

# Together and apart: supporting families through change



## Informing service provision

The research summarised in this briefing will be used by voluntary and public sector agencies to assess what action needs to be taken based on the evidence presented. *About Families* will work with these agencies to develop, implement and evaluate action plans based on the needs they identify.

*About Families* aims to ensure that the changing needs of parents, including families affected by disability, are met by providing relevant and accessible evidence to inform service development.

If you are interested in being involved in one of our events to discuss the implications of our research findings for service development, please contact Katrina Reid on 0131 651 1941 or [katrina.reid@ed.ac.uk](mailto:katrina.reid@ed.ac.uk)

**If you use any of this evidence to inform your services, we would like to know about it. Please contact [karen.mountney@ed.ac.uk](mailto:karen.mountney@ed.ac.uk).**

*About Families* is a partnership between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, Parenting across Scotland and Capability Scotland.

## Acknowledgements

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Research assistance was provided by Marlies Kustatscher.

Research with families affected by disability was carried out by Scotinform on behalf of *About Families*.

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Since good relationships between parents are important for the well-being of both adults and children, *About Families* asked what research could tell us about sustaining healthy relationships and coping with relationship breakdown. The full report (with references) is available at [www.aboutfamilies.org.uk](http://www.aboutfamilies.org.uk).

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## Key points

- **Conflict:** Conflict does not necessarily lead to unhappier relationships. How conflict happens and how it is dealt with is what matters.
- **Pressures:** Many things put pressure on relationships and it is normal for relationship satisfaction to decline after the birth of a baby. Parents of disabled children face additional pressures which can continue into the child's adulthood.
- **Coping:** Parents manage better when they can spend time together as a couple, communicate well, have trust and respect, have a supportive relationship and are happy with their roles and responsibilities. Access to short term breaks is key for families affected by disability.
- **Attitudes:** Seeing relationships as flexible and able to change can help adults to deal with relationship issues.
- **Impact:** Improving relationship satisfaction and preventing relationships from breaking down (where appropriate) are important for the well-being of both adults and children. Stability is more important than family structure for children's well-being.
- **Contact:** Arranging contact with children following separation is complex for both practical and emotional reasons but arrangements do not have to be conflict-free to be successful. Developing good couple communication skills may be more effective in facilitating contact than legal interventions.
- **Finance:** Men and women face different financial pressures following separation. Single mothers are the worst off financially, while families affected by disability face additional financial disadvantage which can continue throughout their lives.
- **Seeking support:** Parents face practical and emotional barriers to seeking support from relationship services. While the most common source of support is family and friends, this is not problem-free. People prefer support from skilled professionals when experiencing serious concerns.
- **Families affected by disability:** Research tends focus on the difficulties associated with living with disabilities or long term conditions. This emphasises the strains and pressure having a disabled child puts on relationships and family life. Help for parents often aims to support them by providing help for the child. Recognising pressures and challenges for these families needs to be balanced with addressing social barriers and the capacity of families to manage well given the appropriate support.
- **What do we know about supporting parents?:** Research does not always distinguish between different family forms, type of relationship, parents and other carers, or gender, and tends to be based on heterosexual families. However, many of the issues arising around relationship support are applicable to many types of families.

### Key trends and statistics

- In 2010 a similar percentage of married and cohabiting couples had dependent children, 38% and 39% respectively.
- Mothers head 9 out of 10 lone parent families with dependent children and fathers head 1 in 10. These proportions have remained stable since 2001.
- Around 10% of all families with dependent children in Great Britain were stepfamilies in 2005.
- In 2008 the proportion of births outside marriage in Scotland rose to 50% for the first time and increased slightly in 2009.
- In Scotland, divorced people accounted for a quarter of people marrying in 2007, an increase from just under 6% in 1971.

### Communication and conflict

Conflict does not necessarily lead to unhappier relationships. How conflict happens and is dealt with is what matters, and can influence the impact it has on children. Taking responsibility for behaviour, and problem solving ability, are important. Behaviours which are associated with unhappier relationships include criticising, contemptuousness, defensiveness, complaining and sarcasm. Good communication between couples can prevent arguments and serious problems from developing, and provide mutual support. Issues reflecting unequal balance of control and poor communication often underlie relationship difficulties.

### What puts pressure on relationships?

Many things put pressure on relationships, including work pressure, financial worries, arguments, and life events such as ill health and bereavement. It is normal for relationship quality and satisfaction to decline after the birth of a baby. Parents of disabled or chronically ill children face additional pressures which can continue into the child's adulthood, and can have a detrimental impact on parents' health, relationship and ability to parent.

### What helps parents to manage better?

Parents manage better when they can spend time together as a couple, communicate well, have trust and respect, can give and take, have a supportive relationship and are happy with their roles and responsibilities.

Balancing closeness with independence is important. However, the multiple challenges facing families affected by disability can leave parents with little time for themselves, other siblings or their relationship.

### Attitudes towards relationships

Attitudes can underpin many relationship issues. Adults with a 'developmental' perspective are more likely to engage in relationship improving behaviour and seek support if they experience difficulties. This perspective can help people to understand and deal with relationship issues by seeing relationships as fluid, in their control and able to change, and appreciating the importance of communication and understanding their partner's behaviour.

### The impact of breakdown on well-being

Improving relationship satisfaction and preventing relationships from breaking down (where appropriate) are important for the well-being of both adults and children. Although living in conflict is detrimental to their own and their children's well-being, parents sometimes stay in unsatisfactory relationships as they worry about the impact relationship breakdown might have on children. However, most children adjust to change after a period of instability. Stability is more important than family structure for children's well-being, even if that is in a single family.

Many factors can influence the impact of relationship breakdown, including social and economic support, the ability to forgive, and who initiated the separation. During separation and divorce, men and women seek help for different reasons. While both want to do the best for their children, their own emotional state can interfere with their ability to do so.

### Contact with children after separation

Most parents make informal verbal agreements over contact and maintenance payments. Successful contact arrangements do not have to be conflict-free, but any issues need to be well-managed. It helps if the resident parent encourages the contact, parents accept each other's new partners, and all parties' wishes (including children's) are considered. A realistic view of each other's strengths and weaknesses, and the ability to compromise, is beneficial. Developing good communication skills between couples may be more effective in facilitating contact than legal interventions.

Arranging contact requires a sustained effort by both parents, and acceptance of changing roles, even if their relationship is not amicable. Non-resident fathers often have to learn a new role and way of relating to their children after separation.

Where fathers pay maintenance, there is usually frequent contact with children and less conflict between parents. However, contact and money can be a source of ongoing disagreement. Long working hours and lack of suitable accommodation can make it difficult for fathers to organise contact.

Mothers can control how much time fathers spend with their children by 'gatekeeping', though they sometimes work hard to ensure that fathers remain involved with their children after separation. A cycle of distrust can be triggered if fathers feel undervalued or excluded.

### Financial issues

Many families affected by disability face additional costs and constraints on income which can continue into the parents' old age and put strain on relationships. Although there is disagreement over the size of extra costs incurred by disability and how best to measure them, estimates range from £7.24 to £1,513 per week. Appropriate and affordable childcare for disabled children can be hard to find, affecting parents' ability to work.

Men and women face different financial pressures following separation. Single mothers are the worst off financially, and some mothers accept lower, or refuse, financial contributions from fathers due to difficulties in the relationship. Non-resident fathers can move several times before finding an adequate home, while continuing to cover some family home costs.

Many families reduce spending on social activities, increase working hours, spend savings or borrow money to deal with immediate financial pressures following separation.

Relationship breakdown places pressure on housing, including social housing, to provide suitable accommodation for blended families and visiting children. Non-resident parents can feel pressured to include bedrooms, garden space and other 'family home' facilities for visiting children.

### Supporting parents

Helping couples to recognise the early signs of relationship difficulty and motivating them to seek help are important. As well as contributing to relationship breakdown, unresolved issues can interfere with the health of a new relationship. For lesbian and gay couples formed following breakdown of a heterosexual relationship, the formation of a new sexual identity while creating a new stepfamily can present further complications. Many parents would be prepared to learn about developing relationship and parenting skills.

Both men and women prefer support to come from someone familiar who has been through similar experiences. Family and friends are the most common source of support for relationship and emotional difficulties, though this is not problem-free. When a relationship is in serious trouble, people prefer support from skilled professionals.

Parents face practical and emotional barriers to seeking support from relationship services, such as not wanting to admit to having troubles, feelings of stigma, not knowing what services exist and thinking that nothing could help. Forming good, intimate couple relationships is still commonly believed to be a private and personal matter. Long waiting times, cost and lack of convenient appointment times can stop people seeking relationship counselling or family mediation. Lack of suitable childcare can make it difficult for parents of disabled children to access relationship services.

Families with disabled or chronically ill children do not receive an appropriate level of support, which puts pressure on relationships. Professionals can see disability in a negative light and not recognise that families can manage very well where sufficient support is in place.

Access to short term breaks is key in easing time pressures and helping relationships between parents of disabled children. However, this is not problem-free as parents can feel guilty or concerned about safety when using breaks, which can add to their stress. Current provision has been criticised for being both inadequate and inappropriate.

Services are most effective when they are flexible and respond to the needs of individuals, and differentiate between mothers and fathers.

### Research on family change

This briefing is based on a longer report. A range of publications were drawn on, including literature reviews of existing research, research findings reported in journal articles, reports of longitudinal studies (e.g. Growing up in Scotland), analysis of other longitudinal studies (e.g. the Millenium Cohort Study) analysis of survey data (e.g. the British Household Panel Survey), Scottish and UK Government reports, research and reports by the third sector, as well as statistical data. Also, a survey and interviews were conducted with disabled parents and parents of disabled children.

A breakdown of the research used, and references, are available in the full report. Download it free at

[www.aboutfamilies.org.uk](http://www.aboutfamilies.org.uk)