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Reducing parental conflict Outcomes framework

Planning to reduce parental conflict

Our research suggests that the UK evidence on how best to address parental conflict and improve outcomes for children is still at an early stage. Most interventions targeting the quality of the interparental relationship, in fact, focus on measuring adult outcomes, not child outcomes, and do not rely on a clear picture of how child, parent and family outcomes interrelate.

This outcomes framework outlines the relationships between different outcomes, including the links between interparental conflict and outcomes for parents, children and the wider family. It is a conceptual framework showing the pathways through which recognised risk factors can lead to child exposure to parental conflict and impact on child outcomes.

Please note that we will be publishing practical advice later in the year on how to use the outcomes framework as part of a local needs assessment, a local performance / data dashboard, or as part of service evaluation.

In this document you will find:

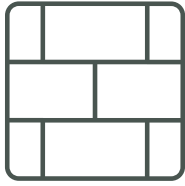
- a brief overview of the evidence underpinning the outcomes framework
- a single-page summary of the outcomes framework
- definitions of the child outcomes and risk factors that currently make up the outcomes framework, some examples of symptoms experienced through the life course, and some measurement tools that are used to assess them.

This is a revised version of the outcomes framework which was first published in March 2019. It is based on EIF's 2016 'what works' report,¹ and our follow-up review of the evidence on interparental conflict and outcomes for children in the contexts of poverty and economic pressure,² as well as a selection of academic sources, including the review by Masarik and Conger on the family stress model.³

1 Harold, G., Acquah, D., Sellers, R. & Chowdry, H. (2016). *What works to enhance interparental relationships and improve outcomes for children*. London: Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/what-works-to-enhance-interparental-relationships-and-improve-outcomes-for-children>

2 Acquah, D., Sellers, R., Stock, L. & Harold, G. (2017). *Interparental conflict and outcomes for children in the contexts of poverty and economic pressure*. London: Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/interparental-conflict-and-outcomes-for-children-in-the-contexts-of-poverty-and-economic-pressure>

3 Masarik, A. S. & Conger R. D. (2017). Stress and child development: a review of the Family Stress Model. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 13(85–90).



Introducing the outcomes framework

This outcomes framework outlines what risk factors can influence interparental conflict and, ultimately, affect child outcomes. The evidence underpinning this framework shows that:

Economic stress, parent's risk factors and the interparental relationship can impact each other.

- 1** Our evidence reviews highlighted that harsh economic conditions, a poor home environment and parents' employment patterns can affect the mental health and wellbeing of each parent,⁴ as well as the interparental relationship and coparenting.⁵
- 2** These risk factors can influence each other. Evidence suggests, for instance, that the mental health problems experienced by a parent can negatively affect the quality of the interparental relationship and parental conflict, and vice versa.⁶
- 3** Individual parents' risk factors, such as their mental health, and interparental risk factors, such as the quality of the interparental relationship, can both in turn influence the home environment and parents' employment conditions.^{7,8,9}

The parent-child relationship and child exposure to conflict are key risk factors.

- 4** Evidence shows that interparental conflict can exert effects on children through disruptions in the parent-child relationship and the development of negative emotions, cognitions, and representations of family relationships caused by exposure to acrimonious interparental conflict.⁴
- 5** Although the parent-child relationship can impact on child outcomes, targeting the parent-child relationship by itself, in a context of ongoing interparental conflict, does not lead to sustained positive outcomes for children.⁴
- 6** The overall impact on children can include problems relating to mental health and wellbeing, physical health, school achievement and antisocial behaviour.⁴

4 Harold et al. 2016.

5 Acquah et al. 2017.

6 Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K. & Wilson, S. J. (2017). Lovesick: How couples' relationships influence health. *Annual review of clinical psychology*, 13, 421–443.

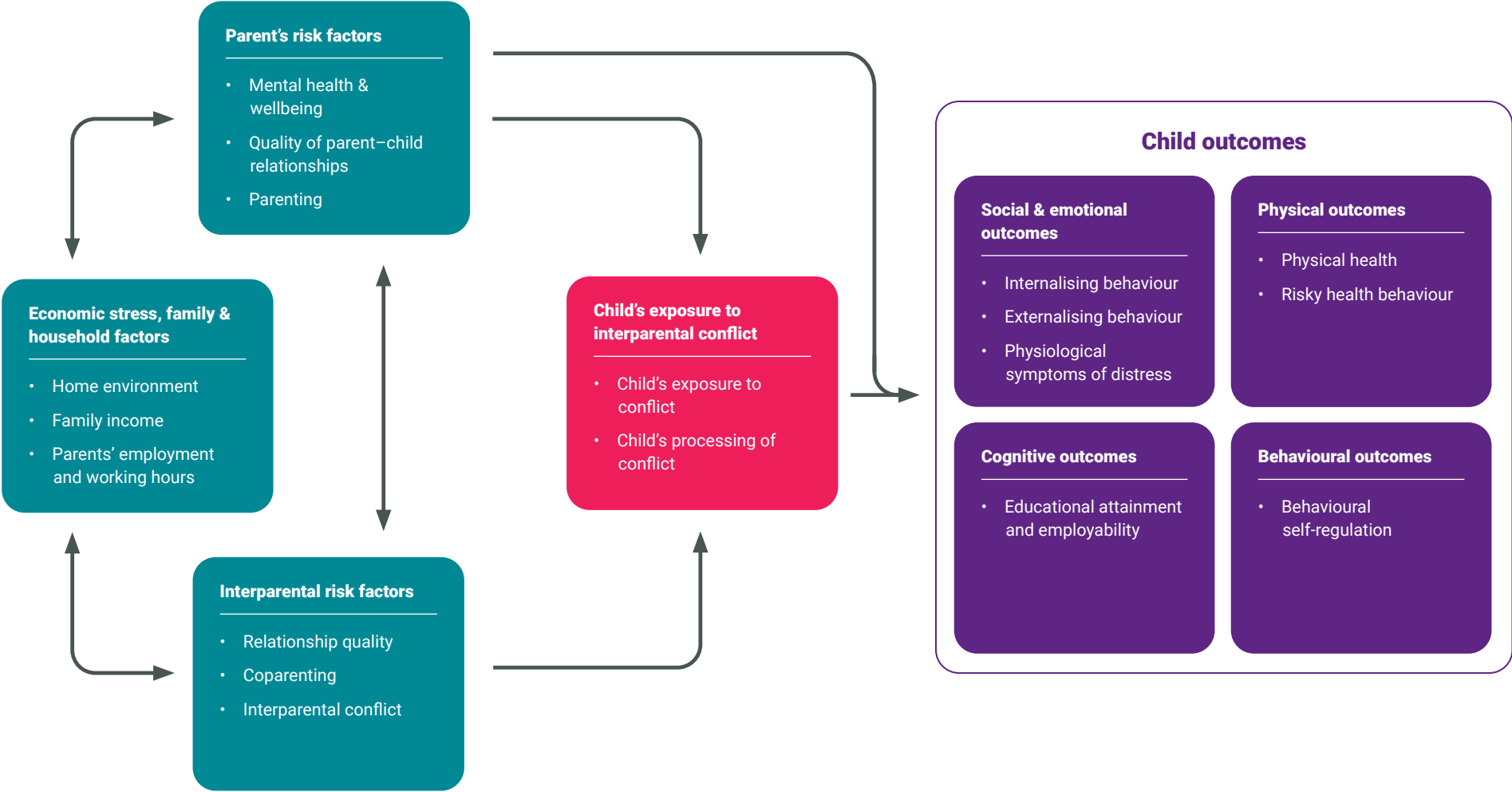
7 Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. (2007). *Mental health at work: Developing the business case*. Policy Paper 8. <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/mental-health-work-developing-business-case>

8 Elliott, I. (2016). *Poverty and mental health: a review to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Anti-Poverty Strategy*. London: Mental Health Foundation. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/poverty-and-mental-health>

9 Howard Kennedy. (2020). *Relationship breakdown and the workplace*. <https://www.howardkennedy.com/en/latest/campaign/relationship-breakdown-and-the-workplace>

Reducing parental conflict

Outcomes framework



Definitions and outcome measures

The following sections provide definitions of the outcome measures and risk factors that currently make up the outcomes framework, and some examples of symptoms experienced through the life course. All outcomes are phrased neutrally and, when possible, include a selection of measurement tools that can be used to assess them.

The measures listed here have recently been assessed against EIF criteria to determine how valid, reliable and practical they are.¹⁰ This selection of relevant measures is not an exhaustive list, and is not prescriptive, meaning that it does not recommend particular measures.

A good measurement tool relates to the specific context, purpose and resources available, and should be:

- **validated**, meaning that it has been tested and shown to be both valid and reliable
- **capable of assessing at least one of the anticipated outcomes** specified in the intervention's theory of change or logic model
- **appropriate for the target population**, meaning that it has been validated with populations that compare well with the intended participants, particularly with regards to age, level of need, demographic characteristics and preferred language.

¹⁰ Measures have been rated according to four psychometric (internal consistency, test/retest reliability, validity, sensitivity to change) and four implementation criteria (brevity, availability, ease of scoring, used in the UK), with one score awarded for each criteria met. For more information, see: Pote, I., Ghiara, V., Cooper, E., Stock, L. & McBride, T. (2020) *Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes: Guidance on selecting and using valid, reliable and practical measures to evaluate interventions*. London: Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/measuring-parental-conflict-and-its-impact-on-child-outcomes>

Social & emotional outcomes

Internalising behaviour

A child's emotional or psychological state that can include symptoms of withdrawal, inhibition, fearfulness, sadness, shyness, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and suicidality in the extreme. Such symptoms can also last or occur in adulthood.



	Antenatal period & infancy	Childhood & adolescence
Possible symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal • Inhibition • Fearfulness and sadness • Shyness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal • Inhibition • Fearfulness and sadness • Shyness • Low self-esteem • Anxiety • Depression • Suicidality
Measurement tools	<p><i>EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Internalising subscale of the Infant Toddler Social Emotional Assessment (ITSEA). We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes.</i></p>	<p>Full measures assessing general internalising symptoms: CHILD REPORT Mood and Feelings Questionnaire (MFQ) <i>Psychometric features 4/4 Implementation features 4/4</i></p> <p>Subscales assessing general internalising symptoms:* PARENT REPORT Internalising subscale of the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL/6–18) <i>Psychometric features 4/4 Implementation features 1/4</i> PARENT REPORT Internalising score of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) <i>Psychometric features 4/4 Implementation features 4/4</i></p> <p>Full measures assessing anxiety and depression: CHILD REPORT Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) <i>Psychometric features 3/4 Implementation features 3/4</i> CHILD REPORT Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) <i>Psychometric features 3/4 Implementation features 3/4</i></p>

* In situations where shorter or more specific measures are required, it may be feasible to administer only one or a subset of the measure's subscales (for example, the Internalising subscale of the CBCL/6–18), so long as this is consistent with the intervention's theory of change and the psychometrics of the subscale have been verified. The psychometric and implementation features reported here refer to the whole measure, not to single subscales.

Externalising behaviour

A child's emotional or psychological state that manifests in various ways, such as aggression, hostility, non-compliant and disruptive behaviour, verbal and physical violence, antisocial behaviour, conduct disorder, delinquency, and vandalism in the extreme. Such symptoms can also last or occur in adulthood.



	Antenatal period & infancy	Childhood & adolescence
Possible symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggression • Hostility • Non-compliant and disruptive behaviours • Verbal and physical violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggression • Hostility • Non-compliant and disruptive behaviours • Verbal and physical violence • Antisocial behaviour conduct disorder, delinquency, and vandalism in the extreme • Violent romantic relationships
Measurement tools	<p><i>EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Externalising subscale of the Infant Toddler Social Emotional Assessment (ITSEA). We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes.</i></p>	<p>Full measures assessing general externalising symptoms:</p> <p>PARENT REPORT Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI) Psychometric features 3/4 Implementation features 2/4</p> <p>PARENT REPORT Parent Daily Report (PDR) Psychometric features 3/4 Implementation features 3/4</p> <p>Subscales assessing general internalising symptoms:*</p> <p>PARENT REPORT Externalising subscale of the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL/6–18) Psychometric features 4/4 Implementation features 1/4</p> <p>PARENT REPORT Externalising score of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Psychometric features 4/4 Implementation features 4/4</p>

* In situations where shorter or more specific measures are required, it may be feasible to administer only one or a subset of the measure's subscales (for example, the Externalising subscale of the CBCL/6–18), so long as this is consistent with the intervention's theory of change and the psychometrics of the subscale have been verified. The psychometric and implementation features reported here refer to the whole measure, not to single subscales.

Physiological symptoms of distress

Physiological reactions associated with exposure to stressors, such as an elevated heart rate, uninhibited crying, acting out or freezing. Such symptoms can also last or occur in adulthood.



	Antenatal period & infancy	Childhood & adolescence
Possible symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elevated heart rate • Poor soothability • Disrupted sleep patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying • Acting out • Freezing • Withdrawing from or attempting to intervene in the actual conflict • Disrupted sleep patterns
Measurement tools	<p><i>EIF did not identify relevant measurement tools.</i></p>	<p>Subscales assessing general internalising symptoms:*</p> <p>PARENT REPORT Somatic complaints subscale of the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL/6–18) Psychometric features 4/4 Implementation features 1/4</p> <p>CHILD REPORT Panic/somatic symptoms subscale of the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) Psychometric features 3/4 Implementation features 3/4</p>

* In situations where shorter or more specific measures are required, it may be feasible to administer only one or a subset of the measure's subscales (for example, the Somatic complaints subscale of the CBCL/6–18), so long as this is consistent with the intervention's theory of change and the psychometrics of the subscale have been verified. The psychometric and implementation features reported here refer to the whole measure, not to single subscales.

Physical outcomes

Physical health

The condition of an individual's body, taking into consideration everything from physical growth, presence and absence of disease, as well as fitness level.



	Antenatal period & infancy	Childhood & adolescence
Possible symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low birthweight • Poor breastfeeding • Poor weight gain • Low gestational age at birth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fatigue • Abdominal stress • Headaches • Reduced physical growth • Obesity
Measurement tools	<p>EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are some tools available, including the UNICEF Breastfeeding Assessment Tool. We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes. In addition, birthweight and weight gain data, as well as data on the gestational age at birth, might be used to obtain information on this outcome.</p>	<p>EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Problem scale of the Lifestyle Behavior Checklist (LBC). We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes. Health data might also be used to obtain information on this outcome.</p>

Risky health behaviour

Behaviours with potentially harmful effects on an individual's physical and mental health, including smoking, substance use, early or unprotected sexual activity, poor diet and a sedentary lifestyle. Some of these behaviours might last into adulthood.



	Antenatal period & infancy	Childhood & adolescence
Possible symptoms	<p>EIF did not identify relevant outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smoking • Substance use • Early or unprotected sexual activity • Poor diet • Sedentary lifestyle
Measurement tools	<p>EIF did not identify relevant measurement tools.</p>	<p>EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Problem Behavior Frequency Scale and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes.</p>

Cognitive outcomes

Educational attainment and employability

The long-term outcomes of a child, including their cognitive development, academic attainment and employability in adulthood, that may affect their future life chances.



	Antenatal period & infancy	Childhood & adolescence
Possible symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor neurological and cognitive development including memory and learning problems, poor early verbal communication and abstract thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor neurological and cognitive development Low academic motivation. <p><i>EIF did not identify other specific symptoms influenced by parental conflict, but we will review this in due course to include more information.</i></p>
Measurement tools	<p><i>EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Problem scale of the Bayley Scales of Infant Development-II (BSID-II). We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes. Health data might also be used to obtain information on this outcome.</i></p>	<p><i>Although EIF did not identify relevant measurement tools in this area, academic data such as KS1–KS4 might be used to obtain information on this outcome.</i></p>

Behavioural outcomes

Behavioural self-regulation

Behavioural self-regulation involves children’s ability to monitor and regulate their own behaviour, attention and impulses. Such symptoms can also last or occur in adulthood, and can include vandalism, delinquency and poor-quality romantic relationships.



	Antenatal period & infancy	Childhood & adolescence
Possible symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor soothability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elevated conflict with peers Antisocial behaviour Delinquency Vandalism Poor-quality romantic relationships
Measurement tools	<p><i>EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Externalising subscale of the Infant Toddler Social Emotional Assessment (ITSEA). We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes.</i></p>	<p>Subscales assessing social competence and behaviour:*</p> <p>PARENT REPORT Social competence scale and aggressive behaviour subscale of the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL/6–18) Psychometric features 4/4 Implementation features 1/4</p> <p>PARENT REPORT Peer problems and prosocial behaviour subscale of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Psychometric features 4/4 Implementation features 4/4</p>

* In situations where shorter or more specific measures are required, it may be feasible to administer only one or a subset of the measure’s subscales (for example, the Externalising subscale of the CBCL/6–18), so long as this is consistent with the intervention’s theory of change and the psychometrics of the subscale have been verified. The psychometric and implementation features reported here refer to the whole measure, not to single subscales.

Child's exposure to interparental conflict

Child's exposure to interparental conflict

Child's frequency and intensity of exposure to overt parental conflict, such as quarrels, sarcasm and physical abuse, or covert discord, such as withdrawing and the 'silent treatment'.

Measurement tools

INTACT COUPLES O'Leary Porter Scale (OPS)

Psychometric features 2/4 | Implementation features 4/4



Child's processing of conflict

The child's understanding of interparental conflict, particularly the cognitive and emotional processing in terms of the frequency, intensity and resolution, and the perceived threat to the child or the family harmony of the conflict. This outcome includes the child's reactions to observing parental conflict, which could include assigning self-blame or developing coping mechanisms.

Measurement tools

Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC)

Psychometric features 2/4 | Implementation features 4/4



Parent's risk factors

Mental health and wellbeing

The state of mental health and wellbeing of a parent, that is the presence, absence or extent of psychological problems that affect the way a parent thinks, feels, and reacts. Some examples of such problems include parental stress, depression and anxiety.

Measurement tools

EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales. We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide [Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes](#).



Quality of parent–child relationships

The unique dynamic connection between a parent and a child. It is about how a parent (or both parents jointly) relates, engages, communicates, plays and lives with a child. It is dynamic in the moment and changes over time as children mature and parents adapt their behaviour.

Measurement tools

EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Dyadic Parent-Child Interaction Coding System (DPICS), and the Parent Child Observation Task. We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide [Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes](#).



Parenting

A parent's ability to accurately interpret the child's bids for attention and appropriately match or 'attune' responses in a way that does not frighten, over- or understimulate the child. This also includes parental satisfaction or sense of competence in their own parenting. Parenting behaviour might include use of verbal arguing and physical punishment, or age-appropriate, non-physical strategies for reinforcing children's positive behaviour and discouraging negative and aggressive behaviour.

Measurement tools

EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC), the Parenting Scale (PS) and the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire. We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide [Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes](#).



Interparental relationship risk factors

Relationship quality

How satisfied an individual is in their relationship, how they feel about their partner's and their own behaviour within the relationship, as well as their attitude and commitment to it. The quality of a relationship can also be defined by the frequency and extent of agreements or disagreements among the couple, as well as their respect for and ability to communicate with one another.

Measurement tools

Measures assessing relationship's satisfaction:

INTACT COUPLES [Couples Satisfaction Index \(CSI-16\)](#)

Psychometric features 2/4 | Implementation features 4/4

Measures assessing relationship's satisfaction and extent of agreement or disagreement:

INTACT COUPLES [Dyadic Adjustment Scale \(DAS-7\)](#) (short seven-item measure)

Psychometric features 3/4 | Implementation features 4/4

INTACT COUPLES [Dyadic Adjustment Scale \(DAS-32\)](#) (32-item measure)

Psychometric features 3/4 | Implementation features 4/4

MARRIED COUPLES [Marital Adjustment Test \(MAT\)](#)

Psychometric features 3/4 | Implementation features 4/4

INTACT COUPLES [Relationship Quality Index \(RQI\)](#) (six-item measure)

Psychometric features 3/4 | Implementation features 4/4

Measures assessing attitudes and feelings about the relationship:

INTACT COUPLES [Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State \(GRIMS\)](#)

Psychometric features 2/4 | Implementation features 4/4



Coparenting

How parents partner together and whether or not parents agree on attitudes around childrearing. It includes parents' ability to cooperate and communicate when performing parenting duties, as well as each parent's confidence in coparenting with the other parent and in the ability of the other parent.

Measurement tools

Measures for intact and separated couples:

Parenting Alliance Measure (PAM)

Psychometric features 2/4 | Implementation features 3/4

Parent Problems Checklist (PPC)

Psychometric features 2/4 | Implementation features 4/4

Measures for separated couples only:

Quality of Co-parental Communication Scale (QCCS)

Psychometric features 2/4 | Implementation features 3/4



Interparental conflict

The frequency, intensity, and subject matter of conflict between parents, whether this is overt, such as hostile exchanges, or covert conflict, such as interparental disengagement. This kind of destructive conflict can range from intense quarrels to verbal or physical aggression, including conflicts that are about or involve the children, the 'silent' treatment, lack of respect and emotional control, and a lack of resolution.

Measurement tools

Measures with some items to assess the extent of agreement or disagreement:

INTACT COUPLES Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-7)

Psychometric features 3/4 | Implementation features 4/4

INTACT COUPLES Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-32)

Psychometric features 3/4 | Implementation features 4/4

MARRIED COUPLES Marital Adjustment Test (MAT)

Psychometric features 3/4 | Implementation features 4/4

INTACT COUPLES Relationship Quality Index (RQI)

Psychometric features 3/4 | Implementation features 4/4



Economic stress, family & household factors

Home environment

This includes all aspects of family functioning and family stress. Family stress refers to any stressor (such as economic or social stress) that affects one or more members of the family. Family functioning refers to a collection of effective behaviours between two or more family members that improves the functionality of the family unit (as opposed to dysfunction). Examples of functioning behaviours include clear roles and boundaries between family members, effective family communication, relationship stability, mutual respect, empathy, and problem-solving skills. The quality of a child's relationship with their sibling/s also characterises the home environment.

Measurement tools

EIF did not assess measurement tools in this area, but there are several tools available, including the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) Inventory. We recommend verifying the psychometric properties of such measures before using them. For some guidance on how to select valid and reliable measurement tools, see chapter 5 of our 2020 guide [Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes](#).



Family income

Total compensation received by all family members aged 15 or older living in the same household.

Measurement tools

Although EIF did not identify relevant measurement tools, data on household disposable income might be used to assess this risk factor.



Parents' employment and working hours

Parents' employment patterns including whether they work part-time or full-time, and their working hours.

Measurement tools

Although EIF did not identify relevant measurement tools, data on parent's employment status and working hours might be used to assess this risk factor.

