



Supporting Adult Relationships – time for a rethink?

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We are in the middle of a revolution in government and in public debate on the family. It holds a place in policy that would have been unthinkable even 10 years ago. All parties believe that here is a connection between social wellbeing and family wellbeing. All are now following New Labour's example and developing policies on supporting families. Yet the focus has largely been on parenting. I want, though, to reflect on couple relationships and on their importance and on what has made it difficult to pay attention to them in this changing policy environment.

In 2000, when FPI surveyed services for families across England and Wales, we found not only that there was little provision for couple support, but that providers considered it a bridge too far for mainstream services to offer relationship support to couples.

Relate was and remains the main provider apart, that is, from the private sector of counselling and therapy or help lines – seen as the poor relation in the therapy world; or the clinical sector where waiting lists often defy gravity.

This applies not only to couples but also to family work. Despite many years of training availability on family therapy, for example, little of it is offered to users of mainstream services. The simple truth is that if you can pay for relationship services you will be able to find them – certainly in urban centres – whereas if you can't you will struggle to find help.

Another barrier is the gap between children's services and adult services. Relationships are nourished or destroyed by circumstances – poverty, poor housing, ill health. Some of the biggest issues that undermine family relationships – mental health difficulties, substance and alcohol misuse, domestic violence, and serious family conflict over relationship breakdown are dealt with by adult services who do not always think couple, think child. And today of all days, budget day, we should remember the scourge of family poverty.

Family services are not a compensation for the structural defects in the social environment, like poverty and poor housing. If we have an environment that is more difficult for families not necessarily because poverty is worse but possibly because poverty in a climate of 'in your face affluence' is worse; and if, as many feel is the case, that leads to the losses of aspiration, hope and resilience and the behaviours of despair – drugs, alcohol, violence; then transforming vulnerable families – not simply so they function better for the state but for themselves – is not the work of a moment. It is not cheap. It is not fast. And it will be not be fixed by parenting programmes alone. People parent badly when they are in trouble. That is why work on couple relationships can produce a better run through in children's wellbeing than parenting programmes.

The Social Exclusion Unit has recently been working on how to join up strategy and services and their proposals are to be welcomed. But there is a very long way to go.

Part of the hesitation over couple relationships is clearly about resource, but it is also encouraged by a deep reluctance on the part of services to enter the world of relationships – a view that people will resent offers of services.

However, we have a great deal of survey evidence from adults that indicates that while people look to families and friends for help with most of the difficulties they face, when things really go pear-shaped, they do wish for something more expert.

We also know from research that when relationships are under strain, it is hard for adults to see clearly the impact the problems are having on their children. Our surveys of parents and children showed that while only 34% of parents thought that their getting on well together was important for raising happy children, 70% of children and young people thought it was. That children are twice as likely as adults to say this is important, tells us something.

So no need to hold back, we know there is a need and we know it is important to children's wellbeing to have parents who get on well together.

Yet another barrier is language. What do we mean by relationship services? All the terms we use to describe help seem opaque rather than transparent. Couple work; relationship support; social work; family work, parenting support family therapy, couple therapy; couple counselling...if ever there was a sector where you don't know what to say on the tin, though you know what is inside, it's the helping professions.

Though we are perfectly well aware that emotional and psychological distress is as real as physical pain, as debilitating and as hard to bear, we have not yet found an accepted language to describe it and have a place for it in our service landscape.

Nor have we put the resources into developing our knowledge so we can confidently state – as medicine can to so much greater an extent – this is what helps for these circumstances. How could we ever think that psychological processes were any less complex than physical ones?

Then, one of the big barriers, that bedevils debate about adult relationships is that as soon as you talk about couple relationships, you hit the issue of marriage. There have been torrents of words about marriage. Any discussion of policy and services gets mired in the question - are we for marriage or against it? And marriage becomes the issue.

For my part, relationships are the issue.

Relationships are complicated and they are personal. And when it comes to people's personal lives, we need to be careful about pushing ideas onto people, even well-intentioned ideas based on sound research. Policy interventions can have inadvertent perverse consequences, bringing about what they are set up to prevent - especially when people feel the state nagging and finger-wagging, intruding on their individual freedom to make judgments about their lives.

Feeling told what to do and how to live brings out resistance – sometimes of the 'cutting off your nose to spite your face' variety. I have to confess to feelings of sympathy for the Mums who were bringing 'MacDonalds' to their children at school. Policy and services have to walk a tightrope here between giving good advice and information to people and getting on people's goat.

So the real difficulty is **how** to talk about relationships and policy at the same time. Most off-putting of all is when the things that matter most to people are discussed in terms of economics and social capital rather than the language of feelings. For, that kind of discussion on the family loses connection with feeling. Not the stuff of poetry is it? What counts? What works? These mantras of policy leave out the things that count but can't be counted, like love - a word you almost never find in these discussion which is, in my view, a pity.

No wonder people watch soaps or read novels to find out how to live or how to feel. People marry, have relationships, have children, or not, for their own, not the social, good. Iris

Murdoch satirised the drive to make marriage do social business when a character in one of her novels says:

'One does not have to get anywhere in a marriage. It is not a public conveyance.'

Whatever the general public good of marriage as an institution, people want the freedom to make personal decisions according to their individual judgment about their own lives. And public policy disrespects that at its peril.

So how, then, do we go about making ourselves a society where long-lasting, loving, stable relationships are encouraged and enabled?

And it **is** an urgent question - not only because families are breaking down, terribly important as that is; but also because people are asking these questions of themselves.

Surveys and consultations that we have done show that people can find their personal relationships a great challenge. There never was a time when people were so avid for advice, discussion and clarity about how to live their relationships.

Often the reality of relationships seems so different from our expectations of them. So much of what we believe about relationships is spread by word of mouth, by cultural artefacts, and gets into the cultural bloodstream and we begin to spectate on our relationships rather than living them. A kind of assessment process goes on as we work out whether what we have is good enough.

Our aspirations for relationships are extremely high. And, though we might think relationships might be best sustained by people believing in them as they really are, not as some ideal burdened with expectations they cannot live up to, research by One Plus One has shown that, early on in our relationships, we are reluctant to face the possibility that we **are** going to face difficulties and problems. This makes preventive work hard to do. We can probably be ready for relationships but I am not sure we can be prepared.

It is certainly time for a rethink.

We need to remember that relationships are a bit like birth and death - a very common experience, banal, ordinary, yet absolutely unique to each person. Even partners of very long standing understand their relationships quite differently. We need to think about relationships – not merely from the point of view of turning them into incubators for the good citizens of tomorrow and producing the best outcomes but for their own sake.

Specific interventions with parents must be part of a policy ecology alongside those directed at teaching and schools, at income levels, employment regulation, housing, neighbourhoods and communities, adult social care, health and mental health services. Part of that service network must be services that focus on family relationships –not as an add-on benefit if you are lucky. But as fundamental to good strong families.

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