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# WHAT WORKS TO ENHANCE INTER-PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS AND IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

## Executive summary



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## Foreword

Healthy child development is the bedrock of a healthy, productive, and secure society. The central role of positive parenting practices in promoting this objective has been emphasised in past research and echoed in recent government policy. The Prime Minister has recently emphasised the importance of both relationship support and parenting as key elements in improving children's life chances. Traditionally these two areas of policy and practice have been seen as separate activities. Yet increasingly, the role of the couple relationship as a precursor to promoting positive parenting practices is recognised as an essential ingredient in delivering positive outcomes and long-term life chances for today's generation of children and tomorrow's generation of parents.

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) was founded as an independent charity and What Works Centre established in July 2013 to champion and support the effective use of early intervention for children with signals of risk. In so doing, we hope to reduce the human and economic costs of late intervention which is needed when problems become entrenched and difficult to reverse on the journey from childhood to adulthood.

EIF was commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions to carry out a review of 'What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children'. The review was commissioned with a view to informing the 2015 Spending Review, as well as the government's 'Life Chances Strategy'.

EIF collaborated with Professor Gordon Harold, a world expert in child development and the role of the family in children's psychological development, and his team at the University of Sussex.

This review summarises state-of-the-art research evidence examining links between the inter-parental relationship, positive versus negative parenting practices, and long-term outcomes for children. It finds that the quality of the couple relationship serves as a substantive influence both on the quality of parenting that children experience and on their long-term mental health and future life chances. This is true both for parents who are together or separate. While everyday conflict between parents is common in families, parents who engage in frequent, intense, and poorly resolved conflict put their children's mental health and long-term life chances at risk.

The case is made that by prioritising and investing in couple relationship support and intervention at key stages in children's lives, improved parenting and child outcomes will be promoted. This will lead to more sustainable outcomes for the present generation of children and the next generation of parents and families in the areas of education, health, employment, family stability, and the overall welfare of society, for example reduced anti-social behaviour, mental health, and related impacts.

In the context of present practice and policy, models of family and child intervention and support, the quality of relationship between parents and associated outcomes for child development is a neglected site for early intervention; it has had little attention in maternity, children's, and family services. But there are critical opportunities ahead with new investment in relationship support, parenting, mental

health, and Troubled Families to bring this focus centre stage. Given that the evidence is still at an early stage it will be vital to test and learn as we go along.

The principal objective of this report is to review and make accessible the very latest evidence highlighting the role of the couple relationship between parents as an influence on children's development. Recommendations are provided for policymakers, commissioners, and practitioners aimed at improving the life chances of modern-day families and the individuals that comprise them – adults/couples, parents, and children.

*Carey Oppenheim, Chief Executive, Early Intervention Foundation*

# Executive Summary

## Chapter One – Background and introduction to the review

- The Early Intervention Foundation has been commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions to carry out a review of ‘What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children’. The review was commissioned with a view to informing the 2015 Spending Review, as well as the government’s ‘Life Chances Strategy’.
- The review has been led by Professor Gordon Harold, an expert on the role of the family in children's psychological development, and Dr Ruth Sellers from the Andrew and Virginia Rudd Centre for Adoption Research and Practice and School of Psychology at the University of Sussex, supported by a team led by Daniel Acquah at the Early Intervention Foundation.
- We have reviewed the literature on how and how much the parental relationship acts as an influence on child development and what the implications for policy are including through local intervention to support inter-parental relationships and promote positive child mental health and related outcomes.
- Inter-parental relationships are defined as relating to both intact and separated couples with children, with a focus on relationship behaviours (e.g. conflict management) rather than relationship status per se (i.e. married, divorced).

## Chapter Two – Evidence on the importance of the inter-parental relationship for children’s outcomes

- The second chapter provides a summary of the key findings in the field on the importance of the couple relationship for child outcomes. The science of how the quality of the relationship between couples impacts on children is described with in-depth consideration of key papers to set out the scientific case underpinning the inter-parental – child development link.
- As children cannot be randomly assigned to specific family environments, longitudinal studies (which track individuals over time) are important sources of evidence to test hypotheses about directions of causality. The majority of representative studies highlighted throughout the report employ longitudinal designs. This offers substantially more support for inferring cause than do cross-sectional studies (which look at a single point in time).
- The review also draws upon research using genetically sensitive research designs. These studies allow the estimation of the interplay between genetic and environmental (rearing) influences on children’s development to understand their relative roles in explaining the link between inter-parental conflict and child outcomes. This review primarily draws upon adoption studies and studies of children born via assisted reproductive technologies.

## Findings

- We find that the quality of the inter-parental relationship, specifically how parents communicate and relate to each other, is increasingly recognised as a primary influence on effective parenting practices and children's long-term mental health and future life chances.
- 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.
- Children of all ages can be affected by destructive inter-parental conflict, with effects evidenced across infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.
- The wider family environment is an important context that can protect or exacerbate child outcomes in response to exposure to inter-parental conflict. In particular, levels of negativity in parenting practices can exacerbate or moderate the impact of inter-parental conflict on children.
- Inter-parental conflict can adversely affect both the mother-child and father-child relationships, with evidence suggesting that the association between inter-parental conflict and negative parenting practices may be stronger for the father-child relationship compared to the mother-child relationship.
- We have not quantified a cost-benefit analysis for inter-parental relationship programmes. We leave this for future work. However, we set out a basic framework, which is that there are significant long-term personal and social benefits of improved childhood mental health, and that these may be improved by working to promote the quality of the inter-parental relationship.
- Evidence shows that child outcomes tend to be worse on average in lone-parent and non-married families, although such comparisons may not take into account socio-economic factors and other features of the family environment that may vary between families of different types. While family breakdown can be detrimental in itself, this review has found that the quality of parental relationships, level of parental stress, and quality of family functioning also have a significant impact on children's well-being, in both intact and separated families. Family structure, family breakdown, and family relationship quality are all closely intertwined, making it difficult to distinguish the causal effect of each factor.
- It is difficult to establish an empirical estimate of the cost of family breakdown. This is because it is difficult to ascertain empirically what proportion of public expenditure is directly attributable to people that have experienced family breakdown, and which would not have been incurred had that breakdown not occurred. The fiscal cost of family breakdown has recently been estimated to be £47 billion per year. However, this estimate does not capture potential fiscal costs incurred from poor parental relationships and family functioning in intact and separated families.
- Further research is warranted in order to obtain more precise estimates of the fiscal cost of family breakdown, but also to quantify potential fiscal costs of poor family functioning regardless of whether family breakdown occurs. The data requirements of this analysis present a significant challenge, but the Understanding Society data set provides what is likely to be the best available option for further exploration of this issue.

## Chapter Three – A review of the international evidence base on programmes to support inter-parental relationships

- Chapter Three focuses on international programmes and evidence. It uses systematic methods to review the international peer-reviewed literature on intervention programmes.
- From a rapid systematic review 28 studies were found which evaluate the impact of interventions to support couples experiencing or at risk of conflict.
- 19 interventions had been evaluated by a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) or quasi-experimental design. A further 2 had pre-post designs with a control group. The remaining interventions were underpinned by evaluations using less methodologically robust designs, such as pre-post studies with no control group.
- Not all RCTs and pilots are implemented as rigorously as is necessary to demonstrate impact and so formal assessment of the quality of trials is important.
- It is clear though that this international evidence includes a number of rigorous trials and suggests that these interventions have the potential to help improve aspects of the couple relationship, including patterns of interaction and communication, benefitting improved parenting practices and promoting more positive outcomes for children.

## Chapter Four – Assessment of the evidence for UK programmes to support inter-parental relationships

- Chapter Four focuses on the evidence base for programmes in use in the UK. We formally assessed the strength of evidence and cost for UK programmes and approaches that responded to our call for evidence.
- 15 programmes were found to be in scope and provided information to assess strength of evidence and cost.
- We assessed them in terms of child outcomes, couple outcomes, and strength of logic model.
- The UK evidence of effective programmes to address inter-parental conflict with a view to improving child outcomes is still at an early stage. This is not surprising as these programmes have not had substantial investment to date and many were not designed with child outcomes as a principal objective. Only 1 of the 15 programmes has preliminary evidence of achieving impact on child outcomes (with existing longitudinal evidence mainly derived from international study evidence). This programme aims to strengthen fathers' relationship with their children, fathers' relationship with their children's mother, and to improve their co-operation as parents when children transition into school.
- Most of the programmes are in the early stages of evaluation and monitor impact on couple outcomes only. They vary in terms of their degree of specification and strength of logic model.

## Review conclusions

- The science of the couple relationship as a focus of early intervention to improve outcomes for children and families is well established. There are strong theoretical and empirical foundations underpinning the core hypothesis that the couple relationship matters considerably for child outcomes.
- There is a growing international body of well-evidenced interventions which indicate positive impacts on both the couple relationship and child outcomes.
- The field in the UK is in the early stages of development with many gaps in knowledge about how to engage families effectively, how to replicate quality of intervention at scale, and how to evaluate and monitor impact on child outcomes.
- This indicates that the couple relationship is an important site for early intervention. It has implications for a wide range of policy areas from effective approaches to child mental health to managing child behaviours. In particular, it is important that policymakers and commissioners consider interventions and support for both the couple *and* the parenting relationship (both the mother–child and father–child relationships). Just targeting the parental–child relationship in the context of ongoing inter-parental conflict does not lead to sustained positive outcomes for children.
- Much more needs to be done to test and learn about what works, for whom, and in what circumstances, and about how to implement effective interventions, ensuring quality of practice, appropriate supervision and impact. It is important that any future investment from government and other funders builds in effective evaluation and enables commissioners and practitioners working on the ground to share learning.

The full report is available at [www.eif.org.uk/publication](http://www.eif.org.uk/publication)



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