Putting relationships at the heart of family support – a new vision for children’s centres

SUMMARY

- The Government’s review of Children’s Centres offers an opportunity to explore whether their remit might be extended to provide access to wider family and relationship support – becoming Family and Relationship Hubs.
- Families need access to the full spectrum of relationship support – supporting healthy relationships, and enabling people to manage relationship difficulties, is vital to enabling families to thrive.
- 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 think relationally.

Background

The Relationships Alliance believes that there is currently a golden opportunity for the Government to act upon its stated commitment to improving family stability, by creating local hubs for access to family and relationship support, as part of its review of Children’s Centres. This briefing builds on reports from organisations such as 4Children and the Centre for Social Justice which set out the importance of couple relationships to children’s outcomes, and the role that children’s centres and Family Hubs/Family and Relationship Hubs can, and should, play in improving them.

Recent developments in this area:

- In a speech in June 2015 the Prime Minister said “Because all the evidence shows if you focus on the early years you have the best chance of transforming a child’s life, we 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”.6
- In July 2015, childcare minister Sam Gyimah MP announced a review of the future of children’s centres.6
- The Department for Work and Pensions will be piloting a ‘local family offer’ with 12 local authorities across England, which will include developing relationship skills in youth services, training frontline staff to spot signs of relationship distress, expanding parenting support, and developing the role of Children’s Centres in couple counselling provision.
- The idea of developing Family Hubs is gaining cross party support – commentators writing on the Conservative Home website have called for the development of Family Hubs and, in a recent speech to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Strengthening Couple Relationships, Lucy Powell MP commented that the Labour Party needed to develop a stronger vision around the future role of children’s centres.6

Relationship support at the core of our offer to families

“Putting relationships at the heart of the offer that takes place between the parental couple which has the most profound effect on the outcomes, behaviour and development of children. Failure either to recognise this, or to tailor programmes to meaningfully address it, means that a great deal of well-intentioned activity is undertaken with parents which is far less beneficial to those parents than they might suspect.” (Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, 2011).

While there are a number of drivers behind the decision to review the support for families that is provided through Children’s Centres, we believe it is important seize this opportunity to build the support for relationships – and particularly parental couple relationships – into our offer for families. The evidence clearly demonstrates that these relationships are vital to the wellbeing of the child.8 For example, research shows:

- "It is the nature and quality of the relating that takes place between the parental couple which has the most profound effect on the outcomes, behaviour and development of children. Failure either to recognise this, or to tailor programmes to meaningfully address it, means that a great deal of well-intentioned activity is undertaken with parents which is far less beneficial to those parents than they might suspect.” (Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, 2011).

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• Associations between parental relationship breakdown and child poverty, behavioural problems, distress and unhappiness, poorer educational achievement, substance misuse, physical and mental health problems, teenage pregnancy, and increased risk of children’s own relationship breakdown down.

• Parental conflict can affect children’s and adolescents’ wellbeing and adjustment, and emotional and mental development – resulting in increased anxiety, depression, aggression, hostility and antisocial behaviour and criminality.

• Children’s exposure to frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict may have a more significant impact than that of divorce or separation.

What would a Family and Relationship Hub provide?

The idea of a Family and Relationship Hub is not to create new infrastructure within communities, but rather to promote more efficient and joined up use of existing community resources. 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, mediation, etc.

Relationships Alliance members already have significant infrastructure and relationships in place in many localities – for example between Relate and Marriage Foundation, or between TCCR and Family and Relationship Hubs. Its network of 65 centrally-funded family relationship centres provides information and confidential advice and guidance to all 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 and fair parenting arrangements outside the court system. These centres aim to:

• 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.

Relate - Derby and Southern Derbyshire

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

Relate finds that co-location in children’s centres offers a range of benefits to families, in terms of easier access, increased awareness and smoother referrals.

The Twinstock Centre for Couple Relationships - training frontline staff

TCCR offers courses for children’s centre and early years’ staff underpinned by evidence attesting to the importance of the couple relationship for adult and child mental health, as well as evidence demonstrating the increased risk of anxiety and depression, aggression, hostility and anti-social behaviour in children as a result of exposure to sustained inter-parental conflict.

These courses look at a wide range of issues such as:

• Identifying couple distress within family problems

• Understanding referral pathways

• Father inclusiveness

• Maintaining a couple state of mind: helping both partners own their relationship and grow.

OnePlusOne

OnePlusOne’s Relationship Support: An Early Intervention training programme enables frontline practitioners to recognise relationship difficulties, respond using active listening skills and solution-focused techniques and review the need for further support.

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

Research on the Brief Encounters model with health workers has shown a three-fold rise in mothers identifying as needing relationship support, a five-fold increase in the percentage offered help and a doubling of the numbers discussing relationship problems with their health visitor. A separate randomised control trial of ‘Relationship Support: An early Intervention’ with children’s centre staff showed this biassed (online and face-to-face) training had had a large and positive impact on how staff responded and how they handled conversations with parents about their relationship difficulties. Children’s centre workers who received the training were more than twice as likely as those in the control group to be confident in knowing where and when to refer parents on for further support.

Conclusion

The Relationships Alliance welcomes the increasing interest in exploring how children’s centres could be expanded to bring together the range of family and children’s services which have a bearing on the quality of family relationships and children’s outcomes.

To be most effective, Family and Relationships Hubs must incorporate the services which focus on supporting the parental couple relationship. We therefore urge the Government to put support for relationships at the heart of the offer to families – making support for parental couple relationships part of core provision.

References


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