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Supporting healthy relationships among separating and separated parents

A practical guide

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INTRODUCTION

Official statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions estimated that in March 2020 there were 2.4 million separated families in Great Britain including 3.6 million children in separated families.^{S9}¹ Although conflict often precedes and contributes to parents' decision to separate, sometimes separation can cause new conflict, as parents might fight over financial support, contact, and living arrangements. As set out in our 2016 review, there is a strong body of evidence suggesting that **when parental conflict is frequent, intense, and poorly resolved, it can put children's mental health and long-term outcomes at risk.**^{S18}

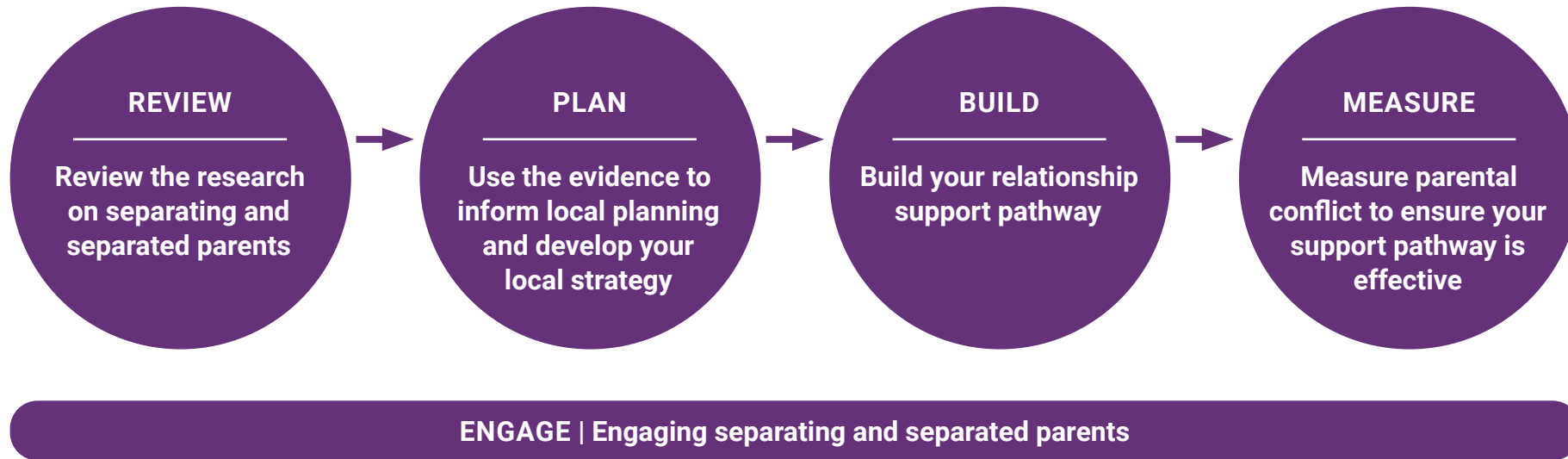
Supporting healthy relationships among separating and separated parents is therefore an increasingly important focus for early intervention and local family services. This practical guide has been developed to improve understanding of how separation and parental conflict can impact on children's outcomes, what evidence-based support can be offered to separating and separated parents, how to assess progress for these families, and how to effectively engage with them.

The guide includes:

- An overview of the research evidence of the impact of separation and parental conflict on child outcomes, and of the risk factors that can increase the risk of parental conflict and separation.
- A section showing how research evidence can be put into practice to inform your local strategy.
- A summary of evidence-based healthy relationship and parenting interventions that can be used with separating and separated parents.
- A summary of measurement tools that can be used to measure parental conflict and co-parenting with separating and separated parents.
- A summary of recommendations on how to engage separating and separated parents that have been developed in consultation with local authorities.

¹ Throughout the text, studies referenced in this review are denoted by **S1–32**, which correspond to the [full reference list](#) at the end of this document.

Figure 1: Components in this practical guide



This is not a prescriptive guide, meaning that it does not recommend one particular intervention, measurement tool or engagement strategy. Ultimately, the guide is intended to provide practical advice to local authorities taking part in the national Reducing Parental Conflict programme and with an interest in improving their understanding, local offer and evaluation in relation to separating and separated parents.

REVIEW

An overview of the research



This section explains what research evidence can tell us about child outcomes, and risk and mediating factors associated with separation and parental conflict. Child outcomes include child mental and physical health, relevant risk factors include key stressors on relationships such as financial pressure and alcohol. Mediating factors that can impact on children include parenting and father absence.

There is an extensive body of UK and international research on what factors increase the risk of parental separation, and how parental conflict and separation can impact child outcomes. This overview summarises the best available research evidence, and more information on the studies can be found in the appendix.²

The research evidence is important for local planning. It can help you to make the case for the importance of promoting healthy relationships and persuade local stakeholders to commit to local work on reducing parental conflict. It should also inform the choices you make in your local strategy, both in terms of priorities for change and the practical ways of taking action.

This section explains what research evidence can tell us about six key areas of child outcomes and risk factors. These areas include child mental and physical health, parenting, and key stressors on relationships such as financial pressure and alcohol. We then show you how the research findings connect in practice to important questions for your local data collection and strategy development.

² Available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/supporting-healthy-relationships-separating-and-separated-parents-appendix.pdf>

Parental conflict can be reflected in a wide range of behaviours, from constructive (helpful) to destructive (harmful) behaviours. Harmful behaviours in a relationship which are frequent, intense, and poorly resolved can lead to a lack of respect and a lack of resolution. Behaviours such as shouting, becoming withdrawn or slamming doors can be viewed as destructive.

Internalising behaviours are characterised by symptoms of withdrawal, inhibition, fearfulness, sadness, shyness, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and suicidality in its most extreme.

Externalising behaviours are characterised by a broad set of behavioural difficulties, including aggression, hostility, non-compliant and disruptive behaviours, verbal and physical violence, anti-social behaviour, conduct disorder, delinquency and even vandalism.

The impact of separation and parental conflict on child mental health and behavioural problems

The majority of the research evidence identified suggests that mental health problems and behavioural difficulties are more common among children of separated and separating parents, although it is not always clear from the evidence what role parental conflict plays.

- **Children from separated families are more likely to have internalising or externalising behavioural problems compared to those from intact families, and this difference can be greatly explained by exposure to parental conflict.** ^{S5, S19, S20, S29} In particular, divorces characterised by high co-parental hostility and low co-parental cooperation can negatively impact children leading to reduced self-esteem, delinquency problems, and problems with intimacy in young adulthood. ^{S19}

- **According to UK research evidence, periods of family disruption (for example, temporary separation, or the divorce process) have a particular negative impact on children**, who can consequently experience more conduct and hyperactivity problems than children from stable, or divorced, families.^{S13}
- According to a longitudinal study conducted in the UK, **children from separated families have lower scores on national tests at age 16 than children in intact homes**. However, it is unclear from the evidence if parental conflict can explain this difference.^{S3}
- Moreover, prenatal **family conflict increases children's vulnerability to the harmful effect of parental separation** on child problem behaviour up to preadolescence.^{S32}
- Separation and marital aggression combined with other factors such as social isolation, financial issues, poor total family functioning and poor maternal mental health can act cumulatively to increase a child's risk of negative outcomes.^{S12} Notably, when considered individually, **living in a lone/separated parent family was the strongest, and significant, predictor of child externalising behaviour at age 10**.
- Conversely, one study conducted in the UK shows that **children in high-conflict situations are at least no worse off when their parents separate**, as emotional health and behaviour are more negatively impacted for children living in high-conflict households than for children whose parents ultimately split up before the end of childhood.^{S3}
- Although some studies reported that parental conflict among separated parents does not have a negative impact on child outcomes, it is not possible to draw conclusions from them given that they suffer from significant methodological limitations.^{S1, S17}

The impact of separation and parental conflict on child physical health

Research on the impact of parental conflict among separated or separated parents on children's physical health outcomes is limited. However, research evidence suggests that separation during childhood can be associated with risky health behaviours, such as smoking, and a lower or higher body mass index (BMI).

- A longitudinal study including UK data shows that regardless of whether parental conflict is present, and the age at which separation occurred, **separation during childhood can be associated with higher likelihood of daily smoking in late adolescence.**^{S28} The same study shows no impact of separation and parental conflict on cardiometabolic risk factors and physical activity in the UK population.
- According to UK research evidence, **parental separation during young childhood is associated, in the longer term, with a lower or higher body mass index** when compared with children in intact families. However, it is unclear from the evidence whether parental conflict can explain this difference.^{S15}

The role of parenting and co-parenting

A number of studies have shown the negative impact that poor parenting/co-parenting practices can have on child outcomes.

- **Conflict between ex-spouses can leave parents emotionally drained and thus less attentive to their child.**^{S19, S29} Evidence from a review article, which includes UK data, shows that poor parenting and co-parenting behaviours, such as low levels of parental support and low levels of parental behaviours that provide structure by consistently setting and monitoring appropriate rules and limits, can in turn negatively impact post-divorce child adjustment.^{S29}

- A review article, which includes UK data, suggests that **there are specific parenting behaviours through which post-divorce parental conflict can impact children's internalising and externalising behavioural problems**. These include: invasive parental behaviours to control or discipline children; situations where parents put children in a parental role for either practical or emotional support; and situations where parents involve children in their parental disputes.^{S19}
- A review article including UK data suggests **that the harm inflicted by negative behaviour is stronger than the impact of positive parenting behaviour**; in other words, 'bad is stronger than good'. For example, hostile parenting was more strongly related to internalising and externalising behaviour than parental support, and parent–child conflicts were more strongly associated with internalising problems than parent–child relationship quality.^{S29}
- **The combination of separation and negative, destructive co-parenting can negatively impact children from a young age** with research evidence from Portugal showing an impact on relational problems, emotional symptoms, hyperactivity and conduct problems for children aged 2 or 3 years.^{S23}

The impact of father absence on child outcomes

Father absence appears to be an important factor that can negatively impact child outcomes. This appears particularly relevant in the UK, as national data from the Department for Work and Pensions shows that from 2014 to 2020, 86% of non-resident parents were male. Some gender differences in child outcomes emerge from the evidence when examining this impact:

- **According to research evidence from the UK, father absence can negatively impact internalising behaviours in both boys and girls**, but there is mixed evidence on whether father absence is more detrimental in early or mid-childhood.^{S7, S8, S11}
- **There is mixed research evidence on how father absence can negatively impact externalising problems in males and females.** One review article including UK data reports that father absence increases externalising problems across boys and girls.^{S22} Research from the UK also suggests that father absence is more likely to increase child externalising problems for boys.^{S11}
- A review article including UK data suggests that **father absence can also have a negative impact on educational attainment, particularly for secondary education (by increasing problem behaviours rather than by impairing cognitive ability)**, and adolescent risky behaviour, such as smoking or early pregnancy.^{S22}

Linking poor parental mental health and separation

Although the research evidence on the link between poor parental mental health – characterised by a combination of abnormal thoughts, emotions and behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental process underlying mental functioning^{S2, S4} – and separation is limited, there is some evidence to suggest that separation is associated with a greater risk of depression among parents.

- **There is mixed research evidence on whether separation can increase the risk of mental health problems among parents** across a range of outcomes including, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation/attempt, alcohol abuse/dependence, and illicit drug abuse/dependence.^{S14, S27}
- However, one US study shows that **separation can increase the probability of future depressive episodes among parents with depressive disorders before separation.**^{S26}
- Research evidence from one other study that used a mother-only sample also shows that **the risk of depression was higher among mothers who were divorced or separated.**^{S10}
- It is unclear from the research whether poor mental health among parents can negatively impact the relationship, leading to separation.


The link between separation and financial issues, and alcohol and substance abuse

Research evidence shows that financial problems and alcohol and substance abuse can impact on parental relationships, increasing the risk of separation.

- One study that analysed data from 30 countries shows that in married couples with children, **both father's long-term unemployment and father's job loss do increase the risk of divorce.** However, it is unclear whether parental conflict can explain this prevalence.^{S16}
- Research evidence suggests that **separation impacts more negatively on internalising behaviours among children from lower-income families than children from higher-income families.**^{S31} However, it is unclear whether parental conflict can help explain this difference.
- **Parental separation is more common in families with parental alcoholism or substance abuse problems,** regardless of parents' age and whether they suffer from mental health disorders. However, it is unclear whether parental conflict can explain this prevalence.^{S30}
- With respect to timing and separation, research evidence shows that **in families with an alcoholic mother, or where both parents are alcoholic, the risk of separation is higher in the period immediately following birth through to 5 to 7 years of age. In families with a father-only alcoholism, the risk of separation is higher from age 8 onward.**^{S30}

PLAN

Using research evidence to inform your strategy

 This section illustrates how the research evidence outlined in the previous section connect to important questions for your local data collection and strategy development.

The research findings can be used to:

- support population needs assessment³ by identifying relevant data you might need to collect, or informing your Joint Strategic Needs Assessment
- inform local planning for how parental conflict is going to be tackled
- identify links with other strategies such as those on early help, domestic abuse and supporting families
- identify training and development needs to ensure your local workforce provide appropriate support.

The table below provides some examples of how the research can help you to develop strategic questions and inform what local data you collect. To simplify the process, you might work with owners of existing datasets (for example, local leads on strategies such as family poverty and drug and alcohol abuse) which are likely to include similar data.

³ Available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/conducting-a-needs-assessment-on-parental-conflict>

Research evidence	Strategic questions	Questions informing data collection strategies
A number of stressors (including separation, social isolation, financial issues, poor total family functioning, marital aggression and poor maternal mental health) can act cumulatively to increase a child's risk of negative outcomes.	How can you integrate healthy relationship support in your local support for families with multiple, complex needs?	<p>What is the prevalence of separated families living below the national average income, and what are their demographic characteristics (for instance in terms of geographical location, average age and ethnicity)?</p> <p>What is the prevalence of separated mothers diagnosed with a mental health condition?</p>
Parental separation is more common in families with parental alcoholism or substance abuse problems.	How can you establish effective partnership arrangements with alcohol and substance abuse services to drive forward local strategy to reduce parental conflict?	<p>What is the prevalence of parents with substance abuse problems, and what are their demographic characteristics (for instance in terms of geographical location, family income, average age and ethnicity)?</p> <p>What is the prevalence of parents with alcohol abuse problems, and what are their demographic characteristics (for instance in terms of geographical location, family income, average age and ethnicity)?</p>
<p>Antenatal family conflict increases children's vulnerability to the harmful effect of parental separation on child problem behaviour up to preadolescence.</p> <p>The combination of separation and destructive co-parenting can negatively impact children from a young age.</p>	How can partnership between maternity and early years services tackle parental conflict as soon as possible?	<p>How many parents access maternity services, at what time periods do they access services, and what are their demographic characteristics (for instance in terms of geographical location, family income, average age and ethnicity)?</p> <p>How many families accessing maternity services were also known to early help services, and what are their demographic characteristics (for instance in terms of geographical location, family income, average age and ethnicity)?</p>

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Research evidence	Strategic questions	Questions informing data collection strategies
Father absence appears to be an important factor that can negatively impact child outcomes.	How can you develop effective strategies to prevent father absence and promote children's wellbeing?	What is the prevalence of children in separated families who do not see their father? TIP: to get an estimate, you can use the indicator on the proportion of children in separated families who see their non-resident parents regularly ⁴ published by the Department for Work and Pensions, based on data from the Understanding Society survey. ⁵
There are specific parenting behaviours through which post-divorce parental conflict can impact children's internalising and externalising behavioural problems. These include invasive parental behaviours to control or discipline children, situations where parents put children in a parental role for either practical or emotional support, and situations where parents involve children in their parental disputes.	How well do your services help parents in conflict recognise these behaviours and their negative impact on children? To what extent does your workforce training highlight the negative impact of such behaviours?	How well do your case management systems capture parental conflict among families you work with? How well do your services use outcome measures to assess the presence of such behaviours in your local families? How confident are you that your workforce is familiar with these behaviours and applies that knowledge in their practice? To what extent is your workforce familiar with these behaviours, and how do you know it?
In married couples with children, both father's long-term unemployment and father's job loss increase the risk of divorce.	How can you establish effective partnership arrangements to promote healthy relationships among families experiencing unemployment?	What is the prevalence of fathers who lost their jobs in the last year or with long-term unemployment known to early help services? What are their demographic characteristics (for instance in terms of geographical location, family income, average age and ethnicity)?

⁴ Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/parental-conflict-indicator-201112-to-201516>

⁵ Available at <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>

BUILD

Building a relationship support pathway for separating and separated parents



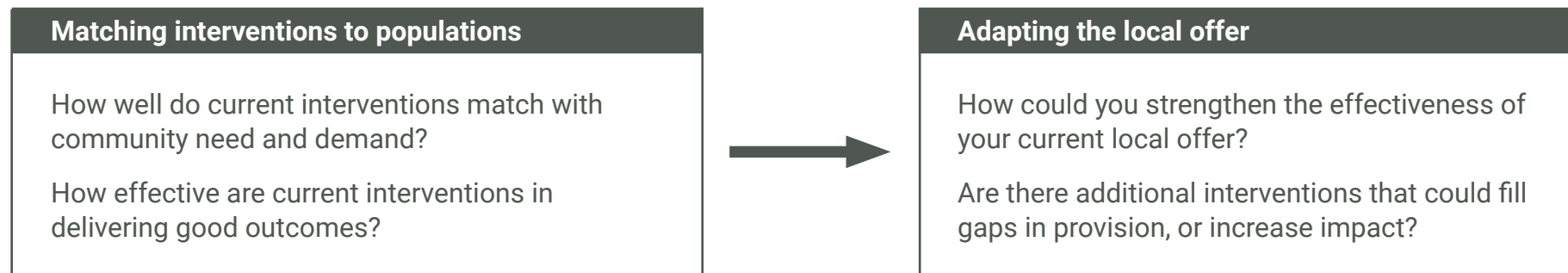
This section identifies 11 evidence-based healthy relationship and parenting interventions which may be helpful as part of local support pathways for separating and separated parents.

In every local area there are various services and interventions that can help separating and separated parents to build and maintain healthy relationships. An effective support pathway starts with the first services that parents turn to when they're struggling, and describes how wider support services fit together to address parental conflict and reduce the impact it has on children.

The EIF's support pathway model⁶ offers a structure to build your universal and targeted support for families, linking local support interventions to your needs assessment and ensuring your pathway is underpinned by research evidence.

⁶ Available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/developing-a-relationship-support-pathway-for-families-a-support-pathway-model>

Figure 2: Matching interventions to populations and adapting the local offer to increase impact



Intervention evaluation evidence is a good place to start when reviewing and considering how to strengthen a local support pathway. Interventions which have been through a structured evaluation process are likely to be specific about their theory of change and implementation and delivery process. This means their learning about delivery and effectiveness can be helpful in a wider context, even if a local commissioner is looking to adapt a local approach rather than invest in a new intervention.



EIF resources: evidence-informed interventions for improving child outcomes

EIF publishes details of interventions which have shown a positive impact on child outcomes in the online [EIF Guidebook](#), including a [spotlight set specifically focused on interventions for improving interparental outcomes](#). You can also find more detail in the Commissioner Guide on [‘What interventions have been shown to improve child outcomes?’](#)

For the purposes of this guide we have identified 11 parenting and relationship interventions which may be helpful as part of local support pathways for separating and separated parents. For each intervention we have set out the following:

- **Description:** the key characteristics of the intervention, to help you to understand whether it could fit your local context.
- **Level of provision:** this information can be used to reflect on the match with the level of need of your local population. Some families will respond initially to a targeted intervention and may then only need universal services and light-touch support, such as a supportive conversation with a health visitor, or signposting to online self-help resources. Other families will go on to have a more persistent need for support, requiring specialist services, such as an intensive intervention on parental conflict and parenting, or psychological therapy from a local mental health service.
- Please note that the interventions included below are all targeted selective (interventions offered to families based on broad demographic risks) because they are all delivered only to separating and separated families, which are considered at higher risk of experiencing parental conflict.
- **Quality of evidence:** to help you to understand how confident you can be that an intervention will work.
- **Training and Cost:** all the interventions included have a low (<£100 per unit) or medium–low (£100–£499 per unit) cost.
- **Delivery and setting:** to help you to understand whether an intervention is a good match for your local context. For instance, based on the data collected on your local population, you might prioritise an intervention that can be delivered in a variety of different settings to allow more flexibility.
- **Duration:** information on how long it takes to complete an intervention will help you to understand if it is appropriate for your local population. For instance, based on the data collected locally about drop-out rates for other interventions, you might prioritise short interventions that have been shown to be effective in improving outcomes.

Interventions assessed through a full EIF assessment of the evidence

The first table includes four interventions for which EIF has conducted a full assessment of the evidence. You can find more information on these interventions and the assessment process in the [EIF Guidebook](#).

Intervention	Description	Level of provision	Quality of evidence: child outcomes	Quality of evidence: parent outcomes	Training	Cost	Delivery and setting	Delivered in the UK?	Duration
New Beginnings Programme (NBP)	A parenting intervention for parents of children between the ages of 3 and 18 years. It aims to improve young people's internalising and externalising problems by teaching anger management skills to reduce children's exposure to interparental conflict.	Targeted selective	Robust evidence (level 4) of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> reduced externalising problems reduced internalising problems reduced number of sexual partners. 	Robust evidence (level 4) of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improved parental discipline. 	Practitioners have three days of training. Booster training of practitioners is recommended.	Medium–low	Delivered by two practitioners, to groups of up to eight parents in outpatient/health centre settings.	No	10 sessions (17.5 hours in total)

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Intervention	Description	Level of provision	Quality of evidence: child outcomes	Quality of evidence: parent outcomes	Training	Cost	Delivery and setting	Delivered in the UK?	Duration
Triple P Family Transitions	An intensive intervention programme for parents experiencing difficulties because of separation or divorce. It focuses on skills to resolve conflicts with former partners and how to cope positively with stress.	Targeted selective	Robust evidence (level 4) of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> reduced externalising problems reduced intensity of externalising problems. 	Robust evidence (level 4) of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improved parenting style reduced parental stress reduced anger. 	Practitioners have 37.5 hours of training. Practitioners must have completed prerequisite training in a Level 4 Triple P Provider Training Course. Booster training of practitioners is not required.	Low	Delivered by a Triple P practitioner, who can come from a range of professions (e.g. family support worker), to groups of approximately eight families. This can be delivered in community centres, children's centres, or other early years setting, outpatient/health centres, or at home.	Yes	Five sessions (10 hours in total)

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Intervention	Description	Level of provision	Quality of evidence: child outcomes	Quality of evidence: parent outcomes	Training	Cost	Delivery and setting	Delivered in the UK?	Duration
Parents Forever	A divorce education intervention for parents who have children between the ages of 0 and 18 years. The intervention aims to mitigate adverse outcomes from divorce and separation on parents and their children.	Targeted selective	Preliminary evidence of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improved emotional symptoms reduced peer problems reduced conduct problems. 	Preliminary evidence of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improved positive parenting reduced inconsistent discipline reduced poor supervision. 	The practitioners have four hours of training. Booster training of practitioners is not required.	Low	Delivered by two practitioners, to groups of up to 12 parents in community-based settings.	No	Three sessions (8 hours in total)

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Intervention	Description	Level of provision	Quality of evidence: child outcomes	Quality of evidence: parent outcomes	Training	Cost	Delivery and setting	Delivered in the UK?	Duration
Parents Plus Parenting when Separated	A parenting intervention for parents of children between the ages of 0 and 18 years. The intervention is designed for parents who are preparing for, going through, or have gone through a separation or divorce.	Targeted selective	Preliminary evidence of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improved child behaviour. 	Preliminary evidence of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improved parenting satisfaction improved parental adjustment reduced parental conflict. 	Practitioners have 17 hours of training. Booster training of practitioners is recommended.	Medium–low	Delivered by two practitioners, to groups of up to 12 parents. This can be delivered in children’s centres or other early years setting, primary or secondary schools, community centres or outpatient/health centres.	Yes	Six sessions (15 hours in total)

Interventions assessed through a preliminary assessment of the evidence

This second table includes a total of seven interventions designed for separating and separated parents delivered in the UK. The strength of the first two interventions listed in this table (Mentalization-Based Therapy – Parenting Together, and Separated Parent Information Programme (SPIP) *plus) have been assessed as part of this guide. For more information on the methodological approach used for the preliminary assessment, as well as further detail on both interventions, including their underpinning evidence, see appendix.⁸

In terms of the remaining five online interventions, EIF has conducted only a light-touch assessment of the evidence in 2020, as part of our recent review on reducing parental conflict in the context of Covid-19. In appendix C⁹ of that review you can find more information on the methodology, each intervention and the underpinning evidence.

Please note: EIF has not conducted a full assessment of these interventions as would be undertaken when assessing a programme or intervention via the EIF Guidebook. Therefore, the ratings provided in the table below should not be taken to be authoritative in the same way as EIF strength of evidence assessments published via the Guidebook.

⁸ Available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/supporting-healthy-relationships-separating-and-separated-parents-appendix.pdf>

⁹ Available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/rpc-c19-vd-appendixc.pdf>

Intervention	Description	Level of provision	Quality of evidence	Training	Cost	Delivery and setting	Duration
Mentalization-Based Therapy – Parenting Together	An adaptation of Mentalization-Based Therapy specifically for separating and separated parents. The intervention is focused on making sense of the feelings experienced by each parent and helping them to recognise the ways in which malign assumptions about the other parent's intentions can lead to increased anger, miscommunication and misunderstandings.	Targeted selective	To date the evaluation evidence for the intervention's effectiveness is limited, as the only evaluation of child and parent/interparental outcomes was part of a small-scale study. A variation of this intervention, Mentalization-Based Therapy PP, is currently being evaluated in the UK.	Practitioners attend a manualised intervention training.	N/A	Delivered by two practitioners	Six to 12 one-hour sessions (average duration: 8 sessions)
Separated Parent Information Programme (SPIP) *plus	A parenting intervention designed to help parents who, the court believes, are able to reach their own agreement about their child(ren). The intervention includes a four-hour group intervention focused on conflict management skills; an online intervention 'Getting it Right for the Children'; a session to consolidate progress; and a mediation information and assessment meeting (or MIAM) where the parents proceed to mediation to negotiate an agreement, make their own arrangements, or return to court.	Targeted selective	To date the evaluation evidence for the intervention's effectiveness is limited as the only evaluation of child and parent/interparental outcomes was a post-intervention study using inappropriate outcome measures.	Practitioners attend a manualised intervention training.	N/A	Delivered by two practitioners	Six hours: four hours for the group intervention + two hours for the 'Plus' session and the mediation information and assessment meeting

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Intervention	Description	Level of provision	Quality of evidence	Training	Cost	Delivery and setting	Duration
Partners in Parenting (PiP)	A parenting intervention designed to increase parental protective factors and decrease parental risk factors associated with adolescent depression and anxiety.	Targeted selective	<p>The evaluation evidence for the intervention's effectiveness is from one RCT and three pre/post studies evaluating interparental outcomes.</p> <p>PiP has preliminary evidence of improved self-reported parenting behaviours.</p> <p>The evaluation evidence for the intervention's effectiveness on child outcomes is limited to date.</p>	N/A	N/A	Digital delivery of unguided self-help content	Up to nine interactive online modules (15–25 minutes each)
Cooperation After Divorce (CAD) Online	A parenting intervention designed for separating and separated parents consisting of 17 digital learning modules, each of which takes 30–60 minutes to complete and can be accessed on a tablet, mobile device or computer. Participants decide which modules they want to complete, and how much time they want to spend on them.	Targeted selective	To date the evaluation evidence for the intervention's effectiveness is limited as the only available evaluation assessed only interparental outcomes and retained less than 30% of the original sample.	N/A	N/A	Digital delivery of unguided self-help content	Up to 17 modules, each of which takes 30–60 minutes to complete

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Intervention	Description	Level of provision	Quality of evidence	Training	Cost	Delivery and setting	Duration
Focus On Kids Online	An adaptation of the face-to-face intervention Focus On Kids. The web-based intervention consists of video vignettes showing common post-divorce and separation scenarios that might produce conflict. Divorcing and separating parents are asked to answer a quiz on the scenarios, and at the end they receive feedback comments derived from group session observation, the intervention curriculum, academic literature on children of divorce, and academic publications on co-parenting following divorce and separation.	Targeted selective	To date the evaluation evidence for the intervention's effectiveness is limited as the only available evaluation assessed only interparental outcomes using inappropriate outcome measures.	N/A	N/A	Digital delivery of unguided self-help content	One 45–60-minute online session
Parents Forever Online	An online adaptation of the face-to-face version of Parents Forever. This intervention covers the impact of divorce on children and adults, legal and money issues, and finding pathways to a new life.	Targeted selective	To date the evaluation evidence for the intervention's effectiveness is limited as the only available evaluation assessed only interparental outcomes using inappropriate outcome measures.	N/A	N/A	Digital delivery of unguided self-help content	Five sections that can be completed in eight hours
Children in Between Online	An online intervention designed to teach parents how to manage the stress of divorce/separation, and how to mitigate the negative effect this can have on their children.	Targeted selective	This intervention is not underpinned by evidence from any published study.	N/A	N/A	Digital delivery of unguided self-help content	Videos and activities that can be completed in four hours

MEASURE

Measuring parental conflict in separating and separated parents



This section outlines different types of measurement tools that can be used to measure parental conflict and co-parenting with separating and separated parents.

A key question for a relationship support pathway is how do you know how effective it is? We do know that on balance, families and children who receive interventions shown through rigorous testing to have improved outcomes are more likely to benefit, and to a greater degree, than those who receive other services. However, selecting evidence-based interventions does not guarantee that they will work well in every local context, or even be implemented in the way that they were intended. Local monitoring and evaluation are essential to answering the question of effectiveness, and this calls for valid and reliable measurement tools.

Different types of measurement tools could be used for:

- **Eligibility purposes:** such as to determine whether separating and separated parents may benefit from relationship support, and if so what type of support would best suit them.

- **Monitoring purposes:** such as to allow both the practitioner and participant to assess and reflect on how they are progressing while the intervention is being delivered.
- **Evaluation purposes:** such as to determine if families receiving support have better outcomes, and if services and interventions are working for the people they are designed to help.

Measuring progress for individual families is one of the most challenging issues that local areas grapple with when delivering parental conflict support. It is difficult to decide what outcomes to measure as well as how to go about measuring them. Without valid and reliable measures, it is not possible to have confidence in any improvements in child and parent outcomes. However, there are a number of other factors to consider when deciding what measurement tool is best for your situation, such as the anticipated outcomes of your intervention, the resources available, and the participants you are trying to reach.



EIF resources: robust measurement tools for child outcomes

EIF publishes details of robust measurement tools for child outcomes which can be used as part of a local programme on healthy relationships in the online [RPC Measures Selector](#).

For the purposes of this guide we have identified five tools which are particularly relevant to support pathways for separating and separated parents. For each tool we have set out the following:

- **Interparental measures – outcomes assessed:** this information can help you understand if the measure is capable of assessing at least one of the anticipated outcomes specified in the intervention's theory of change. If you deliver and want to evaluate one of the interventions included in

the tables above, a practical way of selecting your measure(s) would be to consider what outcomes have improved according to the evidence. For instance, **Parents Plus Parenting when Separated** has preliminary evidence of improving parental conflict, therefore if you deliver this intervention you might decide to use the Acrimony Scale¹⁰ to measure its impact.

- **Respondent – who can complete the measure:** this information can be used to understand who will complete the measure and to decide if the measure is appropriate given your population. For instance, if you are interested in measuring the child’s point of view, you might decide to use the Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale¹¹ that is completed by children. If you want to measure co-parenting for both intact and separated parents, you might choose the Parenting Alliance Measure¹² or the Parent Problem Checklist.¹³
- **Mode of administration:** whether the measure can be completed in-person or online.
- **Target population:** the group or population this measure is designed to be used for.

10 EIF measure report available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/resources/measure-report-child-pac.pdf>

11 EIF measure report available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/resources/measure-report-ipr-cpic.pdf>

12 EIF measure report available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/resources/measure-report-ipr-pam.pdf>

13 EIF measure report available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/resources/measure-report-ipr-ppc.pdf>

- **Psychometric features:** these tell you if a measure is valid and reliable. For instance, knowing that your measure might have low reliability would make you cautious in saying that all the changes are due only to the effectiveness of the intervention. To use this information, you will need to familiarise yourself with four features:
 1. **Validity:** the extent to which a tool measures what it claims to
 2. **Internal consistency:** the degree to which items designed to measure the same outcome relate to one another
 3. **Test-retest reliability:** the extent to which the conclusions of a measurement tool are stable over time
 4. **Sensitivity to change:** the degree to which a measurement tool is able to detect change within the timeframe of the programme under evaluation.

Depending on your need, this information can help you to choose the most appropriate measure. For instance, if you want to make sure that you are measuring a particular aspect of the relationship, you might want to prioritise valid measures. In this case, the only measure for which we found evidence of validity is the Quality of Co-parental Communication Scale.¹⁴ If you want to evaluate whether your support is effective, you might decide to prioritise a measure with evidence of sensitivity to change (in this case, the Acrimony Scale, the Parenting Alliance Measure or the Parent Problem Checklist).

- **Implementation features:** this information can be used to understand if the measure is appropriate given the needs of your population and practical considerations. For instance, you might decide to use the shortest measure to ensure all parents can complete it, or you might prioritise freely available measures.

¹⁴ EIF measure report available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/resources/measure-report-ipr-qccs.pdf>



Common challenges when using measurement tools

‘I want to use the Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) but it is too long.’

Although it may be tempting to remove items to reduce its length, a better solution is to use only the subscale of the measure which is more relevant for your context. CPIC has three subscales: *conflict*, which measures how often conflicts occur and the level of hostility and resolution; *threat*, which indicates the degree to which children feel threatened; and *self-blame*, which assesses the frequency of child-related conflict and the degree to which children blame themselves for parental conflict.

‘Some of the questions I would like to assess are not included in the measure.’

You can combine measures or subscales from different measures to tailor your tool. For instance, you might assess both parental conflict and co-parenting behaviours using the Acrimony Scale (25 items) in combination with the support subscale of the Quality of Co-parental Communication Scale (6 items). Before using your selected measures or subscales, it is important that you confirm they are the right ones to use, as they should be administered in their entirety, without changing, adding, deleting or altering the order of any items.

Read more about practical tips in our short guide: [Using validated tools to measure parental conflict and its impact on children](#)



Additional resources

EIF full-length Guide: [Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes: Guidance on selecting and using valid, reliable and practical measures to evaluate interventions](#)

EIF Tool: [Reducing parental conflict: Outcomes framework](#)

Five measurement tools that can be used to measure parental conflict and co-parenting with separating and separated parents

	Interparental measures Outcomes assessed	Respondent Who can complete the measure?	Mode of administration	Target population	Psychometric features How valid and reliable is the measure?					Implementation features How practical is the measure?			
					Internal consistency (scale)	Internal consistency (subscales)	Test-retest reliability	Validity	Sensitivity to change	Brevity	Availability	Ease of scoring	Used in the UK
					Do the items designed to measure the same outcome relate to one another?		Are the outcomes stable over time?	Does it measure what it claims to measure?	Can it detect important changes over time?	Does it take less than 15 minutes?	Is it freely available?	Is it easy to score and interpret?	Has it been used in the UK?
Parental conflict	Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) This measure assesses parental conflict from the child's point of view, particularly in terms of the frequency, intensity, resolution and perceived threat of the conflict. It also focuses on how the child responds to the conflict, including questions around self-blame and coping mechanisms.	Children aged 9–17 years with intact or separated parents	In person or online	Intact couples and separated parents with children	✓	✓	✓	?	?	✗	✓	✓	✓
	Acrimony Scale This measure assesses relationship conflict, individual adjustment of each partner to separation, concern about child support payments, and concern about current parenting arrangements.	Parents who are separated	In person	Separated parents with children	✓	N/A	?	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	?

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	Interparental measures Outcomes assessed	Respondent Who can complete the measure?	Mode of administration	Target population	Psychometric features How valid and reliable is the measure?					Implementation features How practical is the measure?			
					Internal consistency (scale) Do the items designed to measure the same outcome relate to one another?	Internal consistency (subscales)	Test-retest reliability Are the outcomes stable over time?	Validity Does it measure what it claims to measure?	Sensitivity to change Can it detect important changes over time?	Brevity Does it take less than 15 minutes?	Availability Is it freely available?	Ease of scoring Is it easy to score and interpret?	Used in the UK Has it been used in the UK?
Co-parenting	Parenting Alliance Measure (PAM) This measure assesses how cooperative, communicative, and mutually respectful parents are when caring for their children.	Parents who are in a relationship or are separated	In person	Intact couples and separated parents with children	✓	✓	?	?	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
	Parent Problem Checklist (PPC) This measure assesses the extent of agreement or disagreement between the parents over child-rearing issues.	Parents who are in a relationship or are separated	In person	Intact couples and separated parents with children	✓	N/A	?	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Quality of Co-parental Communication Scale (QCCS) This measure assesses the extent of mutual support and hostility over child-rearing issues with the former spouse. This is one of the measures used to compose the Referral Stage Questionnaire for separated parents.	Parents who are separated	In person	Separated parents with children	✓	✓	?	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	?

ENGAGE

Engaging separating and separated parents



This section covers recommendations on how to engage separating and separated parents that have been developed in consultation with local authorities.

Supporting separating and separated parents depends on good engagement. Engagement strategies should consider:^{S25}

- **recruitment:** how separating and separated parents are approached to take part in an intervention/service
- **retention:** the extent to which separating and separated parents sustain their attendance in an intervention or service
- **involvement:** this is more to do with active participation, such as engaging with material and applying learning by implementing skills between and within sessions.

Below, we discuss some of the key challenges and barriers faced in engaging separating and separated parents, recommended strategies for communicating with separating and separated parents, as well as some key facilitators to engagement. This section combines research evidence produced as part of previous EIF evidence reviews^{S25, S21} and a summary of professional experience collected through consultation with 13 local leads and practitioners. This combination of different types of evidence provides important insights into engaging local communities, overcoming some of the barriers separated parents might be experiencing, and ensuring interventions and services are accessible.

What are the key challenges/barriers in engaging separating and separated parents?

There are some common barriers^{S25} to successfully engaging participants in reducing parental conflict interventions including:

- **awareness barriers:** these include not knowing about the local services that are available, or not recognising the need for support
- **accessibility barriers:** these include cost and location of interventions, as well as timing (at what time the intervention is delivered, but also at what point the intervention is offered within the relationship conflict)
- **acceptability barriers:** these include feelings of personal failure associated with seeking help
- **specific barriers** for accessing relationship support, such as the perception that interventions can be unsuitable or detrimental to people's needs, or the notion that relationships are private and should be managed only by the couple.

Fathers and disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, such as parents with mental health problems and low-income families, tend to be less likely to engage in interventions. Part of the reason is because they are often underrepresented in the workforce delivering family support services.

Key challenges and barriers to engagement: what local experts say

1. Delivery format, including the timing and duration of support, and low motivation can deter separating and separated parents from engaging

The time commitment of a meeting or service involvement can often deter parents from engaging. Scheduling sessions at times where parents are unable to attend, such as during the working day, can also hinder engagement.

Motivational barriers can hinder engagement, for instance it might be questioned whether parents who are compelled to attend services by the courts, rather than engaging for their own reasons, have a real commitment:

'Parents often say that relationship support was needed sooner; however, I do question the motivation to be able to do that because a lot of them that come to us are directed by the court to do so.' **Head of children and family services, Yorkshire and The Humber**

2. Lack of awareness around the impact of conflict on children and around available support may hinder engagement

It can be hard for separating and separated parents to seek help when they are in a high level of conflict, and particularly to get them to see the impact they are having on their children:

'We are seeing lots of cases coming through CAFCASS where it is a parenting assessment because of the level of conflict, and it has got so acrimonious that the parents aren't able to identify the impact it is having on the children. There are bilateral allegations about what is going on and who is to blame for things, and they just can't overcome that. So, it takes some time just to get them to understand the impact on the children as a starting point.' **Domestic abuse lead manager, West Midlands**

A lack of awareness among parents and workers can be an important barrier to engagement:

'The bigger question for me is about how do we promote relationship support amongst the workforce, anybody working with children and families basically, and how do we keep it in their heads when there is such a lot of other services and signposting available? It's kind of one of many.' **Early years manager, North East**

3. Stigma can prevent parents accessing relationship support

There is still stigma around accessing support services, with parents not liking the idea of seeking support and not wanting to be referred to support workers:

'There is a real stigma about us being there just to take your children away from you... We have been doing lot of work with partners about challenging some of that narrative, to show that we want families to stay together because it's the best outcome for children.' **Domestic abuse lead manager, West Midlands**

Moreover, language and communication strategies – such as the decision to target mainly primary caregivers, which for some is synonymous with mothers, or to use only photos of mothers for leaflets – can be stigmatising and might unintentionally exclude parents from engaging with services:

'Unintentionally we can often almost exclude people just by how we say things.' **Team Manager, North East**

Cultural differences may also influence how relationships present and how engaged families are with services. Such differences might raise important questions about whether cultural norms should be challenged in the interest of children:

'There is something around perhaps a Western view of how relationships ought to be, and whether when you give advice to a couple who aren't from the West you need to be a bit more Western, or you acknowledge actually that in their culture that is the standard and the normal.' **Parental relationship coordinator, South East**

4. Fathers can be more difficult to engage

It can be hard to engage fathers in services and it may take them longer to do so. Often fathers are reluctant to engage with services because of previous negative experiences with services where they may not have been, or have fears of not being heard, valued or feel blamed. They may also worry that they will not be treated as equally as the child's mother:

'It takes longer to get them to engage because they have preconceived ideas through maybe past experiences that they have already had with services that they are to blame, or they are at fault, or they are not going to be heard or validated, or we/someone are going to side with mum. I think it's about having those conversations and the reassurance that actually you are just as important and our services are for you also, not just mums; dads are equally as important as mums, especially in the lives of children.' Service manager early support, Yorkshire and The Humber

How best to communicate with separating and separated parents to recruit intervention participants

Multiple communication channels, well-integrated services and a personal offer targeted at the family's needs are all seen as good methods for driving participant recruitment.^{S25} Strategies might include:

- widespread, creative and informative advertisement to reach a wider audience and raise awareness of the support that is available
- recruitment information targeted at separating and separated parents so that individuals can easily determine how interventions would benefit them
- face-to-face contact with parents before the first session to ensure that the correct people are recruited, that their individual needs and concerns are acknowledged, and that they feel comfortable, heard, and reassured by the practitioners

Communicating for intervention recruitment: what local experts say

1. Social media and externally facing websites are very useful to promote services and engage with families

Social media pages and externally facing websites can be particularly helpful if they contain self-help resources and chatrooms. Websites can be codesigned with parents and children to ensure that they are useful and accessible, and can be used by practitioners who can walk users through the relevant information. Creating a website, however, might not be sufficient to promote engagement, as local experts recognised it might be challenging to 'get the website out there':

'There is a barrier to how we get the message out there although the website is there.' **Team manager, North East**

2. Strategies to promote inclusivity can be key to engaging fathers

When promoting and delivering services and interventions, inclusive advertising and language are crucial to recruit and retain fathers:

'Some of the quick wins we found are changes in the way we advertise things, for instance for our young parents programme we have a young dad on the promotional leaflet rather than a woman, and we are working with some male working groups and we are specifically asking them what we need to say and what has prevented them engaging in the past.'

Team manager, North East

'It's kind of anecdotal, but the children with disabilities team...put on two groups for parents, one group was a 'support' group for parents who have a child with disabilities to support each other, the other was an 'information' group to get specialist help and information. They noticed, broadly speaking, men went for the information group. I think that's something around the language. Men actually wanted and needed support and apparently opened up within that group, but it is all about the language and how you frame it a little bit.' **Parental relationship coordinator, South East**

What are the facilitating factors in engaging separating and separated parents?

Research shows that interventions are most likely to be successful when they are developed and delivered around the needs of separating and separated parents to be as accessible as possible. There is also good empirical evidence to demonstrate that a strong and cooperative relationship between a practitioner and participant is critical for effective engagement. Skilled practitioners who are well trained, supported and supervised are critical to a strong therapeutic alliance and intervention effectiveness. Along with interpersonal qualities that contribute to a practitioner's competency, parents value practitioners who are respectful, compassionate, nonjudgmental, empathetic, patient and honest.^{S25}

Moreover, research suggests that participants can be more engaged in online therapy than face-to-face therapy. Geographical distance between the two parties might make the participants feel safer and help them disclose and express themselves more openly than they would in person.^{S21}

Facilitating factors for engagement: what local experts say

1. Be flexible in the delivery of services

Offering timeslots out of regular working hours (such as twilight sessions) can help meet the needs of separating and separated parents. Blended offers, where services/support can be accessed online or in person, can also allow more flexibility and remove barriers for some groups of parents. For instance, online offers might work better for parents with mental health problems, as they can have a break and come back, for parents with social interaction problems, and for parents living in rural areas; while some parents might prefer to meet in person:

'We have just recruited some new staff and we have changed their contracts to include some out-of-hours work so that we are a more accessible workforce. We recognise that people's need doesn't just stop at quarter past five as we do.'

Domestic abuse lead manager, West Midlands

2. Keep in touch with other services/practitioners to ensure they are aware of the local parental conflict support offer

Multiagency meetings can be a good platform for cross-service support and discussion. As part of this discussion, it is key to ensure there is a good understanding of what parental conflict is and how it differs from domestic abuse.

3. Be inclusive and build positive practitioner–family relationships

It is important to reassure both parents that they will be valued and listened to. Having a diverse, well-trained workforce can be key in attracting and retaining parents. For example, men may feel more comfortable attending a service if there is another man or men present, or if the practitioner is a man. Referrals from practitioners already known to the family can help to build a positive therapeutic relationship:

'It's all about valuing both parents... whatever mum gets, dad gets.'

Senior parenting practitioner, North West

'In whatever minority you are in, it's good to see yourself represented.'

Parental relationship coordinator, South East

4. Schools and the voluntary sector can help build trusted and non-defensive relationships with parents and can give voice to the children

Working with schools and the voluntary sector can also help drive participant recruitment, as they can build positive relationships with parents. Schools can also be a key partner to give voice to children:

'Sometimes parents need to hear the children's voice, they need to see it through the children's eyes to realise they may need support; schools can be a nurturing environment for children and parents alike, they are a good place to start some relationship work at the earliest opportunity.'

Team manager, North East

'Schools have been very on board; we had a key person representing the school come along to our bimonthly meetings and really take a lead on this and share across the education sector in the local area.' **Supporting families operations coordinator, North East**

5. Timing is key: be aware of parental 'readiness' to engage with services

Separation is a difficult transition moment, and some parents may be willing to engage sooner than others. It may also be the case that the person who has ended the marital relationship is more ready and willing to engage with a service than the one who has been left. Engaging with practitioners already known to the family can help to learn more about the family history:

'...obviously a separation is a huge thing and it's about how ready you are to accept that the relationship is over. What we tended to find was that the person who left or made the decision to end the relationship was often a lot more ready to receive support than the person who had been left or still wanted the relationship to work.' **Parental relationship coordinator, South East**

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