Key messages

- Evidence shows that relationships are key to the wellbeing of both children and adults
- The current provision of children and family services is not joined up and does not take into account people’s relationships
- Families need access to the full spectrum of relationship support – from relationship education in schools through to support for separating couples. Supporting healthy relationships and enabling people to manage relationship difficulties is vital to enabling families to thrive
- Drawing on lessons learnt from the 65 Family Relationships Centres established in Australia in 2006, the UK should pilot Family Hubs in England and Wales.
- Joining up services could create greater efficiency in the system by breaking down the barriers to relationship support, encouraging people to access help earlier, and enabling a wider range of professionals to promote and support healthy relationships
- The Government’s upcoming review of Children’s Centres will offer an opportunity to explore whether their remit might be extended to provide access to wider family and relationship support – becoming Family and Relationship Hubs

Why relationships matter for children’s outcomes

Relationships are key to improving people’s wellbeing. When the Office for National Statistics 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 Legatum Commission on Wellbeing and Policy headed by Sir Gus O’Donnell similarly recognised the role of relationships in wellbeing, noting that across the world the quality of home life – which is ultimately based on family relationships – is a universal ingredient of life satisfaction, and that the relationships we hold within our communities are another key factor.

Children specifically benefit from having parents who have a good relationship, whether separated or together; children growing up with parents who have low parental conflict enjoy better physical and mental health, better emotional wellbeing, higher academic attainment, and a lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours:
- 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.\textsuperscript{viii}
- Parental conflict can affect children’s and adolescents’ wellbeing and adjustment,\textsuperscript{ix} and emotional and mental development – resulting in increased anxiety, depression, aggression, hostility and antisocial behaviour and criminality.\textsuperscript{x}
- Children’s exposure to frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict may have a more significant impact than that of divorce or separation.\textsuperscript{x}

**Current Provision**

Many family support services are currently provided through Children’s Centres. Children’s Centres have taken a variety of forms over their lifetime; beginning in 1997 as Early Excellence Centres, developing through the Sure Start program and finally being given legal status as Children’s Centres through the 2006 Childcare Act. In 2010 there were 3,361 children’s centres; however this number has been falling since.

At current there are mounting concerns over the impact that cuts to public services have had on Children’s Centres. Findings from the National Children’s Bureau survey of practitioners and parents’ showed that whilst parents and practitioners were confident of the importance of children’s centres, their current state was not meeting requirements\textsuperscript{xii}. They described how the facilities had worsened, that parents were being turned away and that relationships with the centre staff were difficult due to frequent staff turnover.\textsuperscript{xiii}

Children’s Centres provide an accessible, local and non-stigmatised hub for a range of support all in one place. This existing provision is invaluable to families however we believe more could be made of Children’s Centres by building the brand and extending the services they provide. The idea of Family and Relationship Hubs is not to create new infrastructure within communities, but rather to promote more efficient and joined-up use of existing community resources, such as the 3,300 Children’s Centres in England and 59 local Relate Centres across England and Wales.

Local areas would need to determine the most appropriate delivery model for their communities, bringing together statutory and local voluntary sector provision. The range of services which could be included is potentially very large, including antenatal and perinatal services, birth registration, health visiting, early years, relationship education/marriage preparation, counselling and mediation.

Working from the same centre provides a single point of access, making it easier for families to get the support they need. It also reduces stigma by providing services which are potentially considered to be sensitive, such as counselling, alongside everyday services like birth registration. The advantages of collaborative working have been evidenced at Children’s Centres in Plymouth, Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire that are already starting to move toward this concept.
The growing case for Family Hubs

In recent years a number of organisations have joined the call for family and relationship hubs:

- **Innovation Unit**: “Children’s centres could be renamed as Centres for Children and Families. Such a change would indicate an increased focus on supporting families to support their children. Staff in the new Centres for Children and Families will need to deepen their engagement with families”

- **The Centre for Social Justice**: “Hubs should focus on the stability and quality of family relationships – including couple and parent-child relationship – to prevent breakdown or minimise the impact of instability, where it occurs, on children’s welfare”

- **4Children**: “Children and Family Hubs would provide a wide range of family support, across both targeted and universal services [which] could include increased direction and provision of relationship support for couples and family therapy”

We are pleased to also see increased focus at national government level on how support for children and families can be improved, with Family Hubs gaining cross party support:

- **Multiple commentators writing on the Conservative Home website** have called for the development of Family Hubs,

- **Labour MP Lucy Powell**, Shadow Secretary of State for Education, has identified Family Hubs as a key focus for Labour’s offer to parents,

- **In June 2015 the Prime Minister said** “all the evidence shows if you focus on the early years you have the best chance of transforming a child’s life” and stated that the Government “will look at how we can create a much more coherent offer to support children and parents in the early years, bringing together all those services targeted at getting children school-ready by age 4”.

- **In addition**, the Northern Ireland Executive Child Poverty Strategy commits to introduce Family Hubs.

Following the Prime Minister’s comments, a review of Children’s Centres was then announced by Sam Gyimah in July 2015 which should provide an opportunity to explore whether their remit might be expanded. However, the public consultation to feed into this review process has yet to be launched many months on.

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children’s Centres is currently running its own inquiry on the future of Children’s Centres, including the potential to incorporate relationship and other family support. The Relationships Alliance submitted a response to this consultation calling for relationship support to be a core part of the services Children’s Centres offer.

The Department for Work and Pensions is also piloting a ‘local family offer’ with 12 local authorities across England. These local authorities are given national support and a small amount of money to develop strategies identifying how they can support strong relationships and families in their area. One way in which they may choose to do this is by developing Family Hubs locally. The Government has announced the intention to expand this scheme to more local authorities with funding allocated through a Healthy Relationships Fund, although further details are not yet available.
It is encouraging to see such active consideration of how Children's Centres could better support families from a wide range of people and organisations, as well as growing momentum for Family Hubs as a potential solution.

Case Study

**Family Relationship Centres - Australia**

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

These centres aim to assist:

- Couples about to be married to get information and referral to pre-marriage education
- Families having relationship difficulties to get information and referral to other services
- Separated parents to resolve disputes and agree parenting arrangements outside the court system
- Separated parents whose arrangements have broken down, or whose court orders have been breached, to resolve the issue outside the court system
- Grandparents and other extended family members affected by a family separation
- Families to achieve effective resolution of more complex family separation issues through closer linkages with the courts, legal assistance providers and other services within the family law system.

Evaluations have shown that, as a result of the introduction of Family and Relationship Centres in Australia, there has been significant decrease in the number of court applications for final orders in child and property matters – the total number of applications fell by 32% between 2005/06 and 2010/11.

Contact

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i ONS (2011). Findings from the national well-being debate.
viii ibid
xiii ibid, page 6
xxii Northern Ireland Executive (2016) Delivering social change; The Executive’s Child Poverty Strategy