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TALKING WITH FAMILIES
ABOUT PARENTAL
RELATIONSHIPS: PRACTICAL
TIPS AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

Talking with families about parental relationships

Practical tips and guiding questions

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Definitions

Language: In this guide, 'language' includes both colloquial language and professional terminology used to communicate with families about parental conflict and to engage different groups of families in relationship support services.

Parent: Here, 'parent' refers to any person who has care of a child or young person.

Parental conflict: 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 and intense 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 Behaviours such as shouting, becoming withdrawn or slamming doors can be viewed as destructive. Parental relationship distress is different from domestic abuse, because there is not an imbalance of power, neither parent seeks to control the other, and neither parent is fearful of the other.

Introduction

Parental conflict can be a sensitive topic for families. We know that conflict between parents is a normal part of relationships, and seeing conflict resolved in a loving or constructive way is important for children's understanding of relationships. However, parents who are experiencing relationship difficulties can find it difficult to ask for help when they need it, because they feel ashamed and are worried about being misunderstood or judged.

This guide provides practitioners and leads in local areas with practical tips on how to talk to parents about parental conflict, and how to alleviate negative feelings about relationship support. Ultimately, the aim is to increase families' engagement with support and reduce the risk of parental conflict negatively impacting child outcomes.

We also provide a set of guiding questions for practitioners and local leads to ask themselves on the use of inclusive language with specific groups of vulnerable families, including parents with mental health difficulties, minority ethnic parents, parents belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, parents of children with special needs, and separated or separating parents. Given that families may belong to multiple groups, local leads and practitioners might also reflect on how these questions could be considered in relation to each other.

It is also important to note that while body language is an essential part of communicating positively with families, this guide does not include any recommendations on this topic.

This guide is designed to be directly applicable to local practice. It is based on 10 focus groups with a total of 45 practitioners, all working in local areas across England to support different groups of families with parental conflict.*

How to use this guide

This guide provides an overview, rather than a comprehensive account, of language considerations when discussing parental conflict with families. It can be used as an introductory resource for new practitioners or alongside other referenced resources for more experienced practitioners. It can also be used by practitioners and local leads seeking to better tailor their relationship support services to different groups of families. Given that general understanding around inclusive language and how to support different families is always evolving, this guide will be revised over time to reflect these changes.

* The methodology for this work is described in further detail in a separate annex document: www.EIF.org.uk/files/pdf/talking-about-parental-relationships-annex.pdf



Practical tips when communicating with all families about parental conflict

1. Be mindful that the term 'parental conflict' can disengage parents

Not all families identify with the term 'parental conflict' when they hear it in conversation, in the names of family support programmes or in the job titles of support workers. This can lead them to disengage, because they do not see the support offered as appropriate to their needs. For instance:

- Some parents are no longer in frequent communication, so do not see the way that they communicate as 'conflict'.
- Some parents assume that family difficulties or support relates only to issues surrounding the child rather than their relationship with the other parent.
- Some parents misunderstand the difference between parental conflict and domestic abuse. Parental conflict may falsely be seen as another term for domestic abuse, or as something which always leads to domestic abuse.
- In some families, parental conflict may be connected to wider familial conflict, making it difficult to see it as 'parental' conflict. For example, extended family members may be in conflict, and this may eventually cause conflict between parents.

When families encounter services with names that mention 'conflict', consider discussing the meaning of the word. When discussing parental relationships, if appropriate, consider adopting the language used by families themselves to describe their conflict and relationship.

More positive alternatives focused on 'healthy parental relationships' may work better with some families. However, this could be confusing for others: separated parents, for example, might not see themselves as being in a relationship. If you do use general expressions like 'healthy relationships' or 'relationships matter', it may help to clarify that the focus is on the parental relationship specifically.

2. Use inclusive language and avoid stigma

The language used as part of relationship support should acknowledge and celebrate differences, without excluding groups of people based on characteristics such as age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion or belief. Using inclusive language helps parents to feel that their individual experiences are being taken into account in the delivery of relationship support services, and that they are likely to benefit from the support they receive.

As a first step, you might consider becoming familiar with inclusive language used to describe the experiences of different groups of families, and have a discussion with new families, when you meet them, about their individual language preferences.

Practical actions you can take:

- **Promotion:** Ensure service descriptions explicitly welcome all families, especially families that might be underrepresented or feel stigmatised for seeking relationship support. For instance: 'This intervention is for all parents and carers – whether you are LGBTQ+ parents, separated or separating parents, parents in extended families, or any other group'.
- **Adaptation of support:** Adapt the content of support programmes to make sure that descriptions or examples of parental conflict are relatable to a diverse range of families. This could mean, for example, including examples of different experiences related to cultural background, family structure, socioeconomic status, or sexuality.
- **Delivery of support:** Agree ground rules for language at the beginning of any group activities, so that inclusive, non-stigmatising language is not only modelled by practitioners, but also used between families. For instance, some autistic people prefer using identity-first language (eg, 'autistic person') while others might prefer using person-first language ('person with autism').
- **Data collection:** Use inclusive language when collecting feedback in surveys: for instance, use the terms 'parent' or 'carer' to allow for different kinds of family unit, rather than just 'mother' and 'father'.



"From my point of view, asking the family [about the language they prefer], getting their perspective and then using the language that they use, makes it much more effective."

– LOCAL PRACTITIONER

3. Avoid using professional terminology

Families may not fully understand discussions that involve acronyms or professional jargon, such as 'RPC', 'DA', 'assessment' or 'triage'. Straightforward or commonly used terms are more likely to engage families in conversations about relationship support services.

If you have any doubt about the clarity of your conversations with families, check in with parents and take accountability: "It is my responsibility to be clear and to help you to understand."



"It's using [the right] terminology, isn't it? Terminology that is understandable to that family. Not using professional jargon that we use and bounce between us, abbreviations and so forth. It is about being transparent and using vocabulary at the family's level, so that they can feel confident in understanding and sharing their views."

– LOCAL PRACTITIONER

4. Emphasise that conflict and relationship support are normal

Parents with relationship difficulties might feel ashamed about the occurrence of parental conflict and the potential effect of their difficulties on the wider family. Reinforcing that parental conflict and the need for relationship support is common can help parents to feel more confident about accepting support.

When discussing families' experiences of parental conflict, use language which emphasises that conflict between parents, although an issue which must be addressed, occurs in many families for a myriad of reasons.



"Conflict happens, and there's loads of different reasons why people are in conflict. We're not apportioning blame." – LOCAL PRACTITIONER

5. Acknowledge parents' experiences

Using language which acknowledges the unique feelings and experiences of parents can help to reduce feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness about their relationship difficulties. Additionally, approaching each parent with a neutral tone and curiosity about their experiences can help in building a trusting relationship with parents, by avoiding assumptions or generalisations about their experiences.

Listen out for details of a parent's personal experiences, and explore or acknowledge their unique circumstances. Use open-ended questions to ensure you fully grasp the nature of the conflict, and consider how you might tailor support which responds to it.

It is also important, especially when meeting parents for the first time and trying to establish rapport, to highlight parents' strengths, and to avoid language which may directly or indirectly evoke feelings of blame or shame, such as telling parents what they 'must' or 'should' be doing.



"The language and professional voice can reinforce the power imbalance [between parents and practitioners], but it might be difficult to find the right balance between being professional and not reinforcing this imbalance. It is important to recognise that very often 'the expert' is the parents, therefore practitioners need to listen and acknowledge their reality." – LOCAL ADVISOR

6. Apologise when you get it wrong

All practitioners, whether experienced or not, can make mistakes when it comes to communicating with families.

When you use incorrect terminology or language that the family has asked to avoid, apologising can limit any negative effects.

Apologising is essential to building supportive relationships with families, and also an important part of modelling healthy communication behaviours through the relationship support you are providing to parents.



"The responsibility is on me to backtrack and say, look, I am really sorry, that is not what I intended – and to build back up to that [relationship]." – LOCAL PRACTITIONER

Guiding questions for communicating with different groups of families about parental conflict

This section provides a set of questions for you to ask about your services and your own practice, to help increase the chances that you are providing support in a way that works well for as many families and parents as possible.

Come back to these questions from time to time, or when you know you will be working with a new family who may need a different approach to talking about parental conflict.

When supporting parents with poor mental health

- Do you have a general understanding of how parents' mental illnesses might affect their daily lives? Do you have a set of terms you might use to describe such experiences?
- Before starting the intervention, do you have an opportunity to sensitively ask parents about how mental illness manifests for them and what needs they have, which might include more specialist mental health support?
- Do you ask parents if there are personal and environmental factors which might impact their comfort levels or ability to receive support?
 - This might include the difficulty of symptoms on a particular day, the time of day, having their camera on or off during an online meeting, the meeting place, and whether there is a room where they can go to if they are feeling uncomfortable.
- Do you have a sensitive opening conversation with parents, to check in on how they are currently feeling (eg, 'is now a good time to speak?')?
- Do interventions have names that parents might feel comfortable sharing with others?

When supporting minority ethnic parents

- For families who do not speak English as a first language, and if you are not able to speak the family's preferred language yourself, are interpreters being used in the most inclusive or accessible way?
 - Do you consult with the family on whether or not they would be comfortable with an interpreter from the same community especially when discussing sensitive issues such as parental conflict?
 - Do you discuss with the interpreter how certain messages need to be received and translated? Some languages may not have the same words as English to explain certain sensitive topics, or some words may translate with different levels.
 - Are images and videos used to supplement your discussions with families, to promote better understanding?
 - Is language anti-racist? Does it actively seek to acknowledge experiences of racism and to reduce their occurrence and the harm they cause to families?
 - Do you make it clear to families that parental conflict happens to everyone, and is not specific to one group or culture?
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When supporting parents from the LGBTQ+ community

- Do you have a set of inclusive terms that you can use with parents? For instance, 'parents', 'carers', 'partners' might be used instead of 'mothers' and 'fathers', 'husbands' and 'wives'; and references to what is 'normal' should be avoided when discussing sexual orientation and behaviour.
- Do you know how to address situations such as making a mistake when using a pronoun, or directing non-binary participants to the toilets if they are solely for ladies/gents?
- How would you ask participants how they want to be addressed?
- Do you introduce yourself including your preferred pronouns, and indicate your pronouns in your email signature?
- Do your registration and feedback forms use gender-neutral language and give inclusive options? For instance, are there enough options for gender identities and sexualities, or do you provide the option to self-identify?
- Are distinctions between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ families avoided – for example, by discussing LGBTQ+ relationships throughout the intervention, and not only in one dedicated section?

When supporting parents with children with special needs

- There are different types of special needs. Do you have a set of inclusive terms that you can use with parents to discuss their children's specific needs?
 - Different parents might use different expressions, such as 'needs' or 'disability', and might have different understandings of what these terms mean. Do you have conversations with parents about their language preferences and, if appropriate, the meanings behind them?
 - For example, some parents may understand disability as something that is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment or difference, and therefore prefer to use language which aligns with this view.
 - Do you have a set of expressions that can be used to de-escalate situations if parents become frustrated, angry or distraught when voicing their concerns?
 - Some parents might share their children's needs or have different and additional needs of their own. Do your registration and feedback forms use inclusive language for parents, in an accessible format?
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When supporting separating or separated parents

- Do you have a general understanding of how different cultures might consider separation and divorce?
- Are terms which relate to parents being together in a relationship used with caution, to avoid triggers?
- Do you frame questions and discussions with parents so that they focus on their children rather than on their relationship?
- If parents communicate with each other solely to co-parent their children, is your language adapted to focus on parental communication/co-parenting rather than the parental relationship?
- Do you discuss the role played by the child – for instance, whether the child is involved in the parental dispute as a 'messenger' or 'mediator'?