argues, and too many victims get little by way of support unless they report a crime – and are then deemed high risk. She argues for a policy response which has meeting needs and preventing abuse rather than managing risk at its heart.

Susanna Abse and Richard Meier address the links between relationships and mental health. If recent years have seen a welcome increase in attention to mental health, with a government commitment to achieve ‘parity of esteem’ between physical and mental health, the links between mental health and wellbeing and relationships has as yet received little attention. However, they demonstrate, the evidence is clear, supported by the weight of practitioner experience, that relationship distress is a significant cause of mental ill health (for adults, but also for children who are exposed to parental conflict) and mental health problems have adverse impacts on relationships. However, they argue that NHS provision for treating mental health is almost entirely relationships-blind, with little thought given to people’s family contexts. Neither has the evidence yet led to holistic children’s and adolescents’ mental health services which address parental relationships. They argue a cross-departmental relationships strategy is required to ensure that the links are better understood and this understanding is translated into policy and practice.

If health has not yet caught up with the ‘relational turn’ in policy, one policy area which (as Samantha Callan observes) has been driving forwards a focus on relationships is social justice. Family relationships were a central aspect of the Social Justice Strategy under the Coalition Government, and will likely continue to be a prominent policy focus under the new Conservative Government. In the final essay of the collection, Emma Stone addresses the complex interrelations between relationships and poverty. As John Glen and Samantha Callan also observe, she demonstrates a bi-directional relationship: poverty can put pressure on relationships leading to relationship breakdown, but relationship breakdown can also increase risk of poverty. She traces the associations between family and social relationships and poverty from childhood through to adulthood, giving a comprehensive overview of the research evidence. She draws out some implications for policy – chief among which are the need to better protect households from low income; to recognise that it is the quality of the family functioning which matters most; to ensure good quality services which make a difference to parenting, parental relationships and children’s outcomes are available (including relationship support for low income couples); and to improve men’s involvement in childcare and women’s ability to undertake decently paid work.

“We are not self-contained entities - our needs, behaviours, practices, how we see ourselves, are all intimately bound up with our social being - our relationships.”
The essays in Part two clearly demonstrate the centrality of good quality relationships to so much of policy and provide valuable ideas on how different actors and agencies can play a role in supporting good quality relationships. ‘No man is an island’, the poet John Donne reminded us; we are not self-contained entities – our needs, behaviours, practices, how we see ourselves, are all intimately bound up with our social being – our relationships. Yet all too often policy and public services focus only on presenting needs, failing to consider individuals within the context of their social practices and interactions. This neglects the hidden assets which are people’s relationships and capabilities for positive relationships with family, friends, community, as well as at school, work and generally in civil society.

Relate will continue to advocate for and work with others to place couple, family and social relationships at the heart of public policy. We hope that the essays in this volume may help to stimulate discussion, increase awareness of the importance of good quality relationships across policy areas and influence policy and public opinion over this Parliament and beyond, providing arguments and ideas to take this important agenda forwards, ultimately helping to realise our vision of good quality relationships as the basis of a thriving society.
Part 1

Relationships through the life course

Remember how it feels to be young
Simon Blake OBE, former Chief Executive, Brook

Young people’s relationships in the digital age
Lord Willis of Knaresborough

Is love all you need?
Mark Molden, Chief Executive, Marriage Care

Managing change: The transition to parenthood
Adrienne Burgess, Joint Chief Executive, The Fatherhood Institute

We are equal, but are we valued?
Matt Horwood, Communications Officer, Stonewall

Life’s easier with people who love you
Sue Marsh, disability campaigner

Not just the two of us
Sam Smethers, Chief Executive, Grandparents Plus

Living apart, parenting together
Prof. Jan Walker OBE, Newcastle University
Remember how it feels to be young

A bridge between adult rhetoric and youth realities of sex and relationships

Simon Blake OBE, former Chief Executive, Brook

Read some of the mainstream press, or listen to many adults talk, and you might soon get the impression that young people’s relationships are a problem, thanks to the speedy development of social media, internet pornography and the increasing immorality of the young. You would also quickly be of the view that – when it comes to young people – all sex is bad sex and all relationships are bad relationships.

Of course the reality is very different. At Brook, we have direct contact with about 1,000 young people every day. Like Relate, we believe and know that young people are moral and want to get relationships right. In our clinical and support services, education and youth participation work it is clear they want to be good at relationships. Despite problem-focused policy making and the media hype around internet pornography, as well as the very serious issues of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and violence in relationships, with the right education, support and targeted early intervention young people can both enjoy and take responsibility for their sexual choices.

Of course not everything is perfect – like adults, young people do sometimes get it wrong. However, the gap between the popular rhetoric of immoral youth and the reality of young lives we experience at Brook needs bridging because it limits adults’ ability to trust young people and to create a culture in which we have high expectations for young people so they have high expectations for themselves. Positive intergenerational conversations about relationships have to take place so adults can enjoy the energy and excitement as young people develop their gender and sexual identity, and can pass on their own memories and experiences of love and relationships.

We can bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality if we remember ourselves how it feels to be young.

Before reading this chapter, I encourage you to take a few moments to think about some key moments in your life, for example: the first time you felt that surge of sexual feeling; the first time you fell in love; the first time you were dumped and thought you would never laugh again; the first time you kissed someone of the same gender; the pregnancy or STI scare or positive test result; the time you realised you got away with the risk you took, or the time you didn’t. Indulge yourself for a few minutes so you remember how it felt to be young!

This essay is split into two parts – the first sets out the context of young people’s lives, drawing on both Brook’s experience and the research to make the case for trusting and supporting young people, while the second focuses on what we can do to educate and support young people so they develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills to navigate their relationships.

Setting the context

Populist and exaggerated claims that young people are having more sex, earlier and earlier make it easy to get worried and anxious about young people and relationships. The facts paint a different picture.

Some facts about young people, sex and sexuality

- Most young people do not have sex under the age of 16 (legal age of consent in the UK).
- Most young people intend to use contraception and condoms.
- Young people still feel embarrassed about accessing sexual health services.
- Teenage pregnancy in England and Wales is at its lowest level for over 40 years.
- Young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people still experience bullying and harassment at school and can feel invisible to services.
- All young people whatever their sexual and gender identity learn about and are limited by gender stereotyping in the UK.
- Sex and relationships education remains woefully inadequate for the majority of young people.
- Young people learn about sex from pornography in

What’s love got to do with it?

www.relate.org.uk
the absence of more reliable forms of education about sex. 7

- A significant number of children and young people are sexually abused and exploited in the UK. 8
- Young people are drinking less alcohol than they were a generation ago. 9

Adolescence and brain development

Adolescence can be a confusing and unsettling time for many young people. Bodies change – often unpredictably and sometimes in unwelcome ways; new feelings and emotions can be overwhelming. That said, most young people with proper education and support navigate their way through adolescence well.

Neuroscience is now confirming that the teenage brain is much more malleable than had previously been thought. Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London, says that developments in neuroscience show that brain development does not stop in childhood but continues throughout adolescence and into adulthood, and this research “might have implications for education, rehabilitation and intervention”. 10

This research therefore demonstrates how important it is that we provide good quality education and support to help and enable young people to develop and grow. Interventions must help young people develop the confidence and self-belief they need to make responsible decisions, and to ensure they know that adults have high expectations of them and their relationships, so that they have high expectations for themselves.

Adopting a positive approach and trusting young people

Young people tell Brook time and again the most important thing that older people can do is to trust young people, and remember what it feels like to be young – the emotions underpinning every risk and every disappointment; the fear and joy before saying ‘I don’t love you anymore’, ‘I want to marry you’, ‘I am gay’, ‘I am pregnant’, ‘I have HIV’ or ‘let’s have sex’. Contexts change dramatically, but the feelings remain the same and if we, the adults, can connect with those feelings, we will remember that young people are not aliens, and that we must value their experiences and adopt a positive approach to their developing sexuality and that young people must be trusted.

Is it getting harder for young people to navigate their relationships?

Increasingly I am asked whether it is more difficult for young people growing up now to navigate their way through adolescence because there is easy access to internet pornography and new technologies where you can take and send explicit ‘selfies’ – often called ‘sexting’. It is certainly very different now, but I do not think it is ‘harder’. It is so easy to throw our hands up in the air and despair, but before doing so it is important to think about what young people have navigated in recent history: the 1960s when access to contraception was difficult, abortion and loving someone of the same gender was illegal; the 1980s when your right to access confidential advice if you were under 16 was untested in the Courts; the late ’80s and ’90s with the start of the HIV epidemic, Section 28 creating fear of teaching about homosexuality, and young women often struggling to get emergency contraception. Speaking at a seminar in February 2015, Alison Hadley11 reminded us that it is a very British phenomenon to problematise all things to do with young people and sex – we fear the next thing we will fear. A sensible and measured approach to young people’s sexual health requires us to emancipate ourselves from this fear and accept it is not harder for young people, simply different.

If we agree that as a general rule growing up and starting your relationship and sexual journey is simply different, rather than harder, it provides us with a productive and more positive starting point for discussions, education and services.

There are three current issues that need exploring a bit further: gender; internet pornography and social media; and consent, violence and exploitation.

Gender

Whatever your gender or sexual identity, gender stereotypes are limiting for young people because they restrict and limit hopes, dreams and aspirations. One of the greatest challenges and opportunities we have is to free all young people in future generations from the shackles of traditional gender stereotypes.

Internet pornography and social media

No matter what you think about pornography, it is not the best place to learn about sex. The best internet filters in the world will not stop young people accessing pornography – accidentally or by design. Young people tell us that they do understand the difference between reality and fantasy and we should trust them more. Our job is to educate them so they do not go to porn to learn about sex, and to ensure that if they do get worried and frightened by something they see online they know how to access help.

Consent, violence and exploitation

As we become increasingly aware of the extent of violence and exploitation amongst young people, Brook is being asked to do more and more vital work focusing on violence and exploitation. However, it must be balanced with information and skills development focusing on positive and respectful behaviours. Yes, young people need to know about violence and exploitation and understand it is always unacceptable and this must be taught alongside positive and acceptable behaviours, a deep and detailed understanding of consent and the development of negotiation skills. We also have to find sensible ways of
recognising that violence is gendered – overwhelmingly it is men that are violent against women and other men – without demonising boys and young men as they grow up.

What can we do?

It is difficult to legislate for, or write the importance of trust and a positive approach to sexuality into public policy, but we must find ways to do so because it is vital if we are really to transform the way we build the confidence and self-belief of all young people, whatever their gender and sexual identities.

The evidence shows us that if we want to help promote positive relationships and sexual health amongst young people we need to have the following ingredients, and politicians, statutory sector, commissioners, the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors, young people and the public need to work together to ensure the following is achieved:

- a sex-positive culture;
- high hopes and aspirations for all young people;
- parental and intergenerational communication;
- promoting health and wellbeing at school and in the community; and
- easy access to high-quality, one-to-one, confidential advice and support.

A sex positive culture

As one of Brook’s posters says: “There are lots of things young people need to hear about sexual health; an awkward silence isn’t one of them.” Evidence shows young people still experience silence, misinformation and sometimes prejudice about sex and sexuality. We get what we expect from young people and if we want them to be responsible decision-makers about sex, they need to grow up in a culture that is positive and open about sex. Brook’s young volunteers established the ‘Sex:Positive’ campaign to challenge society’s attitudes towards young people and sex. It is a pledge-based campaign which asks people to promise to listen to what young people have to say, support young people’s right to express and enjoy their sexuality and support their individual choices, and to talk honestly and openly about sex. ‘Sex:Positive’ pledgers also promise not to feel embarrassed to talk about sex, to exaggerate young people’s sexual behaviour, to judge and demonise young people, or to allow young people to be bullied and hurt. You can sign up online at sexpositive.org.uk.

High hopes and aspirations

Evidence tells us that young people who feel good about themselves and have a good level of self-belief and confidence are more likely to make good decisions about their health and wellbeing, including their relationships. With growing concerns about mental health, self-harm and poor body image, it is clear we have a lot of work to do in improving young people’s confidence so they navigate their relationships with confidence.

Encourage parental and intergenerational communication

Children tell us they want their parent/carer to be their first educator about relationships. They want and trust their parent to talk to them about their values and beliefs. Parents and carers say they want to talk about relationships and they want their children to be happy and safe. One group of parents and carers I worked with said, “I don’t want my child to have sex too early”;

“when they are thinking about having sex, I want them to talk to me”; “if they can’t talk to me, I want them to be able to talk to someone they trust”; but “I don’t want them to be having sex too early”; and “I want them to talk to me”.

This complex mix of emotions, combined with the fear that children know more than they actually do about sex, often from the internet, can stop parents and carers talking to their children. The evidence from England’s Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (1999) is that parental communication is critical. Further advice for parents can be found via the Family Planning Association: fpa.org.uk/help-and-advice/advice-for-parents-carers.

Grandparents and older family members play key roles in children’s lives. Their tales of love, learning and heartbreak are important channels of passing on learning and understanding.

Promoting health and wellbeing in schools

In a recent report, Public Health England argued that “promoting the health and wellbeing of young people within schools and colleges has the potential to improve their educational outcomes and their health and wellbeing outcomes”, as education and health are “closely linked”. Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education is the curriculum subject that addresses health and wellbeing, including puberty, relationships, and sex and sexuality, as well as developing core skills such as identifying, assessing and managing risk and interpersonal communication, other related areas that apply to sex and relationships, and other issues including substance use. It is important that it is a statutory entitlement for all children and young people from the early years through to Further Education.

All education must focus on developing positive skills and understanding – young people often tell us that education tells them what not to do, and warns of risks and bad outcomes, but not what to do, with examples of positive behaviours. Take consent for example – young people will often learn about exploitation, abuse and violence, but not about (active, enthusiastic) consent.
What do young people want from sex and relationships education?

In 2011, Brook asked young people what they wanted their sex and relationships education (SRE) to cover. The results are hugely telling about young people's priorities and the pressures they face, with the most popular answers being ‘body confidence’ (72 per cent), ‘how to avoid peer pressure to have sex’ (71 per cent) and ‘how to treat a boyfriend or girlfriend’ (69 per cent). ‘Love’, poignantly, was given as an answer by 65 per cent of respondents, and ‘how to behave in a relationship’ by 56 per cent. Clearly there is unmet need for more and better education about the skills needed to sustain healthy relationships.

Young people agree that PSHE education should be statutory in all schools and should be supported by a whole-school ethos and approach, which role models positive relationships, promotes respect for diversity, and creates classroom and whole-school environments which are safe for all children and young people. They will also ensure children and young people know how to access one-to-one, confidential advice within the school, the local community and online.

There is widespread commitment to statutory PSHE education including SRE as some recent polls show: 88 per cent of parents support statutory SRE in all schools, according to a 2014 YouGov/Brook poll. However, fewer than one-in-three business leaders in a YouGov/PSHE Association poll in 2014 thought that schools were equipping their pupils with the requisite skills for the world of work, with self-management, communication, and teamwork considered to be vital by 98 per cent of respondents.

The PSHE Association’s ‘#pshepledge’ campaign, to which Relate and Brook are both signatories, calls for PSHE education to be “a statutory entitlement for every child and young person”. Other signatories include the NSPCC, Barnardo’s, the National Union of Teachers, Samaritans, Stonewall and many more – you can see the full list at pshe-association.org.uk/pledge.

In 2014 Brook worked with the PSHE Association and the Sex Education Forum to produce SRE Supplementary Advice to help schools deliver sex and relationships education fit for the 21st century, which can be downloaded for free via: brook.org.uk/supplementaryadvice. The advice contains guidance for schools and teachers on how best to tackle the topics of healthy relationships, sexual consent, exploitation and abuse.

Promoting health and wellbeing in the community

School-based education is important and must be supported by learning taking place in the community for all young people, alongside targeted education and support for those who may have experienced disadvantage or trauma and may be vulnerable to poor relationship and sexual health outcomes, such as young people who are living in residential care or who have experienced homelessness.

Providing one-to-one confidential advice and support both on and off line

Both mainstream and targeted education are vital in educating young people about relationships and sex. Young people will also need one-to-one confidential advice, relationships support and services in good times – when thinking about relationships or having sex – and in bad times – when they are worried about their bodies or being hurt or abused. A key part of education is building knowledge about and trust and confidence in both on- and off-line services so young people know that it is a responsible decision to access services, they have a right to confidential advice and will not be judged.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out young people’s rights to education, services, protection and to participate in decisions that affect them. Ratified by the United Kingdom Government in 1989, this Convention sets the context for teaching and learning about sex and relationships. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s international monitoring committee report in 2008 stated that the UK is not doing enough to meet its obligations regarding sex and relationships education. Young people tell us decade after decade that sex and relationships education is not good enough.

We know what works and we have a broad based consensus in support of young people’s rights. It is time for culture and systemic change without delay.

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1 Simon would like to thank Jo Tacon and Betsey Benson for support in preparing his chapter
2 The Third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) 2013 http://www.natsal.ac.uk/natsal-3/findings.aspx
3 ComRes/Brook poll (2014) Sexual health & SRE: Young people’s views
6 Barnardo’s (2011) Puppet on a string: The urgent need to cut children free from sexual exploitation
9 Alison Hadley OBE is a leader in young people, teenage pregnancy and contraception in the UK
It is quite remarkable to reflect on the rapidity of technological innovation and change and the impact this has had on life in Britain. I entered politics in 1985 and since then, we have seen an explosion in digital technology, which has had a transformational impact. We now have near-instantaneous communication by email, instant messaging, social networking, online retailing and two-way interactive video calling. In 1993, the internet accounted for about one per cent of information flowing through telecommunications networks, but by 2000 this had risen to more than half – and to an astonishing 97 per cent by 2007.1

Young people’s access to technology

The rise of the internet has inevitably had a revolutionary impact on culture as well as commerce. This has affected education too, where access to a computer and broadband is no longer simply a luxury, but a fundamental requirement of the learning world for children and young people in the technological age. The most potent 21st Century medium for learning today is precisely information and communication technology (ICT). It is therefore absolutely essential to the raising of educational standards to have proper ICT and technology policies in our schools. This is why I have championed the importance of science and technology, particularly ICT, in education, in my various parliamentary roles past and present as Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Chairman of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee, and of the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee, and more recently as Chair of the eLearning Foundation.

Yet while technology presents us with such great opportunity for children and young people to do well at school, in apprenticeships, and progress in work, it also brings the possibility of exclusion. Those who lack access to this technology are at a profound disadvantage, particularly at school, with digital learning technologies playing an ever-increasing role in education and in determining educational outcomes. In adult life more and more services are offered online, including job opportunities as well as basic public services such as Universal Credit. However, despite the essential need for digital access in 2014, four million households in Great Britain were without access and four per cent of households with children still do not have access.2

This digital divide is deeply worrying. In 2013, more than a third of the poorest children did not have the internet or a computer at home, compared to just one per cent of children in the richest ten per cent of households.3 This lack of a home internet connection or access to a computer can mean that children and young people struggle to complete homework or coursework, as well as leaving them unable to access school websites which allow them to submit work and receive feedback and marks from teachers digitally. Yet so many of the projects which they are being asked to complete rely upon them being able to get online and do their work in that way.

Poverty is therefore a barrier which prevents some children and young people from accessing digital learning technologies, which in turn may hinder their performance at school. Access to the digital technologies of today’s learning world is linked to academic performance – and hence to young people’s long term life chances. Digital exclusion also means social exclusion.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that young people with access to both a computer and the internet at home on average achieve higher academic results than those who do not have this access,4 and studies have also found that the availability of a computer at home is significantly associated with Key Stage 4 test scores, amounting to a difference of around 14 GCSE points (equivalent to 2 GCSE grades).5 Access to the internet and to the learning technologies of today’s world is therefore a crucial factor in explaining the gap in educational attainment, and poverty...
plays a significant role in this. The Liberal Democrats have therefore championed the Pupil Premium to enable schools to help to overcome this digital divide and empower young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to be able to take full advantage of the opportunities that digital technologies bring.

**Access to education to navigate the technological world positively**

However, alongside the social justice implications of access to technology there is also the question of equal access to supportive education to prepare young people to be able to navigate their relationships with friends, boyfriends/girlfriends, families and others in the ‘digital age’. If unequal access to the technology itself leaves some young people with lower educational attainment, fewer life chances and higher risk of social exclusion; so too unequal access to good quality education leaves some less prepared to form and maintain safe, healthy and positive relationships.

Teenagers are the most digitally savvy group in today’s world. Nearly nine-in-ten (87 per cent) young people (aged 16-24) accessed the internet through a mobile phone in 2014. Ofcom’s research found that almost nine-in-ten (88 per cent) of 16-24s own a smartphone, compared to 14 per cent among those aged 65+. These young adults use their smartphones for 3 hours 36 minutes each day, nearly three times the average across all adults. However, it is important that young people’s ‘hard’ skills of using technology are matched with support for the ‘softer’ skills which allow them to navigate the digital world safely and positively.

There is rising concern today about young people’s relationships. Such concerns are not new, of course, but the rapid expansion of technological possibilities has changed the context in which young people today are navigating their relationships, with implications for their ability to make informed choices and remain in control. With much of their social lives conducted online, it is clear that young people have access to a much less moderated world than previously existed, with mass 24/7 access to the internet through handheld personal devices. The digital age means that violent, abusive, and pornographic content is only ever a few clicks away.

And with smartphones comes not only increasing opportunities for accessing pornographic material, but also for producing it. The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) surveyed young people in 2014, finding
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almost half (46%) agreed that sending sexual or naked photos or videos is ‘a part of everyday life for teenagers nowadays’.9

Furthermore, mass internet connectivity also brings much greater opportunities for contact, with the potential not only for greater access to information, support forums, social networking and making and staying in touch with friends etc., but also the potential for sustained and intensified bullying and increased chances of online abuse. Research last year suggested that the number of children being bullied on the internet had doubled over the past year, with more than one-in-three young people being victimized. More than a third reported that they had experienced cyberbullying and four-in-ten said they had witnessed others being picked on online.10

Whilst it is important to avoid hysteria or futile hand-wringing, it is also worth bearing in mind that many of us adults today (including parents and teachers) did not grow up with the technologies that have become part of young people’s lives. As a result of the sweeping changes rapidly evolving technology has brought in, there is a widening gulf between the experiences of previous generations growing up and young people today – often leaving those with a responsibility to educate and guide young people at some distance from the behaviours and norms of young people’s relationships in the digital age. In the IPPR poll last year, 61 per cent of young people said adults are out of touch with young people’s relationships and friendships, and 56 per cent said adults find it hard to understand or help with online issues.11

Teachers frequently report not being well prepared to educate young people about the hazards of the modern world. From break-ups playing out online to cyber bullying and easily accessible pornography, today’s social landscape poses new and different challenges to even ten years ago. A YouGov survey in September 2014 found two thirds of teachers had seen pupils abusing and bullying each other on the internet, but over 40 per cent said they had never taught e-safety, while a third said they would feel out of their depth tackling it in class.12

A curriculum for life: PSHE education

This is precisely why the Liberal Democrats are committed to statutory Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) education, including Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), to help children and young people learn about choice, control, and consent so as to help them go on to form and maintain healthy, good quality relationships throughout their education and across their later lives. Availability of good quality PSHE education is essential to prepare children and young people to navigate their relationships with friends, boyfriends and girlfriends, families and others – online and offline – in a positive way, with informed choice at the centre.

The House of Commons Education Select Committee recently published its report of its inquiry into Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education and Sex and Relationships Education in schools, and found that PSHE requires improvement in 40 per cent of schools, with young people consistently reporting that the RSE they receive is inadequate. The Committee noted that this situation would not be tolerated in other areas of education.

More often than not, RSE focuses on biological aspects and places inadequate emphasis on relationships.13 In January 2014, research among young people aged 14-25 found one-in-three did not learn about consent and did not know where to get help if sexually assaulted and 57 per cent had not been taught about what was ‘good and bad about a relationship’.14 Ofsted has also highlighted that primary schools place too much emphasis on friendships, leaving pupils ill-prepared for puberty, and secondary schools give insufficient attention to healthy relationships, pornography, staying safe, and dealing with emotions.15

Effective PSHE education requires willing, confident, and competent teachers. Yet research indicates that 80 per cent of teachers do not feel trained and confident to talk about relationships and sex education,16 and only three per cent report that this was covered adequately within their teacher training.17 Ofsted also highlighted that many teachers lack expertise in teaching sensitive and controversial subjects, and leave subjects such as sexuality, mental health and domestic violence off the curriculum.18

Young people have a right to information that will help keep them healthy and safe. As the Education Committee recently noted, age-appropriate PSHE education also has an important role to play in developing character and resilience, and in instilling the principle of consent to protect young people as they grow up – particularly for vulnerable children such as looked after children, or lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender children.

The Liberal Democrats are therefore committed to ensuring that all children in state funded schools, including free schools and academies, will be taught a curriculum for life which includes age-appropriate RSE. This is something we have been committed to for many years, but which coalition government prevented us from achieving. Many Conservatives retain a reluctance to educate young people about relationships, fearing (without any evidence) that talking about relationships, sex, consent, pornography, etc. may lead to increased and earlier sexual activity.

The Coalition Government achieved notable success in education, including the Pupil Premium for disadvantaged pupils, which can enable schools to narrow the technological divide. One unfortunate legacy of coalition government, however, was a narrowing of focus within the Department for
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Education under former Secretary of State Michael Gove, with the energy given to attainment in international performance tables unfortunately squeezing out the equally necessary focus on skills for life.

Statutory PSHE education should also include lessons about mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, which are increasingly afflicting children and adolescents today. The Government’s task force on children’s mental health reported in March 2015 that referrals and waiting times for young people’s mental health services are increasing, and stigma around mental health prevents people from accessing support. Accordingly, PSHE education should reflect the NHS’s goal of ‘parity of esteem’ between physical and mental health.

The Liberal Democrats believe that a ‘curriculum for life’ is vital. Preparing young people for adult life goes beyond Maths and English or performance in international league tables. We have therefore committed to guaranteeing that children in state funded schools, including free schools and academies, will receive age-appropriate RSE, as well as financial literacy and citizenship lessons.

Life is all about relationships. We are bound up with relationships with others across the course of our lives. If we are to succeed in life, therefore, we need to be adequately prepared with the necessary relational skills to form successful relationships with family, friends, at school, in apprenticeships, and at work. Our capacity for forming and maintaining relationships directly impacts on our capacity to achieve things we value – being healthy, having a good job, being safe, being happy, and having self-respect.

It is therefore just as essential to ensure all young people have access to good quality PSHE education which confers ‘relational’ life skills, which can enable them to navigate safely the new digital world we live in, as it is to ensure all young people have the physical access to this digital world and the learning technologies it offers.

“Life is all about relationships. We are bound up with relationships with others across the course of our lives.”

11 BBC News, 17 November 2014, MP says schools are failing on cyberbullying http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-30043884
14 BBC News, 8 January 2014, Schools urged to teach about consent in sex education, 8 January 2014
15 Ofsted (2013) Not yet good enough: personal, social, health and economic education in schools
16 National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations, National Association of Head Teachers, National Governors Association, and Durex, Sex and Relationship Education: Views from teachers, parents and governors, 2010 http://www.durexhcp.co.uk/downloads/SRE-report.pdf

14 ideas for putting relationships at the heart of policy www.relate.org.uk
Is love all you need?

The case for adult relationship education

Mark Molden, Chief Executive, Marriage Care

When my wife and I decided to get married it coincided with the release of the film Captain Corelli’s Mandolin – an adaptation of the novel by the same name, set on the Greek island of Cephallonia. The main characters are Antonio Corelli – an Italian army captain – and Pelagia – the daughter of the local physician, Dr Iannis. Corelli and Pelagia’s slow developing love is the central focus of the novel, and the film provided the tear-jerking soundtrack that accompanied my wife as she walked down the aisle on our wedding day. It was all very romantic.

However, in the midst of the film Dr Iannis pricks the romantic bubble with words that point to a more enduring love. He said this:

Love is a temporary madness; it erupts like volcanoes and then subsides. And when it subsides, you have to make a decision [...] Because this is what love is. Love is not breathlessness, it is not excitement, it is not the promulgation of promises of eternal passion, it is not the desire to mate every second minute of the day [...] That is just being “in love”, which any fool can do. Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away, and this is both an art and a fortunate accident.

Many of us have the good fortune to find safe, intimate relationships in adulthood that have the potential for healthy growth but there is an ‘art’ (and a science) to achieving that growth. Good fortune may have brought me and my wife together, but that didn’t automatically endow us with the skills to successfully navigate and bring together our expectations, our families of origin and, in our case, the forming of a stepfamily.

We think nothing of investing in our skills and personal development when it comes to the workplace – adult learning and education is recognised as having many benefits¹ – but why, when it comes to the one thing that matters most to us all – relationships – do we fall into the trap of assuming no education and lifelong learning is required?

William Morris wrote a poem called ‘Love is Enough’ and someone is said to have reviewed it briefly with the words ‘It isn’t.’ [...] To say this is not to belittle the natural loves but to indicate where their real glory lies. It is no disparagement to a garden to say that it will not fence and weed itself, nor prune its own fruit trees, nor roll and cut its own lawns. A garden is a good thing but that is not the sort of goodness it has. It will remain a garden, as distinct from a wilderness, only if someone does all these things to it. (C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves)

Healthy, strong and fulfilling relationships don’t just happen; they are created, or rather, co-created. The difference between couples that enjoy good quality relationships and those that do not is not that they are better matched, better looking or more in love. It’s not that they have fewer differences or less to fight about. In fact, research shows that all couples disagree about the same basic issues – money, children, sex, housework, in-laws and time.² The difference is in how they handle these disagreements. Couples that enjoy a good quality relationship disagree in a way that makes their relationship stronger. They also have other skills, knowledge, and attitudes that help them build and maintain the commitment, stability and quality of their relationship.

So the great news is that anyone can learn to ‘do’ relationships better, because it is behaviours and skills that contribute to the quality and stability of our relationships. We now know that couples can un-learn the behaviours that destroy a relationship and replace them with behaviours and skills that help keep love alive; learning what to expect as their relationship journeys through different stages and transitions and learning the skills to manage the predictable challenges along the way.

It is why primary interventions like pre-marriage, marriage enrichment and relationship education courses – promoting relational capability through education, skills and training – have now taken their
A study of relationships in 2011 divided people towards accessing support in the future – increasing working through problems rather than separating and as a catalyst for changing couples’ attitudes towards the couple relationship, but also because they can act impact they can have on the quality and stability of taken seriously not only because of the direct positive These are preventative interventions that need to be taken seriously not only because of the direct positive impact they can have on the quality and stability of the couple relationship, but also because they can act as a catalyst for changing couples’ attitudes towards working through problems rather than separating and towards accessing support in the future – increasing the chances of early intervention, before relationship difficulties become entrenched and in crisis.

A study of relationships in 2011 divided people into two groups, according to whether they hold a ‘developmental’ view of relationships or not. Those with a ‘developmental’ view are more likely to believe that relationships can change or improve, they are more likely to initiate conversations about issues that are affecting a relationship. A person with a non-developmental view is more likely to avoid confrontation or not seek help for a relationship that is struggling, believing that relationships cannot improve, they are a given and it is the luck of the draw whether you get a healthy relationship or not.

A driving force behind couple relationship education is the belief in a developmental view of relationships. Relationships are things people do, not that they have. Relationships do not just happen. They are affected or shaped – both positively and negatively – not only by factors such as family background, wealth, or education, but also by the actions of those engaged in the relationship. Relationship education programmes offer couples the opportunity to make a meaningful and significant investment in the long-term quality of their relationship in the good times, building strength and resilience into the relationship before the predictable challenges come along.

Feedback from the clients we work with in Marriage Care as well as an independent evaluation of our services supports the confidence we have in relationship education. For example, 80 per cent of our couples felt that as a result of attending one of our marriage preparation courses their understanding of how a healthy relationship was built and sustained had increased. Not only that, the research also found that by attending a marriage preparation course, couples were significantly more likely to seek support if things go wrong in the future, despite being initially less likely to ask for help than those who attended couple counselling. Their attitudes towards accessing relationship support were changed.

Kelly and David attended one of our marriage preparation days last year. They were fairly typical of the couples coming to Marriage Care for this service. They were in their early 30s, had been living together for a number of years, Kelly was a Catholic and they had chosen to marry in their local Catholic Church. But when the priest asked them to attend our ‘Preparing Together’ day course as part of their wedding preparations they weren’t very enamoured with the idea! Kelly said “We didn’t know much about it and to be honest […] we thought it would be a boring day and we wouldn’t get much out of it but […] now I think that if we hadn’t have done it and found a way of talking about things I don’t know what [that] might have done [to our relationship].”

Research tells us that people have high expectations of their relationships, yet rarely do they think through the implications of making a life-long commitment or discuss their expectations with their partner. An impressive 88 per cent of couples who attend our marriage preparation courses find them useful despite the fact that only 25 per cent want to attend from the start – but significantly 100 per cent then go on to say that every engaged couple would benefit from attending!

FOCCUS® is a tool we use in Marriage Care – it stands for Facilitating Open, Couple Communication, Understanding and Study – and is a questionnaire and report that if used with a trained facilitator helps couples enhance their relationship by discussing important topics including communication, problem solving, religion, parenting, intimacy, finances and more. The journalist, Robert Colville said this of his FOCCUS® sessions:

The occasion was one of the most terrifying – yet ultimately reassuring – of my life. Before getting married, my girlfriend suggested we took a compatibility test. The idea was to make sure, before we spent a sum equivalent to the GDP of Paraguay on hiring a marquee, that ‘till death do us part’ would be a blessing, rather than a sentence. Which is why I found myself […] sitting in a dining room in south London staring at a list of 180 questions, HB pencil in increasingly sweaty hand. We’d talked a bit about our families and our past relationships, but here was the meat of the test. Pass, and married life awaited. Fail, and – well, married life still awaited, but with nagging doubts suddenly intruding.

And therein lies a challenge for couple relationship education. It is not well-known or understood and support with our relationships is often seen in negative terms – as a compatibility exercise, a test or perhaps – worst of all – only for relationships in trouble. It is the fear of the unknown and couples often struggle to see its benefits until they have experienced it for themselves, as Robert Colville goes on to explain:

When I mentioned to friends that we were doing the test, most of them were amused or even alarmed. I, too, was doubtful that a few yes/no questions could map the recesses of our souls. But I came away a convert. It turned out it wasn’t so much an exam as a lesson, teaching us to recognise our differences in personality and temperament, and to make sure...
Part 1

we came up with ways of resolving disputes without lasting damage. It was a reminder, in short, that happily ever after takes some work. I’ve no idea whether we’ll make it – though I certainly hope so. But at least we can say we’re trying our best. And we’ve even got a certificate to prove it.

Couples need an incentive or a societal ‘nudge’ in order to consider taking up the offer of a relationship education or marriage preparation programme and the cost of doing so has the potential of providing a staggering benefit to the public purse of £11.50 for every pound invested.  

Researchers Markman and Rhoades define relationships education for couples as “efforts or programs that provide education, skills, and principles that help […] couples […] increase their chances of having healthy and stable relationships”. The best interventions are delivered following a blueprint or a manual which is research-based and there are three things in particular that you should find in the blueprint of most evidence-based programmes like Marriage Care’s ‘Preparing Together©’ course.

1. Raising awareness
The first is raising awareness: making couples more aware of the kinds of patterns that will harm their relationship if not kept in some check or dealt with. You will find this in Care for the Family’s ‘Let’s Stick Together©’ programme, reminding couples of the dangers of Scoring points, Thinking the worst, Opting out and Put downs (S.T.O.P.).

In Marriage Care’s ‘Preparing Together©’ course, we encourage couples to share what we call ‘pinches’ (the little irritants or niggles), in order to avoid the ‘crunch’ (the crisis point) which happens when hurts and disappointments lead to a build-up of resentment, anger and disconnection. We raise awareness of the fact that all couples have differences and all relationships go through difficult times as they change and grow – relationships develop.

For example, Duncan and Alexandra got married in the summer of 2013 and attended our ‘Preparing Together’ day course. Like many of our couples, they came from different backgrounds. Alex is Polish and Duncan is from Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Duncan said to us:

_The thing I remember most was the realisation that Alex had – that tone of voice was really important. That really came home to us because with Alex being Polish, she can sound a bit harsh because of her accent because she doesn’t have a nice Geordie accent. So she might say something that is just matter of fact but to me it sounds stroppy or aggressive. They brought it up – about tone of voice – and although we had talked about it before when [our course facilitators talked] about it, [the penny finally dropped for] Alex._

“Couples need an incentive or a societal ‘nudge’ in order to consider taking up the offer of relationship education.”
2. Fostering change in attitudes and beliefs

The second aspect of our course involves teaching people about ways of thinking and acting that are associated with greater levels of commitment, and giving them strategies to overcome dysfunctional thinking – such as putting a partner down. We provide couples with strategies for changing the negative behaviours, which are usually learned behaviours from their family history. And we know that changing behaviour can lead to a change in thoughts and feelings and this is something many of our couples comment on in their feedback forms.

3. Skills training and use of structure

The third aspect is teaching couples positive skills for directly countering negative patterns and agreeing ground rules for handling issues a certain way. We introduce our couples to the Speaker-Listener technique developed by Markman and Stanley – focusing on the skill of active listening so that each hears and understands the problem from the other’s perspective before they begin to find ways to manage or solve it.

Nobody ever said on their death bed, “I wish I’d spent more time at the office”. Our thoughts turn to loved ones because our relationships matter to us. As a nation we remain understandably private about our intimate relationships and yet their flourishing or failure has enormous and often visible public consequences. Relationship education offers a solution to this tension. The courses and programmes on offer do not tell couples what kind of marriage or relationship to have. That is up to them. They are not a test or something for failing relationships. They simply provide couples with the tools to build healthy, committed relationships that have the capability to negotiate, and renegotiate, as our relationships grow, change and develop.

There is widespread acceptance that good quality couple relationships form the basis of a thriving society, economically and socially, and yet we continue to overlook all the political and societal elements needed to realise that good. Any coach of a team sport knows that team spirit in itself can be a powerful ingredient for success, but to send a team out to win on team spirit alone – without learning at least the basic skills of the game – is a recipe for failure. It is why the case for incentivised relationship education in adulthood is such a strong one – when committed relationships are being formed or life transitions made – creating the necessary conditions for relationships to ‘win’ and for society to thrive.

Erich Fromm, in his seminal work *The Art of Loving*, advocates love as a skill, to be honed and worked at, requiring knowledge and effort, rather than “something one falls into if one’s lucky”. He said “Love isn’t something natural. Rather it requires discipline, concentration, patience, faith, and the overcoming of narcissism. It isn’t a feeling, it is a practice.”

Is love all you need? According to the Beatles, yes. But even they concede “you can learn how to play the game. It’s easy!”

1. NIACE (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) says that “Those who participate in learning are likely to be healthier, happier and better paid than those who do not”.

2. For example see Chapter 1 on families in Relate (2014) *The Way We Are Now: State of the UK’s Relationships*.


8. Taken from Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) 3 Key Educational Strategies for Prevention (www.prepinc.com).
Part 1

Managing change

Mothers and fathers across the transition to parenthood

Adrienne Burgess, Joint CEO and Head of Research, Fatherhood Institute

If couples contemplating parenthood knew about the likely impact on their relationship, it’s possible that many would turn and run. Couple relationship researchers have hardly a good word to say about new parenthood. While acknowledging ‘substantial variability’ in couples’ adjustment, they feel bound to point out that most new parents prove less satisfied with their relationship than couples who do not have children, experience increased depression and anxiety and fight and argue more often and engage in relatively high levels of family violence - both partner-to-partner and parent-to-child. Worse, some of these couples (possibly as many as one third) never recover: their diminished relationship becomes the ‘new normal’, heading downhill all the way to separation and divorce. And the damage doesn’t stop there: couple conflict, mother/father maladjustment, poor parenting quality and family violence are all linked with children’s emotional, behavioural, and academic problems.

Why can new parenthood have such a devastating impact? Much of it is not to do with new parenthood per se, but to the fact that new parenthood is a massive life change. Substantial life change of any kind can destabilise couple relationships. Not that change itself is inherently problematic. Change happens all the time and, in fact, love begins in change. Although we like to believe ‘that loving feeling’ just happens, we create love through changes that we make as we get to know our partner. We try to anticipate their needs, are generous with affection and admiration and tell ourselves that attractive ‘others’ aren’t all that attractive. Above all we make time – time for talk, time for fun, time for sex. When ‘that loving feeling’ withers one common reason is that we stop making the changes that helped create the experience of being in love. Agony Aunts who tell us we can bring back passion by scheduling daily couple chats or going to bed together at the same time are talking a kind of sense: they are encouraging us to make the kinds of changes we made to create love, in the beginning.

But the big life event changes, of which the transition to parenthood is one, are a different matter. Positive or negative, they may impact on couple functioning. Couples turning up in counselling report more major life events in the year leading up to their treatment (and almost twice as many in the three years before) than couples who do not seek counselling. Many an elderly couple, posing proudly with children and grandchildren at their golden wedding, are unaware that, had Fate dumped on them even half the life changes she dumped on their unfortunate neighbours, they would by now be living in different cities.

Just as, when our relationships begin, we can be tricked by circumstance into thinking we are better suited or more ‘in love’ than we actually are, so we can be tricked by the negative spin-off from life events into thinking our relationship is on the way out, when it needn’t be. One reason is that life events (both good and bad) generate stress, and when we are under stress our behaviour towards our partner (or theirs to us) alters. We can then start seeing that behaviour (and, by extension, our partner) as ‘the problem’. People under stress may fail to fulfil their ‘roles’ as expected, become touchy or argumentative or ‘switch off’. They almost always cut back on warmth and supportiveness, and may treat their partner with hostility. In a nutshell, stress increases our need for support from our mate and reduces our ability to provide it.

“In a nutshell, stress increases our need for support from our mate and reduces our ability to provide it.”
Supportiveness ranks as a major expectation in close relationships. This means we believe it is something our partner owes us. If it is not forthcoming we feel let down: couples who break up often say that the chief reason was ‘lack of support’ from their partner. The main way we judge whether or not our partner is supportive is how responsive they are to us: that is, how accurately they seem to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ us. Their responsiveness helps us feel safe (it signals to us that they will notice when we need help, and will be able to give us help) and stops us feeling vulnerable and lonely. A major reason life events can cause so many problems is that they absorb our attention, and so diminish our capacity to be responsive to our partner.

Of course responsiveness is not only at the heart of good loving, it is also at the heart of good parenting: as we all know, the ‘best’ parents are those who do not impose on their children but respond sensitively to their needs and wishes, talents and limitations. Indeed, psychologists believe that children’s actual sense of existence depends in large measure on how responsive their caretakers are.

It now seems that, in sexual love, something similar may be going on. Our partner’s responsiveness goes a long way to helping us feel valued and ‘real’. Conversely, their lack of responsiveness makes us feel we are a ‘nobody.’ We are then hurt and sad, and as a result may be primarily motivated by thinking clearly, and makes us feel tired, negative even depressed. When in a negative frame of mind, we tend to interpret others’ feelings and intentions inaccurately, and our awareness of clarity. This is partly because when we are ‘het up’ we are particularly prone to interpreting our partner’s feelings and intentions inaccurately, and become ‘het up’ we are particularly prone to interpreting our partner’s feelings and intentions inaccurately, and to interpreting their attitude as more negative than it is. And since we tend to reciprocate the emotion we think our partner is feeling (and then see them as reciprocating what we’ve been feeling) it is easy to see how upsetting exchanges can develop, even when there was no serious ill-will to start with. After this has happened a few times, the prospect of the simplest conversation can cause stress. Studies have shown that when unhappy couples sit down for a chat about the events of the day, their hearts start racing before either opens their mouth. This agitation can be measured, and used to predict which couples will stay together, and which will not: the greater the agitation, the less likely a long term happiness.

The self-focus that is part of anxiety, negativity and depression also makes effective problem solving less likely: it gets in the way of our understanding and appreciating our partner’s point of view. And in a horrible snowball effect, our partner’s problem solving skills can take a dive when lack of recognition and support from us, makes them depressed. Depression is contagious: researchers have found that college students assigned to live with mildly depressed roommates become increasingly depressed themselves; that 50 per cent of couples who come for counselling contain at least one depressed partner; that half of all depressed women have at-home partner problems; and that unhappy couples are 25 times more likely than the rest of the population to fall prey to depression.

When we are flooded with anxious feelings, which can even happen when our heart rate is just eight beats-per-minute faster than usual effective problem solving goes out the window. This is partly because when we are ‘het up’ we are particularly prone to interpreting our partner’s feelings and intentions inaccurately, and to interpreting their attitude as more negative than it is. And since we tend to reciprocate the emotion we think our partner is feeling (and then see them as reciprocating what we’ve been feeling) it is easy to see how upsetting exchanges can develop, even when there was no serious ill-will to start with. After this has happened a few times, the prospect of the simplest conversation can cause stress. Studies have shown that when unhappy couples sit down for a chat about the events of the day, their hearts start racing before either opens their mouth. This agitation can be measured, and used to predict which couples will stay together, and which will not: the greater the agitation, the less likely long term happiness.

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Once we feel unsupported and are no longer successfully solving problems together, we can no longer see ourselves as a good team. The costs of living together begin to appear high; the rewards low; and one partner (feeling irritated or angry or increasingly detached) may start questioning the relationship. If detachment continues for any length of time, they may begin trying out new (often uncharacteristic) behaviour in an area of life separate from their mate: work, travel, education, drugs/alcohol, an affair. As separateness and secrecy increase and differences develop, a fundamentally compatible couple can begin to see themselves incompatible. In acknowledgement of the fact that this has been a process, what is often said is, ‘we have become strangers.’

However, some couples buck this trend and positively thrive as new parents. Around 20 per cent describe their relationship as closer and better, and what commonly characterises these couples is their capacity to operate as a team. As they manage this great life change successfully and meet challenges and solve problems together, their sense of themselves...
as a successful partnership is reinforced and their satisfaction with their relationship and with each other is enhanced.

Given our understanding of these processes, it would seem sensible if major elements in perinatal interventions included developing the parenting ‘team’ and preparing parents to communicate positively when under stress and understand the huge importance of supportive behaviours, and practise these.

At the time of the birth, 90 per cent of new parents self-identify as a couple and another five per cent regard themselves as ‘good friends’. Among the remaining five per cent (those who declare they are ‘not in a relationship’), one quarter are still in touch nine months down the line.21 What this amounts to is that in the UK today there are hardly any ‘single mums’ at the time of the birth, and this provides perinatal services with a remarkable opportunity to support couples and to support parents as a team. Sadly the way ‘maternity’ services in the UK are structured, with ‘the father’ not even formally invited to one antenatal appointment, actually works agains the notion of parenting as a shared joy and responsibility, to be tackled by parents together, as a team.

The Fatherhood Institute has learned a great deal from bringing over from the US, and adapting for the UK (including shooting UK video material), an outstanding couple-focused perinatal intervention ‘Family Foundations’. The main focus of this intervention is on the couple as partners and as a parenting team. Among other things, the content de-bunks myths such as that women have innate ‘special skills and talents’ with infants that fathers lack, and helps expectant and new mothers and fathers identify their own and their partners’ values, expectations and assumptions, fears and dreams. One of our trainers, awestruck, watching couples practising communicating deeply and calmly with each other, whispered: “What I’m seeing is love in action.”

As is well known, a major reason couple counselling so often fails to bring alienated couples back into ‘synch’ is that they get to it too late: on average, six years after they have first noticed major problems at home.22 When couple-counselling is used like an emergency dash to A&E instead of (as future generations will hopefully use it) like a routine trip to the family doctor to check out worrying symptoms, outcomes are unlikely to be good. The key to healthy love (as to healthy life) is to pick up the early niggles before they turn into chronic problems. Engaging mothers and fathers across transition to parenthood to help them manage change and develop positive co-parenting presents us all with a wonderful opportunity. It should not be missed.

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We are equal, but are we valued?

The journey to ensure same sex relationships are truly valued

Matt Horwood, Communications Officer, Stonewall

2014 was a big year for same sex couples in Britain. It was the year that in England, Scotland and Wales they could get married for the first time. The media coverage of same sex couples marrying in the spring, and later in the year converting their Civil Partnerships to marriages, showed beyond doubt that same sex couples were as capable of celebrating the institution of marriage with cake and champagne and with their great aunts as anyone else. Likewise, go to any wedding venue or registrar’s office today and you will see that nothing has changed for the men and women marrying each other. They are no less happy nor any less willing to get married than they were before. The doom-laden predictions of some opponents were, unsurprisingly, not borne out.

Almost two years since the Act received Royal Assent (and a year since the equivalent legislation passed in Scotland) it is easy to forget how momentous a shift it marked. It is undeniable that securing equal marriage was an important step for lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals and couples, but also for wider society. It seems almost inexplicable on reflection that until 2013 there were 3.7 million people in Britain denied their human rights; that in the eyes of the law same sex couples were felt to be so distinctly different, and by some to pose such a danger to society and the institution of marriage, that they merited different treatment.

The inexplicability of the situation is reflected in the fact that our opponents struggled to evidence a groundswell of public opposition to equal marriage, no matter how many different ways they asked leading polling questions. In contrast, robust YouGov polling showed that the majority of the British population supported equal marriage (70 per cent), so at Stonewall we never had any doubt that it had support. Our opponents persisted however, I suspect because they felt that the British population was simply naïve of ‘consequences’ of equal marriage and just needed to be told what a danger it was. In reality, I think the majority of the population felt that it was such a clearly outdated inequality that it was just an obvious policy to introduce, like making children’s toys safe or making people pass a driving test.

Same sex couples wanted the right to get married and call themselves married (some do not for varied social and political reasons, and their relationships are to be celebrated and afforded equality too), but at its root is the desire to be held in equal esteem by society. Whilst equal marriage goes a long way to saying society holds same sex relationships as equal to opposite sex ones, appearances can be deceptive. We do not yet live in a country or a world where lesbian, gay and bisexual people, their relationships and their families are held in equal esteem. I would suggest that same sex relationships are not yet always afforded the conditions in which they can thrive.

“Whilst equal marriage goes a long way to saying society holds same sex relationships as equal to opposite sex ones, appearances can be deceptive.”
That does not mean that lesbian, gay and bisexual people and same sex couples are incapable of having healthy, happy, strong, loving and committed relationships. They are. There are reams and reams of examples of same sex couples who have as strong relationships as their peers, that are as rewarding and satisfying (and at times difficult) as everyone else’s. But I suggest that this is in spite of the barriers placed against many of them. The lived experience of many same sex couples, even of those in the happiest and most fulfilling relationships, is not an entirely easy one. All relationships can be difficult in the modern world and face challenges – the struggle for work/life balance being just one example – but same sex couples face additional difficulties that opposite-sex couples do not. Equal marriage has provided legal equality but same sex couples may not feel safe holding each other’s hands or showing each other affection in public. A young lesbian, gay or bisexual person growing up today may know that, yes, they can potentially marry their boyfriend or girlfriend, but they may still live with the persistent fear that their friends and family may still disapprove or even abandon them for it. And up and down the country same sex couples may be getting married with supportive and happy family and friends around them, but many still do not feel able to tell their colleagues (25 per cent are not out to anyone at work)² for fear it will affect their career prospects.

Whether or not same sex couples feel comfortable and supported doesn’t just affect the lesbian, gay and bisexual community, but also everyone around them. Lack of support and feelings of discomfort or having to hide can have an impact on happiness and health, and can influence the productivity of lesbian, gay and bisexual people at home, at work or at school. Families, friends, employers, employees, students and teachers of lesbian, gay and bisexual people are just some of the individuals who this can have a direct impact on.

During the campaign for equal marriage, Stonewall was clear that the goal was not solely the legal right to marry; our goal was to ensure lesbian, gay and bisexual people, their relationships and their families are held in equal esteem to that of everyone else and that the uniqueness and importance of every relationship is celebrated and supported, regardless of the gender or sex of those involved. We have yet to achieve that goal. But society has a legacy to unpick before that can happen. We live in a world where generations upon generations of lesbian, gay and bisexual people have been told that they and their relationships have no worth. Alive in Britain today are a generation of men who were told that to be gay or bisexual was a crime; another generation of men whose lives were ravaged by HIV and AIDS and whose sex lives were accused of being abhorrent; a generation of lesbian, gay and
bipolar people who were told by the government that their families were 'pretend'; a generation of young people who because of Section 28 were denied the information and support they needed to have happy and healthy relationships. That is the legacy that cannot be ignored, but we have an opportunity to move from a society which actively inhibits strong and healthy same sex relationships to one that proactively encourages them.

This sort of legacy has a long-lasting effect on individuals and can affect how they interact with others and how they access the hard-won legal rights they now have. This is often more so the case for older individuals – we have the first generation of same sex couples who have been open about their sexuality and their relationship for the majority of their lives who face the prospect of having to go back into the closet when accessing the later life care they need. We know too that often lesbian, gay, and bisexual people face significant health inequalities, especially in their mental health, and this can affect their ability to form and sustain healthy same sex relationships.

One of the best ways to unpick that legacy is to build a society where lesbian, gay and bisexual people, their relationships and families are actively valued. There is no better place to start than with the next generation. What we aspire to at Stonewall is a world where every single young person questioning their sexuality has a safe and positive environment in which to explore their thoughts and feelings, without judgement. An environment where they have access to age-appropriate information on what constitutes strong and healthy same sex relationships, including safe and healthy sex. An environment where they can discuss their feelings and concerns and be assured that being lesbian, gay or bisexual does not have to have an impact on their aspirations, whether in terms of relationships or otherwise. An environment where they have seen and heard that lesbian, gay and bisexual people do make a positive contribution to society. An environment where they are told that people may have different views about homosexuality but everyone, regardless of their sexuality, has equal worth as a human being.

Sadly, we are nowhere near that point yet. Stonewall research published in 2012 by the University of Cambridge showed that more than 85 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people are never taught in school about the biological or physical aspects of same sex relationships and 81 per cent are never taught about where to go for help and advice about same sex relationships. Just 33 per cent of gay young people discuss lesbian, gay and bisexual issues in Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education lessons and only 22 per cent discuss gay people or their relationships in Sex and Relationship Education (SRE). Meanwhile, 54 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people do not feel there is an adult at school who they can talk to about being gay and 25 per cent do not have an adult at school, home or elsewhere they can talk to about it.

The same research shows that 55 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils experience homophobic bullying in school and 99 per cent of them hear derogatory statements such as ‘that’s so gay’ in school. This impact on self-worth and belonging are clear, with 54 per cent feeling as though they ‘don’t belong’ at their school and 46 per cent feeling unable to be themselves at school. Most shocking of all is that 23 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people have tried to take their own life at some point.

Our schools are not only often an environment where these young people are not being given the information they need to have healthy and strong relationships, but are outright hostile environments where the prevailing message – both explicit and through a failure to challenge it by teachers – is that being lesbian, gay or bisexual is wrong and that these young people do not belong.

At Stonewall we are clear that creating a more positive environment for young lesbian, gay and bisexual people need not be complex. First, schools need to ensure that young people are being given the information they need to have healthy, happy and consensual relationships and sex. That is why we support the introduction of compulsory SRE that is inclusive of same sex relationships. There is no point in introducing compulsory SRE if it continues to only talk about one sort of relationship or provides advice on safe-sex that protects only some young people. But for this to happen schools and teachers need to feel confident in discussing these subjects – more rigorous training is needed.

Schools also need to tackle the hostile environments in schools by having a zero tolerance policy on homophobic bullying and tackling the insipid and damaging casual use of homophobia. The persistent use of ‘gay’ as a derogatory comment to mean stupid, bad, worthless or wrong, cannot help but impact on young lesbian, gay and bisexual people’s sense of worth and belonging. Research has shown that simple measures such as having a comprehensive bullying

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policy, training teachers and school leadership in communicating why tackling homophobia is important to parents, staff and pupils all make a significant difference.

Finally, we need schools, and the media too, to be far more proactive in discussing difference, the role lesbian, gay and bisexual people play in society, and presenting inspirational lesbian, gay and bisexual role models.

Young lesbian, gay and bisexual people need to feel that their lives and their relationships can be successful, happy and rewarding. But more often than not when they look around them they see no one that they feel similar to; they see few representations of happy, healthy and successful lesbian, gay and bisexual people that they can relate to. Elton and David and Ellen and Portia may be brilliant role models, but they are not really relatable to your average young person growing up in a small British town. Our ‘School Role Models’ programme aims to achieve this, by sending role models into schools to speak to students about their experiences of growing up. Students are able to meet lesbian, gay and bisexual people who they can relate to, and who are not just defined by the person(s) they fall in love with.

Alongside any specific work to create the conditions where happy and healthy same sex relationships can thrive, we need to be mindful of the other factors that can affect same sex relationships – stereotypical gender roles being one of the most important. We also need to be supporters and allies of others who suffer similar barriers to those strong and lasting relationships, particularly people who are transgender or transitioning. They often have very loving and stable relationships but they feel bureaucratic and legal barriers – such as the spousal veto – which are put in their way. We have made progress on creating the conditions where lesbian, gay and bisexual people can have happy and loving relationships and we are considering how we can best help transgender people, and their families, too. We would not claim to have a developed knowledge and understanding of how to tackle these issues around relationships and role models for transgender people – Stonewall has not traditionally worked on transgender issues – but we are committed to working with transgender communities going forward to help address them.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual people may now be equal in law, yet it is our value within society and the hearts and minds of those around us which truly impact on our ability to form healthy and happy same sex relationships. Incomprehension, ignorance, negative attitudes and sometimes outright hostility still present themselves to many lesbian, gay and bisexual people when they go to school; go to work; when they come out; when they book a holiday, or hotel or dinner with one another; when they want to have children.

It is a long journey to achieve the world Stonewall wants to see, where same sex relationships have just as much potential for health and happiness as our friends and family in heterosexual relationships. We are on our way. But there is still lots to do.
Part 1

Life’s easier with people who love you

Relationships and living with a long term health condition

Sue Marsh, disability campaigner

I’ve written many articles about how hard life is with a chronic illness, but if it’s hard for the sufferer, I believe it’s actually harder for their families, friends and loved ones. And those articles are rarely written.

It wasn’t really until I became a mother myself, that I truly realised what my wonderful mum has had to go through over the 30 long years that I’ve suffered from a serious bowel disease (Crohn’s disease). Watching your child suffer, helpless to do a thing to change it is agonising. Watching them suffer for an entire lifetime is more than anyone can bear without going through significant personality changes. My mum worries constantly about everything. Controlling her direct environment gives her a sense of control she simply cannot have over my illness. She gets palpitations, suffers terribly with pain in her joints and she finds it hard to listen, so constant is the soundtrack of worry in her head.

Mum has sat up infinite long nights with me, stroking my hair as I vomit constantly over a bowl. She’s suffered through my many major operations, terrified every time that the latest will be the one I don’t wake up from. I can rarely truly tell her how very hard certain mountains are to climb or of my desperation at my very lowest moments. It’s no easier and no less work or expense now that I’m 41.

But if anyone dares to nag me; pulls me through whichever crisis is making me feel desperate; picks up the slack I can’t manage; pays the bills I can’t pay; makes the phone calls I can’t make; and generally makes sure I survive with my life at least partly intact, it’s my mum.

My husband suffers just as painfully, but in other ways. It took him six years to propose to me as he tried to come to terms with a life without the children he was so desperate for. Happily, they came along anyway, in the way that babies often will, but he didn’t know that when he promised to stay by my side, in sickness and in health.

He suffers from depression himself and has had two major breakdowns during times when my health has particularly tested our family. He also has heart disease.
and the stress of our chaotic lives only puts more strain on his heart. But no-one cares for the carer. No matter how sick he might get himself, no matter how much pressure rains down upon him, he has to carry on. One parent out of action, one wage missing, one half of a partnership broken and needy is quite enough. He simply has to manage. If he gets a cold or ‘flu’, it can never be as bad as Crohn’s. If he wants to go out or has a meeting, it can never be quite as important as making sure I’m ok. He used to manage a call centre; now he works in one, the responsibility of a career, one responsibility too far as home always pulled rank over work.

I’ve always needed to be treated in a hospital specialising in bowel disease, meaning round trips of 260 miles for the first 18 years of our relationship, then of 140 miles when I switched to a London hospital. He holds down his full-time job, whilst looking after two small boys alone and bringing himself and them to visit me religiously at weekends.

However, we’ve often marvelled at how strong our marriage has remained, even through so many tests. The threat of losing someone makes you realise how much you value them. Our marriage faces those threats constantly, so I believe we’ve never taken each other for granted, treasuring every day we can be together.

One by one, our friends have come together and drifted apart, but Dave and I feel we become closer with every passing year. As a form of marriage counselling, I wouldn’t recommend long term illness, but there’s no doubt the kind of pressure we live under will either make or break a relationship. It is testimony to my husband’s astonishing patience and kindness that ours was made despite his suffering.

We also believe our household is happier than most. Whilst that seems totally counter-intuitive, when we are all together, we make the most of every day.

The relationship I have with my children is also very unusual. The relationship they have with each other is even more so.

They’ve never known me well. In the space of two days, my youngest went straight from breast feeding to not seeing me at home for five weeks as I underwent yet another operation, triggered by the withdrawal of the hormones necessary to produce first babies, and then milk. When it was finally all over, his first word was ‘home’ as I rushed back through our front door and scooped him up from his cot in sheer joy, shouting “Mummy’s home! Mummy’s home!” He learned early that ‘home’ was a magical, important word.

My boys are ten and nearly seven now and there’s no doubt they have suffered pain and hardships that none of their friends can even imagine. I can’t imagine being without my own mum for weeks on end. They always do jobs I ask them to do without complaining, well aware that Mummy only asks if she has to. They have patience that most young boys will never learn. They empathise with and care about their friends; they’re aware that they need to help Daddy whenever they can.

My oldest judges my health by the boniness of my fingers - he knows that skeletal means yet more impending chaos. Sometimes he gently takes my hand, stroking the protruding bones as though he hopes he can massage away the poorly. My youngest judges it by how ‘pretty’ I look, knowing that I only ever wear make-up or style my hair when I’m at my best. In his world, ‘Mummy’s pretty’ and the huge grin that goes with it means ‘Mummy’s well’.

Their relationship with each other is a beautiful thing. They support each other through so much, the usual childhood bickering mostly alien to them. They will very often stop what they’re doing to give each other a cuddle, whilst the oldest is wise well beyond his years and often acts as a kind of surrogate parent to the little one. He was born with great sensitivity, but my illness has certainly developed and honed that natural trait in him.

They’re impossibly patient, often enduring long car journeys to visit me, or long waits in various waiting rooms. They wouldn’t ever dream of saying they’re bored, or that life isn’t fair. I’ve taught them from the start that life isn’t fair and they shouldn’t expect it to be.

Which takes us full circle to the start of this essay. Watching your children suffer is almost unbearable. I have to let them down or break promises constantly, but they almost never complain, understanding that I will always push myself to my very limits. If I ever say ‘I can’t’ to them, it means I really can’t and they understand that.

But their suffering has undoubtedly made them stronger, not to mention nicer, people. There is a pleasure and a pain in seeing your children grow through pain. All we can do as parents is to teach our children how to survive life with as many tools as we can bestow upon them. Children who are protected through pain. All we can do as parents is to teach our children how to survive life with as many tools as we can bestow upon them. Children who are protected from life in every way by well meaning parents get a tremendous shock when they hit 18 unequipped for the real world in every way.

My boys will be men. Kind, caring men full of empathy and strength, and that can be no bad thing.

But what does this say about our relationships? In essence, that we take one another for granted. As a busy mum and wife, when life is good and I’m able to participate more fully in our family and the chaos of two young boys at primary school, we fall into the trips and patterns of any family. I scream at them to get their school uniform on, shout at them for an untidy bedroom, sometimes forgetting how good they are and take their tolerance and fortitude for granted.

When I should be making a fuss of my husband, trying to pay back some of his selfless care for me, it’s all too
easy to nag about gas bills or refuse him a rare night out, forgetting how much he sacrifices. I remember arguing with him once for not doing enough as a soundtrack started to play in my head, rewinding all the times I can’t get my own slippers or get dressed or the times he tenderly lowers me into the bath despite a bad back or brushes my hair.

But our relationships have those moments of pure joy most might wait a lifetime for.

The day I’m finally released from hospital after long weeks of trauma and pain and suffering, of loneliness and fear and want and lack of love, are the most precious days of our lives. The sky is more blue or the clouds more majestic and brooding. The breeze feels like silk on my skin. I bubble and fizz at the thought of waking up in my own bed, with my arms around my own husband, catching the boys as they hurl their skinny little bodies at me under the duvet, and nestle in as though they want to crawl right back under my skin.

The first meal we eat at the table together feels like the most exclusive restaurant in the world, with the most A-list guests possible. When my mum is there, there are no four people I want to be with more. The food tastes sublime after months of hospital food, or worse, being fed into various veins or intestinal receptacles.

Their laughter makes me fill up with tears of joy, in fact I spend most of the first month crying at baked bean ads or Christmas jingles. I cry at the sound of the wrapping paper, the rustle of tinsel, the sound of the first Christmas song, the whispered conversations about Santa’s benevolence in the boys’ bedroom.

I see my life as a set of scenes, in sharp technicolour. Here I am, in front of an open fire, wrapping presents in my lovely flat with my lovely husband. The shock of it is a thrill. Here I am watching a panto and my children are crying with laughter. Later, the small one hides in my lap as the baddy takes the stage and I jolt into the next scene, his soft hair under my hands, my son, with me, comforted by me, not the succession of well meaning relatives and friends who have juggled him so expertly for the last six or ten weeks.

It’s almost a crime that we forget how precious these moments are. It’s a great gift that I am reminded of my blessings so acutely and regularly. In a marriage, as in anything else, I know that bad times will pass, and the good times will be sweeter for it every time. As a mum, I know that whatever my children do, however they might screw up their lives, or their lives be screwed up for them, there is absolutely nothing we cannot get through. That gives you confidence as a parent.

In policy terms, clearly times are changing medically in all areas, at a pace so rapid, we can’t always keep up. Whilst of course it’s vital that we put resources into research and new and innovative treatments to both improve quality of life and with luck, to lengthen it, it’s also crucial that we share resources rather better between prevention and cure.

Our generation is the first to face the challenges of keeping people alive and comfortable with long term conditions that undoubtedly would have killed them just 50 or so years ago.

As things stand, there is no cure for bowel disease. As the years pass, very more targeted and successful treatments are devised, but in every long term condition, I don’t think we’ve yet considered how to minimise and comfort many of the symptoms. It can cost hundreds of thousands of NHS pounds to see me through each health crisis. Yet so little goes into either prevention of future ones or making life more comfortable when the invariable crises do arise.

Families like mine get little or no support at present. I think most would say that whilst they are grateful for any financial support they might get, they would love a little attention focused onto how very difficult long term illness can make lives. A cheap, comfortable and safe place to stay close to hospitals, that family and friends can sleep in or retreat to would be more valuable to us than all the costly new diagnostics combined. Somewhere to relax outside also has a hugely beneficial effect, but can be difficult to provide in central London or other large cities.

Little more can be done medically to support me – I feel blessed to have such great medical, surgical and GP support. However, massage, hydrotherapy, counselling, relaxation methods or diet advice could probably do more for me at less cost than most official new treatments combined. To see my babies faces during the week or to hold my husband and take comfort just from being near him might save hundreds of hospital days a year for people like me.

All UK healthcare can really do at the moment is tread water, desperately trying to navigate the very real dangers it faces from austerity, lack of funding and massive reorganisation. If it is ever again given the chance to just develop, at its own pace and according to the people who use it, innovations should aim to make long term illnesses easier to live with every day. Sadly, some illnesses are for life and improving the quality of those lives should be our top medical priority going forward.

I’ve learnt a few simple truths. Life is hard. Life’s easier with people who love you. Loving them back is the least you can do. Loving them every day is worth the effort.

“Sadly, some illnesses are for life and improving the quality of those lives should be our top medical priority going forward.”
Not just the two of us

Why wider family relationships matter

Sam Smethers, Chief Executive, Grandparents Plus

The nuclear family is a very fragile thing. In fact I would go so far as to say it does not really exist. Feeling loved, the strength of couple relationships, and parents’ relationships with their children are of course central to their happiness, the stability of a household, their ability to function in the wider world of school and work. But focusing on those relationships alone is a bit like assuming the actors on a West End stage are putting on a show without any help from a director, a playwright, lighting or sound technicians, or without a responsive and encouraging audience. Even in 21st Century Britain it takes a village to raise a child. The only issue is that we do not readily acknowledge that in our society. This does not undermine parents. Rather, it does the opposite. By supporting and enabling the role of grandparents and the wider family to care for children, we will strengthen couple and parental relationships, and strengthen our economy and our wider society. But these wider family relationships can also breakdown. They are complex and sometimes need attention too.
A special relationship

The most common thing I hear from grandparents is that becoming a grandparent is overwhelming. The wave of emotion they feel as they watch their own child become a parent is unexpectedly powerful. So it is not surprising that they then establish something unique and special with their grandchildren. Grandparents are often the ones who have time to play or to listen. They can avoid the need to discipline or punish as parents have to do and so can be the person who is freed up to take the time to give and receive a child’s love. They also embody the family history and cultural heritage. As we grow up the question of where we come from becomes important to us, and our grandparents can help to provide some of the answers. As our society is living longer we can expect our grandparental relationships to endure for longer too. Grandparents can be a presence in their grandchildren’s lives well into adulthood and form relationships with great-grandchildren.

Day-to-day support

Since the 1970s maternal employment has increased and alongside that we have seen an increase in grandparental childcare. Grandparents are the single biggest providers of childcare in Britain with 40 per cent of working families using informal childcare and 27 per cent using both formal and informal.\(^1\) Grandparents are the single biggest source of informal childcare (after parents themselves).\(^2\) There are 13.6 million grandparents in Britain\(^3\), and 63 per cent of grandparents provide childcare – that is 8 million grandparents.\(^4\) Parents turn to grandparents because formal childcare may be too expensive or too inflexible or of variable quality, or sometimes it is just because they want their child to be cared for by someone who knows and loves them. The significance of the relationship is key. But it is younger grandparents who are particularly likely to be called upon to provide childcare as it is not when you have the time to care but when your children have children that determines this. Those who are most likely to be providing childcare are aged under 50 and then 55-64, followed by those aged 65-74.\(^5\) 30 per cent of grandparents who provide childcare are in paid work.\(^6\) Historically it was often grandmothers who retired by the time they were 60 who then took on the childcare role. But this is changing. As our State Pension age is pushed back and with the statutory retirement age now a thing of the past this proportion is likely to increase. Changes in the labour market are also potentially significant here too. Our 24/7 economy, the extent of low paid work, the growth in insecure employment, low paid self-employment, mini-jobs, and zero hours contracts all work to drive parents to relying on informal childcare, both because it is cheap and because there are few formal sources of childcare which can offer irregular hours or cope with that level of job insecurity.

The fact is that because we are all working longer we cannot build our childcare infrastructure on the assumption that grandparents will step in. But we can create the flexibility they need to support and enable parents to take up formal childcare that is on offer. An investment in good quality, flexible formal childcare combined with the introduction of a period of grandparental leave would give parents the mixture of formal and informal support that they need.

Grandparents also provide significant financial support. A recent poll published by Grandparents Plus, the Family and Childcare Trust and Save the Children found that the value of grandparent-to-grandchild transfers was £8 billion in one year (a conservative estimate).\(^7\) It is not just those with wealth to transfer who provide support. The Social Market Foundation found that 52 per cent of low income adults had received financial support from their parents and 35 per cent benefitted from practical support.\(^8\)

When things go wrong

Life, as we know, is what happens to you when you are making other plans. If you reflect on the vast array of situations we may be confronted with in our lives, we often need someone to turn to. Grandparents are often the ones who provide that emergency support. A sick child who cannot go to the child-minder; parental mental or physical ill health or an accident which leaves us unable to care for our children; the death of a parent; a disabled child whose parents cannot find suitable formal childcare; teenagers who need somewhere to stay while they cool off after having a row with their mum or dad; parents who are separating where one returns home to their mum and dad’s, bringing the kids with them; and so on. In fact one survey found
family to be the first line of welfare support with 43 per cent of people believing the family has the greatest responsibility to provide financial support for those who need it – far higher than the state, charities or friends and neighbours.9

The poll by Grandparents Plus, Save the Children and the Family and Childcare Trust found that 14 per cent of grandparents – that’s 1.9 million grandparents – said they had taken annual leave, days off sick, or given up a job to care for a grandchild.10 We often focus on grandmothers but this includes over 400,000 grandfathers.11 The reality is that grandparents do not have an entitlement to periods of leave. Emergency leave provisions do apply to a grandchild, but few employers or grandparents know this. However the entitlement is weak, only applies if the situation was not predicted, and most employees will be lucky to get a few days off. This is why a strengthened leave entitlement would help. Is it reasonable to ask employers to do more? The truth is there is a real win for employers and the economy here. Employers and the economy need employers to do more? The truth is there is a real win

When parents cannot parent their children

If a child in your family could not remain with their parents, who would you want to care for them? I suspect few would opt for local authority care. A grandparent, an older brother or sister, their aunt or uncle – these are who we usually think of for children in our own family; someone who has a relationship with or connection to the child. There are an estimated 200,000 grandparents and wider family members who are raising up to 300,000 children in the UK.12 This is approximately four times the number of children in the care system. According to 2001 census data, 44 per cent of children living with wider family are living with grandparents but 38 per cent are being cared for by older siblings.13 Of these children cared for by wider family, 95 per cent do not have ‘looked after’ status – which means neither they nor their carers have the same entitlements to care and support.14 Yet their experiences prior to entering wider family care are very similar to children in the looked after population (parental alcohol or drug misuse, abuse or neglect, bereavement, mental or physical ill health, disability, domestic violence, imprisonment). Seven-in-ten carers in this situation become stressed, depressed or isolated.15 Almost half (42 per cent) give up their jobs.20

Their relationships are placed under a huge strain. The impact on the household and wider family is significant. If it is a grandparent who steps in to raise a child then their grandchild suddenly becomes a ‘sibling’ to their aunts or uncles. Other grandchildren in the family may feel displaced or jealous; wills may need to be rewritten. Families can fracture under the strain. Four-in-ten kinship carers are raising a child alone and for some that is because their own relationship broke down.21 Life stage plans that grandparents may have had suddenly recede away from them. The needs of the child become paramount and these are often children with significant needs: 48 per cent have a disability or Asperger's Syndrome.22 and 16 per cent have autism or Asperger’s Syndrome.23 There are a number of policy changes which would significantly help this group but in particular there should be a requirement to consider the wider family first before a child is taken into care so that families are not separated unnecessarily; support at local level to be based on the needs of the child not their legal status to prevent children and carers struggling on without help; and a period of adjustment leave followed by paid leave equivalent to adoption leave if the arrangement becomes permanent so that they do not have to give up their jobs.
Reciprocity

Care is the new currency. People often refer to being ‘time poor’ but here I use the word ‘care’ instead of ‘time’ because I think this better reflects what people need. Grandparents have traditionally spent time caring for grandchildren. That is not new. But what is new is their need to work longer and therefore be less available; their potential to care for longer, because they stay active longer; and also, as they age, the potential for more of them to live longer and eventually to need care themselves. Grandparents Plus’ Grandparenting in Europe study found that grandparents are net givers to their families until they are 75. It is only in the last phase of life that they may need more care in return. Research also shows that three-in-ten are caring for grandchildren and a partner or older relative too.

Recent ONS data shows that the fastest growing household type is the multiple-family and three-generation household. Families are finding solutions to both the cost of housing and the need to support and care for each other by living together. This is not unusual in other cultures but for us in the UK it represents a shift – from a focus on the individual and independence to recognition of the need to rely on each other and care for each other. Perhaps this is no bad thing? Although no doubt it will bring its relationship challenges!

Despite my emphasis here on the significant contribution grandparents play in children’s lives, a recent survey found that one-in-five grandparents rarely or never see their grandchildren. By 2030, a quarter of people in the UK will grow old without having had children. Both of these stark facts represent a relationship deficit, a care deficit and potentially a social care ‘time bomb’. Cuts in local government and central government spending mean that over the next five years we are likely to see the state doing less and an expectation that the family will step up to the plate and do more. The Government’s ‘Family Test’ is an indication of the direction of government thinking. Grandparents Plus strongly welcomes it. We need to consider what will strengthen or undermine relationships and ensure that policy is not ‘family blind’. There is also a real dividend to be had here. The Relationships Foundation has estimated that relationship breakdown costs the UK economy £47 billion per year. It is the strength of families we should be focussing and building on. Because they hold the solution. In fact it is remarkable how strong and resilient they are, despite the many adversities they face.

But we also need to balance our family and relationships focus with a recognition that not everyone has family to rely upon and that families cannot do it all unsupported. We have to have decent childcare and care services to underpin informal family care. Instead of regarding spending on care as a cost we should see it as an investment. By valuing and investing in care we could create a ‘care economy’ and by enabling and supporting informal care we would create stronger family relationships and a more stable society. Now that is something worth having.
Few, if any, would argue with the view that strong, stable families are central to the psychological, emotional, social and economic health and wellbeing of adults and children in all types of society and in all corners of the globe. Although family structures have evolved throughout history, by the beginning of this century more and more people were spending longer periods of their lives outside the conventional family unit of two married parents and their biological children. The institution of marriage has been regarded as the cornerstone of family life for centuries, signifying the existence of a committed couple relationship which binds partners together in law, and the provision of a secure, stable environment in which to bring up children. But over the last fifty years this formulation has changed dramatically and the traditional pathway to marriage, parenting and family life has been steadily eroded. Instead, adults have a wide range of choices about how they make, break and remake intimate couple relationships and raise a family. While marriage remains important and the majority of couples still aspire to it, the unparalleled technological, social and economic advances in recent years have challenged traditional expectations about how adults form intimate couple relationships and traditional gendered approaches to parenting.

The rise in cohabitation (for heterosexual and same sex couples), the deferment of marriage and starting a family, and the increase in the number of relationships that break down and end in separation and/or divorce, have far-reaching implications for today’s children and young people. Because getting married is no longer a prerequisite for living with a partner or having children, increasing numbers of children today are likely to grow up in a variety of family forms, including single parent households, and be looked after by a range of different ‘parental’ figures. Should we be concerned about the unprecedented diversity and fragility of family living arrangements? Should we worry about the impact of divorce, once graphically referred to as a “gigantic, moral, religious and legal revolution”? Many would argue that increasing choice and greater emphasis on achieving personal emotional satisfaction as an adult have not been good for children’s wellbeing and family stability, and a tension undoubtedly still exists between valuing choice and freedom in personal relationships on the one hand and valuing continuity, commitment and stability on the other. But to answer questions about whether these changes matter and what governments should be doing in response we need to move beyond moral debate. By examining the evidence about what is important in family relationships we are in a better position to encourage the development of sensitive, supportive family policies which can foster strong, stable relationships within a multiplicity of family forms, protect families when they are most vulnerable, and enhance positive outcomes, particularly for children, whilst avoiding accusations of over-interference by a ‘nanny state’ in the privacy of everyday family life.

Getting family policy right is no easy task: it is one which successive governments have grappled with. In recent years, however, political parties of all persuasions have begun to recognise the importance of looking through a relational lens when making policy decisions which impact on family life. Protecting children’s best interests and wellbeing has become
a legitimate and important aspect of public policy. Protecting and bolstering the quality of children’s relationships with those who matter most to them requires all-party cooperation and consistent policy responses. There is growing evidence that policymakers are prepared to increase investment in protecting family relationships and in addressing the consequences when these relationships break down. Views vary, however, as to the best policies and the priority they should be given. This essay looks specifically at the steps which can be taken to support parents and children when parents separate.

A quick reality check

Before we think about how to support families to maintain strong relationships and foster resilience when sustaining constructive relationships is threatened, it is important to discard prejudicial attitudes which can hinder serious debate. The evidence tells us that:

1. Children’s cognitive, social and emotional development does not appear to be negatively affected by their parents’ marital status.
2. Parental sexual orientation does not appear to be associated with child development.
3. While children living in single parent households (mostly headed by mothers) have poorer outcomes than children living with two parents, it is not single parenthood per se that increases the risks for children: a wide range of adversities, such as economic disadvantage, poorer mental health, and heavy domestic loads cluster within single parent families thereby rendering them considerably more disadvantaged than two parent families.

Armed with this evidence, we should maybe worry less about the changing family structures and increasing diversity in family living arrangements and concentrate more on tackling the conditions which increase risk and promoting the factors that enhance wellbeing. There is no doubt that forming a co-residential intimate adult relationship is one of the most important life course transitions that people make, and sustaining it can be extremely challenging in our fast-changing, fast-paced world. Moreover, the transition to parenthood marks a critical change in the life course and can impose stresses for couples which, if not addressed, can fester and ultimately lead to separation and divorce.

Bringing up children is one of the most important and most challenging tasks that adults perform, and society places an increasingly high value on mothers and fathers being involved in all aspects of childrearing. Gone are the days when traditional gender roles dominated family life and childcare. Fathers as well as mothers are now expected to make a significant contribution in all aspects of family life, including in situations when parents do not share an intimate couple relationship or live together. Importantly, we know that the quality of the relationship between parents is a significant factor in promoting positive child development. Living in a household where the quality of relationships is poor or abusive is detrimental to children’s outcomes and development. This indicates that during significant transitions in family life we need to protect adult couple relationships. Investing in relationship support and reducing the stigma associated with seeking help are essential to achieving this goal.

But some couple relationships will still not be harmonious and some will break down. When they do we need to take steps to prevent the parental relationship from being irreparably damaged by
ongoing conflict and bitterness. If we do not, then outcomes for children look bleak and, if children face multiple disruptions, their vulnerability is increased even further. Equally, conflict and hostility between the parents is likely to damage their own mental health and wellbeing, reducing their ability to parent effectively. Although no direct causal link has been found between parental separation and detrimental outcomes for children, a number of factors, such as economic hardship; multiple transitions; parental conflict; poor, erratic parenting; and the loss of one or both parental relationships; undoubtedly increase the risks for children. These risk factors have to be reduced.

Protecting children’s best interests and wellbeing when parents separate is a legitimate and critical aspect of family policy. So what evidence can guide good policy development? We know that:

1. The majority of people value family connectedness and commitment and seek deep, lasting emotional bonds, so the decision to split up is not taken lightly.6

2. The vast majority of parents care deeply about their children and do not want to hurt them when their own adult relationship breaks down, but breaking up is hard to do and most parents are totally unprepared for the emotional rollercoaster they encounter.7

3. The quality of the child’s home and family environment and the quality of the relationship between the child and its parents are more important in facilitating positive child development than the type of family structure in which the child lives.8

The overriding conclusion from a large body of research is that children thrive best when they are brought up in families characterised by consistent, predictable care, and such care is associated with there being a harmonious relationship between the parents and between parents and their children. It is essential, therefore, that policies are designed to assist parents and children to manage the consequences of relationship breakdown and parental separation so that consistent care can be provided by each parent wherever possible. Governments need to acknowledge the critical importance of sustaining constructive relationships in all families, irrespective of whether parents are living together. We know that family breakdown poses a threat to the health of individuals, families and society, and especially to children’s wellbeing and development, and that this demands a more supportive socio-legal approach to protecting children and their parents if reconciliation is impossible.

**Working together for children**

Healthy, well-functioning parental relationships facilitate the wellbeing of and positive outcomes for children. When parents part, one of the most challenging tasks they face is working out how they will live separate lives and continue to parent together. In the vast majority of cases both parents are keen to continue to have a good relationship with their children. This is hugely demanding, however, and frequently leads to conflict and disputes between parents. If conflict escalates, children find themselves in the middle of what many have described as ‘a war zone’ and, eventually, they may lose contact with one parent, often their father. We should not let that happen and in these situations the state has a responsibility to uphold human rights and support parents in carrying out their responsibilities towards their children, irrespective of their marital/couple status.

Over the last 30 years, practitioners and policymakers...
have sought to reduce conflict when parents split up and encourage parental cooperation. Family mediation endeavours to alleviate the potential damage inflicted by an adversarial legal system which prompts parents to cite ‘fault’ in order to obtain a divorce. A fault-based approach is not appropriate in modern society, and England and Wales trails behind most jurisdictions which long ago moved away from an unhelpful and outdated family justice system. Hopefully, a future government will be bold enough to reform the divorce law in the interests of all concerned. Furthermore, courts are not the best place to sort out relationships that have gone wrong and, increasingly, the emphasis is on encouraging parents to resolve disputes by working together in a conciliatory manner out of court, to make arrangements for the care of their children and agree how property and financial assets should be shared, rather than expecting a judge to make decisions for them. Although this is unquestionably sensible, only a minority of separating parents have sought the help of a mediator in the last 30 years and many continue to struggle to reach agreement and come to terms with how to work together for their children’s wellbeing and healthy development. Despite the widespread acceptance that it is better to talk things out and avoid conflict as much as possible, in reality it is a big ask and one that is not easy for parents to fulfil when their own emotions are running high.

In 2011 the Norgrove review of family justice in England and Wales argued that more could and should be done to support families to resolve issues independently via a range of high-quality dispute resolution services. The review described existing processes as falling short, primarily because parents did not know where to get information and support; too many cases ended up in court; the family justice system was hard to navigate; children had no opportunity to have their say and were largely ignored; and there was a lack of understanding about what parental responsibility actually means in practice. The report was well-received and many positive changes have taken place, including the establishment of a unified Family Court, an emphasis on providing better information for parents, and an expectation, enshrined in legislation, that both parents should share in the care of their children after separation unless there are specific safeguarding concerns. Sharing parenting does not mean that children should spend equal amounts of time with each parent, however, but that a child should be able to enjoy a close, loving relationship with each parent and that neither parent should seek to undermine or hinder this. It is essential that arrangements for children to spend time with each parent should reflect each child’s developmental needs and be sufficiently flexible to be sensitive to changing circumstances as they grow up. The review gave a strong message that children and young people should be given options to have a voice when decisions are being made about arrangements that will affect them.

So where are we now and what do we need to do?

Much has been achieved but more needs to be done. It is clear that one size does not fit all when it comes to mapping paths to family justice. Traditionally, parents seeking divorce have sought legal advice and used solicitors to help them resolve disputes. If this arm’s-length negotiation fails then the courts have provided the remedy. The focus on mediation changes the dynamic and places parents in the driving seat, offering them the chance to work together to sort things out with the help of an independent mediator. In order to assist parents to consider whether out-of-court dispute resolution processes are relevant for them, the introduction of a mandatory Mediation and Information Assessment Meeting (MIAM) before one party can begin a court application was designed to help people make an informed choice but, since there is no compulsion on the other party to attend a MIAM at this stage, the impact is not as positive as it might be. It is important to find new ways of engaging both parents, explaining the options available to them, and signposting them to the most appropriate pathway for their particular circumstances.

Although legal aid is available for mediation for those eligible for public funding, the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) withdrew legal aid for legal advice and representation in private family law matters. This had the unfortunate unintended consequence of reducing the numbers of people opting to mediate. In 2014 a Mediation Task Force considered what steps should be taken to reverse the decline in mediation and develop more innovative ways to resolve disputes. It provided the opportunity to examine the dispute resolution landscape in a range of countries and drew attention to the importance of implementing high-quality front-line information, advice and support for parents, providing wrap-around services to promote cooperative parenting, and increasing inter-professional cooperation.

We can learn much from experience elsewhere. For example, Family Relationship Centres were established by the Australian Government in 2006 in a package of reforms to provide integrated information, advice and dispute resolution services for families at all stages of relationship difficulty. This wrap-around service supports parents who are still living together and having problems and parents who separate. This has encouraged much closer partnership working between counsellors, mediators and lawyers, reflecting a model of practice which is essential if families are to be able to access the right kind of support at the right time for them. The Centres act as a focal point for the development of child-sensitive dispute management services that can be personally tailored, drawing on a range of skilled practitioners and offering a variety of innovative interventions including, for example, programmes tackling domestic violence and abuse and
Radical cultural change is also essential to ensure that of their children so we should expect practitioners to multidisciplinary and blended services here. Just as There is considerable enthusiasm for developing and practice innovations must be evidence-based. resolution needs to be modernised, and policy of relationship support, family law and dispute various providers of information, counselling, advice breaking down professional silos and encouraging working. Cultural change is essential to develop more effective partnerships between the increasing choice for families via an effective triage system. Parents want information and advice they can trust at a time when they are feeling vulnerable. Information needs to be authoritative, the language of relationship support, family law and dispute resolution needs to be modernised, and policy and practice innovations must be evidence-based. There is considerable enthusiasm for developing multidisciplinary and blended services here. Just as we expect parents to work together for the wellbeing of their children so we should expect practitioners to work together for the benefit of all family members.

Radical cultural change is also essential to ensure that the voices of children and young people are no longer marginalised and silent when parents separate. Their wellbeing must be at the heart of policy. In July 2014, the Minister for Justice and Civil Liberties outlined the government’s commitment to giving children and young people a greater voice in family proceedings both in and out of court. Traditionally, they have not been routinely included and research shows just how frustrated many young people are about being excluded when decisions are being taken about arrangements for their future. A recent report from the Voice of the Child Dispute Resolution Advisory Group made 34 recommendations for change. These offer a holistic approach to hearing the voices of children and young people. They require extensive change in dispute resolution culture to provide a whole-family approach, including a non-legal presumption that every child aged 10 (the age of criminal responsibility) and above should have the option to have a conversation with any professional who is assisting their parents make decisions for their future. It is not about conducting forensic interviews or taking evidence from children, nor asking them to make decisions, but respecting their right to be heard. Child-inclusive practice implies a radically different approach to resolving family disputes and promoting children’s wellbeing.

If all 34 recommendations were to be implemented children, young people and their parents would be provided with much better information and support before, during and after parental separation. Separated Parents Information Programmes in England and Working Together for Children programmes in Wales would be routinely offered to parents at the start of the separation process and appropriate funding would be secured to put children’s wellbeing at the centre of the drive for change. If we are serious about supporting children and their parents when parents split up, and about promoting strong stable family life, then governments must implement policies that address the challenges of relationship breakdown, enabling families to benefit from new opportunities while protecting children’s best interests and encouraging greater stability in parenting practices, whatever the living arrangements.

1 Stone, L. (1990) Road to Divorce, OUP.
Part 2

Relationships in policy and practice

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Strengthening families and supporting couples to transform children’s life chances

Dr Samantha Callan, Associate Director for Families and Mental Health, Centre for Social Justice

Politics and government policy have both taken a decidedly welcome ‘relational turn’ over the last six years but the seeds were sown in the early days of the Labour Government when in 1998 they published Supporting Families, the first ever Green Paper on the family. This consultation document laid the foundation for all the work-life balance policies, parenting support and Sure Start programmes (the progenitor of children’s centres) which have become firmly embedded in national policy and, to a large extent, national culture. Less well known perhaps are other sections on ‘Strengthening Marriage’ and ‘Supporting Adult Relationships’. 
This promising beginning for relationships, certainly for those between adults raising children together rather than those between parents and their children, did not survive the serious backlash coming from certain quarters in response to any suggestion of perceived government interference in personal choice and family structure. It was to be another decade before the soaring social and financial cost of relationship breakdown began to receive any government attention at a senior level.

Notably, there was a landmark Relationships Summit in December 2008 that came heavily backed by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families and saw the wife of the then Prime Minister, Sarah Brown, taking an unusually prominent role. She spoke movingly, from her own experience of her parents’ amicable divorce, about the potential for helping parents minimise conflict after their relationship has ended. This is absolutely vital because of the heavy emotional toll parental acrimony inflicts on their children.

Although in many ways this might more accurately have been termed a Post-Separation summit, nevertheless, couple relationships were back on the policy agenda, especially as the Conservative Opposition had begun to talk about the need to address family breakdown as a driver of child poverty. It was in this context that the importance of explicit commitment, usually expressed by marriage, as a protective factor against relationship breakdown began to regain a degree of traction in policy narratives. Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study found only nine per cent of married parents had split by the time a child was five years old compared with 34 per cent of unmarried parents.1

Unusually, David Cameron made his personal support for marriage unapologetic and unambiguous, laying out his position particularly clearly at the 2008 Relate Conference: “Some say I am harking back to the 1950s but how can I when I wasn’t even born then? […] I am a marriage freak because I’m a commitment freak.”2 He acknowledged it annoyed some people that he was willing to speak out in favour of marriage but explained that in his opinion “it does make a difference when you stand up there in front of your friends and family and say ‘from now on it’s not about me anymore, it’s about us.’”

That sense of a shared project stretching into the future, intentionally embarked upon and backed up, ideally, by the extended family and wider community, provides some of the ‘glue’ that will help a couple stay together and raise their children in a stable environment which tends to provide better outcomes.

The stakes are high: children who experience family breakdown are also more likely to experience behavioural problems; perform less well in school; need more medical treatment; leave school and home earlier; become sexually active, pregnant or a parent at an early age; and report more depressive symptoms and higher levels of smoking, drinking and other drug use during adolescence.3 The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) has identified these as ‘pathways to poverty’ and many of these problems continue into adulthood. One study showed that 60-year-olds still suffer the long term effects of childhood stress linked to the psychological trauma of family breakdown.4

Although it remains a deeply contested issue, the opening up of a marriage gap between rich and poor – despite aspirations to marry being consistently high across the socioeconomic spectrum – makes such explicit recognition of marriage imperative. The editor of the Spectator, broadcast journalist and Fellow of the CSJ, Fraser Nelson recently sounded an alarm about how this gap is growing:

There was already a pronounced marriage gap in 2001 […] with those at the top 24 per cent more likely to marry than those at the bottom. But since then, the gap has been rising – now, it stands at 48 per cent. A marriage gap that barely existed generation or two ago has managed to double in the last decade, with a minimum of public debate.5

There is no doubt that a range of policy mechanisms are needed to strengthen relationships and some of those currently being deployed are described below before laying out where the Government must do more.

Encouragingly, the Conservative Manifesto in 2010 and the Coalition Agreement that followed the General Election that year both included references to putting relationship support on a sustainable footing and taking steps to make it more culturally acceptable. They both also referred to support for marriage, albeit that the very modest transferable allowance for married couples promised by the Conservatives6 was specifically mentioned in the Coalition Agreement as an acceptable issue on which Liberal Democrats could abstain.

While the Coalition Government did increase spending on relationship support to its highest ever level (of £7.5 million per annum) there were serious concerns that the tidal levels of family breakdown and father absence were never going to be turned by a small, though very welcome, pot of funding in a renamed Department for Education.7 Almost half of all children are no longer living with both their parents by the time they are 15 years old and a million children have no significant contact with their fathers.8 Much needed policy and political traction came in the form of the Social Justice Unit, the executive arm of the Social Justice Cabinet Committee that operated out of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

“Almost half of all children are no longer living with both their parents by the time they are 15.”
This Unit set up a Family Division in recognition that many of the difficulties facing adults (and their children) who are struggling to break out of entrenched disadvantage come from their family circumstances and that family instability was, very often, a driver of poverty and not just a result of it. After a marital split, the income of women with children falls on average by more than a tenth (12 per cent)9 and in 2011, 41 per cent of children from lone parent families were in households living on less than 60 per cent of median income, compared with 23 per cent of children from two parent families.10

Slowly but surely the argument is being won in government that addressing the root causes of poverty requires a multi-faceted approach to the problem of relationship breakdown, the cost of which to the Exchequer has been estimated at over £47 billion per annum.11

While living in material and financial poverty can be deeply damaging for children’s health, self-esteem, ability to perform well in school and future life chances, their wellbeing is primarily dependent on them benefiting from safe, stable and nurturing relationships.12 Resting ‘relational’ policy development on this three-legged stool means that safety is not trumped by stability (domestic violence and abuse should never be downgraded in importance for the sake of keeping couples together and families intact) and children’s need for warm, confiding and caring relationships is prioritised.

Social Services and a range of other agencies, including schools and children’s centres, are rightly vigilant about safety issues within families and there is also a range of parenting support to meet a broad spectrum of difficulties many parents face in balancing love and care with discipline and boundary-setting. However, ensuring services and other interventions effectively help parents to provide their children with stable close family relationships, when this can imply that they should work to maintain (but preferably improve) a conflictive or poor quality couple relationship, has always been a far knottier policy challenge.

There is no doubt that complex and highly disadvantaged families are frequently caught up in a range of entrenched problems in addition to relationship issues; these include behavioural difficulties (such as truancy, self-harm, antisocial behaviour and criminal activity), alcohol and drug misuse, low educational attainment, economic dependency and severe debt.13 Along with these come other long term difficulties including domestic violence, depression or other mental health problems and living in poor housing, all of which make it very hard for parents to provide those all-important safe, stable and nurturing relationships for their children.

The Government’s Troubled Families programme aims to help families struggling with this broad range of profoundly challenging problems but tends to stop short of providing relationship support and counselling. This is not least because so many of the families being helped are headed by single mothers, many of whom have been the victims of domestic violence. However they are not all in this position – there are many couples who have never seen a committed, respectful and equal relationship from which they could learn, who would benefit greatly from a programme like ‘Parents as Partners’.14 Based on an approach subjected to rigorous empirical testing by United States psychology Professors Philip and Carolyn Cowan, this gives adults in chaotic, vulnerable families a chance to strengthen their relationship as they parent together and increase fathers’ hands-on involvement with their children. Crucially, it also aims to reduce harsh parenting and have a positive effect on children’s cognitive, emotional and social development. The Department for Education has provided a £2.9 million grant for the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships and Family Action to launch this approach in the London Boroughs of Camden, Westminster, Islington, Southwark, Greenwich, Lewisham and Wandsworth. After the development phase there will, ideally, be a programme in which local authorities can have full confidence that can be rolled out in other areas of the country.

We also need programmes like ‘Within My Reach’15 to be available for mothers (and younger women) particularly if they have had experience of domestic violence in their own or their parents’ relationship – and even if they are currently unpartnered. Developed at the University of Denver, this programme builds the skills and motivation to help them form equal, respectful relationships, from the start or next time around, which can help break cycles of abuse and breakdown in their lives and, ultimately, the lives of their children. This will require UK trials to take place, again so local authorities can confidently commission programmes to help vulnerable young women, ideally before they have children, as well as mothers being helped by local Troubled Families programmes.

In order for this commissioning to happen routinely, it is vital that local authorities put the prevention of relationship breakdown at the heart of their overall
child poverty reduction strategy. Hence the work carried out before the 2015 General Election within DWP to support 11 pilot areas to develop a ‘local family offer’ (for example by providing funding for technical assistance). These 11 authorities all have ‘Pioneering Place’ status with the Early Intervention Foundation which means they have partnerships on the ground committed to early intervention to tackle disadvantage.

Part of their innovative approach will include a relationship strengthening and breakdown prevention strategy that will mean parents and partners get help as early as possible, in children’s centres and other maternity, antenatal and postnatal settings, if it becomes clear that their partnering relationship is coming under pressure. Perinatal pilots will also be rolled out with the aim of providing information to expectant couples on the effect having a baby can have on their relationship and how to deal with any conflict that ensues. Specialised training will be given to health visitors to help them identify the early signs of relationship difficulties and give them the confidence that they can make a difference if and when they are asked for help – initially and on an ongoing basis. Sometimes this might mean them showing new parents online tools or introducing them to face-to-face services.

All of these measures are very welcome because they have the potential to lay a foundation for the development of what the CSJ has referred to since 2007 as ‘Family Hubs’. We have consistently argued that families need to be able to access local ‘nerve centres’ that coordinate all family-related support, including universal services and specialist help, to help meet both parents’ most pressing needs. There is particular potential for these to grow out of the infrastructure of local children’s centres. Taking a preventive and early intervention approach to poor family functioning and possible relationship breakdown is essential if children are to get the good start they need and progress is to be maintained ‘from cradle to college’.

We recommended that local health and public health commissioners should ensure all antenatal and postnatal services are co-located within or co-ordinated from Family Hubs and that all birth registration should take place within these Hubs instead of in civic registry offices. This would ensure all parents saw what support was on offer, including for fathers, in the earliest days of their children’s lives but also as they grow older. Parenting support for the teenage years is very thin on the ground but urgently needed. To ensure these were not just seen as places for mothers to go, we insisted that father engagement should be part of Family Hubs’ reformed core purpose and included in inspections of their early years and maternity services by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (and, if they are using them, local authorities’ payment by results frameworks).

In some ways this approach to children’s centres strongly echoes many of the original aims of the Sure Start programmes which featured prominently in the Supporting Families Green Paper mentioned earlier in this essay. These were resolutely focused on tackling the poor outcomes typically experienced by children from disadvantaged backgrounds which an enormous body of evidence suggests are strongly rooted in their early childhood.

Norman Glass, one of the creators of Sure Start describes how the local programmes were to:

*bring together, in a ‘joined-up’ way, core programmes of health (child and maternal), early education and play, and family support […] with an emphasis on outreach to access difficult-to-reach families, and autonomy for local projects to add extra services of their choice, such as debt counselling, benefits advice and so on. They were to be locally administered by partnerships between the statutory agencies (local authorities and primary care trusts) and the voluntary and private sectors.*

He also describes the “extraordinary enthusiasm for Sure Start among parents […] which was run on community development principles – that is, it was structured to allow local people, particularly parents, to participate fully in determining the content and management of the programmes, in the light of their perceptions of what their areas needed.”

This was to be somewhat short-lived, dampened by the next major evolutionary stage of Sure Start but surely something that can and should be recaptured:

*However, with the new and major emphasis on childcare and the massive expansion of the programme to 3,500 children’s centres came a reversion to local government control and an abandonment of the autonomy that had been a hallmark of the original Sure Start vision.*

The generosity of funding also went – as did any degree of ring-fencing after the 2010 election. As Family Hubs will operate on a ‘hub and spokes model’, connecting people to other support and help in the community and bringing other projects powered by local enthusiasm
(and externally generated funding) in-house, this should help ensure local people are more involved in determining how the bricks and mortar are deployed.

In some ways, therefore, we are calling for the best of the old and the best of the new. Local authorities and health commissioners must maximise the real estate of their children’s centres by co-locating services, opening up premises to other types of services which are utterly vital for strengthening families and addressing root causes of disadvantage, and connecting people to support available elsewhere in the community. Given the very high levels of family breakdown in this country we emphasised that Family Hubs should include couples’ relationship support and education as part of their core offer to families and extend their core purpose even further to incorporate the vital work of Australian Family Relationship Centres, which ensure all separating parents have access to support.

In many ways, the last Government retained its commitment to localism and avoided being overly prescriptive but the widespread need for an effective local response to our very high rates of family instability means there has to be strong leadership provided from the centre in this area. The Family Division of the Social Justice Unit is attempting to blaze a trail as already described, and its work must continue.

Invaluable lessons will be learned from the perinatal and ‘local family offer’ relationship support pilots they are facilitating and funding. However the magnitude of the cultural change required to reverse family breakdown points to the need for a weightier Whitehall response. We have consistently recommended that there be a Secretary of State for the Family – a cabinet-level minister with explicit responsibility to strengthen this vital building block of society.

The value of the ‘marriage allowance’ in the tax system must be significantly increased over time, particularly given the very high tax burden faced by single earner couple families (where one member of the couple is not able to benefit from their personal tax allowance). A good starting point would be to double the amount that parents with children under three can transfer as this is when very many want the opportunity to take some time out of the labour market or sharply reduce their hours, potentially taking them well below the tax threshold. CSJ polling has found that 88 per cent of parents and 82 per cent of adults thought that more should be done to help those who wish to stay at home and bring up their children in the early years.18

In conclusion, it is essential that the new Government recognises the need to support stability and does not shrink from the task out of a misplaced fear that this will be ‘nannying’, patronising or prescriptive. Of course families come in all shapes and sizes: this is not about denying demography or trying to turn the clock back. Yet surely where government has the power to make it a little more likely that children will grow up with both their parents and benefit from the greater human capital, earning power and sheer energy this usually entails, they should exercise it.

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6 At a late stage of the last Parliament a measure was passed enabling spouses to transfer ten per cent of their tax-free personal tax allowance (if unused) to the other basic rate taxpayer spouse or civil partner.

7 Formerly the Department for Children, Schools and Families


9 Jenkins, S. (2008) Marital splits and income changes over the longer term, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex


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14 See relevant pages on Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships website available at http://www.tccr.ac.uk/policy-research/policy-briefings/S75-helping-families-in-trouble-through-the-parents-as-partners-programme


19 This was consistent across socioeconomic groups ABC1 and C2DE: Centre for Social Justice (2008) Breakthrough Britain: the Next Generation, London: CSJ
We live in a time where we seem to bounce from one crisis to another: from evolving terror threats to economic uncertainties. Politics sometimes feels like it can only ever be reactionary in light of these ever-changing tides. But policy – setting a clear direction of where we are going – should be proactive, seeking to drive outcomes. To ensure that policy really is proactive, we need to establish a fresh agenda to frame and understand our policies.

That agenda should be based around good quality relationships and community ties. Sadly, the dominant liberal orthodoxy of recent generations has helped to undermine family, community and societal relationships. For many who have pursued this path, autonomy and personal freedom must trump everything else, and there is consequently less value attached to enduring relationships or family. The opposite poles of an authoritarian state and an unrestricted free market have both fallen short as providing complete answers to society’s most pressing social problems. In their place there needs to be a new foundation on which to build our policy agenda. I suggest that civil society is the future centre of British politics; and relationships and family are the keys to civil society.

Stable families are the bedrock of society. Thanks to the work of a number of charities and think tanks there is a wealth of evidence demonstrating the value of stable and good quality relationships in family life. However policy makers are often reluctant to stress the importance of family, and more specifically marriage, to society. They are concerned they will be interpreted as moralising or judgemental on people who have divorced or chosen to co-habit rather than marry. This is mistaken.

Evidence shows that some 48 per cent of children will see the breakdown of their parents’ relationships. When it comes to marriage, it is telling that children born to cohabiting parents are almost three times as likely as those born to married parents to see their parents split up by the time they are five. In light of this, it is vital we take seriously the evidence which highlights that lone parent households are two-and-a-half times as likely to be in poverty as couple families. It is clear that the relationship between poverty and family breakdown works in both directions. Whilst financial pressures can put strain on relationships and increase conflict within a family, family breakdown itself can reinforce and entrench poverty.

In addition to the economic consequences, family breakdown has very clear implications on children’s wellbeing: children who experience family breakdown are more likely to experience behavioural problems; perform less well in school; need more medical treatment; leave school and home earlier; become sexually active, pregnant or a parent at an early age; and report more depressive symptoms and higher levels of smoking, drinking and other drug use during adolescence and adulthood. Evidently, family instability and breakdown is not just an emotional tragedy for children and families involved; it drives disadvantage, poverty and social exclusion.

Despite the staggering financial and human cost that family breakdown exacts, many on the Left do not understand or appreciate the importance of family life. Labour peer Maurice Glasman admitted that in Labour’s policy, “there is a lack of understanding and a lack of appreciation for the family.” Glasman, who used to advise and write speeches for Ed Miliband, acknowledged that “Labour has been captured by a kind of aggressive public sector morality which is concerned with the individual and the collective but doesn’t understand relationships.” Glasman’s honest and revealing comments highlight Labour’s obsession with a large state as the only model for caring for the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. They are
blinkered in their belief in the power of the collective without understanding community. What Labour governments have thus far failed to realise is that the family plays a role that the state has never been able to play, and will never be able to play. The lumbering state will never be able to care for and support people with the same compassion and intimacy that a stable family will have. Rather than focusing policy towards the state, what is needed is policy with civil society as the new radical centre of politics where family and relationships are valued and prioritised. We must recognise that civil society is not peripheral to the state; the state is peripheral to civil society.

If we are to follow through with this vision of a flourishing civil society centred upon relationships and family, a flourishing voluntary sector is needed as well. Too often the critique of the Left is Clement Attlee’s sentiment that “charity is a cold grey loveless thing. If a rich man wants to help the poor, he should pay his taxes gladly, not dole out money at a whim.” This thoroughly depressing critique should be rejected. Charitable activity is deeply rooted within communities and their particular needs. It is often supported by generous volunteers and springs from a sense of compassion and responsibility, not obligation or whim. All this should be encouraged in our society. Furthermore, when it comes to fostering good quality family and social relationships, it is the local voluntary sector that is best placed to do so. The successful implementation of localism has demonstrated that personal and local solutions to problems will often be preferable to the dictates of an impersonal and distant Whitehall machine. This is especially true when it comes to the matter of relationships and the family. The Conservative vision of civil society taking centre stage needs a thriving voluntary sector. It is about using the power of society, not the state, to protect minorities, defend and promote local communities and create supportive, strong and stable relationships.

It has often been pointed out that in a ‘big society’ citizens take responsibility; it is about real humans doing real things for themselves, their families, their neighbours and their wider community. It is not here in Westminster that social transformation will happen, but out there in the charities, churches, mosques and community groups of Britain. The idea of a ‘big society’ is an exciting one. But it must also be a resilient society. In order for charity to offer reliable and sustainable support to people wherever and whenever they need it, charity must be embedded within civil society. As I argued in my essay in *The Blue Book of the Voluntary Sector*, the factors to enable this embedding must be both internal and external. Internally, organisations should seek positive relationships with other local organisations and government agencies, expanding their networks and encouraging faith-based charities with their wealth of local expertise and motivated volunteers. Externally, government should open up contracts and funding to smaller charitable organisations. As a result of this, society would not just be big, but resilient: with stable charities in place to enable stable relationships. This refutes Attlee’s claim...
that money given to charities is ‘on a whim’. Rather, it would allow the voluntary sector to flourish in playing its vital role of supporting and fostering good quality family and social relationships, which in turn are the key to civil society.

Having focused exclusively on the roles and position of civil society and the voluntary sector so far, I now turn to the state and how it can be involved in supporting and fostering good relationships. The first thing for the state to realise is the limit of its own power and scope. The state will never be able to replace relationships as the first point of call for support and it must realise this. However, there is clearly a role for the state to play as a last resort for the poor and vulnerable in our society, when they have nowhere else to turn. Nevertheless, this should be seen as a genuine safety net; a last resort which underpins rather than overarches everything else. As I said earlier: civil society is not peripheral to the state, but the state is peripheral to civil society.

Once the state has recognised that it should not and cannot replace families, neighbours and communities as the primary support for the needy, those vital areas of civil society will be able to flourish under their own responsibility. The state can positively act by acknowledging that charities, especially local charities, situated in local communities have a great deal of expertise in supporting and fostering good quality relationships.

In light of this, where government services are contracted out, the Government should offer contracts and grants to charities, on the basis that charities are better placed to provide particular services, in particular relationship support. The contracts that government does offer are often too inflexible and are not accessible to the small, local charities best placed to offer the support needed. What are needed are more flexible contracts in terms of time and resources to encourage smaller organisations to win bids and develop closer ties with government.

As I have argued, stable relationships in families are vital for the financial and emotional wellbeing of children and adults throughout society. The scale of family breakdown in the country must not be underestimated and its potential consequences must be understood. As a result, there should be direct funding incentives for stable families. This could include financial incentives for those taking part in accredited marriage preparation courses; couple support being available through the NHS and the couple family benefit cap being uprated at above the rate of inflation.

At a time when the British public are increasingly politically apathetic but socially engaged, it is more evident than ever that civil society is the radical new centre of British politics. This is where the moral authority lies and this is where social changes will happen. It is a space that is, as yet, unclaimed and the Conservative party must move into it. For too long the Left has been perceived as those on the side of the poor and vulnerable. Despite this, the legacy of the last Labour Government was of dependency on a welfare state that entrenched poverty rather than alleviating it. By ignoring the family in favour of the individual and the collective, the Labour Party has demonstrated that it profoundly misunderstands both the causes of, and the solutions to, poverty. Now is the time for Conservatives to shout louder about their vision of social justice: a big and resilient civil society centred on stable, good quality family and relationships. Relationships, fully supported by the community and voluntary sector, and aided by the state are the only way to build this society. The Conservative Party must understand this, and put relationships at the heart of a Conservative policy agenda.

“What is needed is policy with civil society as the new radical centre of politics where family and relationships are valued and prioritised.”

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‘Love and work, these two things only’

Dr John Cruddas MP

From 2012 to 2015, I ran Labour’s Policy Review. Its task was to make policy and rethink how Labour did politics in a period of austerity when there was no extra money to spend. We ran scores of events involving hundreds of people. One of these, a symposium on Family and Relationships, helped to define the way ahead for social policy.

Successful social policy involves working with people’s relationships, with the ‘whole family’, and not just with individuals as if they exist separate from one another. We live in a society of individuals. Relationships make individuals and they make up society. They are the bond that holds the two together. Individual wellbeing relies upon a healthy society, and society is only healthy if most of its individuals have a sense of wellbeing.

It is my belief that what is missing in our politics, apart from the need to change leadership, is the idea of fraternity. We hear a lot about liberty and equality but not the third idea – what holds people and society together. This essay is a plea to put fraternity back into our ailing politics.

What matters?

I grew up in a household whose heroes were the Kennedy brothers. In March 1968 Bobby Kennedy spoke about a system of government that had lost touch with the people and their daily lives. The state of our nation, he said, is judged by Gross Domestic Product:

*It counts air pollution and cigarette advertising; ambulances to clear our highways of carnage; special locks for doors and the jails for those who break them. It does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages […] It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.*

It was 1968. America was at a turning point in its history. Millions of its citizens had lost faith in its system of government. In 2015 here in Britain we are in a similar crisis. The challenges we face are big, but our politics are small. We have stopped asking ourselves the important question Bobby Kennedy asked. What makes life worthwhile?

At a different time in history, in a similar moment of change and uncertainty, William Morris answered that question. His answer was, “Love and work, these two things only”. Love, because nothing else matters more in life than secure and loving relationships. And work that is fairly paid, because it gives meaning to our days and supports those we love.

“Relationships make individuals and they make up society. They are the bond that holds the two together.”
Love

Politicians do not talk enough about love. After all, it is people’s close relationships – the national web of love and dependence – that make our society strong. Where those relationships are weak, we are weak. Where there is a lack of love there is a lot of trouble.

Think of yourself without your loved ones. Think of your loved ones without you. Babies suffering neglect – with all the impact that brings on the development of the brain, on their emotions and cognitive processes; children lacking guidance and encouragement and boundaries; adolescents and young adults rootless – liberated into a solipsistic hedonism that seems like maturity but leaves them empty; parents struggling alone or in pairs to bring up kids in a little nuclear unit that can not possibly manage on its own, but somehow has to; and older people – the rightful heirs of all that family should mean, of all the love and support and honour that the elderly deserve – left alone for days and weeks, lonely, abandoned.

Not all – not even most – people in Britain live like that. But the fact is that for many families, this sad list is our society. The point is, these problems are not a failure of public services or even the economy – though both of these play their part. They are a failure of relationships.

We need to stop making policy as if grandparents, mothers, fathers and children exist in separate silos and not as part of a whole family. Throughout our lives we are dependent upon others for our wellbeing and sense of identity. Relationships give meaning to our lives. They bind us all together into society and give us our sense of belonging. We are literally nothing without them.

We need to use the power of relationships to help strengthen the capacity of men, women and children for love, care and resilience. We need government that helps create the conditions for families and people’s relationships to thrive. Not passing judgment or micro-managing, but supporting people to help themselves; working with people, not doing things to and for them.

Relationships – love – goes wider than the family. William Morris meant the ordinary love of our family but also a broader understanding – love is the duty we have to others and the sense of self we get by living with and for other people. People need to live in communities of value and meaning and reciprocity.

Institutions – formal and informal – are the contexts of our freedom, the secure foundation for the diversity and innovation that modern life offers us. Some institutions become oppressive – especially if they are vehicles for state or corporate power.

But one of the great things about Britain is the extraordinary range of institutions we have created – and are creating all the time – to give individuals a sense of belonging, and to give structure to our society.

This can include institutions that act as a surrogate family, supporting individuals – children, or vulnerable adults or older people especially – who don’t live in their own family. In the past these kinds of institutions run by the state were devoid of love and relationships, and were pitifully impoverished. There is a terrible sadness about those we abandoned in them, and the lives they lived.

Family life is changing. More and more of us are looking after older or disabled relatives, often battling with different services to get the support we need. One-in-three carers have to give up work or go on reduced hours. Sons, daughters, husbands wives and partners trying to look after the person they love. That is why Liz Kendall, Labour’s Shadow Minister for Care and Older People is arguing for a system of care that puts families first and gives older people choice and control.

And there is a new generation of social entrepreneurs like Alex Fox of Shared Lives and Hilary Cottam of Participle who are pioneering life-sharing communities, putting people’s relationships at the heart of public services. Home Start, for example, is run in local authorities across the country, matching young single parents with experienced parents from their own community for practical help, and as a source of comfort and reassurance.

We need to shift the focus of public services from crisis intervention with troubled children and families to building their capacity for relationships to break cycles of deprivation. Frank Field has been championing this approach for years. And Jon Collins and Nottingham Council, together with local MP Graham Allen, have been pioneering early intervention.

Labour is at its best when it is pioneering a reform movement, creating models of mutual self-help that give people dignity, power and control over their lives; whether they be residents in a care home, young people in care, or mothers and fathers using a children’s centre.

Relationships thrive when we have time. We need time to be with family and friends, and time to pursue our enjoyment and interests. But time is the scarce commodity of modern capitalism. People either have too much time with no work, no money and nothing to do, or they have too much work and no time for anything else. It was this lack of time to be with family that started the campaign for a Living Wage. Time is the connection between love and work.

“Relationships thrive when we have time...But time is the scarce commodity of modern capitalism.”
Work

Love and work, said William Morris. The purpose of life is to employ one’s talent to useful, beautiful and meaningful ends. Work is about relationships. We inherit knowledge from the past and we shape it with others into new forms of value. Work creates hope.

Morris describes it as worthy work. It carries with it the hope of pleasure in rest, the hope of pleasure in our using what it makes, and the hope of pleasure in our daily creative skill. All other work he said is mere toiling to live that we may live to toil.2

Today the value in work is neglected. We have got to the point where everything other than work generates value: capital, technology, risk-taking, innovation, anything other than accomplished work and skilful co-operation with others. Both the market and the state have undermined the conditions of meaningful work.

The crash of 2008 revealed the problem with relying upon the financial sector and state administration as the drivers of growth. It was not just the private debt and the public deficit. It was the neglect of vocation and virtue that led to an economy too often rewarding vice in the form of cheating and greed, and excessive self-regard. Labour serves our country best when it reminds itself that work is a value, and that it is carried out by human beings who are not commodities to be exploited.

In an economy that values work and workers, the old mentor the young and pass on their wisdom and experience, as well as technical skills to the younger apprentice. Workers associate in order to strengthen their knowledge and skill and where it is valued and upheld by vocational colleges. That is why I am committed to the restoration of vocational training so that we can fix and mend, innovate and create.

Labour has committed to introducing a gold standard system of vocational education to help drive up productivity for higher wages and to transforming the best Further Education colleges into specialist Institutes of Technical Education. And we have committed to creating thousands more apprenticeships in the public sector and making sure firms getting a major government contract take on apprentices. In work we will value quality and equality.

We need to ensure employees are represented on the remuneration committees of large companies, with real status within the firm. The labour interest has a constructive role to play in improving business performance and the shaping of strategy. It should not be ignored as peripheral.

Building partnerships and dialogue between management and workforce creates mutual responsibility and accountability. Management would need to justify their bonuses and the workforce would need to understand the realities of the company.

We will deploy the idea of ‘skin in the game’ to extend accountability into the market. Instead of tying up business in complicated rules and regulations, ‘skin in the game’ reforms incentives in the market. People who make decisions on behalf of others should share in the risks, not just enjoy the rewards. Only then can we start to truly align power and accountability.

Not all relationships are healthy. There are abusive relationships, where one side dominates the other. The Labour way is based on reciprocity, of a balance of interests that can negotiate a common good.

It is not just the private economy that has become disconnected – and threatens to disconnect society from itself. Our system of government and our public services are the same. The state is over-centralised and out of touch. It lacks the trust we need to hold society together. Some of our public services have pursued ‘value for money’, and ‘customer satisfaction’, but neglected the human relationships and trust that lie at the heart of public services.

Public sector reform has failed to give frontline staff and users a sense of ownership and control. Instead, it has transferred power from an accountable state to unaccountable big corporations. Too much power has been concentrated in the market and the state. There is too little accountability, and too little transparency. People are left feeling powerless and often humiliated. The market and the state have been used as instruments of reform without any transfer of power to people.

The consequences are insecurity at work and low pay; falling living standards; high levels of immigration; and for many a sense of loss of belonging. We need a stronger and more connected society to reform our economy and share our prosperity more fairly. No Whitehall target will create it. People and politics have to make it.

Politics

When David Cameron became leader of the Conservative Party he argued for a pro-social politics – remember ‘hug a hoodie’? He talked about love, empathy and relationships. He said “the aim of the Conservative Party is nothing short of building the good society.”3 The ‘big society’ was the idea of people feeling free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities – “a dramatic redistribution of power from elites to the man and woman in the street.”4

To me, it looked like a radical renewal of his party. It was attempting to break with its Liberal market orthodoxies and put Conservatism back where it belongs – in community, in relationships, in tradition. It looked a very interesting compassionate conservatism.

Meanwhile Labour’s traditions are both radical and
conservative: radical in defending the labour interest, and sharing our power, resources and opportunities; conservative in our instinct for preserving society and people's mutual dependence. Labour is a love of home and the common life and inheritance that belongs to 'us', the people, wherever we have come from. Our neighbourhoods and the landscapes we live in give us our sense of identity and belonging.

Society cannot be made by government. It is not held together by the transactions of the market or the administrations of the state. It is made and renewed in the daily life of generations; in friendship, family, community and love of place.

This Labour tradition is in keeping with the Conservative tradition of community. That is because these are British traditions – things we all believe in, things our country is good at. The difference between us is our response to politics, power, and the money interest.

Confronted by the power of money, the unaccountability of power, and the corrupting effect of institutionalised privilege, Conservatism turns a blind eye. The response of the best traditions of Labour is democracy: creating power with people through mutual support and self-help; resisting the power of the market to commodify labour and turn it into a thing valued only by its price.

Labour’s future is as a party of self-determination; political action based in people’s relationships. It is a politics subject to the principle of reciprocity which establishes a sense of justice. Each individual irreplaceable in our mutual dependence. An equality of worth which is the ethical core of justice. I think the Labour approach is the right one but I also respect those Conservatives – and people in all parties – who, like me, believe that strengthening community and relationships is the great purpose of our politics. Those who believe in the social freedom which is the basis of a settled life. Edmund Burke describes it as “that state of things in which liberty is secured by equality of restraint”.

Labour built its history organising working people to defend their family life, to struggle for fair wages and a decent home, and to create a better future for their children. It is an aspirational politics about bread-and-butter issues. It is also about creating power together for individual freedom. Our traditions of English liberty – say what you think, live as you will – run deep in our country. They are conservative and radical in their origins, and this paradox is the source of Labour’s renewal in England.

A new settlement

After all these high ideals, I will end with some reality. We will not be able to increase public spending to solve all our social problems. Life in many of our communities is going to be tough for a long time – it will take a long time for the economic recovery to reach them. But many of the major social problems we face do not always need more money.

They need radical new ways to use existing resources. Putting relationships centre-stage in service design. Helping people to help themselves and each other. Drawing on the assets of local communities to build resilience and break cycles of deprivation.

I believe that, together, we can make a new settlement for our country – one that mobilizes people of all parties and none: a new settlement based on relationship, reciprocity and responsibility.

“...we can make a new settlement for our country – one that mobilizes people of all parties and none: a new settlement based on relationship, reciprocity and responsibility.”

2 Morris, W. (1884) Useful work versus Useless Toil, November 1884 https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/useful.htm
3 Cameron, D. (2008) The Conservatives have a plan and we can make it work, The Times, 3 July, 2008
4 Cameron, D. (2010) Big Society, speech at Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, 19 July, 2010
5 Burke, E. (1789) letter to Francois Depont, http://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/473

14 ideas for putting relationships at the heart of policy www.relate.org.uk
It is a deeply unsettling fact that many relationships hide psychological and physical torture, sexual coercion and violence, control that amounts to isolation or even imprisonment. In a culture that celebrates romantic love and the couple relationship; aspires for all children to be brought up by the nearest thing possible to a loving couple; respects the privacy of the family and the decisions that are made within it; it is no surprise that dealing appropriately with the growing realisation of the extent of domestic violence and abuse is proving no easy task.

Much has to change, however. On average, in England and Wales, two women a week are killed by their current or former intimate partner. The police receive one call every 30 seconds relating to a domestic violence incident, although less than 40 per cent of domestic violence is reported to police. In ‘snapshot’ research on 28th September 2000, nearly one-in-five counselling sessions held in Relate Centres in England mentioned domestic violence as an issue.

Three-quarters-of-a-million children each year witness domestic violence, and of those, almost three quarters have witnessed the physical assault of their mother and ten per cent the rape of their mother. Domestic violence is present in over half of child protection cases coming to the attention of the NSPCC and a similar proportion of local authority child protection cases.

Our current response is limited in the extreme. The failings of the criminal justice system in listening to victims, gathering evidence and prosecuting successfully have been well documented, most recently in a scathing report by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) last year. But these shortcomings are actually relatively well understood and accepted compared with the utter lack of a systemic approach to prevention, earlier intervention, recovery and independence for survivors and their children, and a vision for a future of relationships where abuse is no longer commonplace.

Without such a guiding vision, state agencies, and indeed the charities increasingly beholden to their commissioning plans, are bent on improving the management of risk, when we should be demanding they strive to reduce abuse itself, so that the relationships on which our society and culture are built are safe ones.

Put simply, you can manage risk without meeting needs. The criminal justice system can do its job (not that it always does) without meeting needs – which is not the role of the police or prosecutors in any case. But given that safety is a fundamental human need, you cannot meet needs without also reducing risk.

Chantelle is 29 and has a son of three and a daughter of 18 months. Her partner of five years had been increasingly controlling and had isolated her from all her former friends and her family. She had not been allowed to work and had been severely emotionally abused. When she decided to end the relationship, he became violent and injured her severely. Both children witnessed this. He was arrested and Chantelle was allocated an independent advisor to support her through the criminal justice process. Her partner was convicted and imprisoned six months ago. She reports that she feels ‘safer’ now. She is receiving no further specialist support. She is self-harming but has not disclosed this. She has been prescribed anti-depressants. Her children are not thriving and she is struggling to manage her son’s behaviour, sometimes being physically violent towards him. She drinks a lot and may well be dependent on alcohol. Her partner will be out of prison soon and she knows he wants the family together again. She feels the best thing that could happen would be to meet someone new, because she hates being on her own. She is also becoming very poor indeed.

Chantelle could have been luckier. If she had lived somewhere else, she might have been referred by the police to a specialist domestic violence service, still funded to provide individual and group support; specialist work with children and parenting; advice on welfare, housing, money management and getting
“Three-quarters-of-a-million children each year witness domestic violence, and of those, almost three quarters have witnessed the physical assault of their mother.”

a job; the reassurance of other women who have survived; a goal of recovery and independence.

But these services are increasingly rare, and in Chantelle’s case, and those of thousands like her, you get nothing unless you report a crime, and are then deemed ‘high risk’. Even then, in terms of support triggered by domestic violence, now Chantelle’s partner is in prison she is now deemed at ‘low risk’ and therefore off the radar. Her various needs, as far as they are known to professionals, are not being joined up. The specialist support she received following the violent incident, which led her to be identified as ‘high risk’ for a time, has been evaluated as successful because Chantelle reported she felt safer – unsurprisingly, as her partner was in prison.

If her history repeats itself, the professionals tasked with protecting her and her children may well still not spot the pattern. If her needs are not understood and met, she may be abused by a new partner and she may lose her children to the care system.

The Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference – a meeting of professionals at which the woman is almost never present herself – has ticked the box marked ‘job done’, but this is a delusion. The job that has been done is to ensure that each agency around that table can audit and defend its decisions about Chantelle and her children. If we are serious about supporting healthy relationships as the foundation of society, we must do far better.

There are three stages at which radical improvement is needed: identification and disclosure; the gateway to and provision of specialist support; and the level of understanding that informs the response of other agencies and institutions.

1. Identification and disclosure

First, we must become a society in which asking for help if you need it is normal. In cases of domestic violence and abuse this means accepting that not every victim will want to involve the police, and certainly many may only do so after they feel supported and safe. It means widespread awareness and understanding of the nature of domestic violence is vital, and in particular the ways in which women are controlled, and the sheer physical danger – as well as psychological difficulty – of breaking free of that control. We need to understand the limited opportunities to seek help that exist for women whose every move is monitored, and ensure that women can find someone who knows how to ask safely about domestic abuse, and is confident in what to do next. If we’re serious about early intervention, we should think radically about this: the chance for a woman to disclose safely might be at the hairdresser, or a place of worship, or an English language class.

For those disclosures that do involve the police, the response must be to believe, and to investigate, equipped with an understanding of the experiences of victims and the tactics of perpetrators. But police officers must not be expected to provide specialist support. For anyone who identifies domestic violence, or receives a disclosure, the referral path to support must be clear.

“For anyone who identifies domestic violence, or receives a disclosure, the referral path to support must be clear.”

www.relate.org.uk

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2. Specialist support

At the next stage, the gateway to support services cannot be an assessment of risk alone. Immediate safety concerns might be overwhelming – not least for children – but unless the wider impact of the abuse on the woman and any children is understood, as well as the resources they themselves contribute and depend on, few will achieve independence and sustain it in the longer term.

As a society, we are fascinated by the couple relationship. There is still a stigma attached to being single, particularly for women, with single mothers objects of pity or blame, and single women without children marginalised, laughed at, disrespected. Even when the couple relationship has been a place of terror, its veneer can still look and feel like a protective shell from the inside, such is the hostility of the outside world. This hostility must be broken down by awareness and education – both to make any progress at all towards earlier intervention, and also to support recovery.

This means not seeing the relationship with a partner as the inevitable centre of women’s lives, but understanding the wider networks that will be critical to safety and recovery: family; friends; community; workplace. For women who have no choice but to flee to a refuge, a specific focus on rebuilding these is vital, and something that is lost immediately when a specialist refuge closes down, to be replaced by a place in a homelessness hostel. Relationships with children must also be supported. As specialist services disappear, more children are being taken into care after their mother discloses domestic violence. The Family Rights Group reported a 1,100 per cent increase in such cases in the five years to 2013. This is a powerful disincentive to disclose, and could actually expose women and children to further danger. The damage to parenting confidence and capacity often caused by domestic violence is undeniable. Yet established and evaluated programmes to help repair it exist, but are rarely commissioned in a system which isolates risk from any evaluation of needs or existing resources.

To be clear, the change needed in terms of how services are both commissioned and accessed by the service user is huge. But if the goal is independence from further abuse, and as much as possible from state or charitable support, the way to achieve it is to build on and enhance those resources by which we all attain and sustain whatever degree of independence we can. A narrow focus on risk will never work, yet a new approach would work for risk too: of course those of us who are at least risk are those with the resources for independence.
3. Understanding among agencies

That is not all. A transformation is needed in the understanding of domestic violence and abuse, its nature and its impact, among all agencies and institutions. At least the police are being held to account for the shortcomings identified by HMIC last year. Elsewhere, victim blaming continues with impunity, and the terrifying nature of the so-called choices women experiencing domestic violence are often pressurised to make is simply not understood. Social workers driven by risk and a narrow conception of children’s needs threaten women to leave a violent partner or lose their children, then in a matter of weeks use the same threats to force that woman to facilitate contact between the children and the perpetrator. Family courts, perhaps reacting to the pervasive myth that fathers are commonly denied access to children for no reason, are blind to their own manipulation by men wreaking revenge on a woman they have already subjugated by fear. In fact, between 1999 and 2004 at least 19 children were killed during a contact visit.23 Health professionals lose sympathy when women repeatedly present with similar injuries, not understanding why she cannot ‘just leave’.

A comprehensive training in the nature and effects of coercive control can’t credibly be deemed a waste of time or money given the huge burden domestic violence and abuse place on all these agencies.

It is impossible to conclude without making explicit the assumptions about gender that run through this essay. Indeed, any improvement in the way we as a community and the institutions we depend on respond to domestic violence and abuse depends on ending the fear that so often attaches to naming domestic violence as a manifestation of women’s inequality, of the damage caused by men’s belief in their entitlement, and of the implicit and explicit reinforcement of these by society and its institutions.

There are of course men who experience violence in their relationships, and women who perpetrate it. But given that men perpetrate the vast majority of violent crimes (in 2012, men were responsible for 89 per cent of crimes against the person, 98 per cent of sexual offences (although many go unreported), and 89 per cent of homicides)13, it should not be hard to accept that they perpetrate the vast majority of the most persistent and violent domestic abuse: in fact 89 per cent of victims of four or more incidents of domestic violence are women.14 The endemic domestic violence that costs our economy millions each year; that drains our police and health resources; that is writ large across our care system, our prison population, our mental health services, our homelessness crisis; is a phenomenon we can only tackle if we are prepared to acknowledge and challenge institutional sexism.

This means men have to acknowledge and question their sense of entitlement. That is a hard thing to do. How often in everyday life do we respond to hearing about someone’s problem by supplying one of our own, instead of by listening? It is not that easy to say “I’m privileged, I have advantages”: it is like saying “so if I mess up, I’ve got no one to blame but myself”. It is hard for white people to acknowledge what they have gained purely through the advantage of being white. It is hard for rich people to acknowledge how much of their comfort results from luck, not superior intelligence, hard work or skill.

Without change driven by men’s determination for equality in their relationships, we will never do more than firefighting, we will never reduce domestic violence. An end to the ‘we’re victims too’ syndrome would be a start, and an education system compelled than firefighting, we will never do more than firefighting, we will never reduce domestic violence. An end to the ‘we’re victims too’ syndrome would be a start, and an education system compelled to promote healthy relationships based on equal rights and equal respect would help greatly.

If our society is one built on relationships, it is under severe threat unless we strive to end domestic violence, not just to manage the risks that it will continue to create, over and over again until we are brave enough to make it stop.

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7 HMIC (2014) Everyone’s business: Improving the police response to domestic abuse
What can clinical experience and evidence tell us?

The link between couple relationship distress and poor mental health is self-evident to any couple therapist dealing daily with couples in chronic or acute distress. No couple therapist can ignore the great weight of emotional pain and disturbance that is brought daily into their consulting rooms or the constant stories of children wetting beds, refusing to go to school or presenting with myriad symptoms of mental health problems. Yet, despite this empirical understanding and the international research evidence, in the UK, we apply almost no health funding to tackling this distress.

At The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR), we have recently analysed data on our clients and found that of 7,455 people who accessed our couple therapy services, 71 per cent were suffering with a mild-to-severe depressive illness. These findings are directly in line with the wider research knowledge.

For example, authors of a study conducted in 1999 of over 900 married individuals who, at the start of the study were classified as not having major depression, concluded that “20 per cent to 30 per cent of new occurrences of major depressive episodes could be prevented if marital dissatisfaction could be eliminated”. To add to this startling conclusion, researchers who conducted a meta-analysis published in 2001 found marital dissatisfaction to be “associated with both depressive symptoms and diagnostic depression” with 66 per cent of the variation in major depression explained by the variation in marital distress – a strong correlation in statistical terms.

More recently, a study of nearly 5,000 adults has shown that the quality of a person’s relationships with their partner predicts the likelihood of major depression disorder in the future. This research found that one-in-seven adults with the lowest quality relationships were likely to develop depression as opposed to one-in-15 with the highest quality relationships; and that people with unsupportive partners were significantly more likely to develop depression, whereas those without a partner were at no increased risk.

The evidence about anxiety disorders is equally compelling: a recent study which examined 33 couples in which the female partner was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder found “an association between anxiety disorders and relationship distress consistent with previous research”.

And it is not only mood disorders which, research shows, are affected by relationship issues. Personality disorders have adverse consequences on intimate relationships, according to research. Of these disorders, it is suggested that borderline personality disorder may demonstrate “particularly strong associations with relationship functioning, insofar as it is characterized by impulsivity, affective instability, and inappropriate or intense anger, features that carry importance in an interpersonal context.”

“There are bi-directional links between relationship distress and mental ill health.”

Susanna Abse, Chief Executive, and Richard Meier, Policy Manager, Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships
Developing new approaches to couples with mental health problems

This last study is confirmed by our clinical experience at TCCR, where ever-increasingly couples are presenting with borderline features. These couples have relationships which are characterised by intense feelings resulting in unstable relationships with frequent emotional crises. They have difficulty managing feelings, are frequently angry and overwhelmed. Incidences of violence and abusive patterns of interaction are common and these couples often complicate matters by having difficulties with drug and alcohol use.

Commonly, one partner will present with borderline features whilst the other presents as rather withdrawn or passive. The relationship is then characterised by one partner being angry, threatening to leave and self-harming, with the other partner appearing emotionally fenced-off, depressed, indifferent and sometimes downright cruel.

These couples, intensely pre-occupied with their unhappiness, often find working and ordinary day-to-day life, such as parenting, a challenge. They want help together but there is little on offer outside the services of charities such as TCCR and Relate – charities which must, to make ends meet, charge for their services.

To address the specific needs of couples with depression or presenting with borderline features, specialist expertise is required. At TCCR, we have developed new methodologies to work with couples presenting with such challenges and most recently have developed a Mentalization-Based Therapy (MBT) for couples which is finding new ways to help partners manage extremes of feeling and behaviour. ‘Mentalizing’ refers to the spontaneous sense we have of ourselves and others as persons whose actions are based on mental states: desires, needs, feelings, reasons, beliefs and the like. Being able to mentalize allows us to spontaneously and intuitively make sense of our own actions and those of others which in turn gives us the ability to regulate our emotions. It is a vital capacity in the context of inter-personal relationships because it allows us to manage all the challenges that arise from two people coming together in an intimate relationship. For instance with good mentalizing we can imagine that our version of events might differ from someone else’s and indeed we might modify our version in the light of this new information. Because of this, we may get less upset, less likely to apportion blame or believe we are being wounded or attacked. We will naturally want to try and make sense of things that seem unfair or unjust. We will want to know why someone is cross or rejecting. We will see ourselves as having agency in a relationship; not merely victims of others actions or beliefs.

MBT was originally developed for patients with borderline personality disorder and has, in longitudinal research, shown very positive impacts. MBT has its theoretical roots in attachment theory and TCCR has adapted this type of therapy to work with couples with these borderline features and we are finding it invaluable for helping those in greatest distress who seem most hard to help. Mentalization-Based Therapy for couples (MBT-C) is specifically designed to help couples manage their emotional states, particularly in the context of their relationship. Therapists encourage couples to develop a curiosity about their own mental state and those of their partner and the model is based on the premise that, in order for meaningful thinking to be possible, emotional ‘affect storms’ have to be managed. Therapists in the MBT-C model take a ‘not knowing’ stance, using their own curiosity and skilled questioning to help couples reflect on their own minds and to put themselves in the shoes of their partner.

The policy and practice landscape

One might assume, given the wealth of research in this area attesting to the links between relationship distress and mental ill health, that the mental health needs of people who are experiencing couple relationship problems would be a priority area of policy development and service delivery. One might also expect that policy makers would have recognised that the costs of relationship distress are too large to ignore. The reality however is that NHS provision is almost entirely unrelational in its approach to treating mental health, with services focusing almost exclusively on the individual as though their difficulties have arisen in isolation, with little or no thinking given to the family context of their illness.

For example, official statistics from the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme – the only pocket of the NHS where couple therapy (couple therapy for depression) is recommended – indicate that just one in every 250 sessions delivered in IAPT is of this particular treatment. So whilst it

“The reality is that NHS provision is almost entirely unrelational in its approach to treating mental health, with services focusing almost exclusively on the individual as though their difficulties have arisen in isolation, with little or no thinking given to the family context of their illness.”
was encouraging that the Government’s mental health strategy – *No health without mental health* – acknowledged at its outset the link between mental health and strong relationships (“*Good mental health and resilience*, the document states, “are fundamental to our physical health, our relationships, our education, our training, our work and to achieving our potential”), it was noticeable that the strategy has nothing to say about the impact of poor relationships on mental health or indeed how this should be tackled.

The impact of poor couple relationships on children’s mental health

If the evidence base linking adult mental health problems and relationship distress is substantial, it is as nothing compared to the wealth of evidence demonstrating the impact of parental conflict on children’s mental health, with couple conflict which is frequent, intense and poorly resolved having been shown to be very harmful to children’s mental and physical health.\(^{12}\)

In response to this kind of conflict – as opposed to ordinary difficulties and rows between couples which are resolved\(^ {13} \) – babies may become agitated, and children under five may respond by crying, acting out, freezing or withdrawing from or intervening in the conflict. Older children may show a range of symptoms including anxiety, depression, aggression, hostility, anti-social behaviour, and perform worse academically than their ability level.\(^ {14}\) Conflict does not just have to be violent or outwardly expressed to have these impacts; conflict that is characterised by deliberate coldness and withdrawal can also affect children, creating long term emotional and behavioural problems.\(^ {15}\)

This research, however, has not led to holistic children’s mental health services and treatments which target dysfunctional, angry parental relationships, for whilst the offer of family therapy exists within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), direct work with the parental couple relationship is almost never undertaken. This is despite the fact that problems children are presenting with are, effectively, symptoms of relational problems at home. Indeed, in a recent survey of over 4,500 children seen by 11 CAMHS services carried out by the Anna Freud Centre, ‘family relationships problems’ was found to be the single biggest presenting problem.\(^ {16}\) And yet, as the researchers of this study note, no NICE guideline exists for this. This is a major oversight, if an unsurprising one, given the reluctance of our health services to acknowledge the relational factors which are so commonly at the heart of both child and adult mental ill health.

During 2013-15, TCCR, with support from the Department for Education, trained over 350 clinicians working in CAMHS, nearly half of them consultant level staff. The overwhelming response from these staff was the recognition that children were being failed when services did not help couples to collaborate better in parenting their children, and a strong request for more training and resources to help CAMHS staff tackle the impacts of parental conflict.

This essay has so far looked at the evidence regarding the links between relationship distress and mental ill health in relation to both adults and children; it would be incomplete however, without some reference to the separate but related area of infant mental health. Research tells us that the quality of the parental couple relationship has an effect on the development of security of attachment in babies with indirect impacts via maternal depression and father engagement. Given the well established links between secure attachment and a whole host of emotional and social consequences for children, the quality of the parental couple relationship, the bedrock of secure family life, needs to become a central focus of perinatal research and intervention development.

Establishing what works

The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships is at the forefront of efforts to establish an evidence base for parenting interventions to improve and support children’s mental health. For example, the Parents as Partners programme – our groupwork programme for couples based on the longitudinal, randomised controlled studies by Professors Phil and Carolyn Cowan in the U.S. – is showing promising results in terms of children’s emotional wellbeing from the pilot studies we have run in six London boroughs.

And yet it is not only group-based interventions which we are finding that parents and couples find acceptable. For example, a randomised controlled trial from 2000 found that couple-oriented approaches to treating mental ill health were more acceptable to patients than anti-depressant medication.\(^ {17}\) That said,
it would be remiss not to acknowledge the fact that the evidence base for such interventions is not extensive, resting largely on randomised trials using couple therapy for treating depressive illness. Furthermore, in terms of the effectiveness of couple therapy as a treatment for children’s mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, the research base is almost non-existent, despite the fact that couple therapists who work with conflicted parents will commonly report a reduction in symptoms of their clients’ children as a result of the therapeutic work undertaken.

A call for change

In conclusion then, we face a situation where a significant amount of evidence has shown that there are bi-directional links between relationship distress and mental ill health. At a policy level, however, there is little evidence that such a linkage is understood; and at the practice level, very little relationally-based clinical work to help prevent or alleviate mental health problems is actually undertaken.

How long though can we go on ignoring research which shows, say, that common mental health problems are more prevalent in people who are experiencing relationship distress than those who are happier in their relationships? And that people who live in distressed and troubled relationships are three times more likely to suffer from mood disorders (e.g. depression), two and a half times more likely to suffer from anxiety disorders, and twice as likely to suffer from substance use disorders as people who do not experience such relationship distress.

We are calling on the Government to commit to producing a cross-departmental relationships strategy. Only through such a concerted move will we stand a chance of aligning the different elements of the system in order that the links between couple relationship distress and mental ill health are better understood, and that this understanding is translated into more informed and effective policy and practice.

**“We are calling on the Government to commit to producing a cross-departmental relationships strategy.”**

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2 Because of the legal status of marriage, the majority of research studies in the field of relationship distress have collected data on married relationships rather than other relationships. It is likely however that similar associations to those found to exist by research looking at marital quality and other factors are evident in other relationships, such as cohabiting partnerships.


19 Ibid
Relationships matter to each of us – no matter what our age, life stage or background. This is one of the strongest messages from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s (JRF) work on loneliness and on an ageing society. Across the landscape of relationships – from couples to communities – you do not have to look far before you bump up against poverty.

Poverty matters

Poverty in a country like the UK is about not being able to make ends meet. It is about not having the resources to afford basic needs, including social participation. Last year, JRF published a pamphlet making the case for a UK without poverty, which conveyed three key messages.

Firstly, poverty is real in the UK. Projections are bleak. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, by 2020/21 there will be 3.3 million children and 7.5 million working age adults living in poverty, measuring income before housing costs, with rises in both absolute and relative poverty levels.

Secondly, poverty scars the lives and futures of those who experience it, but the costs extend to us all. If you add up the cost in additional demands for public spending and services, alongside lost earnings in adulthood arising from damaged prospects in childhood, the annual cost of child poverty alone in the UK is estimated to be a staggering £29 billion.

Thirdly, poverty is not inevitable. When we look at trends in poverty over time we see that poverty changes, and can be changed, and that policies make a difference. The decrease in levels of pensioner poverty is the stand out good example, contrasting with a continued rise in levels of in-work poverty and growth in the numbers of people in poverty in private rented housing. Families with children are now at greater risk than any other group of having an inadequate income, with at least 8.1 million parents and children living on incomes below the ‘Minimum Income Standard’. But the message holds: poverty can be changed. At JRF, we believe that we need a long term, comprehensive strategy for reducing poverty for all ages. The question for this essay is: where and how should relationships feature within an anti-poverty strategy?

Below, I set out some of the messages from research, followed by implications for policy. That there is no clear cut, linear causal association between poverty and the nature or number of relationships does not surprise; nor should it deter us from designing better policy.

“Research tells us that differences in family structures may be both an effect and cause of poverty; that family structures are less important than family functioning for child and adult outcomes; and that family functioning too may be both an effect and cause of poverty.”
Poverty and couple and family relationships

Poverty is associated with higher levels of cohabitation compared to marriage, higher levels of relationship breakdown, and greater prevalence of family structures like lone parenting, step families and non-resident parents. These associations are complex: research tells us that differences in family structures may be both an effect and a cause of poverty; that family structures are less important than family functioning for child and adult outcomes; and that family functioning too may be both an effect and a cause of poverty.

A review for JRF in 2012 on the role of institutions, behaviour and culture in explaining poverty found that the main reason behind differences in poverty levels and children’s outcomes between married couples, cohabiting couples and lone parents is that the parents have different characteristics and resources to begin with: married couples are often older, have more qualifications and are more likely to have experienced other advantages. Cohabitation is no more susceptible to breakdown than marriage; cohabiting couples have similar levels of commitment to married couples, but fewer resources.8

The stress of fewer resources, the struggle to make ends meet, can affect the quality and stability of couple relationships. This is no surprise when we think about what it means to live on a low income; maybe living in damp, cold, overcrowded, insecure housing on short tenancies; working in low paid jobs, with little or no job security or chance of progression; and going without (especially mothers). Welfare support is critical to parents on low incomes, but negotiating this support can be a stress itself. In this way, poverty puts increased pressure on relationships, and can be a cause of relationship breakdown.

Whilst the stress of living in poverty can contribute to relationship breakdown, so also relationship breakdown can increase the risk of poverty for mothers, fathers and children. Significantly it appears to be the increase in poverty that drives many of the subsequent negative impacts of family breakdown on children’s outcomes:

Most children experience short-term negative outcomes from parental separation including socio-economic disadvantage, but these lessen over time for most. However, for a minority of children there are long term negative consequences. Significantly, when the income of families is controlled for, the negative effect of separation reduces or disappears. This suggests that family functioning, rather than family structure per se, is the most important factor. Indeed, the key risk factors that determine long term negative outcomes for children are: existing poverty, maternal mental ill health, parental conflict, and poor parenting.10

Lone parent families are at higher risk of poverty, and are also more likely to spend a longer time in poverty (with negative implications for children’s prospects). In large part, these higher risks arise from the additional challenges in combining caring and earning on low incomes. There are also challenges around how to share financial resources fairly after separation, including when either or both parties re-partner, and these can be more acute where resources are already stretched. The UK’s current system of child maintenance has low levels of compliance from paying parties; charging for the services of the Child Support Agency may inhibit access by low income couples to these formal (but more sustainable) arrangements.11 Evidence is also building about non-resident fathers, including how welfare systems and mainstream services are poor at recognising and supporting them.12 More positively, re-partnering and step family formation can also reduce poverty, bringing improved financial circumstances to a lone parent family.13 It is worth noting that there is limited evidence on the role of state financial incentives in affecting family formation such as marriage.14

Behind the headline data on associations between family types and poverty, we therefore see a complex story of the interplay between pre-existing disadvantages, past and current experiences of poverty, stress, and the quality and stability of couple and family relationships.

How are poverty and relationships linked in childhood?

In childhood, the links between relationships and poverty are very important, especially around doing well at school. Educational attainment is the strongest single predictor of adult poverty in the UK. Holding all else equal, those with low attainment are almost five times as likely to be in poverty now as those with a high level of education and 11 times as likely to be severely deprived.15 Parenting and parental relationships have an important effect on children’s educational attainment – although perhaps less than might be expected. Research suggests that parenting practices explain less than half of the educational disadvantage faced by children from low income backgrounds.16 Living in poverty makes it much harder for parents to support children’s education and provide a good home learning environment, both through limited access to financial, and social, resources, and through increased likelihood of parental stress, anxiety and depression.17 There is also evidence that children in poverty are disproportionately negatively affected by low quality provision of early education and childcare.18 Children and parents who live in poor quality or overcrowded housing have worse physical and mental health, and low income families are also more likely to move house frequently, with very negative impacts on

14 ideas for putting relationships at the heart of policy

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children's educational attainment. As children get older, poverty can erode aspirations and hinder the development of social and emotional skills that are known to be important for adult socio-economic, labour market and mental well-being outcomes, such as self-efficacy or the belief that one's own actions can make a difference. This may reflect lower achievement at school so far, as well as local contexts of worklessness, low skilled jobs and limited chances to use qualifications.

A systematic review into the effect of money on children's outcomes found supporting evidence for two theoretical models which explain how relationships and children's educational attainment are linked: the 'family stress' model (the stress and anxiety caused by low income), and the 'investment model' (parents' ability to invest in goods and services that further child development). There was compelling evidence that children in lower income families have worse cognitive, social-behavioural and health outcomes in part because they are poorer – and not just because low income is correlated with other household and parental characteristics. It also found money affects other outcomes that impact on children, their development and attainment, including maternal mental health, parenting, and home environment.

How do relationships and poverty interact in adulthood?

Money also affects adult outcomes, although the evidence is less clear cut for some outcomes (e.g. physical health) than for others (e.g. mental health). A systematic review found that additional financial resources make people happier and reduce mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. The review also found that additional income gives people more choices in a range of areas of life, including decisions about relationships (with evidence of a boost in income resulting in more relationships starting and more relationships ending). The review included two studies on women's income and domestic abuse, with both finding that increases in women's income reduced the likelihood of domestic abuse.

In adulthood, we see the complex interaction between structural drivers, individual experiences, relational capabilities and social exclusion. We see this most clearly at the extremes. Research for the LankellyChase Foundation into the characteristics of people facing severe and multiple disadvantage (people who experience one, two or all three of homelessness, offending, and substance abuse in one year) shows how very poor educational experience, difficult family relationships, poverty and deprivation, mental health, and childhood trauma feature in the life histories for these adults. This research and prior research on multiple exclusion homelessness spotlight the interplay between socio-economic disadvantage, family and relationship disadvantage, and public services and systems.

We also see these interactions at times of significant change in our lives. Having a child, starting work, redundancy, onset of illness or disability, separation and bereavement – all can put unbearable pressure on stretched resources, resilience and relationships. If our financial, relational and health capabilities are already stretched, then such life events carry a greater risk of poverty and crisis. It is at these times when the affordability, availability and quality of advice and support services can make a huge difference, both in lessening financial hardship and in building human and social capital. Yet many services are underfunded and/or underused by those who might benefit. For example, research into relationship support services has found that they tend to focus on couples from more stable economic circumstances, and also from white ethnic backgrounds. This points to the value of evidence-based interventions like the Race Equality Foundation’s ‘Strengthening Families’ programme (inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds, including black and minority ethnic parents, parents with learning difficulties); and the need to improve the quality of links with other services such as independent money and debt advice, housing, and health.

More attention is now being paid to later life transitions and to kinship care. For a growing number of grandparents, this includes providing informal (free) childcare. Kinship care is socially patterned, with more provided in low income families, especially lone parent families. Whilst grandparent caring brings many benefits, it can also put pressure on grandparents’ own resources if they have a low income or had to reduce hours or give up work to provide care, affecting their current and future income and savings. In a context of ageing populations, rising retirement ages, welfare reform and reduced public services, this is an issue of growing importance for poverty and for relationships.

Links between poverty and wider social networks

The links between poverty and wider social relationships are similarly complex. Drawing on community research into neighbourhood approaches to loneliness, research into ethnicity, poverty and social networks; a review on links between social networks and poverty; and research into relationships and risks; three key points emerge.

First, most of us have networks with people similar to ourselves. The same is true for people in poverty, who are more likely to be in networks with other people in poverty, in low paid work or unemployed. These networks are valuable: they offer financial, material and emotional support – a buffer against the worst effects of poverty. However, they seldom help people to overcome poverty, because they tend to be ‘like-with-like’. So while networks are used to access employment, this is often into low paid jobs which rely on informal recruitment processes.
Secondly, the protections that social networks can provide may not be available for everyone as poor health and poor finances can leave people with reduced ability to build supportive relationships, and the experience of racism and other discrimination may also reduce access to social networks. New analysis of Understanding Society data shows that social isolation is a particular risk for living in poverty (or a consequence of poverty) and people from Black African, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean ethnic groups appear most likely to have only one or no close friends. Social isolation and other factors such as having no qualifications, or being separated or divorced, were found to be stronger predictors of being in poverty than who is in one’s wider social networks.

Thirdly, poverty acts as a barrier to participation in wider social networks through reduced access (e.g. high transport costs); through self-exclusion arising from the stigma of poverty; and through affecting the potential for reciprocity (the ‘give and take’) of resources in networks. Reciprocity is increasingly recognised as an important element in relationships and resilience, but how it plays out in our lives is complicated. In a recent study, researchers found that people generally think giving help is good, yet express reluctance to ask for or accept help themselves.

In this extended period of austerity, with changes to welfare support and reduced services, evidence is emerging from disadvantaged communities of supportive social relationships, of resilience and reciprocity, and of the potential to build resilience through skilled community development and neighbourhood-led action. But evidence is also emerging of the strains of trying to absorb the transfer of risks from the state to individuals and communities.

What are the implications for policy on poverty, and on relationships?

The policy implications of the evidence summarised in this essay are far reaching and point again to the need for a comprehensive, long term and all-ages strategy for ending poverty. Multiple approaches will be needed, and the responsibility is not only one for government. Thinking about couple, family and wider social relationships:

1. Social security and labour market policies should be co-ordinated and focussed on preventing poverty and improving people’s financial prospects. Families with children have seen the biggest increase in the risk of having an inadequate income since the recession. Evidence is compelling on the beneficial effects of increased family income on a child’s cognitive and educational development, and on a range of outcomes indirectly affecting children’s prospects (including maternal mental health). Increasing household income, whether through benefits or wages, is not the only solution (the cost of living matters too), but few other changes will affect such a wide range of outcomes at once.

2. Families come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and policies must recognise this and find ways to support family relationships, as it is the quality of family functioning that matters most. For example:
   - Avoid policies that offer additional benefits for married couples over cohabiting couples, as these currently disadvantage proportionally more low income households.
   - Address public perceptions of there being a strong ‘couple penalty’ in the welfare system, and reduce the stigma of seeking relationship support.
   - Redirect money set aside for childcare across all income groups (including tax-free childcare) so it is targeted more directly at low income households.
   - Under Universal Credit, increase the designated amount that a household can earn before their benefits start to be withdrawn, and introduce an earnings disregard for a second worker.

3. Good quality services can make a major difference to parenting, parental relationships and children’s outcomes and prospects for adulthood.
   - Good quality childcare in deprived areas that low income families can afford. This will reduce household poverty, reduce risks of poverty should the couple separate, have positive effects on women’s lifetime position in the labour market, and alleviate pressures on couple and family relationships.
   - Doubling the value of the Early Years Pupil Premium (designed to improve the quality of childcare for deprived young children) since low quality early years education and childcare is proven to have a disproportionally negative impact on children who are already disadvantaged.
   - Better access and affordability of relationship support services for low income couples and families from marginalised groups. Relationship support services need to be better connected to other services, providing advice and support before, during and after major life changes.
   - Practical support for low income parents to improve home learning environments, alongside attracting excellent teachers into schools serving low income children. Children’s and whole-family centres that provide quality targeted support for multiple issues can help here.

“Poverty acts as a barrier to participation in wider social networks through reduced access.”
4. Policies to increase men’s involvement in childcare and women’s ability to carry out decently paid work, such as:
   • Reducing costs of childcare and transport (to enable easier access to both work and childcare settings, especially in rural areas).
   • Shared parental leave – which is well paid, non-transferable, and equal for both parents to encourage low income fathers to take parental leave.
   • Rebalancing the UK labour market to improve the quality and pay of jobs - in particular of part-time jobs (where a parent needs or chooses to work part-time to balance caring and earning).

There is more to learn about effective neighbourhood-based approaches to reducing poverty over the long term, and what role relationships and social networks have to play in this. But there is good evidence to build on about the benefits of community development approaches, and how to create the conditions for resilience and supportive social relationships where we live.

For JRF, our challenge over the next year is to produce our best attempt at an evidence-based strategy for ending poverty in the UK – making clear our assumptions, modelling policy options where possible – so that we can inform better debate and policy. This essay reminds us of the important place that relationships – from couples to communities – have throughout our lives, and how these affect, and are affected, by poverty in the UK.

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the authors
Simon Blake OBE is Chief Executive of National Union of Students. Until May 2015 he was Chief Executive of Brook – the young people’s charity specialising in sexual health and wellbeing. Previously he was director of the Sex Education Forum. Simon has been one of the UK’s leading campaigners for young people’s rights and entitlements to high quality sex and relationships education at home, school and in the community for a long time. He tweets @simonablake.

Lord Willis of Knaresborough D.S (Hon,) B.Phil, FRSA, FRCN is a Liberal Democrat peer and member of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee. Before entering the House of Lords, Lord Willis served as the member of Parliament for Harrogate and Knaresborough from 1997 until retiring in 2010, having notably defeated the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Norman Lamont to take the seat for the Liberal Democrats. In Parliament Lord Willis was appointed shadow secretary of state for education and skills by Charles Kennedy, retaining the post until the 2005 general election when he was appointed chairman of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee. As chairman he developed a special interest in evidence based policy making, knowledge transfer leading to wealth creation and medical science. In addition to science and technology, the other major focus of Lord Willis’ career has been working with young people, acting as head of two large comprehensive schools in Middlesbrough and Leeds from 1978 until 1997, where he achieved national recognition for his pioneering work on inclusive education. Combining these passions, Lord Willis is a Patron (and former Chair) of the E-learning Foundation, a charity dedicated to helping schools and families provide computers, educational software and Internet access to all school children. He has recently written a major report on the future education and training of nurses and care workers ‘The Shape of Caring’ and is currently involved in its implementation.

Mark Molden is Chief Executive of Marriage Care. Mark’s experience spans the commercial, public and voluntary sectors. The value and significance of healthy relationships have been a consistent theme across Mark’s career for over a decade and he is passionate about helping build healthy, lasting couple relationships.

Marriage Care is one of the largest relationship support charities in the UK working through 53 Centres and 800 professionally trained and accredited volunteers. It provides marriage and relationship information, education and counselling support to thousands of people each year and has been doing so for nearly 70 years.

Mark joined Marriage Care from the national charity Care for the Family where he was Chief Executive and instrumental in the national rollout of ‘Let’s Stick Together’ for new parents. His previous roles include the Chair of the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners, strategic lead for access to education and innovation at Bristol City Council and providing business support for the Sure Start and Children’s Fund programmes at Barnardo’s. Mark is married with six children, one grandchild and two rabbits!

Adrienne Burgess is Joint CEO & Head of Research at the Fatherhood Institute and has written widely on fatherhood and on couple relationships. Her book Fatherhood Reclaimed: the making of the modern father (Vermilion, 1997) helped set a new agenda on fatherhood in the UK, and has been published throughout the world, as has Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow (2002). This book pulled together, for a popular audience, the international evidence on couple relationships, to identify which succeed, which fail – and why this happens. Adrienne trains and speaks on fatherhood and couple relationships in both the public and private sectors across the world: in Washington, New York, Qatar, Delhi, Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia. She also writes on these topics in a wide variety of forms, from popular magazines to peer reviewed journals, most recently with colleagues from Yale University in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry: Engaging fathers – recommendations for a game change in parenting interventions based on a systematic review of the global evidence. Adrienne is currently completing training materials for Health Visitors for UNICEF while managing a research project for the Nuffield Foundation: Contemporary Fathers in the UK: what do we know? what do we need to know? This collates and reviews UK fatherhood research since 1998.
Matt Horwood works for Stonewall, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans equality charity, as its Communications Officer. As well as handling media relations, he develops media strategies for key events and launches, manages Stonewall’s social media presence and drafts comment and copy on behalf of the organisation.

Prior to joining Stonewall in 2014, Matt worked in communications roles for organisations including Comic Relief, Visit Manchester and Manchester Pride. He also managed the PR and social media for two week arts festival Pride House Manchester and has three years’ experience of lifestyle writing. Matt has an MSc in International Public Relations from Manchester Metropolitan University, where he was acting Faculty Representative. Before this, he graduated from the University of Manchester with a degree in Social Anthropology.

Sue Marsh spent 6 years as a campaigner for sick and disabled people writing on a variety of disability subjects, but most often her own experiences as a long term sufferer of severe Crohn’s disease. She is now Head of Customer Experience for MAXIMUS, tasked with advising on improvements to Work Capability Assessments of sick and disabled people.

Sam Smethers has been the Chief Executive of Grandparents Plus since 2008 and is the former Director of Public Affairs of the Equal Opportunities Commission. She has worked as a communications consultant and also has eight years’ experience of working in parliament. Sam is a former trustee of Gingerbread and the Fawcett Society. She has four children and was brought up by her grandparents.

Grandparents Plus is the national charity which champions the vital role of grandparents and the wider family in children’s lives – especially when they take on the caring role in difficult family circumstances. Under Sam’s leadership the charity has made a number of high profile interventions into the family policy debate during recent years, challenging the focus on the nuclear model of family life and demonstrating the contribution that grandparents and the wider family make. The charity wants to see the grandparental role better recognised, valued and supported.

Grandparents Plus has a particular focus on childcare provided by grandparents, their multiple caring roles and also on grandparents and family members who are raising children who cannot live with their parents, keeping them out of care and provides advice and peer support to carers in that situation and campaigns with them to improve policy, services and support at national and local level. Grandparents Plus also works to support social workers and other professionals who work in kinship care, recognising the practice challenges they face.

Professor Janet Walker OBE FAcSS FRSA is Emeritus Professor of Family Policy in the Institute of Health and Society (IHS) at Newcastle University. Janet studied social sciences and then trained and practised as a probation officer, family therapist and family mediator. Between 1985 and 2005 she was the director of a multidisciplinary research team at Newcastle University, leading over 50 studies in the fields of marriage and divorce, parenting, policing, criminal justice and services for children. She has published widely on these topics. In 2005, Janet retired as Director of the Newcastle Centre for Family Studies and became Strategic Research Adviser in IHS until 2010. Since then she has participated in various research and consultancy activities and continued to publish widely. She is the co-editor of an international text exploring contemporary issues in family studies, published in 2014.

Janet has been an expert consultant on family mediation to the Council of Europe and provided advice on divorce reform to governments in several countries. She has held a number of public appointments, including as a member of the local parole board at HMP Durham, as non-executive Director and Vice-Chair of Newcastle City NHS Trust, and as a member and Deputy Chair of the Social Security Advisory Committee, Department for Work and Pensions, until June 2013. She has been a trustee of several charities, including the Family and Parenting Institute and the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners. In 2014 she was a member of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Mediation Task Force, and in November 2014 she was appointed by the Minister of Justice and Civil Liberties as Co-Chair of the Voice of the Child Dispute Resolution Advisory Group. The report of the Group was published by the MoJ in March 2015. Currently, she is a trustee of Relate, trustee of Safe Families for Children, and a Board member of the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family in Calgary.

The Authors
Dr Samantha Callan is recognised as a research and policy expert in the fields of family relationships, early years, mental health and work-life integration. She is currently an Associate Director at the leading Westminster-based think tank, the Centre for Social Justice, for whom she has chaired four major social policy reviews, a panel member of Scottish Widows’ Centre for the Modern Family and an honorary research fellow at Edinburgh University’s Centre for Research in Families and Relationships (CRFR). A published academic in peer-reviewed journals and elsewhere, she has recently co-authored the latest introductory textbook for family studies, Understanding Families: a Global Introduction with Professor Linda McKie, Associate Director at CRFR.

In her current role she advises politicians and policy makers from across the political spectrum, in local, national and international governments, and is a frequent speaker at parliamentary and other seminars and conferences on a broad range of policy areas. She is also a regular contributor to local and national media debates on family and social justice issues.

John Glen is the Member of Parliament for Salisbury and South Wiltshire. He is the Parliamentary Private Secretary to Rt. Hon. Sajid Javid, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills. John has had a longstanding interest in the family and young people. In 2006 he became a Magistrate (JP) and since becoming an MP in 2010, has regularly spoken about the importance of the family in society with a particular focus on the importance of father’s in young people’s lives.

John is married to Emma lives with her and his two step-children in Wiltshire. After reading Modern History at Mansfield College, Oxford, John spent several years working in management consultancy, including taking time to gain an MBA from Cambridge, before becoming the Deputy Director of the Conservative Research Department in 2004. After the 2005 General Election he became Director of the department. He then returned to Accenture in 2006 before entering Parliament in 2010.

Dr Jon Cruddas was re-elected as the Member of Parliament for Dagenham and Rainham in the 2015 general election with an increased majority.

After gaining a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Warwick and being visiting Fellow at the University of Wisconsin Madison, he became a policy officer for the Labour Party in 1989, before becoming chief assistant to the General Secretary of the Labour Party in 1994. After the 1997 general election, he became deputy political secretary to Tony Blair and as the link between the Prime Minister and the trade unions, worked heavily on the introduction of the minimum wage, before being elected as MP for Dagenham in 2010.

In 2007, Jon stood for election as Labour’s deputy leader following the resignation of Tony Blair and John Prescott as Leader and Deputy Leader. At the 2010 election Jon campaigned hard against the BNP, who enjoyed a strong presence in Barking and Dagenham until they lost all of their councillors in the 2010 elections. Between 2011 and 2015 Jon was a member of the shadow cabinet and oversaw labour’s Policy Review.

Polly Neate is Chief Executive of Women’s Aid, which she joined in February 2013. Leading the organisation through a time of significant challenge and change, she is also a prominent commentator on violence against women, and on sexism and feminism more widely. Throughout Polly’s career she has influenced government and campaigned for policy change and social justice. Her previous role was as Executive Director of External Relations and Communications at Action for Children, one of the UK’s largest charities. Her responsibilities included public policy, campaigns, research, communications, brand and fundraising. In 2008 she was responsible for the relaunch of the organisation, formerly NCH. She also developed organisational strategy and led significant cultural change and staff engagement programmes. Polly is a journalist by profession, with her last media job being as editor of Community Care, a major weekly title for professionals in children’s services and social care which under her control included two magazines as well as web-based products and large-scale events. She has contributed to national newspapers, magazines and books. She won several awards as an editor, both for journalism and campaigning. She has been a member of many advisory and working groups for government and opposition. She was recently voted one of the Top 30 charity CEOs on Twitter and can be followed at @pollyn1
Susanna Abse is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and CEO of The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships. Before training as a psychotherapist she taught troubled adolescents in a variety of clinical and educational settings. Since 2009 she has been involved in co-developing a new mentalization-based intervention for parents in destructive conflict over parenting issues, many of them post-separation. This intervention which has been shown to have positive impacts has undergone randomized control trial funded by the Department for Education and is now delivered in partnership with London CAFCASS. She has published widely on clinical work with couples and family policy and lectures and teaches on a variety of related subjects. She is a member of the International Advisory Board for the Journal of Couple and Family Psychoanalysis and a series editor for Karnac Books.

Richard Meier is the Policy and Communications Manager at The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships. He has worked in mental health and relationships policy for many years for organisations such as YoungMinds, the NCT and the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He has an MA in Psychoanalytic studies from the Tavistock Clinic, and his debut collection of poetry was published by Picador in 2012.

Dr Emma Stone is Director of Policy and Research at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust, based in York and working across the four nations of the UK. The JRF is an independent endowed foundation which funds research and development work as part of its purpose to help achieve a poverty-free and prosperous UK, where everyone can thrive and contribute.

Emma began her JRF career in 1998, managing programmes on disability, and subsequently on immigration and inclusion. Emma represents JRF at relevant fora about the role of research in inspiring social change and informing policy and practice. Before joining JRF in 1998, Emma was a contract researcher for the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Leeds and completed a PhD on ‘Disability and Development in China’ (having previously done Chinese as an undergraduate followed by a Masters in International Development Studies). Outside JRF, Emma retains her interests in international development as a Trustee of Y Care International and of DORS: Development Organisation for Rural Sichuan. Emma tweets @jrfemma

Dr David Marjoribanks is Senior Policy and Research Officer at Relate. He joined Relate in June 2014, and has since co-authored two major reports (Relationships, Recession and Recovery: The role of relationships in generating social recovery and The Best Medicine: The importance of relationships for health and wellbeing). Prior to joining Relate, he was the researcher for family policy at the Centre for Social Justice, focusing on support for people to form and maintain healthy relationships over the life course, including relationship education for young people, relationship support around key transitions, help for separated/separating parents, and interventions for complex families. Before this, David was an Associate Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Kent, where he also completed his PhD. He also has an MA in Political Philosophy and BA in Politics, both from the University of York.

Chris Sherwood is Director of Policy, Communications and Digital Services at Relate. Chris leads on campaigns, marketing, policy and research, digital media and media and communication for Relate. Chris joined Relate from Scope where he was the Director of Innovation and Development. He was previously a Senior Development Manager at Nesta where he led their work on Co-production, People Powered Health and Ageing. Chris has over ten years’ experience of working in the voluntary sector and prior to this he worked in Westminster and local government. His career interest to date has been on policy, innovation and service improvement in welfare to work, family support and adult social care.

Chris holds a degree in History and Society from Exeter University. He is also the Co-Founder of Guerilla Policy, a hub site for frontline bloggers on social policy. He tweets @ChrisSherwood80
Relate is the UK’s leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people through information, support and counselling every year.

Our vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis of a thriving society and our mission is to develop and support healthy relationships by:

- helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better
- delivering inclusive, high-quality services that are relevant at every stage of life
- helping both the public and policymakers improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

Everyone can access Relate services through a growing range of channels: face-to-face, online, on the phone and via email.