



How does resourcing relationship support for adults improve outcomes for children?

Speech given by Claire Tyler at the APGPF seminar on Supporting Adult Relationships – 12 March 2008

Relate is an organisation associated with support for adults, although last year we saw 22,000 children. We are proud that we offer a service where parents – and non-parents of course! – can receive support in their own right, and not be viewed solely as carers of children. However, the reality is that the majority of our clients are parents and it is rare that, during their time with us, they do not worry about how their problems are affecting the kids or attribute some of their problems to the kids, and the strains of parenting. Clients' children, and their needs, are, therefore, often at the front of our practitioners' minds. We know there is plenty of evidence to show that investing in the quality of adult relationships within the home pays dividends in terms of better outcomes for children.

Let's look at some of our own data first. Although nearly three quarters of our adult clients come to us to about their couple relationship, 50% of these clients say that the problems in this relationship are having a negative effect on their children. After we had worked with them on their relationship issues:

- 45% said they had seen their children's behaviour improve (with less than 2% having seen a negative effect)
- 43% said they had seen a strongly positive effect on their children's level of distress (with less than 3% having seen a negative effect)

Parents also reported positive effects on their children's attainment at school, their need to go to court over contact or child support arrangements, and their own ability to provide financially for their children. More broadly, adults took less days off work, made less visits to the doctor, and felt happier after accessing our services. We conclude from our data that adults who are given support to work on their relationship problems are more able to be engaged and supportive parents.

This is backed up by the work of Carolyn and Phillip Cowan at UC Berkeley. They observed in the 1970s that couple's satisfaction with their relationships tended to decline after the arrival of children, and that new parents were usually ill-prepared for the task of raising children. Their subsequent work since then clearly shows a connection between relationship quality and parenting. This seems to be particularly true for fathers – those who are unhappy with their relationship are likely to be less nurturing, and physically rougher with their children, especially their daughters.

The Cowans' work endeavours to discover whether, and to what extent, parenting classes and support were made more effective where couples also received support to explore impasses in their relationship. A series of randomised controlled trials, including parents from

low income and excluded background, have consistently shown that parenting support is always more effective when combined with an intervention aimed at increasing relationship satisfaction.

To explain in more detail, parents who attended groups which had only a parenting focus demonstrated more effective parenting than those parents in the control group, who had received no intervention. Their children also did better in school. But parents who attended groups which also had a relationship support focus demonstrated a 'double your money' effect – their parenting was better, their children did better in schools, and the adult relationships were stronger, with less conflict. Parents' satisfaction with their relationship did not decline after the birth of their child. In a follow up study, these results had endured ten years on, and the benefits exhibited by parents in the relationship focus group were always equal to, or greater than, those in the parenting focus group.

The government's focus on parenting, and the increased provision of parenting support is undermined where it is not combined with relationship support. Carolyn Webster Stratton, the creator of 'The Incredible Years', one of the most successful and popular parenting interventions, said:

"...it appears that while traditional parent training can improve parent-child interactions, it has little impact on marital satisfaction or conflict; conversely marital conflict and satisfaction do appear to have an impact on the outcome of parent training in terms of children's adjustment. All of these findings taken together suggest that parent training programs need to be broadened to emphasize partner involvement, parent support, marital communication, problem solving, and coping skills".

If we are going to invest in parenting, and it seems clear that we are, we must invest in relationship support too as a wholly complementary factor which improves outcomes and cost-efficiency. We believe relationship support must become part of the core offer for parents offered through Children's Centres and Extended Schools.

It is not, however, only parents in intact couples who will find that relationship support can improve their parenting. We believe it is also crucial for separated parents. Although the majority of children whose parents separate (around a quarter of all children) go on to show on long term negative outcomes, they are 70% more likely to exhibit serious psychological problems in adulthood than the rest of the population. Research shows that the two most important variables in determining why some children sink after separation, and others swim are:

- The level of conflict between separated parents to which a child is exposed
- The quality of the child's relationship with their non-resident parent

Both of these variables can be mediated by therapeutic work on the parents' relationship, which will help them to move past the anger, hurt, and frustration they may feel at the end of their relationship, and help them to be successful co-parents. Of course, in these situations, children and young people may also need one to one interventions to support them as well. Research has shown that therapeutic forms of mediation increase a parent's ability to understand their child's perspective – this is said to be one of the cornerstones of secure attachment, and something that is commonly eroded through high conflict divorce.

Work by Jen McIntosh in Australia has shown that a therapeutic and child inclusive mediation (that is where a practitioner spends time with a child and is able to feed back their views to the parents) has significant positive effects in terms of reducing conflict between parents, supporting high levels of good quality conflict between children and parents, and improving parent-child relationships. Contact arrangements made by parents who had experienced this intervention were more likely to be 'developmentally correct' – i.e. they suited the child's needs, not the parents'. All members of the family were more likely to be satisfied with contact arrangements. Fathers in particular were less likely to feel acrimony towards their former partner, and more likely to feel an 'alliance' with them as co-parents.

Such findings show very clearly that parents may be separated but still need to receive support jointly if the eventual aim is to improve parenting. Relate has recently developed a therapeutic mediation programme, and we are looking to pilot it with high-conflict separating parents. We hope that over the next few years we will begin to see a cultural change that

focuses on the continuing parenting role of separated parents, and the need to develop, whenever possible, a civil relationship with your ex-partner. This is not yet a cultural norm in the UK, but we were encouraged by the DCSF's recent commitment, within The Children's Plan, to a review of the needs of separating parents, and their children. CAFCASS are also looking to provide a more comprehensive service to separating families, and this could be a fantastic opportunity.

Supporting relationships to improve parenting is far more complex than telling parents that children do better in two-parent households. A married home filled with conflict will damage a child, while a separated family in which children see both parents, and know their needs come first, is a family doing a great job. Parents need to be able to access relationship support and education both routinely – e.g. during antenatal classes, health professionals, and at particular times when they may be having difficulties. The difference this makes to children is clear.

Claire Tyler, Chief Executive

Relate

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