

- The Relationships Alliance believes that strong and stable couple, family and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society.
- Relationship health is an essential part of the UK's economic recovery – relationship breakdown will cost the UK £46 billion this year alone, an unsustainable figure.
- Good quality personal and social relationships are central to our health and well-being.
- The quality of people's relationships is an important 'social asset', yet one that is often ignored or undermined by public policy.

What do couple relationships have to do with children's academic achievement?

SUMMARY

- Research shows that the quality of the relationship between a child's parents has an impact on children's academic attainment
- Authoritative parenting (characterised by parental encouragement and warmth) is associated with better language ability and communication skills
- Authoritarian parenting (characterised by harshness and limit-setting but lacking in warmth and responsiveness) and permissive parenting (characterised by warmth but lacking in structure and limit-setting) are associated with poorer academic outcomes and social competence
- Marital conflict and ongoing, acrimonious exchanges between parents are associated with poorer academic outcomes in children

Factors associated with children's academic achievement

While family income and level of parental education have consistently been shown to be associated with children's language development and reading ability (Dollaghan, 1999) (Hart, 1995) (Hoff, 2003) (Arriaga, 1998) (Christian, 1998), other factors have also been identified as playing a role in these aspects of child development, including parental vocabulary, word exposure and joint reading.

While these have received relatively widespread attention, this briefing focuses on two drivers of children's academic achievement – parental relationship quality and quality of parenting – which are arguably under-researched and under-acknowledged. As Harold et al. observe, "few studies

have considered the role of the inter-parental relationship as a source of influence on children's academic attainment and fewer still have considered the joint interplay between family problems (inter-parental and parent-child conflict), child behaviour problems and academic well being" (Harold et al., 2007).

Regarding the quality of the relationship between a child's parents and that child's scholastic achievement, research finds:

- links between relationship conflict, attention difficulties and school problems (Davies, 2008)
- marital conflict to be linked with children's sleep problems which are themselves associated with children's behavioural, emotional, and academic difficulties, including maths, language, verbal and

nonverbal achievement (El-Sheikh, 2007a; Mannering, Harold et al., 2011)

- exposure to ongoing, acrimonious exchanges to be linked to signs of emotional and behavioural distress in children between the ages of 6 and 17 years (Harold, 2001)
- exposure to ongoing, acrimonious discord to be associated with deficits in academic attainment (as well as increased anxiety, depression, aggression, hostility, anti-social behaviour and criminality) (Harold, 2007; Harold et al., 2013)
- parental separation (i.e. divorce and post-cohabitation separation) to be associated with lower levels of academic attainment (among a host of negative outcomes), leading the authors of this meta-analysis to conclude that "the argument that parental divorce presents few problems for children's long-term development is simply inconsistent with the literature on this topic" (Amato, 1991; Harold and Murch 2005).

Regarding particular aspects of parenting behaviour and children's academic achievement, research shows:

- parental (particularly maternal) sensitivity, i.e. encouragement, warmth and emotional support, to predict:
 - language ability at 15 to 36 months (NICHD, 1999)

This briefing was produced by the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships on behalf of the Relationships Alliance. The Relationships Alliance, a consortium comprising Relate, Marriage Care, One Plus One and the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, exists to ensure that good quality personal and social relationships are more widely acknowledged as central to our health and wellbeing.

– development in later language and reading beyond socio-demographic characteristics of individual families (Wade, 2013)

– teacher-reported readiness skills, social skills, communication skills, and receptive communication (Connell, 2002).

Understanding the link between parenting style and the quality of parental relationships

Having identified that certain kinds of parenting behaviours are linked with children's achievement and development, it can be tempting – and to a large extent social policy in the UK in recent years bears this assertion out – to focus exclusively on such behaviour at the level of the individual parent – with little, or no, regard for the context within which individual parents bring up their children.

Such a focus has led to the widespread use of parenting programmes which do not, on the whole, pay attention to the relationship between the parents concerned (TCCR, 2011).

And yet, with research showing that families account for 40% of the overall variance between children in their academic progress during secondary schooling (compared with the wider shared environments of primary school (9%), secondary school (10%), neighbourhood (2%), LEA (1%) and child characteristics (38%)) (Rasbash, 2010) (Leckie, 2010), it is legitimate, and somewhat overdue, to look more closely at the role which family (and particularly parental) relationships play in children's readiness for learning and academic achievement.

And while the Rasbash study mentioned above (which followed a cohort of half a million school children through secondary schooling) was not able to identify how

much of this family impact related to genetic factors or parenting ones, other sources of research strongly suggest that parenting and parental relationships play a substantial role.

For, as Professors Carolyn and Philip Cowan observe: "In families with authoritative parents [i.e. those in which parents are warm and responsive, structure tasks, and set reasonable limits for their children's behavior, and at the same time grant the children age-appropriate autonomy (Baumrind (1980)), young children and adolescents show more advanced academic achievement, greater competence in relationships with peers, and fewer problem behaviors than peers whose parents have authoritarian or permissive parenting styles ((Conger, 1994; Cowan, 1998; Parke, 1998; Steinberg, 2001 referenced in Cowan, 2005))."

"Parents who are authoritarian, punitive, and harsh (structured and limit-setting without warmth and responsiveness) or permissive (warm but laissez-faire)", these authors continue, "tend to have offspring who are less academically and socially competent and more likely to have behavior problems – as described by teachers, parents, peers, or the children and adolescents themselves in different studies" (Cowan, 2005).

Policy implications

While research implicates both the quality of the parental relationship and parenting behaviour as factors in children's academic achievement, it is the latter which has enjoyed more sway in influencing UK family policy in recent years.

Relatively little acknowledged in policy spheres here is the link between parenting style and the quality of the relationship between parents. And yet almost every study examining associations between parental relationships and parenting has

found that the quality of the relationship between parent and child to be linked to the quality of the relationship between the parents (Lindahl, 1997).

Moreover, "when parents report greater intimacy and better communication in their marriage, they tend to be more attuned to and affectionate toward their children. The most consistent findings indicate that happily married parents are more sensitive, responsive, warm and affectionate toward their children" (Grych, 2002). Crucially, therefore, research tells us that "when the parents' relationship as a couple is troubled, one parent or both are less likely to have a more effective, authoritative parenting style with their children" (Cowan, 2005).

So, while it is undoubtedly heartening that the Department for Education has provided funding to test the Cowans' approach in the UK (i.e. the 'Parents as Partners' programme delivered by Family Action and TCCR), there needs to be a fundamental shift in understanding such that the link between what goes on in families (and particularly between parents) and what goes on in schools is more widely acknowledged and appreciated.

For while school standards, governance, infrastructure and curricula all play a major role in providing the environment for children to learn and achieve, we must do more to address other key determinants of children's academic success or failure. As the leading academics on this subject observe: "Enhancing the couple's ability to resolve disagreements and solve problems effectively in their relationship as partners can produce substantial benefits in terms of enhanced marital interactions, more effective parenting strategies, and ultimately the children's academic achievement and relationships with peers in the early elementary school grades" (Cowan, 2005).

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