

This content was created by the Early Intervention Foundation before merging with What Works for Children's Social Care to become Foundations.

The content contains logos and branding of the former organisation.



EIF SECTOR BRIEFING

Why reducing the impact of parental conflict matters for schools

The impact of conflict between parents on children and young people is increasingly recognised at both a local and national level. This briefing introduces the evidence on parental conflict and explores what this means for how schools can best support children's needs.

Defining the problem

Conflict between parents is a normal part of relationships. However, when the conflict is frequent, intense and poorly resolved, it puts children's mental health, education attainment and long-term outcomes at risk.

- Parental conflict can harm children's outcomes regardless of whether parents are living together or separated, and whether they are biologically related or unrelated to the child, such as in blended or foster families.
- Destructive parental conflict behaviours include aggression, non-verbal conflict or the 'silent treatment', lack of respect and emotional control, lack of resolution and, in their most extreme form, domestic abuse.
- Exposure to destructive conflict between parents is associated with a range of problems for children and young people. This can include poorer academic outcomes, negative peer relationships and psychological difficulties shown as aggression, anxiety, depression, withdrawal, fearfulness and even suicidality. Parental conflict can also affect risk-taking behaviours such as smoking, drug use and early sexual activity.
- The risk of conflict between parents is higher at transition points in family life such as becoming pregnant, having a baby, a child starting or changing school, or separation and divorce. Yet relationship difficulties are often seen as a private matter and families tend to only seek help when they are in crisis.
- According to estimates by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 11% of all children have parents in a distressed relationship. Some families are also more vulnerable to parental conflict than others. Financial difficulties, for example, can impact on parental mental health, which in turn can increase conflict between parents. The DWP estimates that 28% of children in workless families have parents in a distressed relationship.

Parental conflict may impact on school effectiveness.

- Parental conflict can place significant pressure and cost on schools as they deal with the consequences of the home environment in school.
- Evidence suggests that conflict between parents can negatively impact on children's academic performance, with children from high-conflict homes achieving lower scores on maths, language and verbal school ability tests.
- Children who experience parental conflict are less likely to come to school ready to learn. They may have disrupted sleep, affecting their attention and concentration at school. Exposure to ongoing hostile exchanges between parents has also been linked to emotional and behavioural difficulties which play out in the classroom, including social and interpersonal problems with peers.

"In our school we want to help our children to become the best they can be. Having an understanding of what is happening in their family life, particularly at difficult times of family conflict, helps us to understand the behaviours a child may be presenting, ultimately helping us to target appropriate support."

Melanie Pallister, Headteacher,
Manor Park School, Dorchester

"What I've found helpful on a few occasions is to have the conversation with the parents alongside the class teacher, so that there's someone who can speak directly about what they have observed in terms of the impact on the child's behaviour."

Fiona Carrick-Davies, Family &
Community Co-ordinator,
Surrey Square Primary School

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.

10 Salamanca Place,
London SE1 7HB

W: www.EIF.org.uk

E: info@eif.org.uk

T: @TheEIFFoundation

P: +44 (0)20 3542 2481

This briefing was first published in
February 2020. © 2020

Reducing the impact of parental conflict on children is everyone's business

Anyone working with children, young people and families, including those working in schools, can have an impact on improving outcomes for children exposed to destructive parental conflict.

Opportunities to intervene

CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND REDUCING THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL CONFLICT

Teachers and teaching assistants

Teachers and teaching assistants engage with children and young people on a daily basis. This enables them to build trusted relationships with their pupils and identify emerging issues early on.

Helping children to identify their emotions and better understand their behaviours is part of classroom work on healthy relationships and avoiding bringing conflict behaviours into the school environment.

Teachers and teaching assistants can also model how to respond to conflict situations in a constructive way.

In their pastoral role they can also explore sensitive and personal issues which may be affecting children's ability to participate in the school community, by for example asking them about how things are at home.

Headteachers, school leaders and governors

School leaders are responsible for creating environments which help children and young people to learn and thrive. This includes ensuring that pupils are taught about emotional wellbeing and healthy relationships, by embedding this in the curriculum and reinforcing it through a whole-school approach.

It also includes developing a workforce which responds to vulnerable pupils affected by parental conflict. This could include training staff to identify and support children affected by conflict, or making sure that links are in place with local early help teams and specialist support services.

As community leaders, school leaders also have a key role in normalising conversations about interparental relationships and conflict resolution. This could be achieved by providing children with a common language and shared set of strategies to better manage conflict around them.

Staff in welfare roles

There are specific staff in school with responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, including nurses, learning mentors, tutors, welfare officers and safeguarding leads.

These staff have an important role to play in understanding causes of emotional and behavioural distress for children, be it parental conflict or otherwise, and providing sensitive support.

Where appropriate, they can work with early help teams or specialist support services to consider how best to support children, raising any issues with the parents beforehand, and monitoring progress as part of their ongoing relationship.

Staff may also have opportunities to speak to parents, although these can feel like difficult conversations to have and not all parents will be equally receptive. Nonetheless, with sensitivity and experience, staff can raise awareness about the impact of parental conflict on children and signpost parents to available support in their area.

Specialist support staff

There are a wide range of specialist support staff operating within schools, including educational psychologists, counsellors, behaviour support specialists, play therapists, and SENDCOs.

These staff have a key role in identifying where conflict between parents is an influence on manifested problems for children, and using this to tailor any treatment or support they provide.

Specialist support staff can also help children to understand their emotions and behaviours, educate children on what constitutes a healthy relationship, help them to foster positive relationships with other trusted adults, and encourage them to seek help when they feel it is needed.

They can also provide children with a set of strategies to better manage conflict around them so that they do not replicate the destructive behaviours they may be exposed to.

Taking action

Key education priorities to support children with emotional wellbeing and healthy relationships.

- The green paper *Transforming children and young people's mental health provision* (2017) identified exposure to persistent and unresolved parental conflict as a risk for children's emotional, behavioural and mental health problems. It also highlights findings from the *Improving Lives* report, which stated that 11% of all children in the UK have parents who are in a distressed relationship, with children in workless families almost three times as likely to experience this. Reducing parental conflict may be one way of improving children's mental health and wellbeing.
- Under the new relationship and sex education (RSE) requirements, pupils will be taught about intimate relationships, family relationships, and other kinds of relationships, such as friendships. This should enable pupils to understand the benefits that healthy relationships can have on their mental wellbeing, and distinguish healthy from distorted or harmful relationships.
- There are a growing number of interventions with evidence that they can reduce the impact of parental conflict on children. Commissioning these is likely to be done by the local authority or NHS. *
- Schools too can take action on reducing the impact of parental conflict on children, and this could include:
 - developing the confidence and capability of the school workforce to identify and support children who are affected by parental conflict *
 - supporting children through high-quality social and emotional learning so that they can understand how to articulate and manage their emotions, deal with conflict and communicate in appropriate ways *
 - reinforcing healthy relationships through the school curriculum and classroom practice, while helping children with additional needs to get the emotional support they require
 - championing healthy relationships with families, normalising the conversation about relationships, and signposting parents to relationship support
 - testing and learning about what works in the local school context to support children's social and emotional development.



Improving social and emotional learning in schools

EIF's guidance report, produced with the Education Endowment Fund (EEF), sets out six recommendations for primary school leaders to support children's social and emotional learning (SEL), including to:

- **teach SEL skills explicitly**, including relationship skills using a range of strategies such as role playing good communication and listening skills, group work and circle time
- **integrate and model SEL skills through everyday teaching** by embedding it across subjects and not relying on 'crisis moments'
- **reinforce SEL skills through a whole-school ethos and activities** by, for example, actively engaging with parents to reinforce these skills in the home environment.

Download the guidance:
www.EIF.org.uk/resource/improving-social-and-emotional-learning-in-primary-schools-guidance-report



To date EIF has assessed several programmes that have evidence of improving child outcomes by targeting the relationship between parents, including:

- Enhanced Triple P
- Family Check-up for Children
- Family Foundations
- Parents Plus Parenting when Separated
- Schoolchildren and their Families
- Triple P Family Transitions

Find out more about these programmes at guidebook.EIF.org.uk



For more on the free training available to local areas, including school staff, speak to the contact for Reducing Parental Conflict in your local area or visit:
www.knowledgepool.com/what-we-do/managed-learning-services/reducing-parental-conflict

You can also find out more by talking to your Regional Integration Lead for the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme:
reducingparentalconflict.eif.org.uk/about-the-rpc-programme#rils

Why reducing the impact of parental conflict matters for schools

A national programme

There is a national programme designed to help local areas improve outcomes for children through reducing parental conflict. This cross-government programme includes workforce development funding and guidance, as well as a network of regional leads to provide support and challenge.

As part of this programme EIF has created the Reducing Parental Conflict Hub.* This is an online repository of key 'what works' evidence and tools, including the latest evidence on the impact of parental conflict on children, details of evidence-based interventions, guidance on how to prepare and develop your workforce, and advice from local pioneers.



See our Reducing Parental Conflict Hub: **reducingparentalconflict.EIF.org.uk**

DORSET

Dorset's Relationship Support Navigator raises awareness about the importance of recognising and responding to signs of parental relationship distress.

Schools often see the fall out of these childhood experiences on a daily basis. Because of the immediate and long-term impact of parental conflict on children, training is offered to help school staff navigate sensitive conversations with parents, by building their skills and confidence in responding to issues and knowing how, when and where to signpost people to further support.

Dorset's approach is one of early intervention: to provide support before crisis point. This is why the Relationship Navigator has also explored how an enquiry about parental relationships could be incorporated into schools admissions processes.

"Teachers are busy people. Looking after the emotional health and wellbeing of parents is not the only thing they have to do. This role has made it possible for professionals to work more as a team, and it has strengthened trust between teachers and parents."

Vicky
Headteacher

HARTLEPOOL

After completing a skills-based training on reducing parental conflict, Claire (Parent Support Advisor at a Hartlepool Primary School) has changed the way she introduces her role, explicitly letting parents know that she can be available to support them as a couple.

Recognising how the tension between separated parents at handover between contact arrangements was impacting on a little girl in her school, Claire decided to respond by having a direct conversation with the parents – a conversation she would have seen as being outside of her remit prior to training.

"I feel more confident now. I've actually managed to get both separated parents in the same room together. I wouldn't have been able to do that before. When I explained how much confusion and upset their outward tension was causing their child, they admitted to not having thought of the impact their conflict was having. It made a big difference to speak of things openly."

Claire
Parent Support Advisor

WORCESTER

Tudor Grange Academy Worcester starts to build relationships with parents from the first week in year 7 using a tutor system to keep in regular contact with parents, get to know the family and open up communication. If there is problematic conflict between parents the tutor involves the school's family support and safeguarding team to have an open and honest conversation with parents about how the conflict is affecting their child. If appropriate they would trigger the early help process to involve other agencies who can help, for example primary schools if there are younger siblings. Tudor Family Support can support parents on things such as debt or housing problems and other stressors associated with conflict at home.

The Academy runs interventions about healthy relationships for pupils and for parents, although not yet directly on reducing parental conflict, and there is limited access to relationships specialists such as Relate. A first step has been for a member of staff to take part in the Knowledgepool parental conflict training and consider how to cascade the learning across the wider school team.

"We always try to get both parents in the room together, even if they haven't been together for a long time. We need to raise awareness with our families about how those heated arguments can have a massive effect on their children. But this needs to start early, before families are engrained in conflict – it will only work if everyone is on board."

Katy
Deputy Safeguarding Lead