



For frontline
multi-agency
practitioners.

County Durham's Relationships Matter Toolkit



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or scan the QR code to find
out more and get support
for your family today.



Foreword.

At Durham County Council we are passionate about helping families to improve and build on their relationships with each other. We are equally passionate about empowering local practitioners to make that happen and this toolkit is here to help both of those goals become a reality.

Our Relationships Matter Toolkit is designed for you to use everyday as you work with families, guiding you and helping you to build on the skills you already have.

We know from our many years working in the field, that relationship support for families works best when a range of practitioners come together under a common banner, striving towards a common goal. Our multi-agency approach brings together a broad range of organisations including local-authority, education, health and well-being services, the local community and voluntary sectors.

By unifying what we do, we know that families will hear a consistent message, no matter who is working with them. So whether it's a midwife, a teacher, a housing officer or a counsellor, the same advice is being offered, in the same way, which means families grow to understand what we are trying to achieve with them and start to build trust and faith in the process.

This booklet has been produced with kind permission of Amity who we have partnered with as part of our offer to professionals. The content in this booklet has been created by Amity and we are grateful for them allowing us to shape it for our professionals in Durham. We are delighted to be collaborating with Amity and thank them for sharing their expertise with us all.



What is our goal? That all families can enjoy the benefits of strong, conflict-free family relationships, which help all family members to build resilience, trust and confidence in themselves and those around them. We are enabling families to thrive both together and apart and developing the next generation of adults who will go into the world understanding the benefits of healthy relationships and how to establish and maintain them.

The benefits of good relationships stretch far and wide; from mental wellbeing to physical health, educational attainment to social integration. Put simply, we thrive when we connect well with those around us in whatever capacity that may be.

We hope that this toolkit will be the start of us collectively guiding families towards stronger, healthier relationships and building their skills, resilience and coping strategies along the way.



We firmly believe that healthy relationships are a human right, and we are here to ensure that families now and the generations to follow can enjoy quality relationships for many years to come.

Introduction.

Firstly, we need to be clear about what this booklet is about. Parental conflict is different and separate to domestic abuse. It's often difficult as practitioners to start conversations about relationships, but we know that we must try. Domestic abuse is a widespread and often hidden issue that profoundly affects individuals and families, making it crucial for all multi-agency practitioners to engage in conversations about it. By addressing domestic abuse and parental conflict directly, we can break the silence that often surrounds this sensitive topic, offering support and resources to those in need.

These conversations not only help to identify and assist those struggling but also promote an environment of trust and safety, encouraging disclosure and facilitating early intervention. Understanding the importance of these discussions empowers workers to play a pivotal role in the prevention and resolution of domestic abuse and parental conflict. Ultimately this will contribute to the well-being and resilience of families and communities.

Discussing intimate relationships with people can be challenging due to the perceived deeply personal and private nature of these topics. People may feel embarrassed, vulnerable, or fearful of judgment, which can create a significant barrier to open communication. Additionally, cultural norms and personal values may lead to discomfort or reluctance in discussing intimate matters.

For workers, there is also the concern of overstepping boundaries or inadvertently causing distress. These factors, combined with the potential for uncovering painful or traumatic experiences, make initiating conversations about intimate relationships a delicate and often difficult task. Recognising these challenges is essential for creating a safe and supportive environment where those you work with can feel respected and understood.



What is parental conflict?

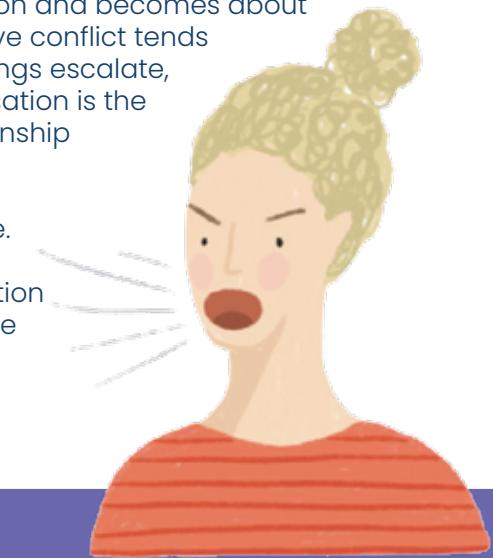
Disagreements in relationships are totally normal and not necessarily problematic when resolved constructively. However, when couples are entrenched in conflict that is frequent, intense and poorly resolved it is very likely to have a negative impact on both the parents and their children's emotional well-being. This impact is serious for some children and can have lifelong implications just in the same way that domestic abuse can too. Constructive or destructive conflict is about disagreeing.

How you work with your partner or co-parent to resolve the conflict is what shapes the health of the relationship.

The current drive by government and local authorities, encourages practitioners to have more conversations about parental relationships. It helps practitioners to identify parental conflict and decide what interventions, if any, are needed to support the family. Conflict in relationships is expressed through many different behaviours which can have an impact on family life. When conflict is between parents, it can have negative effects on their children's mental health and wider development. Disagreements in relationships are normal and not necessarily problematic when resolved constructively. However, when parents are entrenched in conflict that is frequent, intense and poorly resolved it is likely to have a negative impact on the parents and their children. Where there is domestic abuse there will be an imbalance of power and one parent/carer may feel fearful of the other.



The difference between arguing in a healthy relationship versus unhealthy is that the argument tends to be focussed on finding resolution not on winning. In an unhealthy relationship arguing personal, never gets to a solution and becomes about winning at all costs. Constructive conflict tends to involve an apology when things escalate, and at the heart of the conversation is the desire to find a solution. Relationship damaging conflict does not have this focus on a solution. It is damage on top of damage. There is only rupture and no repair. This kind of communication between a couple is not positive role modelling for a child to be exposed to.

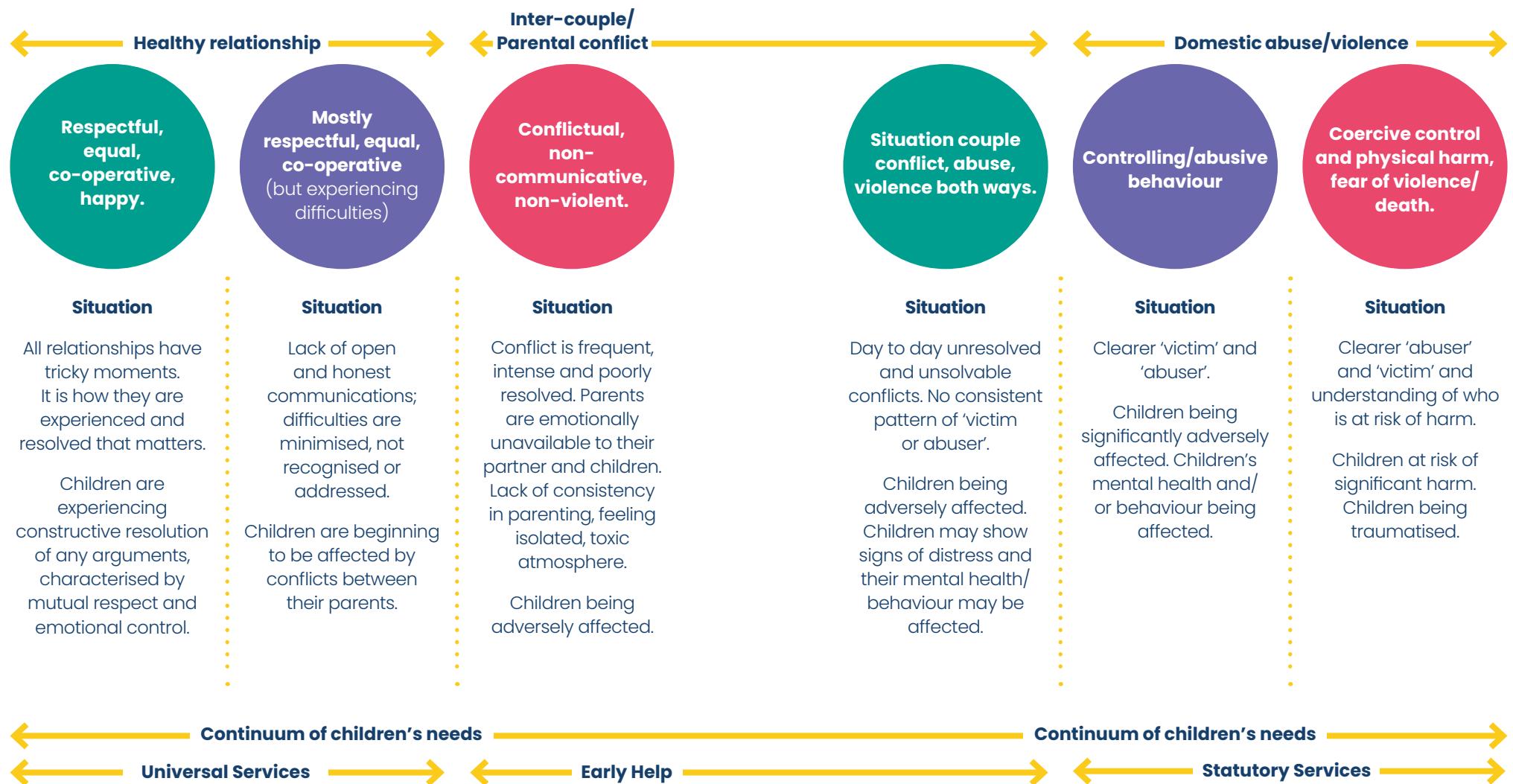


When you are in a high conflict relationship, and those arguments are frequent intense and poorly resolved (which is the key really) they can range from silent hostility to loud shouting matches. This creates a sense of uncertainty for children about the stability of the relationship. This is likely to impact on their well-being.



Parental Conflict and Domestic Abuse, the difference.

People who are in abusive and coercive relationships are unlikely to be able to use words like equal, happy, co-operative etc. Even where there is 'parental conflict' within a relationship they should still be able to use words like mostly equal, respectful, co-operative but whilst acknowledging that they are still having difficulties. Abusive relationships are not co-operative or equal. There will be one person who feels scared, controlled or intimidated by the other.



Why do we need to care about relationships?

Why does this work matter?

Studies have noted that children show a higher distress level in response to parents' conflict from about six months old. Children who have lived in high conflict with hostile interactions between parents are less able to solve problems, negotiate interpersonal relationships and have higher levels of social anxiety.

Children who have experienced hostility between parents are shown to have lower satisfaction levels in their own relationships from adolescence onwards, with some reporting negative views on family structures, marriage and relationships in general.

High-conflict home environments have also been found to change the brain and increase the risk of mental health issues. Severe or chronic conflict in the home has been found to disrupt early brain development in infants as early as six-months-old, children, and adolescents up to 19-years-old. It can also lead to imbalanced sleeping patterns, depression, anxiety, conduct disorder, difficulties forming bonds with peers, and managing emotions.

Not every child who is in a high-conflict environment will surely experience the worst of these consequences, however. Genetics and resiliency play a role in how severely a child will be impacted, as does emotional intelligence and coping skills.



Females tend to be at a greater risk of developing emotional problems, while males are more likely to develop behavioural issues. In cases where a child has a genetic predisposition for mental illness, it's family life that can determine which way the scales will tip. In addition to facing developmental, emotional, social, and psychological disturbances, children who are repetitively exposed to high-conflict environments are more prone to developing physical illnesses, stomach aches, and headaches.

It also impacts their cortisol levels while causing difficulties with concentration and academic performance. Sibling relationships may also be impacted by these environments, and have a tendency to be either overprotective and over-involved or disengaged and distant. While high-conflict environments don't always include fighting parents, this is the most common scenario children face.

While a mere argument will not have a negative impact on a child, arguing that turns into fighting and destructive conflict does. This is especially true when it's about a child. This can cause children to internalize the conflict and blame themselves—leading to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and self-harm.

Parental Relationships.

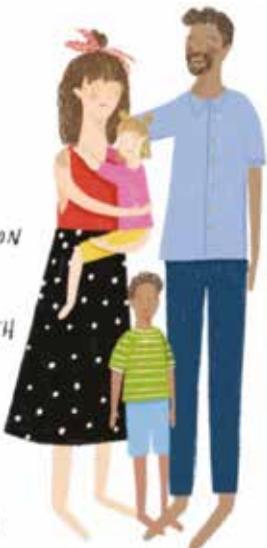
Why do we care about them?

The statistics speak for themselves. Unresolved, destructive conflict has an impact on a child's wellbeing and development. Not all conflict is harmful, but the kind of conflict that is, is the kind that re-occurs because there is never any solution found, lots of personal insults and a focus on winning.

The affects on a child are real and can cause long lasting issues into adulthood.

children exposed to frequent, destructive conflict are more likely to:

- EXPERIENCE DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY
- HAVE PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS
- DEVELOP BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS
- DO WORSE AT SCHOOL



There is a knock on effect in later life:

- ADULT RELATIONSHIPS
- PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING
- EMPLOYMENT



The importance of Relationship Quality

It's challenging to parent well in a relationship fraught with conflict.

It's normal for poor communication between a couple to impact on how well they're able to parent together as parenting takes communication and teamwork.



We also know from research that:

76%

of male prisoners did have a relationship with their father (Prison Reform Trust) and three quarters (74%) of British adults whose parents never lived together when they were growing up say they rarely/never saw their father during their childhood, compared to just 1% of the same group who say they rarely/never saw their mother.

(Centre for Social Justice March 2019).

Research suggests that the father or male carer has a significant impact on:

- early development
- play
- modelling
- later development
- personal and family development

Relationship quality affects how parents...

- CARE FOR THEIR CHILDREN
- ESTABLISH A CONSISTENT ROUTINE
- PROVIDE A STIMULATING ENVIRONMENT FOR OPTIMUM DEVELOPMENT
- PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SECURITY AND WARMTH
- ROLE MODEL HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS



The impact of parental conflict.

Undoubtedly, ongoing conflict negatively impacts children's short and long-term outcomes. With a mountain of evidence, more than we have ever had access to, we can certainly conclude that destructive conflict is damaging.

Extensive research by Professor Gordon Harold and his team on behalf of the Early Intervention Foundation/DWP concludes that:

- Parents embroiled in hostile and distressed relationships are typically more hostile and aggressive toward their children and are less responsive to their children's needs.
- 42% of children do not live with both parents by the age of 16.
- Children who witness severe, ongoing and unresolved inter-parental conflict can be aggressive, hostile and violent. Others can develop low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and, in extreme cases, be suicidal. It also reduces their academic performance and limits the development of their social and emotional skills and ability to form positive relationships themselves, all of which will affect the long term life chances of children.
- Inter-parental conflict can adversely affect both the mother-to-child and father-to-child relationships. Evidence suggests that when the mother and father are in conflict, the father-to-child relationship is more likely to become negatively affected.
- Interventions which seek to improve parenting skills in the presence of frequent, severe and unresolved inter-parental conflict – without addressing that conflict – are unlikely to be successful in improving child outcomes.

- Poor child outcomes associated with separation and divorce CAN be mitigated if conflict is resolved or parents explain to children that the conflict is not their fault and they continue to co-parent well.
- The fact that some children have been shown to prosper after living with conflict after separation suggests that it may be helpful or harmful, depending on whether it adds or removes stress and trauma in children's lives. (Harmful conflict, a structured guide, Cafcass).

In addition to this research has also shown that:

- Babies as young as six months, exhibit higher physiological symptoms of distress such as elevated heart rate in response to overt, hostile exchanges between their parents when compared to exchanges between non-parental adults.
- In any given month, over 90% of GPs see people with relationship problems, making them the most frequently turned to professionals for relationship support.
- In one study of a primary children's mental health service, they concluded that over 50% of children referred to them were referred due to 'family relationships problems', making this the single biggest presenting issue. (Wolpert).
- 76% of all male prisoners in England and Wales did not have a relationship with their father (Prison Reform Trust).



Separating or Separated Parents

When parents split up this can be hard for children, but there is an awful lot both parents can do to help ease the impact it could have on them. Reassurance is the main thing that children of all ages need.

Children respond differently to separation depending on several factors: how long the parents have been together, how long it took for the relationship to end, how the parents behaved before and after the split, how close the child is to the parent who leaves, and the child's age and understanding.

Children can cope and manage when their parents separate but this very much depends on the behaviour of all the adults around them (including family and friends), whether the communication between the adults is constructive or destructive and the number of changes the child has to experience.

Essentially, children can go through exactly the same feelings as their parents – shock, anger, confusion, sadness etc. However, they can also feel safer and less under pressure if they are no longer in the middle of arguments between the adults and a hostile environment.

What children see and hear during and after separation is often more upsetting and damaging than the fact that the parents have separated.

This temporary relief displayed by the child can sometimes be interpreted by the parent the child usually lives with as meaning that the child is happier and, therefore, better off without the other parent. This completely misses the point that children can feel relief but still miss and want to have a positive relationship with their other parent, who they love.

Signs of the effects of relationship distress on parents and children

In an adult, we may notice:

- A change in appearance
- A change in habits/usual behaviour
- A withdrawal from social situations
- An increase in use/misuse of alcohol, substances, gambling
- A low mood/increase in anxiety
- Signs of mental health or emotional difficulties
- A change in parenting style
- Indifference towards partner

In a child we might typically see (remember this may look similar to children experiencing domestic abuse):

- A child who externalises the effects of living with destructive conflict could become aggressive towards others, start to make trouble, or struggle to socialise. Perhaps we may see these young people getting into trouble at school and being excluded, missing from home, becoming known to youth justice services, or causing a neighbourhood nuisance.
- A child who is internalising their feelings, withdrawing from their surroundings and friends, they become less engaged with their environment. May be the quiet and withdrawn child at school or may come to the attention of children's mental health services.
- Parentification* is the child who engages with parent-like behaviour, taking responsibility for things that should be the parent's. They may also try to mend rifts between parents and make things better. Parentification is a process of role reversal whereby a child feels obliged to parent their parent or sibling to fill a void.

*Parentification was defined by Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark in 1973

Is it always black and white, no! It can be grey!

There are of course similarities, and this is why practitioners can often find it difficult. It is not always black and white, here at Durham, we often call it 'the grey area in the middle'. Where there is frequent, intense and poorly resolved arguing this is what we refer to as parental conflict. When one person feels scared, controlled or intimidated by the other, this is domestic abuse.

It is important to talk about a pattern of behaviour, knowing the couple's history, rather than a snapshot of them as a couple at this moment in time. Ask those curious questions!

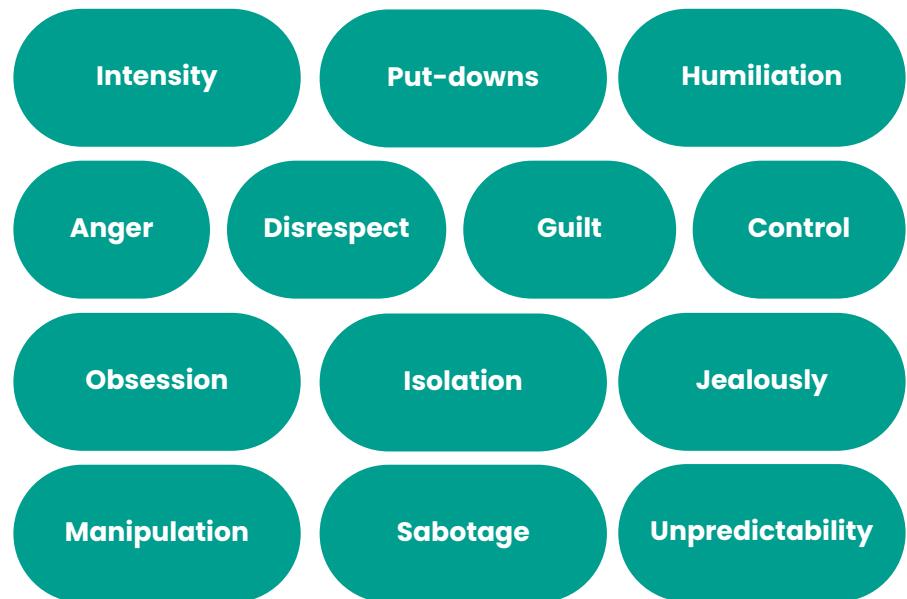
What does a mutually respectful relationship look like?



How does it feel?

Cared for, loved, able to make decisions together, taking turns, gets along with your friends and family, shares the chores and the childcare, supports education and work, takes turns to pay for things, looking forward to things together, making plans together, feels like being part of a team.

What does an unhealthy/abusive relationship look like?



How does it feel?

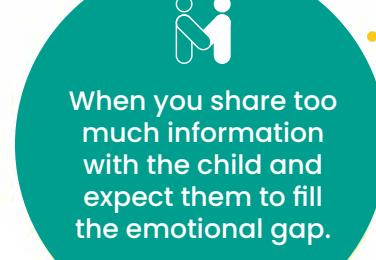
Like walking on eggshells, scared what the day might bring, how they will behave towards friends and family, not being able to make decisions, not getting a say, trying to keep the peace, planning your life around their needs and how to not cause problems.

Withdrawing from family time or family engagements, trying to excuse their partners behaviour, sudden changes in behaviour or appearance, unexplained marks or bruises that are excused as something else, becoming concerned or anxious if they are not responding to messages immediately from their partner, expressing fear about the way their partner might react in a given situation.

Childrens roles in conflict. Putting children in the middle

Children's roles in conflict that make them feel uncomfortable
If parents are together or not and they are in conflict, their children simply have no choice but to watch from the side-lines as their parents try to score points against one another.

Sometimes children try to get involved to protect their parents in order to make the conflict stop. They try to please each parent by agreeing that the other is wrong even if they don't mean it just to make it stop. There are a number of 'roles' that children can take on when their parents are in conflict, as explained in Lisa Parkinson's book; Family Mediation, 2014. In the book Lisa explains the role of the mediator in addressing this. Your role is to help the parent identify if they put their child in the middle and how to address that.



Activity.

Questions to ask your parents



Do you recognise doing any of these behaviours yourself?

They are easy to slip into.

1

The danger of using a child to pass on messages.

They become involved in details about their care that are not appropriate for them to know, they are just a child, they shouldn't be worrying about parental details.



What do you think the impact of doing these things is on the children involved?

2

The danger of using a child to mediate between parents.

the child feels like they have to try in some way to keep the peace, that can feel like a heavy burden.

3

The danger of making a child feel like a judge.

They are put in the uncomfortable position of feeling like they have to decide which parent is right and which parent is wrong in a situation. They're often made to feel like they have to think that there is a goodie and a baddie in every situation.

4

The danger of making a child spy.

They may learn to lie and adopt sneaky behaviour, they may feel pressure to report back details about each parent that they would normally not be interested in as a child.

What causes conflict?

We can all think of a vast list of things that might spark disagreement in a relationship.

- Money
- Household chores
- Parental responsibilities
- Parenting styles
- Extended family
- Social media
- Sex
- Communication styles

The list could be endless, basically if it causes stress it's likely to cause arguments! Most couples whose relationship feels unstable are struggling to juggle the things in their life that are causing them stress and this spills over into how they then manage to communicate with each other.

Having a child with additional needs for instance can be the cause of significant stress and if you then disagree about how to meet that child's needs it becomes a flash point for arguments and feeling like you are on the same page as each other becomes more and more difficult.

If a couple is struggling to see a situation from the other persons perspective, which is very common, this will usually result in a clash of views and opinions. It may then become common for frequent eruptions to occur as a result of the frustration of feeling unheard and misunderstood and it then becomes common to blame each other and avoid any accountability.

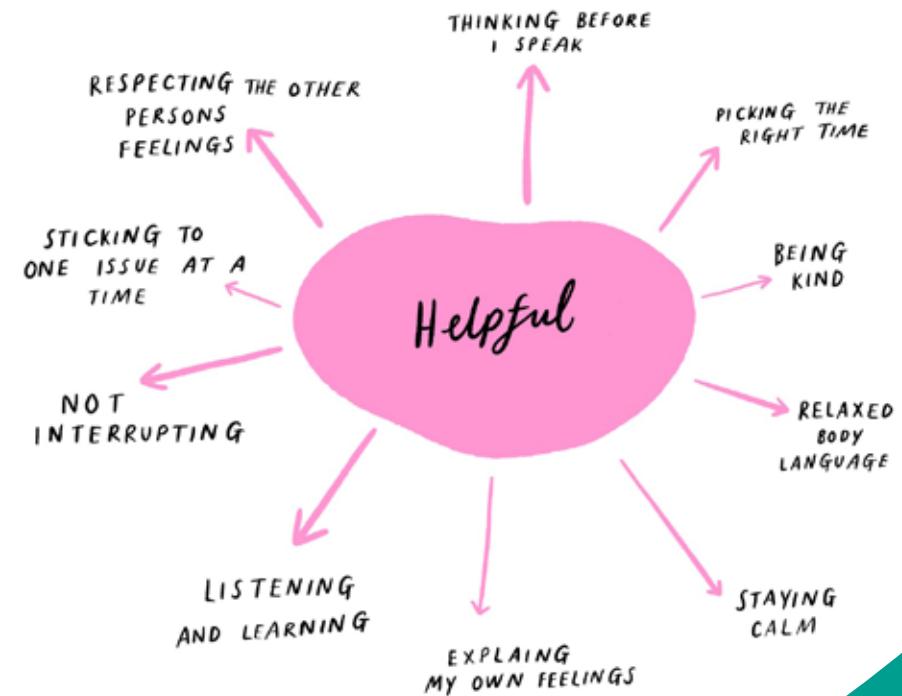
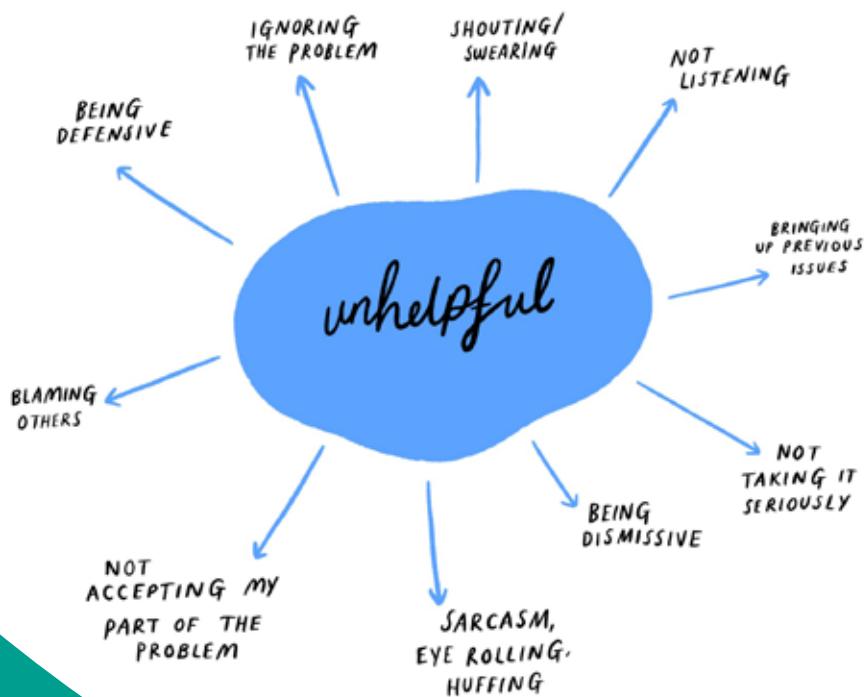


Let's change the way families communicate!

It is important that we try and help families to recognise that destructive communication is unhealthy.

Lots of people struggle with the concept of constructive communication, especially if you been brought up in a shouty environment yourself.

But the key here is to help families break the cycle for the sake of their own children.



The five love languages.

A common mistake many couples make is trying to love their partner in the way in which they would like to be loved not in the way that their partner wants to be loved. The 5 love languages may help you to understand this better.

The idea is that different people like to be loved in different ways. Are you sure you really know how your partner likes to feel loved by you?

Knowing how your partner likes to feel loved and cared for by you can be the golden ticket to a stronger bond between you.

Spend 5 minutes thinking about your love languages.

(Gary Chapman (1992)



Actions

- Run an errand for your partner, cook a meal, complete a household chore.

Physical touch

Hug, kiss and hold hands.

Saying nice things

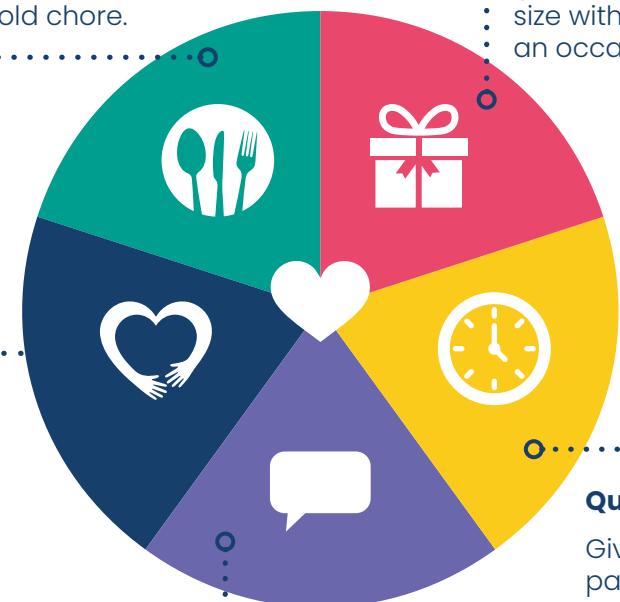
Offer verbal compliments and words of appreciation.

Gifts

Give thoughtful and meaningful gifts of any size without an occasion.

Quality time

Give your partner undivided attention via exclusive time together.

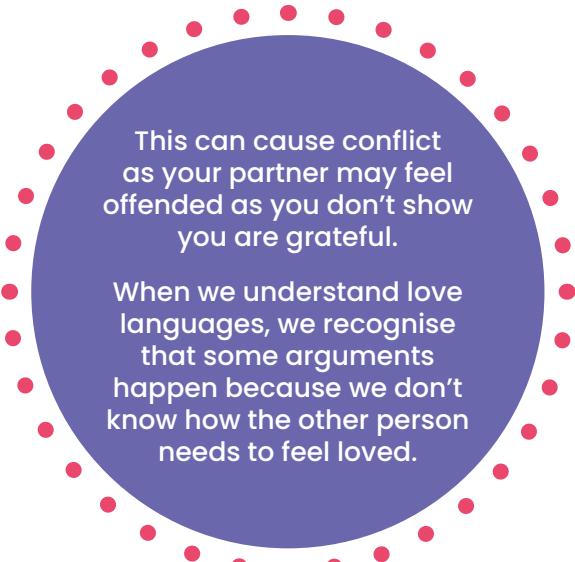


Next, find out which one is your partners and ask them to give you an example so you have clarity too. Now you can move forward with your precious knowledge, knowing how to meet your partners needs in a way that is best for them, and visa versa!

Simple really, understand your partner better and you have just increased your chances of lasting closeness. If you carry on trying to show your partner love using your love language rather than theirs, it is easy for you both to become frustrated with each other. Let's think about an example here.

Imagine that your partner often brings home your favourite bar of chocolate or picks up your favourite magazine for you on the way home, but if you are honest what you would really like them to do is spend more time with you, proper time when they are not distracted by their phone or the kids.

It's easy to assume that gifts are kind gestures and being given them should make you feel loved. Gifts are kind gestures but if you want to be loved by the giving of time, whilst gifts are lovely they are not what you need.



Questions for curiosity.

The way we make ourselves most valuable in a conversation is by asking useful questions. The right questions allow us to be curious in a way that makes sure we are not making ourselves feel professionally vulnerable during the conversation.

Here are some examples of the kinds of questions that you might use to find out what is really going on for someone.

- If you felt that your relationship was in a better place what would be different?
- What would you both need to do differently get to that better place?
- What might get in the way of you making these changes?
- How could you help each other to overcome those barriers?
- What support do you need from myself or someone else?
- How will you know if your relationship has improved?
- What kind of things do you not both sweep under the carpet and avoid talking about?
- What could your partner do to make you feel more loved and secure?
- If you were feeling brave enough to be honest what would you say to your partner if you had no worry for how they would respond?
- If you were to ask your friends or family what they thought about your relationship what do you think they would say?
- Do you think your children feel effected by the stability of your relationship?
- Do you think your child ever feels caught in the middle of your disagreements?

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🌐 relationshipsmatter.uk

www.weareamity.co.uk

click.clickrelationships.org/home/all-issues

www.relate.org.uk/reducing-parental-conflict

tavistockrelationships.org

steppingstonesmediation.co.uk

