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## EIF BRIEFING

# Using validated tools to measure parental conflict and its impact on children

Supporting healthy relationships between parents is an important focus for early intervention and local family services. However, it is not always easy to select the right measurement tools that will tell you if an intervention is making a difference to the lives of families. This briefing provides practical advice for local leaders and commissioners of services and interventions for reducing parental conflict.

## When are good measurement tools needed?

There are various points at which you would want to use valid and reliable measurement tools. In the context of interparental relationships, for example, different types of measurement tools could be used for:

- **Population prevalence purposes**, such as to understand population trends in terms of the prevalence of low income and teenage parents, or the frequency and intensity of conflict between couples/co-parents so that local areas are better able to identify risk factors and meet the needs of their population
- **Screening or diagnostic purposes**, such as to identify whether couples are in domestic abusive relationships
- **Eligibility purposes**, such as to determine whether couples/co-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 in time
- **Evaluation purposes**, such as to measure change over time and assess the impact of interventions
- **Feedback purposes**, such as to collect information from participants on their experience of the intervention, including the practitioner delivering it.



**EIF has assessed 18 outcome measurement tools: seven measuring child outcomes and 11 measuring couple relationship outcomes.**

To learn more about the properties of these outcomes measures, see our report on measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes: [www EIF.org.uk/resource/measuring-parental-conflict-and-its-impact-on-child-outcomes](http://www EIF.org.uk/resource/measuring-parental-conflict-and-its-impact-on-child-outcomes)

Some measures may be suitable for a range of purposes. However, it is important to be clear on your measurement purpose so that you are better able to select the most appropriate tool.

You can also find out more about how to use appropriate measures for different purposes in our blogpost: [www EIF.org.uk/blog/a-place-for-everything-and-everything-in-its-place-using-the-outcomes-stars-in-combination-with-validated-measures-of-impact](http://www EIF.org.uk/blog/a-place-for-everything-and-everything-in-its-place-using-the-outcomes-stars-in-combination-with-validated-measures-of-impact)

## Who are we?

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity whose mission is to ensure that effective early intervention is available and is used to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of poor outcomes.

## FEATURES OF VALIDATED TOOLS

Validated measurement tools have been carefully tested to make sure that they produce reliable and accurate results, and reduce the likelihood of any bias. They are an important way of determining whether an intervention has an impact, and what kind of impact. They have four key features:

### VALIDITY

The extent to which a tool measures what it claims to.

### INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

The degree to which items designed to measure the same outcome relate to one another.

### RELIABILITY

The extent to which the conclusions of a measurement tool are stable over time ('test-retest reliability'), or when used by different practitioners ('interrater reliability').

### SENSITIVITY TO CHANGE

The degree to which a measurement tool is able to detect change within the timeframe of the programme under evaluation. Longer measurement tools are generally more reliable and sensitive to change over short periods of time.

## Selecting outcome measures

There are a number of factors to work through when deciding what measurement tool is best given the purpose, specific context, and resources available. To evaluate the impact of an intervention seeking to reduce parental conflict, you will need validated tools to measure participants' outcomes. When selecting outcome measures we recommend the following:

### Select a measurement tool based on anticipated outcomes

Any measures used in an evaluation must be capable of assessing at least one of the anticipated outcomes specified in the intervention's theory of change or logic model. An intervention seeking to reduce parental conflict, for example, might have anticipated impact on the quality of the couple relationship, parents' mental health, co-parenting and parental conflict.

A core element of the theory of change might also be to improve child outcomes through strengthening parents' ability to manage conflict constructively. In this case, it would be important to include a measure to assess the impact on specific child outcomes, such as internalising or externalising behaviour, behavioural self-regulation or social relationship skills.

A practical way of selecting your measure(s) of choice would be to consider what has previously been used in impact evaluations of the intervention you are delivering.

### Consider measurement tools that are appropriate for your target participants

When selecting measures, you should only consider those that have been designed for and tested with populations that compare well with the participants you are seeking to reach.

To choose appropriate couple relationship outcome measures, you should pay special attention to marital status and living arrangements, as some measures can be used only with married couples, while others are specifically designed for separated couples.

Some measures may not necessarily be appropriate for use by all cultural groups. It is therefore important to ensure your selected measures are appropriate for your target population's characteristics, including ethnicity, language and cultural background.

To choose appropriate child outcome measures, you should pay special attention to age: a measure which has been validated for use with teenagers, for example, might be inappropriate (and yield invalid and unreliable results) when used to assess younger children.

### Select a number and combination of measures that 'fit' together as a whole

Couple relationship interventions often seek to influence more than one outcome. For instance, an intervention might seek to reduce parental conflict; strengthen co-parenting practices; and increase child internalising behaviours.

The overall time taken to complete the entire set of measures will likely depend on the duration of the intervention. For example, a one-hour assessment comprised of three measures may be acceptable for a six-month intervention, but would be inappropriate for a week-long intervention.

In this case, rather than "cutting" the selected measures, you might opt for shorter measures. For instance, you might assess both interparental and child outcomes using the SDQ and DAS-7 (total estimated completion time: 10 minutes).

### Conduct further due diligence to finalise your selection of measures

It can help to test/pilot the measurement tool first to get feedback from users and practitioners on whether the measurement tools under consideration are practical and appropriately matched to the intervention's intended outcomes and target participants.

To better understand the suitability of a measurement tool, you should pay particular attention to the age, capability and personal circumstances of the participants you will be asking to use it.

You could also consult with subject-matter experts, specialists in the design of impact evaluations, as well as those with experience using the measures you are considering.

A good way of learning more about the measures you are considering is to directly contact the developer of the tools themselves.

## Using outcome measures

When using measures to evaluate the impact of an intervention seeking to reduce parental conflict, it is important that you consider the following:

### Consider research ethics, including informed consent and data protection

If you are collecting data from participants for research purposes, you are required to gain informed written consent from your participants, and appropriately store sensitive personal data including data revealing racial or ethnic origin, health-related data, and data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation. It might also be useful to have a privacy statement for participants to read.

Some of the child measures you might use could contain sensitive items enquiring about parental physical punishment, self-harm, or suicidal ideation and intent. Similarly, your selected couple relationship outcome measures might ask about interpersonal violence or abuse between adults. In this situation, you should take appropriate precautions and ensure that data collection methods are properly embedded within local safeguarding procedures.

### Measures should be used in their entirety

For a measure to be appropriately validated it must undergo a series of stringent statistical tests. These ensure that the measure accurately quantifies the outcome it claims to assess, is able to produce the same result when repeated multiple times under the same circumstances, and can detect change within the timeframe of the programme under evaluation.

While it may be tempting to remove items from a measure in order to reduce its length and shorten its completion time, modifying a validated measure may compromise its ability to detect changes accurately and reliably.

Before using your selected measure, it is therefore important that you confirm it is the right one to use, as it should be administered in its entirety, without changing, adding, deleting or altering the order of any items.

### Measures should be administered in the same way every time and for each group

When evaluating the impact of an intervention seeking to reduce parental conflict, you should ensure that you are using them in line with any requirements imposed by the developer(s), and you should administer your measures in the same way every time (for example, face-to-face by a trained practitioner).

In particular, you should present the measures to all respondents in exactly the same way, for instance creating a standardised script to introduce the measure and encourage respondents to provide honest answers.

You should also collect data in the same way for all participants, particularly with regards to the method, time and duration of measurement.

If you want to assess the impact of an intervention, it is important that you administer the outcomes measures consistently before and after the intervention.

### Be aware of the strengths and limitations of the measures you are using

It is important to bear in mind that many of the commonly used couple relationship measures are validated, but only appropriate for specific participants. For instance, they may have been designed and tested with heterosexual married couples and therefore may not be suitable for individuals who are separated or not married, or for individuals of the same sex.

We recommend selecting measures that have been designed or tested with the specific population groups that you want to use them with.

Furthermore, in order to properly score and interpret the results of your outcome measures, it is important to be aware of the properties of your measures, such as their validity and reliability. 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.



**Collecting data on participants' outcomes is a vital step to assess the impact of an intervention.** Our guide *10 steps for evaluation success* sets out the main steps along the evaluation journey: [www.EIF.org.uk/resource/10-steps-for-evaluation-success](http://www.EIF.org.uk/resource/10-steps-for-evaluation-success)

## Managing challenges

### The measure you would like to use is too long

If the selected outcome measure is too long, it may be tempting to remove items to reduce its length. However, this may compromise the measure's ability to detect post-intervention changes accurately and reliably.

Therefore, in situations where shorter measures are required, rather than removing items from a measure, it would be preferable to administer only one or a subset of a validated measure's subscales.

Some couple relationship measures have subscales to assess different outcomes such as parental conflict, cohesion and communication. Similarly, some child outcomes measures have subscales to assess different outcomes such as internalising and externalising behaviour.

When selecting the subscale(s), you should verify if this is consistent with the intervention's theory of change, and if the items of the subscale are sufficiently correlated to one another so that the outcome is measured consistently.

### The selected measure needs to be adapted to the context

We recommend that you select an outcome measure that is appropriate for your target population, rather than trying to adapt a measure that was not designed for your sample.

For instance, many couple relationship and child outcome measures have already been translated and validated in a range of different languages, and we strongly recommend that you use a measure with validated translations if needed.

Some tools may use wording which may not suit your sample population, for example the Marital Adjustment Test and the O'Leary-Porter Scale include terms like 'spouse' or 'marriage', rather than 'partner' or 'relationship'. In principle you should not change the wording of the measure's items, but it may be helpful to get in touch directly with the developer to clarify any such queries.

You should also report any modifications to a measure explicitly within your evaluation write-up.

### Some of the questions you would like to assess are not included in the measure

If you did not find a suitable outcome measure assessing all the relevant aspects, and would like to ask further questions on a specific outcome, it would be better to search for an additional measure or a subscale, rather than changing the validated measure you are using. When selecting it, you should verify if this is consistent with the intervention's theory of change.

You can use two measures one after the other, for instance, but you should be mindful not to mix them and administer and assess them separately using developers' instructions.

For instance, if you would like to assess if your intervention is improving not only parental conflict, but also how mutually respectful parents are when caring for their children, you might use the O'Leary Porter Scale (OPS), a 10-item measure designed to assess overt hostility, and then use the Respect subscale of the 20-item Parenting Alliance Measure (PAM).

### Combining validated measures

To assess the impact of the parental conflict interventions delivered as part of the national Reducing Parental Conflict Programme, the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) developed a new measurement tool called the Referral Stage Questionnaire. This tool was, in fact, a sequence of validated measurement tools (including the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales and the O'Leary-Porter Scale) and specific subscales (such as the Satisfaction subscale of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale) that measure relevant outcomes, such as agreement between parents on how to deal with conflict.

At the pilot stage, DWP identified some items that users were finding difficult to answer. To decide how to appropriately adapt these items without compromising the validity of the scales, DWP consulted with subject-matter experts. For instance, in one item the words 'husband' and 'wife' were replaced by 'parents'.

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