

## Relationships Matter - The importance of supporting Healthy Relationships in Kirklees – a 7-minute guide

### Why do relationships matter?

Healthy, happy relationships are at the heart of a thriving society. The relationships we have with those around us, make a big difference to how happy we are. Strong relationships help us get through the challenges we all face at different points in in our lives.

However, there is strong evidence that conflict between parents – whether together or separated – can have a significant negative impact on children’s mental health and long-term life chances. Not all conflict is damaging, but where this is frequent, intense, and poorly resolved it can [harm children’s outcomes](#) and, put children at more risk of:

- having problems with school and learning,
- negative peer relationships,
- physical health problems,
- smoking and substance misuse,
- mental health and wellbeing challenges.

The risks can also influence long-term life outcomes such as:

- poor future relationship chances
- reduced academic attainment
- lower employability
- heightened interpersonal violence
- depression and anxiety
- What the evidence tells us

### What do we mean by parental conflict?

Disagreement in relationships is normal. Conflict can be positive if it is handled well, involves negotiation, and reaches an agreed resolution. Destructive conflict is where arguments are not resolved and comprise of:

- Criticism, with personal attacks on character
- Stonewalling; the silent treatment or withdrawal
- Defensiveness: making yourself the victim and blaming the other person
- Contempt

Kirklees has developed a definition of parental conflict through consultation with partner agencies, parents, children, and young people:



*“Parental conflict does not involve any abuse or violence. Conflict between parents - whether together or separated – is a normal and healthy part of relationships. However, when children witness conflict that is not resolved or includes regular or long periods of bickering, arguing, shouting, or ignoring one another, it can be harmful to our children. It can result in children feeling upset, confused, and angry, affect their relationships throughout their lives and impact their schooling, their health and wellbeing and their behaviours”*

## What is the difference between parental conflict and domestic abuse?

Parental relationship distress is different from domestic abuse. This is because there is not an imbalance of power, neither parent seeks to control the other, and neither parent is fearful of the other. In Kirklees we have adopted the [Stefanou Foundation](#) and their work with [For Babys Sake](#) and their representation of the Intimate Relationship Spectrum. The spectrum includes the following relationship descriptions.

1. Respectful, equal, cooperative, happy
2. Mostly respectful, equal, cooperative but experiencing difficulties
3. Conflictual, non- communicative, non-violent
4. Situational couple conflict, abuse, violence both ways
5. Controlling, abusive / behaviour
6. Coercive control and physical harm, fear of violence / death

Good practice would always support practitioners having a conversation with families to help them determine if they are experiencing Parental Conflict. If practitioners are in any doubt, they should refer to their agency’s Domestic Abuse policy, refer to [KSCP Domestic Abuse page](#) and/or seek guidance from their line manager.

## What are we doing across Kirklees?

We understand that conflict is an everyday part of life; our aim is to ensure that conflict is constructively resolved thereby modelling appropriate relationships where any differences are agreed amicably between adults. In Kirklees, our behaviours are guided by relational practice, where we build healthy relationships with the people that we work with whereby there is high support offered as well as high challenge. We are committed to supporting families to have choices and develop their own solutions to the challenges that they may face, and this includes helping parents where there may be conflict between them.

The ambition in Kirklees is for families experiencing Parental Conflict to be supported at the right time, by the right practitioner to prevent any impact of this conflict on children. Our aim is to increase awareness of Parental Conflict and the impact it can have on families, children, young people, and their outcomes. In Kirklees, we are taking a practice led approach by providing workforce development opportunities.

We are seeking to better understand the communities we work with across Kirklees and therefore asking services to inform us when they identify conflict within a family. This is so that we can ensure that we also have the right support at the right level to respond to parental conflict and so that we know that as a partnership the work we are doing is having an impact and improving children’s lives.



Kirklees, along with Local Authorities across Yorkshire and Humberside have jointly commissioned a website, awareness raising campaign and workforce development programme called '[Relationship Matters](#)', which is accessible by families and the workforce alike.

### Who should be asking about relationships?

Because relationships are everyone's business, all practitioners working with people who are parents, young people, children, or families should think about healthy relationships. This involves all organisations who are part of the wider early help system, and includes but is not limited to, health services, police, third sector partners, youth services and local authority services. Asking parents "how are things between you" can open the conversation about relationships in a healthy and supportive way.

### Those who work in schools, colleges, and early years settings

1. *"Parental conflict can place significant pressure and cost on schools as they deal with the consequences of the home environment in school."*
2. *"Evidence suggests that conflict between parents can negatively impact on children's academic performance, with children from high-conflict homes achieving lower scores on maths, language, and verbal school ability tests"*
3. *"Children who experience parental conflict are less likely to come to school ready to learn. They may have disrupted sleep, affecting their attention and concentration at school"*
4. *"Exposure to ongoing hostile exchanges between parents has also been linked to emotional and behavioural difficulties which play out in the classroom, including social and interpersonal problems with peers."*

Sources: [Why reducing the impact of parental conflict matters for schools | Early Intervention Foundation \(eif.org.uk\)](#)

### Those who work with families where there are children with SEND

1. *There is little research into the prevalence of Parental Conflict in families with children with distressed behaviours and/or SEND, but we know for these families - divorce and separation rates amongst couples are significantly higher than in the general population.*
2. *Offering support early improves school attendance and reduces risk of exclusions and custodial proceedings. Children & young people with SEND are already at higher risk of experiencing mental health problems and this can be further exacerbated by the presence of parental conflict.*
3. *Additional challenges associated with caring for their children, as well as the stresses associated with diagnosis and getting support can create a strain on families and can contribute to parental separation<sup>1</sup>. This aligns with evidence that childhood disability is associated with lone parenthood<sup>2</sup>. Coping with childcare (and maintaining a balance between work and childcare responsibilities) and disagreements over a child's disability and how best to care for them have been identified as major causes in relationship breakdown<sup>3</sup>.*

Sources: <sup>1</sup>Children with SEND and the emotional impact on parents (2019), <sup>2</sup>Blackburn, et al. (2010),

<sup>3</sup>Together and apart: supporting families through change (2011)



### Those who work with fathers

1. *"Evidence suggests that parental conflict may have more of a negative impact on the father-child relationship than the mother-child relationship. Fathers are more likely to respond to parental conflict by withdrawing from their children or being hostile towards them."*<sup>1</sup>
2. *"...fathers are less likely to be reached by support services."*<sup>2</sup>
3. *"fathers' active engagement in family-focused interventions increases efficacy in relation to sustained outcomes for children, particularly among hard to engage fathers."*<sup>3</sup>
4. *"Parental separation can lead to reduced and inconsistent contact between children and non-resident parents, who are typically fathers, further disrupting the father-child relationship. For these reasons, including fathers in family-focused interventions is an important future direction for both practice and research."*<sup>3</sup>

Sources: <sup>1</sup>Research Review: Gordon Harold & Ruth Sellers (2018), <sup>2</sup> Why reducing parental conflict matters for local government (EIF), <sup>3</sup> [Inter-parental conflict and outcomes for children in the contexts of poverty and economic pressure](#)

### Those who work in adult services

1. *It is recognised that outcomes for children depend to a large extent on the capacity of their parents and carers to deliver a positive, happy, safe, and secure home life in which children and young people can grow and achieve their potential*
2. *The engagement of services which are focussed on support for adults as well as children is important. There are strong links between parental conflict and many of the complex challenges being faced by parents*
  - a. *We know from our Innovation Fund Projects of the links between alcohol misuse and parental conflict both as a cause and a symptom*
  - b. *We know that parental mental health can be linked to relationship difficulties but particularly in the context of separation and divorce*<sup>1</sup>
  - c. *We know that if a parent is in prison, absence from the family home can put a significant strain on relationships and that returning to the community with probation service support can mean more challenges for family life*
  - d. *We know that debt can have a detrimental effect on relationships and that separation & divorce can lead to homelessness*
  - e. *Whole family working provides an opportunity to look at service provision in a holistic way. The ambition is that adult services, whether it is a community mental health nurse, a probation officer, or an alcohol treatment worker, will attend relevant multi-agency meetings to ensure a fully integrated and coordinated whole family approach*
  - f. *The Programme offers an opportunity to understand the value of joint working and the need to share information when necessary. It also brings legitimacy to staff working in adult services to care about the relationship difficulties their clients may be experiencing*

Source: <sup>1</sup>[The effects of divorce and separation on mental health in a national UK birth cohort](#)

### Faith groups and community-based organisations

1. *Community based organisations have established trusted relationships within under-represented communities which can support the delivery of a range of family support services including reducing parental conflict.*



2. *“Through sharing physical resources, the richness of their connections and networks, their involvement in governance and their collaborative work with others, faith groups contribute substantial and distinctive social capital.”<sup>1</sup>*
3. *“...in Britain in 2020, faith groups have vital resources which are crucial for community wellbeing, and which cannot be found anywhere else.”<sup>2</sup>*
4. *“Collaboration between local authorities and faith groups has dramatically increased in the pandemic.”<sup>2</sup>*
5. *91% of local authorities describe their experience of partnership with faith groups as ‘Very Positive’ or ‘Positive’<sup>2</sup>*
6. *Faith groups have a long history of providing pastoral/relationship support (e.g. 1 million couples have attended [The Marriage Course](#))*

Sources: <sup>1</sup>[Working with faith groups to promote health and wellbeing](#), <sup>2</sup> [Partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during and beyond the pandemic](#), <sup>3</sup> [Exploring religion in England and Wales: February 2020](#)

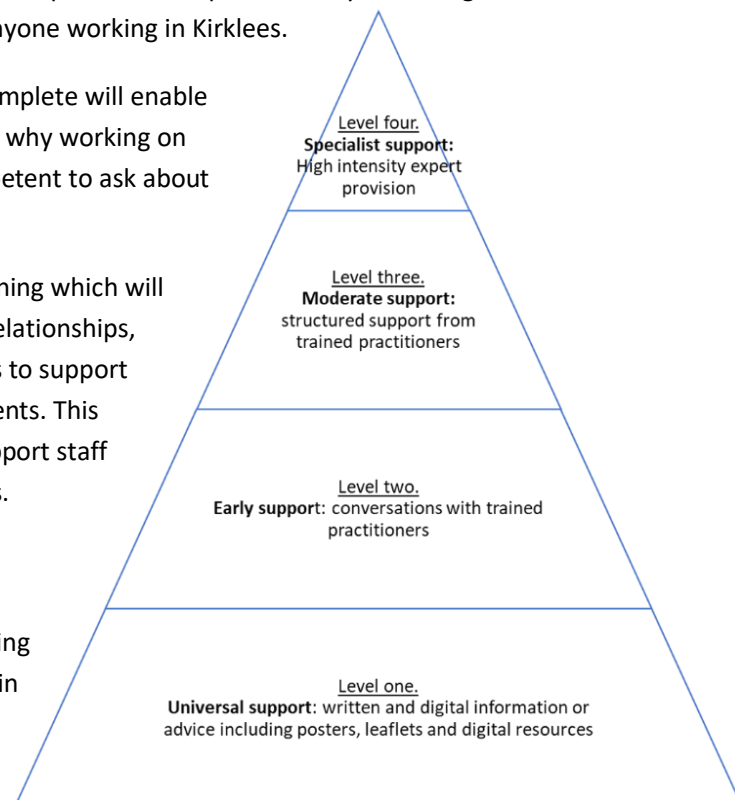
## What training is available for staff?

Interventions supporting healthy relationships between couples can be represented by the triangle diagram. We are offering training across level 1-3 for anyone working in Kirklees.

Level 1 training is an e-learning package, which once complete will enable practitioners to feel confident in their understanding of why working on relationships is important and their business, and competent to ask about relationships.

Level 2/3 training is delivered through face-to-face learning which will allow practitioners to build their skills in asking about relationships, recognising parental conflict, and offering interventions to support the development of healthy relationships between parents. This training also introduces a toolkit of interventions to support staff to complete direct work with children and their parents.

We are also offering training for line managers and supervisors of those supporting families around relationships, as well as offering ‘train the trainer’ training for staff willing to become relationship champions within their organisation.



## Where do I go/who should I speak with to know more?

Please see our website [Relationship Matters](#). If you wish to book training for your organisation, please visit the [KSCP website](#) or get in touch via [earlysupportreferrals@kirklees.gov.uk](mailto:earlysupportreferrals@kirklees.gov.uk).

