



**TAVISTOCK**  
RELATIONSHIPS

#RelationshipsMatterInTowerHamlets

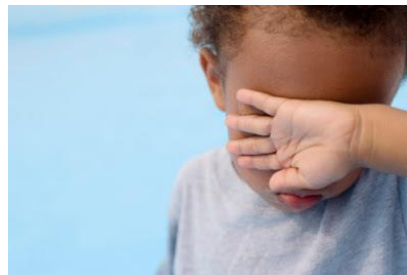
# **Why parental relationship quality matters, especially to children, and how we can help**

Honor Rhodes OBE – Tavistock  
Relationships / Trustee Early  
Intervention Foundation (EIF)



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@honor\_rhodes



# Parental couple relationships

- Thinking about this provokes anxiety and worry work; and reflections on our own relationships, our commonalities too, here there is no 'us and them'
- Of course we need to think about domestic violence and abuse
- But, what about the resource that the couple relationship brings?
- Today's task: bringing together research, evidence, making a difference and thinking about parents' and children's experiences, and what we can all do to help





For heaven's sake... what  
are relationships FOR?  
Tell me AT LEAST TEN  
reasons...

**Is it romance?**



**Did you ACTUALLY talk about sex?**



You'll have got this one, people are  
making families in lots of different  
ways





And this? Companionship?  
This is Moira and Ted



The secret to a long lasting relationship?.....

Why we need to work bearing parental relationships in mind and why thinking and working relationally is not promoting marriage, heterosexuality or any other normative arrangements....

- Quality of co-parenting relationship affects
- Mental health of individual parents
- Parenting style
- Child outcomes
- 'Workfullness'
- Poor relationship co-parenting relationship quality affects
- Child attainment
- Child behaviour
- Child's family and peer relationships
- Child's adult mental health
- Child's adult partner choices



<http://tavistockrelationships.ac.uk/policy-research/policy-briefings>

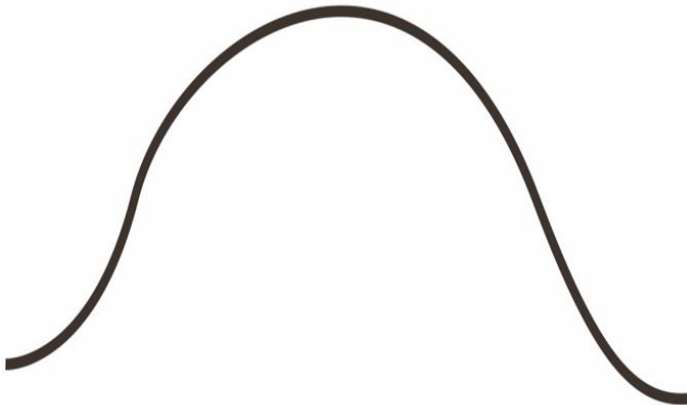


# What do we mean by parental conflict?



# What do we mean by parental conflict?

- Frequent
- intense and
- poorly resolved
- conflict



## conflict



*noun*

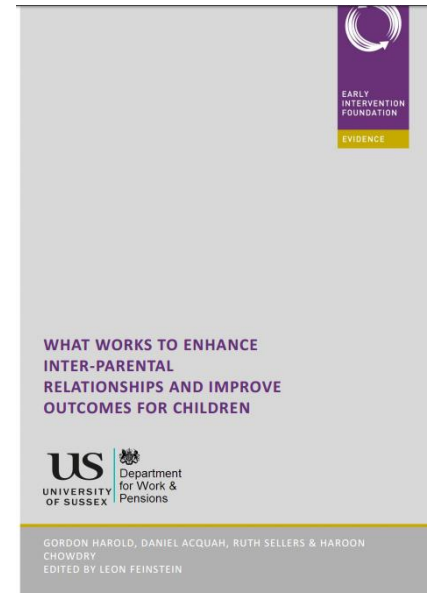
noun: **conflict**; plural noun: **conflicts**  
/ˈkɒnflikt/

1. a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one.  
"the eternal conflict between the sexes"  
*synonyms:* dispute, quarrel, squabble, disagreement, difference of opinion, dissension; *More*  
*antonyms:* agreement
  - a prolonged armed struggle.  
"regional conflicts"  
*synonyms:* war, armed conflict, action, military action, campaign, battle, fighting, fight, (armed) confrontation, (armed) clash, engagement, encounter, (armed) struggle, hostilities; *More*  
*antonyms:* peace
  - a state of mind in which a person experiences a clash of opposing feelings or needs.  
"bewildered by her own inner conflict, she could only stand there feeling vulnerable"
  - a serious incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles, or interests.  
"there was a conflict between his business and domestic life"  
*synonyms:* clash, incompatibility, incongruity, lack of congruence, friction, opposition, mismatch, variance, difference, divergence, contradiction, inconsistency, discrepancy, divided loyalties  
"there was a conflict between his business and domestic life"  
*antonyms:* harmony

- What is it NOT?
- DV/DA
- Clear? Need an expert?

# Intervening early in parents' relationship troubles: how can we?

- 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.
- HOW do we capture this?



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

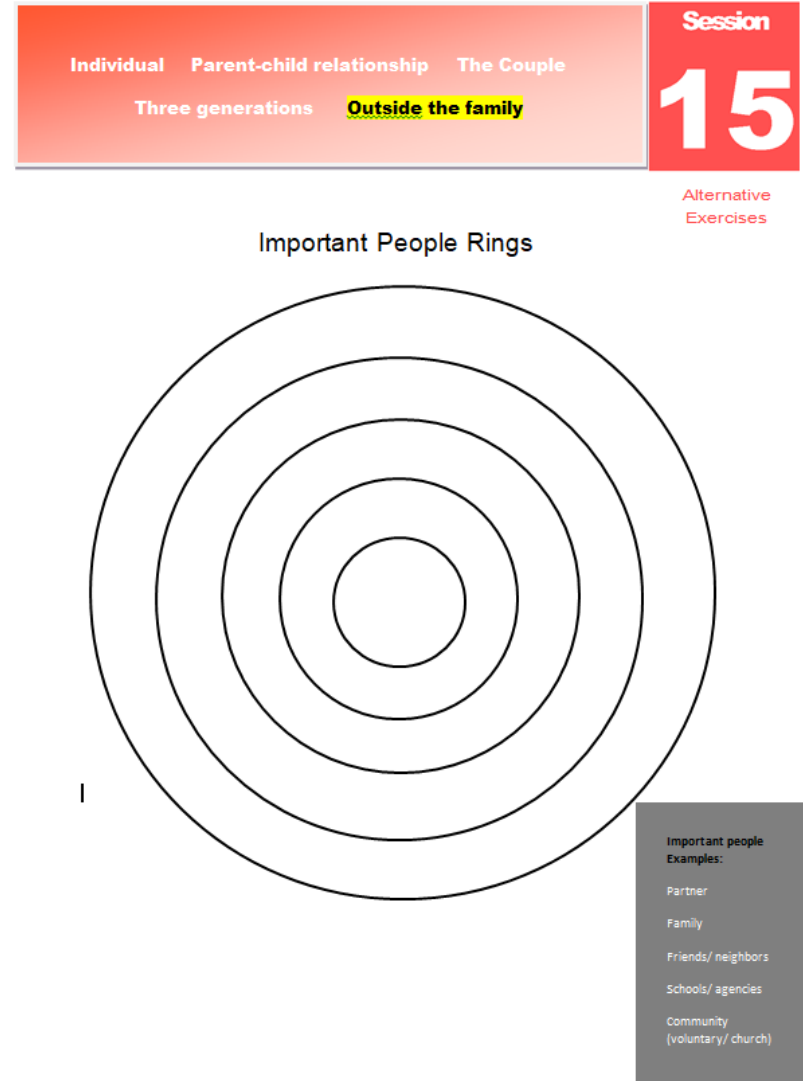
# Intervening early in parents' relationship troubles: how can we?

- 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
- HOW do we capture these pieces of information?



# Intervening early in parents' relationship troubles: how can we?

- The context of the wider family environment is an important factor that can protect or exacerbate child outcomes in response to exposure to inter-parental conflict. In particular, levels of negativity and parenting practices can exacerbate or moderate the impact of inter-parental conflict on children.
- And how do we gather this?





# Intervening early in parents' relationship troubles: how can we?

- Inter-parental conflict can adversely affect both the mother-child and father-child relationship, 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.**
- This matters, how can we find out and talk about it?

June 2018

Contemporary Fathers in the UK

Fatherhood Institute



## Who's the bloke in the room?

Fathers during pregnancy and at the birth in the UK

Adrienne Burgess &  
Rebecca Goldman

*"After the birth I was treated as a nuisance and was in the way. I was told to leave immediately after my wife was brought to the ward with the baby. She was high on medication from a forceps delivery, exhausted and full of wires and a colostomy bag hanging out of her. She was starving because she hadn't eaten in more than a day. I felt like a spare part but I could have helped her and the baby while she was establishing breastfeeding after being in labour for 18 hours. The midwives told my wife I wasn't allowed to stay to respect the other women. I drove home after the birth and nearly crashed my car."*

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Whos-the-Bloke-in-the-Room-Full-Report.pdf>

# We don't help by swerving, we have to model our interest and help others be...



- steadfast enough to have kind, curiosity filled, pertinent conversations
- able to ask questions and endure the answers
- able to not have answers but equally able to help parents find their own

When considering the child's environment and adult's capacity as a parent have you considered the quality of the couple relationship?

Blackpool Council  
research centre

How much time do you spend together?

Blackpool Council  
research centre

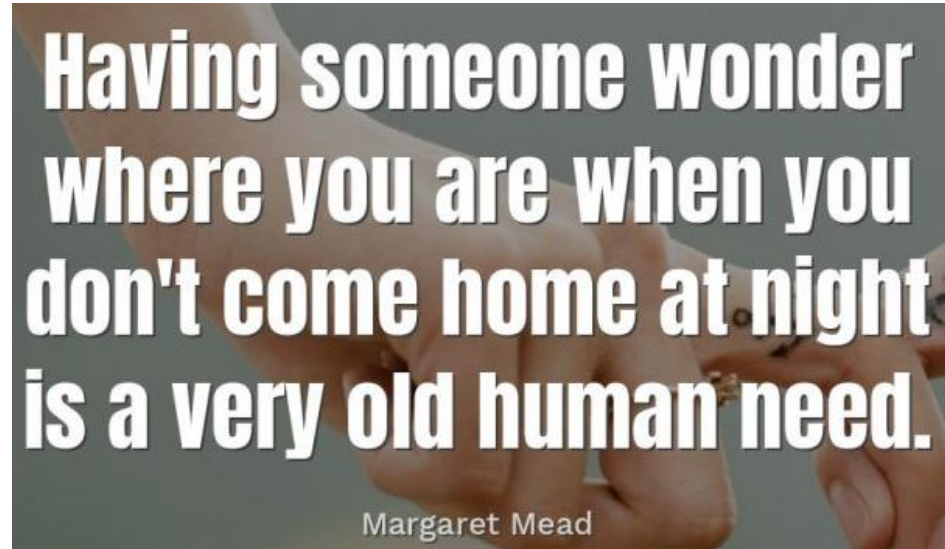
What do you enjoy doing together?  
As a Couple? As Parents?

Blackpool Council  
research centre

What do you do when times are hard?  
Ignore it? Talk about it?  
Work together?

# How would you like someone to talk to YOU about it?

- Beating about the bush?
- Or asking about it with a bit of wondering



# The families who need our effective help

- Have complex relationships
- Have a challenge of understanding themselves and how to describe themselves to us
- How do we intervene, when and with what?
- Workfull and workless
- Work – love balance
- Reality of austerity
- Reality of being afraid
- Reality of failure



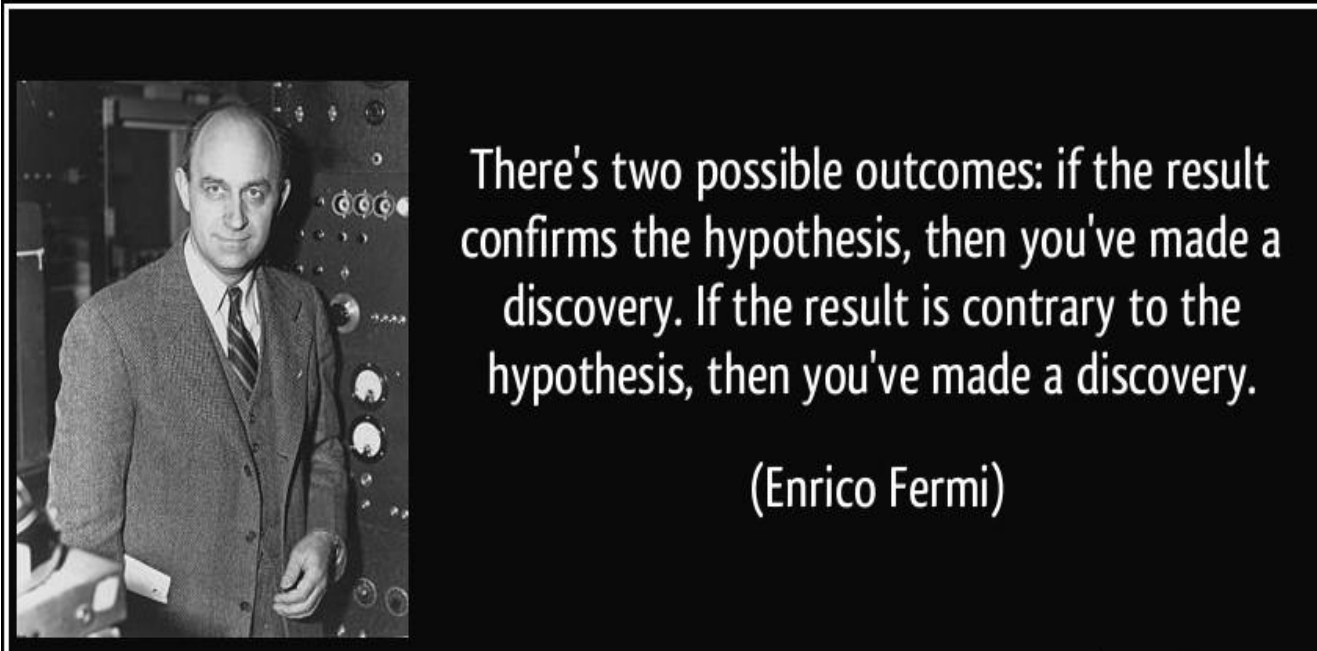
# What are families expecting from us?

- Help
  - An ally in their fight against each other or a common enemy
  - Magic
  - An answer that they agree with
  - No change if possible even if people expressly ask for it...
- What we are expecting is usually rather different





# What is in our mind? Having a hypothesis



There's two possible outcomes: if the result confirms the hypothesis, then you've made a discovery. If the result is contrary to the hypothesis, then you've made a discovery.

(Enrico Fermi)

- Don't go 'empty minded' but open minded
- “This family finds arguing exciting and oddly unifying as everyone gets involved.”

# What do we usually do with families where there are relationship difficulties?

- **The things we talk about....**

- Warmth
- Parenting styles
- Children's behaviour
- Rules and boundaries
- Money
- Change making
- Plans

- **The things we don't talk about...**

- Parental couple relationship quality
- Sex and intimacy
- Sex and violence
- Grief and jealousy, any of the 'ugly' emotions
- Forgiveness
- Joy

# Why are some families harder for us to help?

- The Wilsons and their biggest secret
- Cracking the code
- Bearing the answers
- Acting as a thinking human being
- Any family you know and their secret(s)
- Look at London.....

TOP FAMILY SECRETS	
1. Illegitimate children	18%
2. Changed names	14%
3. Secret adoptions	6%
= Missing persons	6%
= Unmarried parents	6%
= Unmarried grandparents	6%
7. Links to royalty	4%
8. Convicted thieves	3%
9= Convicted murderers	2%
= Bigamy	2%
= Other convicted criminals	2%

REGION BY REGION	
Percentage with family secrets	
North East	53%
Lancashire	47%
Wales	47%
Midlands	45%
South West	42%
South England	40%
East of England	36%
London	35%
Yorkshire	34%

# What do we need to do then?

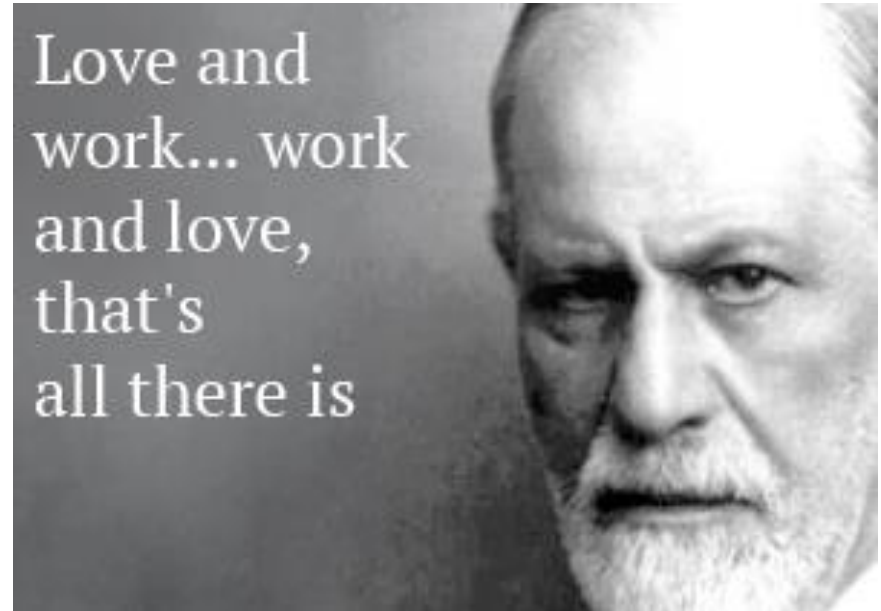
- **We know now that....**
- We need to help all staff who work with families have conversations that ask about relationship quality, conflict and what parents want to do about that.
- We need tools for the job – so interventions that target conflict reduction not simply parenting (Harold, 2017)



- **Parents know now that**
- they are best helped by accessible, 'ordinary' services that include relationship thinking
- frontline practitioners are not therapists
- they believe they can be helped if the first conversation is 'good enough'

# Why we should

- Compelling research about the effect of inter-parental conflict on children
- Early intervention in parental relationships is the really early – and cheapest
- To most questions love and work are a good part of the answer
- We can repair, mend and patch our relationships, 'good enough' really is good enough





# In case you need more....

- There's a crack, there's a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in, that's how the light gets in'.

Leonard Cohen

