



For partners
working with
County Durham
parents/carers
and families

Relationships Matter Conference 2025



Durham's first Relationships Matter Conference took place in February 2025. The event was developed with a number of partners and also with the insight of many agendas.



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Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the event were to:

- Raise awareness of the impact of Parental Conflict on children and families and the importance of healthy relationships.
- Identify opportunities for the voluntary and community sector and partners to provide support to families to promote healthy relationships and tackle parental conflict.
- Share useful strategies, tools and pathways of support that Durham's partners can use with families to initiate discussions on the quality of co-parenting relationships and support families to access the support they need.
- Take a solution focused, collaborative approach to removing barriers in championing the Reducing Parental Conflict agenda.
- A really enjoyable and stimulating event to both listen, learn and share with others, including parents/carers with lived experience.
- Networking opportunities across this important field of work.
- Celebrate the work of Durham's partners in relation to Reducing Parental Conflict.



So, what is parental conflict?

Nature of Disagreements

Parental conflict involves disagreements about various aspects of parenting, parenting practices, or co-parenting responsibilities.

Frequency and Intensity

The conflict is characterised by frequent, intense arguments, bickering, and possibly shouting or name-calling.

Poor Resolution

The disagreements are often not resolved constructively, leading to ongoing tension and unresolved issues.

Impact on Children

Parental conflict can negatively affect children's mental health, behaviour, and development. Children may experience anxiety, fear, and difficulty coping with the conflict.

What is NOT parental conflict?

Parental Conflict is distinct and different from Domestic Abuse

While parental conflict can include arguments, it doesn't involve domestic abuse, which includes a power imbalance and fear in the relationship, coercive control, physical, emotional, or financial abuse.



The Conference!

The agenda involved a jam-packed day of theatre production, keynote speakers, listening to the experiences of Durham's parents and carers, vibrant market stalls promoting support to families, workshops on newly developed practitioner resources and a session on 'Love Languages!' The event concluded with a Q&A session from willing participants from across Durham's partnership.

We opened the event by sharing the background to the national Reducing Parental Conflict Programme that we re-branded in Durham to 'Relationships Matter'. We also took the opportunity to share Durham's journey so far and highlight some important, take away messages.





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Background

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) leads the national Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Programme to embed evidence-based support to tackle parental conflict in local areas. The RPC Programme was rolled out nationally in 2017 following research.

Conflict between parents is a normal part of relationships. However, **there is a large body of evidence that shows that parental conflict, which is frequent, intense and poorly resolved** puts children's mental health and long-term outcomes at risk.

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.

According to the DWP, children in **workless families are up to three times more likely to experience damaging 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.

Research found that **interventions which focus solely on supporting the parent-child relationship (such as parenting programmes) in the context of parental conflict are unlikely to improve outcomes** for children unless the parental conflict is addressed first.

Evidence also 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.

Throughout the conference delegates were repeatedly reminded that Parental Conflict IS NOT Domestic Abuse although the impact can be just as harmful. Nationally, it is acknowledged that there can be 'grey areas' and it can be difficult to differentiate between the two however the conference set out to provide the tools and networks of support to help partners navigate this hugely important agenda.

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Durham's Journey So Far

Although the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme started in 2017 the concept of Parental Conflict and what practitioners, partners and parent/carers understood Parental Conflict to be was limited, and frequent confusion between the difference of Parental Conflict and Domestic Abuse.

*Just another reminder - **Parental Conflict IS NOT Domestic Abuse!***

Durham began by establishing a multi-agency Steering Group, to drive this agenda and to facilitate our shared responsibility for the RPC Programme across the county. 'Durham continues to go from strength to strength with our partnership work and collaboration. We continue to weave and embed the importance of healthy relationships across all services whether that be maternity services, health, education, police and so on. This is integral to all of our work.

Early into the national programme, Durham commissioned a piece of Community Engagement work to help us determine if we were community ready and understand what parent/carers thought of parental conflict, their understanding and how we could support them. We had a good response with 451 respondents BUT only 4% from Dads/Male Carers. This has certainly been the eye opener and catalyst for Durham in reviewing how we approach our work as to have the **optimum impact on improving outcomes for children we need to engage BOTH parents.**

The commitment from Durham to improve how we engage Dads and Male Carers in all family support work is evident by the vibrant partnership Dads Project Group and appointment of our full time Dads and Male Carer and Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities Coordinator, Craig Williams.



Dads and Male Carer and Empowering Parents,
Empowering Communities Coordinator, Craig Williams
dads@durham.gov.uk



**EMPOWERING
PARENTS
EMPOWERING
COMMUNITIES**

This significant community engagement work formed the basis of Durham's Partnership Action Plan. It has informed Durham's graduated support offer including parent peer support known as **Empowering Parents,**

Empowering Communities; led to the development of a public facing website and most significantly a re-brand from Reducing Parental Conflict to Relationships Matter, hence the name of the Conference. For obvious reasons parents and carers did not like the stigma attached to Parental Conflict and felt Relationships Matter was far more engaging.

The Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Programme was introduced before Family Hubs and RPC was pretty much a standalone programme until government departments got together and realised the importance of this cross-cutting agenda. Now we see Reducing Parental Conflict in Durham's Supporting Families Family Outcome Framework and also as one of the 24 Family Hub Pathways along with Support for Separated Parents in its own right.



In the Northeast we have excellent relationships with our neighbouring authorities and work closely with them. Together we are co-delivering training, sharing learning and resources, and have developed a new [Relationships Matter website](#). This was to try and get consistent messages out to partners, parents and carers across the region. We have also developed our regional branding and logo. We are all for making more efficient use of our collective resource.

We have excellent working relationships with our Domestic Abuse (DA) Service, Harbour and Public Health colleagues, who are our DA commissioners. We have clear pathways and shared Triage, and all training is developed collaboratively so we are giving consistent messages.

At the time of the Conference, we were working with the research body Foundations (What Works Centre). We know it is tricky for practitioners and managers to sometimes differentiate between parental conflict and domestic abuse therefore we were interested to know how effective our tools and support to staff are across Durham's partnership. The research findings will be published by Foundations in Spring 2025 and will provide the focus for Durham's Relationships Matter work in the coming year.



We know we are on a journey, and this requires a system wide approach. RPC is applicable to all of our work.

What we do acknowledge is that we need to do better with how we reach out and engage with our voluntary and community sector (VCS) colleagues. VCS and Faith organisations reach families often other partners cannot including marginalised groups. Families are often inclined to reach out to their communities due to reduced stigma. We know our VCS colleagues work differently to Local Authorities and other partners but often respond to chaos and the needs of our communities swiftly and have fluidity in their practice. They are the experts in working with our communities. Our commitment is to work collaboratively together in partnership. Only by working in collaboration and understanding one another can we achieve our shared goals of improving the lives of children and families.

In Durham, across our partnership, we are always looking at ways to improve, progress and grow. We still have a huge amount of work to do and partners to engage, but we are getting there!



Guest speakers

Narrative Alchemy



Our first guests were the amazing Narrative Alchemy and Sean McGrath, one of the Co-artistic Directors. The Conference started with a powerful theatrical introduction from Narrative Alchemy which captured everyone's attention. The interactive production illustrated the impact conflict can have on all ages, from even unborns, to babies, toddlers, primary age children, teenagers to young adults and beyond. We learnt about the physiological changes to our brain development caused through changes in hormones provoked by negative stimulation (conflict). We also learnt about our emotional responses that may present in our behaviours, these may appear similar to a victim of domestic abuse or be totally misunderstood!



We experienced firsthand the physical and sensory impact witnessing and hearing conflict can have, even the unnerving silences. We discussed the potential risks caused by conflict such as a baby being in distress or neglected of their basic needs due to the adults being preoccupied by arguing. We explored the impact on educational outcomes and the likelihood of children not being able to focus and concentrate on their learning. We also looked at the increased risk of teenagers and young adults voting with their feet and leaving the household to escape the conflict, heightening their risk of exploitation and further harm outside the home.



This powerful and creative opening to the event facilitated delegate's reflections both personally and professionally and helped to emphasise that regardless of which service or organisation we work for, we can have a positive impact with any individual we come into contact with, if we know what we are looking for and are curious in our practice.

Professional Curiosity

Following on from Narrative Alchemy we watched a [short video](#) produced by Walsall Council on the importance of professional curiosity and a stark reminder of the heightened risk parental conflict can have for children and young people.

Amity

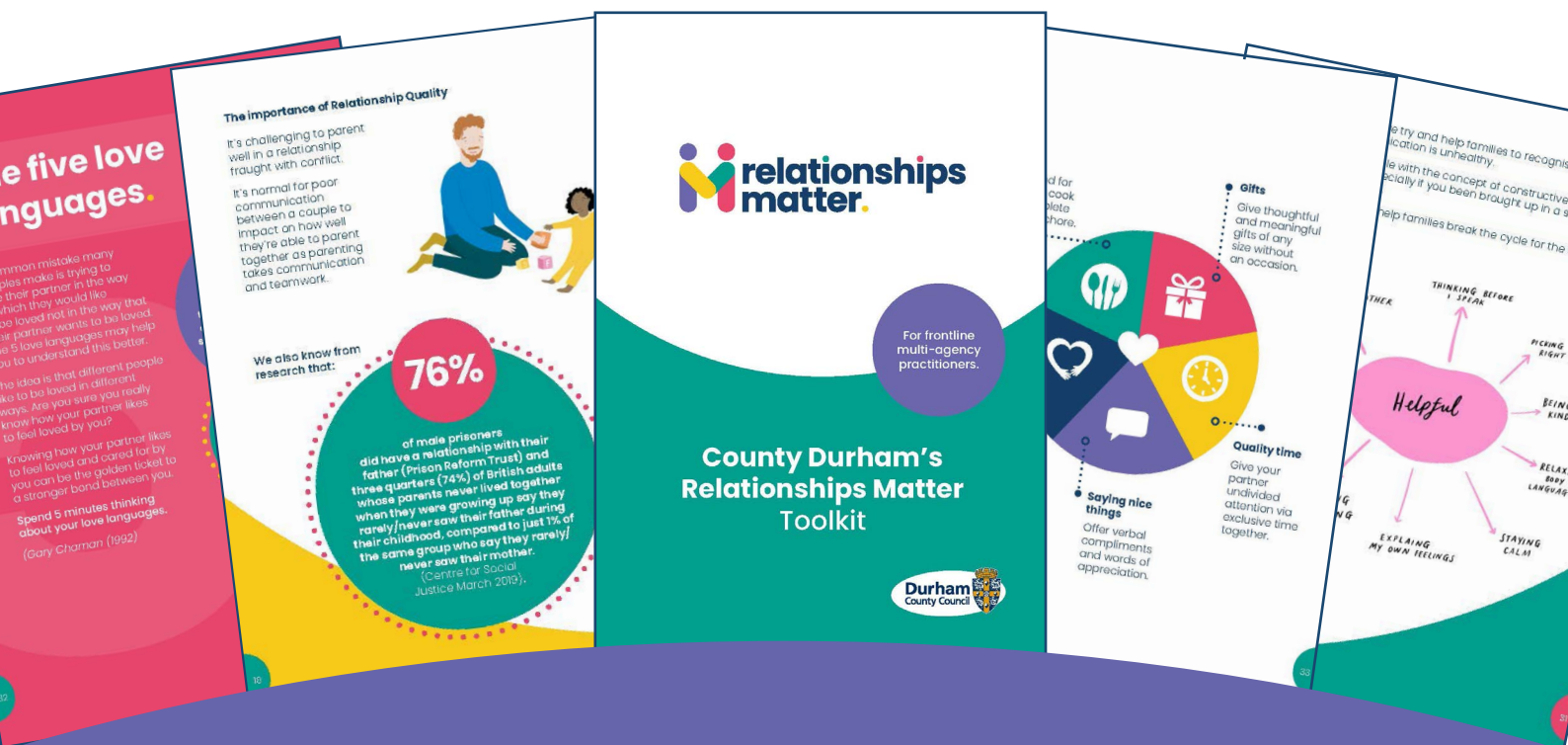


Our second guest was the wonderful keynote speaker, Kate Nicolle who is the co-founder of 'Amity'. Amity have been supporting Durham to develop their own Relationship Toolkit for practitioners using evidence and theory-based tools that practitioners who are supporting Durham families can use in their day-to-day work for FREE.

Kate shared with us her experience of being a Relationship's Counsellor and the interesting stories and anecdotes of some of the issues that have caused couple conflict. A key message from Kate was the need to for us, as practitioners, to help adults understand what helpful and unhelpful behaviours look like, what is a mutually respectful relationship and what is a harmful/abusive relationship. Kate helped us think about how children are often stuck in the middle without us even realising and how as practitioners we need to be curious with our questioning.

All of the content Kate shared with us has been captured in Durham's Relationship Matters Toolkit.

For your FREE copy please email relationshipsmatter@durham.gov.uk or see download link below.



[Download the toolkit here](#)



For frontline
multi-agency
practitioners.

County Durham's Relationships Matter Toolkit



Market Stalls



Knowing that parental conflict can be triggered by a myriad of reasons, we decided to invite some of Durham's partners to promote their services for families so that not only would delegates leave the conference knowing how to support families in conflict, but can also draw on partners to address risk factors such as financial hardship, mental health, SEND, expectant parents, substance misuse, caring responsibilities, going through the family court arena etc.

A huge thank you to:

- Maria Clarke, from HFDT for promoting the amazing health support available to families and promoting the Growing Healthy 0-25 APP for County Durham
- Sam Scotchbrook from Advice in County Durham, sharing the online platform full of support networks practitioners can access on behalf of families.
- Lisa Gallagher Dent from Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), who promoted the support they offer families who are going through the child and family court process.
- Claire Houghton from CAMHS and the specialist support available to children and adolescents who have poor mental health.
- Alison Ghent, Laura-Jayne Morris and Craig Williams for promoting the Family Hub and Start for Life offer including Durham's parent peer support programmes (Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities) and support available to Dads and Male Carers.
- Caroline O'Neill from Durham's Drug and Alcohol Service, Way Through.
- Chris Affleck from Investing in Children promoting the work they do in ensuring the voices of children and young people are heard.
- Suzanne Lanes and Michelle Wright from Durham County Carers.



THE ANXIETY
ICEBERG



Love Languages and why they are important?

After the lunchtime lull we were rejuvenated by an insightful session from Durham's RPC Coordinator and Workforce Development Officer, Laura-Jayne Morris and Catherine Wray. We looked at what love languages actually are and how understanding them can reduce conflict and improve communication in families. Love languages are crucial for reducing parental conflict as they enhance communication and of understanding emotional needs. By us being able to recognise the different love languages, we can help ourselves in our relationships as well as the families we are working with to create stronger, more harmonious relationships. Love Languages can be applied to any relationship dynamic including parent-child relationship, so they are good to know!

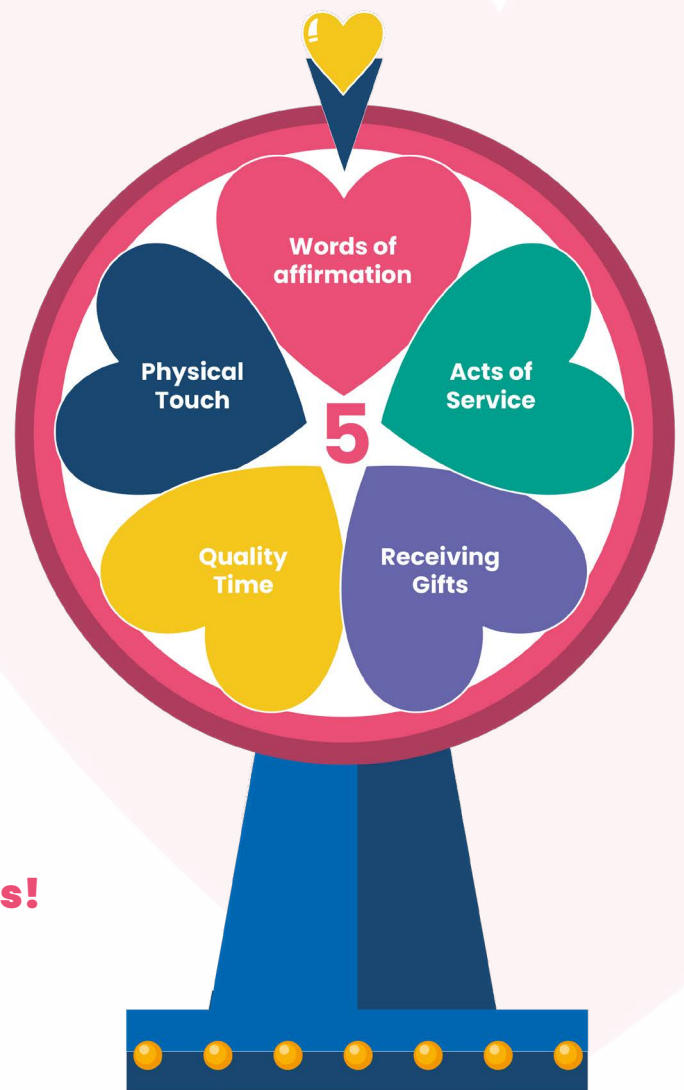
What are love languages?

Love languages refer to the different ways people express and experience love. Everyone has a primary love language, which is the way in which they feel loved. Often you find that people will love their partner in the way in which they feel loved not in the way that their partner would actually want to be loved. Love languages are so fascinating and can literally be a huge game changer to having a healthy relationship!

Parents often have different ways of showing and receiving love, which can lead to feelings of being misunderstood or neglected. Mismatched love languages can exacerbate conflict and tension within families. For instance, one parent might be expressing love through 'Acts of Service' (like making dinner or taking care of chores), but if their partner's primary love language is 'Words of Affirmation', they may not feel appreciated. Recognising this difference can help them learn how to express love in ways that make the other person feel valued. By understanding love languages, we can help people communicate their needs more effectively and strengthen relationships by ensuring that emotional needs are met.

There are five primary love languages which is a concept that was developed by [Dr Gary Chapman](#).

Take the quiz now to find out yours!

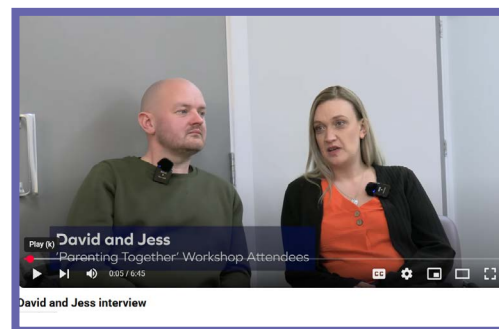


Parent Vids

Throughout the day we heard from a range of Durham's parents/carers who were kind enough to share their own experiences of conflict and how they accessed support to address this.

Jess and David, two of Durham's parents spoke of their own personal experiences and how the Parenting Together Workshop has helped them and their children.

Ewa, a Durham Mam, shared with us her story of separating from her ex-partner and how completing the Parenting When Separated Course has helped support her and her children.



Q&A Panel

Finally, we ended the day with our wonderful panellists who answered a range of questions that were posed by delegates.

- Laura-Jayne Morris, Reducing Parental Conflict and Empowering Parents Empowering Communities Coordinator.
- Samantha Parker (Team Leader, Harbour).
- Kate Nicolle (Co-Founder Amity).
- Nicola James (Headteacher, St Andrews Academy).
- Amy Hodgson (Matron for Public Health, Maternity Services).
- Maria Clarke (0-19 Family Health Service, Community Anchor).
- Lisa Gallagher Dent (Service Manager Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS)).



Our Next Steps and Hopes for the Future

We are ambitious in Durham to continue embedding the importance of healthy co-parenting relationships across all of our services. Our collective, partnership priorities for the year ahead are to:

- ★ Engage and support Durham's Voluntary, Community and Faith organisations in this agenda.
- ★ Collaboratively, with Maternity and Health Services, develop antenatal and postnatal pathways for expectant parents and new parents which include the importance of healthy co-parenting relationships.
- ★ Use Durham's committed Reducing Parental Conflict Steering Group to lead the way in supporting managers who provide case management supervision in being better equipped and confident in supporting practitioners working directly with families.
- ★ Promote and share the resources, tools and pathways developed by Durham to support all practitioners and managers in their work with families to identify and address parental conflict.
- ★ Work collaboratively with Durham's Domestic Abuse Commissioners and workforce to ensure consistent messaging to help practitioners and managers distinguish between parental conflict and domestic abuse.
- ★ Train and support Durham's amazing parent volunteers to deliver peer support addressing parental conflict to the parent/carers of County Durham.

Conference Evaluations

5 STAR RATING!

There were 107 delegates who attended the conference with 72 completing the evaluation. There were 22 different services and organisations in attendance including Durham's parents and carers.

We asked delegates to tell us how the conference will impact on their practice, quotes received include:



"Absolutely fantastic conference will make a huge difference about how to approach things."

"I feel more confident about being able to recognise the signs of parental conflict and how to get support."

"Having practical tools I can use to help steer conversations with parents."

"Extremely informative and learnt a lot about love language, curious questions and how to explore this further."

"I feel more confident about asking the right questions."

"Learning differences between conflict and DA."

"How to approach conversations with parents differently."

"Having practical tools I can use to help steer conversations with parents."

"Introduction of all the amazing tools - with the increased confidence to do so."

"Learning differences between conflict and DA."

"By encouraging practice to be more focussed on exploring parental relationships and how these are impacting children."

"It gives me much more awareness of what Durham has on offer for the families we work with. It makes you think more outside the box around parental conflict and domestic abuse."

92% of respondents said they would welcome another conference. When asked what topics they would like to be included they said...

"Supporting Children in Care to have healthy relationships"

"Some training or package for separated families that Domestic abuse was apparent, but they still need support to parent separately"

"If parents are in agreement to try strategies to resolve parental conflict how do you get stepparents on board?"

"Voice of children"

"SEND"

"Getting Dads/Male Carers involved"

If you would like to know more about Relationships Matter in Durham, head over to www.relationshipsmatter.uk or contact Laura-Jayne Morris (Reducing Parental Conflict Coordinator) by emailing relationshipsmatter@durham.gov.uk