Supporting evidence – Why good quality couple and family relationships matter

The importance of parental relationships for children

The evidence is clear: parents’ relationship quality is a profoundly important factor in their children’s wellbeing and development, and parental relationship distress is damaging to kids:

- The recent evidence review by the University of Sussex and the Early Intervention Foundation found that the quality of parental relationships and family functioning have a significant impact on children’s mental health and wellbeing – both in intact and separated families – and concluded that the quality of the inter-parental relationship is a ‘primary influence’ on children’s outcomes. It showed that parents/couples who engage in frequent, intense, and poorly resolved inter-parental conflicts put children’s mental health and long-term life chances at risk, and children of all ages can be affected by destructive inter-parental conflict, with effects evidenced across infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

- Children growing up with parents who have low parental conflict – whether parents are together or separated – enjoy better physical and mental health, better emotional wellbeing, higher academic attainment, and a lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours.

- High levels of couple conflict is associated with less emotional availability and less warmth in parents towards children, as well as resulting in parents being perceived as more hostile and rejecting by children, and children whose parents have poorer relationship quality have more externalising behaviour problems (e.g. hyperactivity, aggression).

- Evidence demonstrates that persistent and unresolved parental conflict is likely to have a negative impact on maternal mental health, often leading to depression, and that children who have a parent with mental health problems are at an increased risk of emotional and social problems.

- Conflict between parents can result in impaired parent-child relationships and can affect children’s and adolescents’ wellbeing and development, leading to increased anxiety, withdrawal and depression, and behavioural problems including aggression, hostility and antisocial behaviour and criminality.

- Many of the mental health problems children present within counselling are symptoms of problems at home: a survey of over 4,500 children seen by CAMHS services in 2015 found ‘Family Relationships Problems’ to be the biggest presenting problem – ‘severe’ or ‘moderate’ for over 25% of children, and ‘severe’, ‘moderate’ or ‘mild’ for over 50%. Similarly, a meta-analysis of evaluations of counselling in UK secondary schools found family issues were the largest presenting issue (by a factor of almost two).
The importance of good quality relationships for adults’ wellbeing

In addition to the evidence showing the importance of inter-parental relationships for children, evidence also shows their importance to adults’ health and wellbeing:

- People who live in distressed and troubled relationships are three times as likely to suffer from mood disorders (e.g. depression), and two-and-a-half times as likely to suffer from anxiety disorders, as people who do not experience such relationship distress.\(^{17}\)
- Some studies have found that over 60% of those with depression consider relationship problems to be the main cause of their illness.\(^{18}\)
- Studies indicate that treatment of relationship distress may have the potential to alleviate up to 30% of cases of major depression.\(^{19}\)
- Other studies point to links between relationship distress and: alcohol misuse,\(^{20}\) depression,\(^{21}\) and poor health in general, as well as an association with more specific conditions such as coronary heart disease and raised blood pressure.\(^{22}\)
- Poor quality relationships can also lead to an increase in risky health behaviours, such as smoking and substance abuse, as well as driving emotional distress such as depression and anxiety.\(^{23}\)
- Relate’s analysis of data from the Understanding Society survey (using a sample of almost 21,000 people) found that that almost one-in-five (18%) people (2.87 million people) in adult couple relationships in the UK are in relationships which could be characterised within clinical practice as ‘distressed’.

Evidence for relationship support

International evidence, including several randomised control trials, shows that relationship counselling or therapy can be effective in improving relationship quality, relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution skills, and wellbeing and mental health:\(^{24}\)

- Studies have found relationship counselling improves relationship satisfaction,\(^{25}\) and couple therapy results in significant change in relationship satisfaction;\(^{26}\)
- A review of previous meta-analyses comparing couple therapy with control groups, found people in therapy were better off than 80% of those in the control group;\(^{27}\)
- Clinical practice studies show couple therapy reduces relationship distress and improves mental health,\(^{28}\) and the recent largest naturalistic study of couple therapy in the UK found significant improvements in both general psychological health and relationship satisfaction;\(^{29}\)
- The government-backed evaluation of UK relationship support found counselling and relationship education resulted in statistically significant positive changes in individuals’ relationship quality, wellbeing and communication, according to validated scores of relationship quality, communication and wellbeing.\(^{30}\)
References


Counterpart to the Relationships Alliance Manifesto 2017