



Supporting Adult Relationships: Time for a rethink?

Helen Barrett, PhD
Senior Research Fellow
barrett@familyandparenting.org
APGPF, March 12, 2008

Why care about couple relationships?

- Because we care about individual happiness?
- Because we need to rely on couples to protect children?
- Because we think couples can damage children?
- Because couples are more sociable/jollier than singletons?
- Because happy couples make for a safer society?
- Because we want everyone to live happily ever after?
- *Or why?*

Do adults matter anyway?

- *Every Child Matters*
 - *Every Parent Matters*
 - *Some people matter more than others*
- *But do most people really matter?*

Every Child Matters – the five desired outcomes

- **Staying safe –**
Family, community and environmental well-being
- **Being healthy –**
Mental and physical well-being
- **Enjoying and achieving –**
Emotional, intellectual and creative well-being
- **Making a positive contribution**
Social well-being
- **Achieving economic well-being**
Economic well-being

If every child really matters, every adult must too

Every adult should have equal opportunities to enjoy:

- Family, community and environmental well-being
- Mental and physical well-being
- Emotional, intellectual and creative well-being
- Social well-being
- Economic well-being

Failing this, how can they be expected to provide for others?

What is 'normal'?

In any sample of people, at all ages, we can expect to find substantial numbers of people who do not match the ideal of Mr. and Mrs. Averagely Fit, Active, Positive and Responsible.

They might have:

- learning difficulties
- physical or mobility problems
- different sensory abilities, e.g. deafness, blindness
- they are poor
- mentally or physically ill
- have communication or social skills problems
- have adopted destructive life-styles, alcohol, drugs, etc.
- have social histories of lack of care, abuse, neglect
- *or other difficulties ...*

How romantic ..

- All relationships contain conflict
- Relationships come under strain at particular transition points, e.g. deciding to have children, having children, when children start school, when children leave home
- Relationship skills don't come 'naturally' to everyone
- A substantial minority of people have insufficient social skills to negotiate difficulties/disagreements
- Many relationships do not last; evolution is common
- Parental separation is problematic for all concerned

How romantic, continued ..

- Cohabiting relationships can last as long as marriages
- Couple relationships where each partner has an insecure attachment style can last as long as those where both partner has a secure attachment style
- But they manage conflict differently
- How conflict is managed is what matters
- This can predict relationship durability even in very early stages of relationship formation

Key findings from Attachment Research and Theory

- By 12 weeks, some infants show ‘triangular skills’
- The appearance of these skills seems to coincide with the quality of parent interaction
- Securely and non-securely attached adults differ in what they want and expect from relationships; how they communicate; how they perceive each other; and how they manage conflict
- High conflict is associated with particular combinations of gender role attitudes and attachment style
- Attachment style is not an individual trait – it can change

Some other research findings

- Prolonged stress is associated with social interactive problems for a substantial minority of individuals
- Relationship strain is directly linked with financial strains and decision-making
- Work-home 'spillover effects' can impact on family life
- Gender relationships can be influenced by employment status
- Expectations about couple relationships vary within and between different cultural and faith communities

What we know about couple relationships:

- Quite a lot about what makes relationships work/not work, e.g. how to identify patterns of interaction that are likely to be problematic, early in relationship formation
- That they serve multiple functions - 'safe haven', 'secure base', sexual play and exploration, mutual care-giving, romantic relations, often also reproduction and nurturance.
- That they are rarely easy to maintain
- That, when they begin to break down, it is usually very painful, especially where children are involved

We also know that couples find it difficult to:

- Know when to seek help
- Agree with each other about seeking help
- Overcome barriers to seeking professional help
- Understand what professional help is on offer
- Find the professional help they need
- Get help before it's too late

And we know that providers find it difficult to:

- Reach the 'non-converted'
- Give help before it's too late
- Provide evidence of effectiveness
- Give a clear account of services offered
- Be sustainable and accessible

We don't know enough about:

- How to create a society that supports rather than blames
- How best to help people improve their relationship skills
- What might be the most appropriate format to use when offering relationship support
- How to promote constructive inter-parent interactions when spousal relationships have broken down

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS, I

We need RESEARCH to find out:

- What is currently on offer
- What kind of relationship support might be wanted by couples from different backgrounds and at different life stages: when, who, where and how
- How support can best be delivered
- What works best worldwide, for and within diverse community contexts and faith groups

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS, II

We need a change in CULTURE to:

- Encourage participation in extra-familial information exchange and support networks
- Enable couples to access appropriate services
- Extend media/web-based presentations of and discussions about positive couple interactions
- Move away from the notion that still lingers on, that “the Englishman’s home is his castle” and recognise that support for couple relationships should be readily available ‘on tap’ as it can prevent a lot of misery

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS, III

Finally:

- We can't sustain the myth that relationships don't change and that families don't evolve
- Romantic notions (which never were veridical) about perfect happy-ever-after couples need to give way to much more realistic planning, better services and more appropriate advice, for everyone
- This is likely to mean re-educating and re-training if professionals, e.g. lawyers, CAFCASS officers, etc. are to be better equipped to give sound advice to separating couples with children.
- All this will require FUNDING..