



EIF SECTOR BRIEFING

Why reducing parental conflict matters for local government

The impact of conflict between parents on children and young people is increasingly recognised at both a local and national level. But what does this agenda mean for staff working in local government?

Defining the problem

Conflict between parents can harm children's outcomes.

- Conflict between parents is a normal part of relationships. However, there is a large body of evidence that shows that parental conflict puts children's mental health and long-term outcomes at risk when it is frequent, intense and poorly resolved.
- These destructive conflict behaviours include aggression, non-verbal conflict or the 'silent treatment', lack of respect and emotional control, lack of resolution and, in their most extreme form, domestic abuse.
- Parental conflict can harm children's outcomes regardless of whether parents are together or separated, or are biologically related to the child, such as in blended or foster families.
- Exposure to destructive parental conflict is associated with a range of problems for children and young people. This can include poorer academic outcomes, negative peer relationships, substance misuse, poor future relationship chances, low employability and heightened interpersonal violence. It is also associated with mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression, conduct disorder, poor attachment, risk-taking behaviours and even suicidality.

Some families are more vulnerable to parental conflict.

- Financial difficulties impact on parental mental health, which can increase parental conflict. This in turn can impact on parenting and children's outcomes.
- Children in workless families are up to three times more likely to experience damaging parental conflict, according to data from the Department for Work and Pensions. Yet low-income families who may benefit most from relationship support are less likely to receive it, due to lack of service availability, cost or stigma.

Parental conflict reduces the effectiveness of family services.

- Interventions which focus solely on supporting the parent-child relationship (such as parenting programmes) are unlikely to improve outcomes for children if they take place in a context of parental conflict.
- Evidence suggests that fathers' parenting may be more adversely affected by parental conflict (by withdrawing or becoming hostile) yet fathers are less likely to be reached by support services.
- The impacts of parental conflict on children and adolescents can place significant pressure and economic cost on public services, including health, social care and school systems, and judicial services.

WHO ARE WE?

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity whose mission is to ensure that effective early intervention is available and is used to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of poor outcomes.

"The evidence on parental relationships dropped like a very large penny. Before, if you had asked 'Is it a good idea for parents to shout and swear at each other in front of their children?' most people would say 'no'. But their answer would have been based on common decency, not science.

"Now we have evidence this is actually damaging to child development. It means we can say to GPs, for example, that doing something about parental conflict is your business as much as tackling smoking. Its impact on children is as harmful, in terms of both direct outcomes and learnt behaviour."

Colin Williams
Director of Transformation
Newcastle Council

Why reducing parental conflict matters for local government

Reducing parental conflict is everyone's business

Any practitioner or volunteer working with children, young people and families can have an impact on reducing parental conflict.

The risk of conflict between parents is higher at crucial transition points in family life, such as becoming pregnant, having a baby, starting or changing school, or separation and divorce. However, relationship difficulties are often seen as a private matter and couples tend to only seek help when they are in crisis.

Frontline practitioners often lack the confidence, tools and knowledge to raise relationship issues with parents and so miss opportunities to identify and support families experiencing parental conflict.

Opportunities to intervene

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT WORKFORCE AND PARENTAL CONFLICT

Early help

Vulnerable families are usually first known to local authorities through their early help teams and services. Early help practitioners can identify where conflict between parents is affecting their family by including questions about relationship quality in strength-based family assessments.

They can help parents to understand the causes and impact of parental conflict as part of their family support work. They can offer advice and light-touch interventions to help parents understand how to reduce or avoid conflict and so reduce the impact of this on their children.

They can refer families on to specialist relationship support services and monitor progress as part of their ongoing relationship.

Troubled Families

Local Troubled Families teams routinely work with families experiencing poverty and financial stress, worklessness and relationship distress, building effective working relationships while being persistent and assertive.

They can identify the important issues which are undermining family stability. They can provide hands-on support to model positive behaviours and strategies, enabling parents to develop ways of handling relationships and behaviour that contribute positively to everyday life.

They can identify and deal with the earliest signs of conflict and abuse, prevent abusive behaviour, and refer to appropriate evidence-based support as required.

Social care

Social workers in Adult and Children's Services work with some of the most vulnerable families at the key transition points which heighten the risk of parental conflict.

They can identify where conflict between parents is a key influence on the family dynamic through the assessment process, and help parents to understand how to reduce or avoid conflict and so reduce the impact of this on their children.

They can engage with specialist relationship support services and maintain oversight of progress.

Commissioned family services

Local authorities specify and commission family services, including health visiting, children's centres, school nursing, parenting programmes, CAMHS, short breaks for children with disabilities, targeted youth support, community safety interventions and domestic abuse services.

Local authority commissioners (including public health consultants) can require commissioned services to collect data about parental relationships; select and train their workforce to meet standards related to supporting parents in conflict; apply assessment tools which take account of parental relationships; provide advice and light-touch interventions to support parents in conflict; and refer families on to more specialist support if this is needed.

What needs to change?

Using evidence-based early intervention to reduce parental conflict responds to key local government priorities.

- We know that around 11% of all children in the UK have parents who are in a distressed relationship, with children in workless families almost three times as likely to experience this.
- The green paper on Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision identified the challenge of responding to the one in 10 children and young people who have some form of clinically diagnosable mental health disorder, such as anxiety or conduct disorder, and recognised parental conflict as a factor in child mental health. Reducing parental conflict may be one of the most important ways of reducing child mental health problems.
- There are a growing number of interventions with evidence that they can help parents to improve their relationship, reduce conflict and improve prospects for children.
- Effective interventions appear to have specific components: *
 - helping couples to understand the impacts of conflict behaviours, and what they could do differently
 - focusing on stress management, effective coping and problem-solving
 - building skills, through modelling, roleplay and feedback, to communicate more effectively and avoid conflict
 - for parents in the context of divorce or separation, building motivation to strengthen the quality of parenting and not to undermine the other parent
 - targeting couple relationship communication and conflict management skills at key transition points, such as becoming a parent or a child's school transition.
- However, most of the evidence for these interventions comes from outside the UK and many have not yet collected evidence to show if they improve child (rather than parent or couple) outcomes.
- It is critical that evaluation is part of local work to develop and commission relationship support: without this we won't know if or why services have worked or had an impact. For local government this means collecting data on relationship conflict prevalence and taking a more robust approach to testing and learning about prevention and treatment take-up and impact, particularly on children.



For more detail, see 'What works to enhance interparental relationships and improve outcomes for children':

www.eif.org.uk/publication/what-works-to-enhance-inter-parental-relationships-and-improve-outcomes-for-children-3/

EVIDENCE-BASED EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES

To date EIF has assessed seven parenting interventions that have evidence of improving child outcomes by reducing parental conflict:

Enhanced Triple P

Parenting intervention of 10 sessions for families with parenting problems with a couple component.

Family Foundations

Couple relationship programme over five sessions for parents expecting their first child.

Family Check-up for Children

Parenting intervention for families with moderate to high needs with a couple component.

Incredible Years Preschool (Advanced)

Parenting intervention of 18–20 sessions for low to high needs with a couple component.

Incredible Years School Age Basic (Advanced)

Parenting intervention with a couple component for families with children aged 6–12 years.

Schoolchildren and their Families

Universal couple relationship programme of 16 sessions when children transition to school.

Triple P Family Transitions

Parenting intervention with a couple component involving five sessions for separating families.

Find out more about these programmes at guidebook.eif.org.uk

Take action now

Local government leaders and commissioners have a key role in reducing the impact of parental conflict on children by integrating this within the wider system of family support for health and wellbeing, working with their partners in the NHS, schools, the police and the voluntary sector.

This should include recognising parental conflict within wider service review, aligning and pooling resources with their partners, investing in specialist interventions for reducing parental conflict, and building workforce confidence and capability to identify and act on conflict between parents.

There is a new national programme designed to help local government leaders and commissioners, alongside their key partners, to improve outcomes for children through reducing parental conflict.

- The Department for Work and Pensions has established a new network of Regional Integration Leads, and Ambassadors from the areas that are pioneering work on reducing parental conflict, to provide bespoke support and challenge to local areas. *
- Every top-tier local authority is being offered funding to help them to develop their strategic approach to embedding parental conflict support – known as Strategic Leadership Support. A new planning tool has been created by EIF and DWP to support this process.
- DWP is also offering training for frontline practitioners across England's 152 local authority areas to help them to identify relationship distress, provide initial support and refer appropriately.
- EIF has created the Reducing Parental Conflict Hub, an online repository of evidence, information and resources on reducing parental conflict. The Hub includes: **
 - The Reducing Parental Conflict Planning Tool and resources to help local areas to conduct Strategic Leadership Support. The Planning Tool is a self assessment which focuses on four dimensions:
 1. LEAD change and champion the importance of tackling parental conflict
 2. PLAN and commission with local partners to reduce parental conflict and integrate this within local family services
 3. DELIVER support to vulnerable families that takes account of parental conflict and equip the workforce with the skills and knowledge they need
 4. EVALUATE the impact on reducing parental conflict.
 - A practical guide on commissioning to reduce parental conflict, with summaries of the evidence for the impact of parental conflict on children, advice and case studies from pioneer local authorities, and links to resources to support implementation, including details of evidence-based interventions.
 - The latest information about research evidence and practice experience, including more detail from pioneer areas across the country.



For more about the Local Family Offer pioneers and Ambassadors, see:
www.eif.org.uk/local-family-offer-network/



See our Reducing Parental Conflict Hub: reducingparentalconflict.EIF.org.uk

CASE EXAMPLE: HERTFORDSHIRE

Mum and Dad have 4 teenage children and have been together for 25 years. The most difficult year of their relationship was when Dad spent the family savings on his alcohol addiction.

"We forgot how to talk to each other. I almost walked away."

The couple tried mediation. They found it hard to acknowledge and listen to each other's feelings at first, but now find it much easier to say things to each other.

"The mediation helped us from week 1. We were only being negative and she helped us to be positive again. The children are much happier now."

CASE EXAMPLE: DORSET

Dorset's Relationship Support Navigator raises awareness for school staff about the importance of providing support to parents on relationships, building their skills and confidence in responding to issues and knowing where to refer people for more help.

"Teachers are busy people. Looking after the emotional health and wellbeing of parents is not the only thing they have to do. This role has made it possible for professionals to work more as a team, and it has strengthened trust between teachers and parents."

The post is co-funded by the local authority and the Chesil Education Partnership.

Early Intervention Foundation

10 Salamanca Place, London SE1 7HB

W: www.EIF.org.uk

E: info@eif.org.uk

T: @TheEIFoundation

P: +44 (0)20 3542 2481

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