

# WHY RESPONDING TO RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT BETWEEN PARENTS MATTERS FOR THE POLICE SERVICE

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The impact of conflict between parents on children and young people is increasingly recognised among professionals across the public sector. Based on the perspectives of police stakeholders, and a range of evidence, including evidence generated as part of the Department for Work and Pension's Reducing Parental Conflict Programme, this briefing explores the collaborative role that police professionals can play in helping respond to conflict between parents.

## Defining parental conflict and understanding how it affects children

### Defining parental conflict

- Some conflict between parents is a normal part of relationships. However, when parental conflict is frequent, intense and poorly resolved, it can impact on children and young people's mental, emotional and physical health, and is linked to an increased risk of antisocial behaviour, such as vandalism, substance abuse, and later intimate partner abuse.
- Parental conflict refers to ongoing disagreements or tensions between parents where there is no physical violence or coercive control. It can be expressed in various ways, including unresolved arguing non-verbal conflict (e.g., 'the silent treatment'), lack of respect and failure to reach resolution.
- Parental conflict is different to domestic abuse because there is no controlling and coercive behaviours between the parents as part of the conflict, and no physical and sexual violence present. There is no one parent who has all the power.
- 10% of all UK children live with at least one parent reporting relationship distress in the most recent survey period 2021 to 2022 (Department of Work and Pensions, 2025). Parental conflict can affect children in all types of families: whether parents are married, cohabiting, separated or divorced, biologically related or unrelated to the child, such as in blended, foster, or adoptive families.



- Some families are more vulnerable to parental conflict than others. For example, financial difficulties can impact on parental mental health, which in turn can increase conflict between parents. The DWP estimates that parental conflict is twice as likely in workless couple-parent families compared to families where both parents are working.

## **National and local support with Reducing Parental Conflict**

- The DWP is leading an England-wide evidence-based Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Programme,<sup>1</sup> which is an opportunity for local areas and the police to work more closely on RPC, and can include training for the multi-agency workforce – including police – to support them in understanding, identifying and discussing parental conflict with parents, and refer them on for further support where appropriate.
- Local authority Children's Services lead on delivering support and interventions to reduce parental conflict. This work is supported by staff in many public sector roles including the police.

## **Why police involvement matters in tackling conflict between parents**

Police involvement in reducing conflict between parents can be effective and beneficial because:

- police staff, especially in the community, witness parental conflict in their day-to-day work and are in a unique position to help families get support.
- soft skills, including empathy, active listening, and sensitivity to the home environment are central to the work of police teams. These skills enable officers to build relationships with families, manage crises effectively, and provide specialist support such as vulnerabilities officers.
- Identifying and offering support for parental conflict can help to de-escalate conflict, stop repeat incidents, and prevent harm to family members.
- Responding to parental conflict fits with the strategic approach of prevention, risk reduction and early intervention in policing.
- Reducing parental conflict may prevent and reduce the likelihood of longer-term impacts of parental conflict, such as children and young people's increased vulnerability to be involved in the criminal justice system.

## **Attending training to learn about parental conflict**

- Many local authorities are actively supporting training on reducing parental conflict for the police.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/reducing-parental-conflict-programme-and-resources>



- Police staff at all levels can access training and make themselves aware of how to identify, record and refer local families where there is parental conflict.
- Engagement with stakeholders indicated that there appeared to be advantages to having staff in different roles and at different levels trained and aware of parental conflict to encourage joined-up working across the police force.
- Police stakeholders suggested the most useful training was short, clear and incorporated real-life examples. Both training packages – already in use with schools and social workers – and bespoke training delivered to police by voluntary sector organisations were valued and seen as suitable for adaptation to support police in distinguishing between abuse and parental conflict.

## CASE STUDY

### Reducing parental conflict training

One local authority contacted Police Sergeants from smaller departments to establish buy-in for reducing parental conflict training, and foster commitment to integrative partnership working on reducing parental conflict. They provided training directly to teams in face-to-face workshops and developed a remote-learning option consisting of an online video for those who were not able to attend face-to-face training.

The training has generally been well-received by police in the local authority, and sparked discussions about balancing working in a trauma-informed way with an authoritative approach when crime is involved.

Find out more: <https://foundations.org.uk/our-work/publications/embedding-reducing-parental-conflict-within-the-police-service-in-north-somerset/>

## Your role in recognising parental conflict

- The process of recognising and recording parental conflict and distinguishing this from cases of domestic abuse can be complex. Police officers may be concerned potentially mistaking domestic abuse for parental conflict.
- Parental conflict differs from domestic abuse in key ways:
  - While parental conflict is intense, frequent and poorly resolved conflict, there is no assault, threat or coercive control, and no fear or power imbalance between the parents involved.
  - There is not a perpetrator and a victim in parental conflict in the same way as there is in domestic abuse, and both parents can be equally involved in the initiation and escalation of the conflict.



- Police staff say that bespoke training and collaborating with staff with a parental conflict remit within their force and the wider local authority has helped them more accurately identify parental conflict in families, and know who and how to refer.

## CASE STUDY

### **Reviewing a range of information to identify relationship conflict and help families get the right support**

In one local authority, a Police Community Officer (PCO) and Early Help Practitioner lead have worked closely together to address parental conflict for a number of years. They come together each morning to:

- review police safeguarding forms and incident logs from police call outs to families with children aged 4–11 years old.
- review police bodycam footage to gain insight and understanding around the call out.
- explore whether the families already have involvement with children’s services or other agencies.

The information is reviewed in a triage meeting by Early Help, Children’s Services, housing, and domestic abuse workers to decide if social service involvement is needed. to. The PCO will ring the parents as a follow-up to the police attendance and arrange to visit them. This is predominantly well received by parents.

The PCO helps families undertake a short initial needs assessment to identify ways to reduce the stresses within the family home, for example, by supporting them with:

- housing
- employment
- finances
- drugs and alcohol
- mental health
- referral to the local reducing parental conflict programme.

“We’re making a difference. We get a lot of positive feedback from families.”

– Early Help Practitioner lead

They see their role as one of prevention and problem-solving, utilising the skills and experience PCOs have in working with families in the community.

This early identification and needs assessment approach has been successful in reducing parental conflict and police costs. An independent evaluation by a local university and the Constabulary found a significant reduction in repeat call outs comparing the same months in the year before, and after the work began.



## Opportunities to take action in your role

Police at all levels can take action to respond to conflict between parents in their area – from frontline staff, through to those in management positions, those with senior, strategic leadership roles and police and crime commissioners.

**Police Constables and Sergeants in frontline police teams**, can follow up on: incidents of parental conflict after the initial call out; and any de-escalation of the conflict or immediate situation. This gives police staff more time to carry out detailed assessments of what has happened and may encourage parents to begin opening up about the problems they are having. Questions to ask include:

- Are you arguing a lot?
- Are you finding your arguments are intense?
- Are you ever resolving the arguments?

When talking to families, using the right words is important. While training and support programmes may be labelled as ‘reducing parental conflict’, police professionals say they prefer to describe what they do as ‘supporting healthy relationships’, alongside other similar terms, which make it clear that parental conflict is not a criminal act.

If relationship conflict is identified, **frontline police professionals** can direct families to local and national Reducing Parental Conflict support, programmes and resources.

### RESOURCES

#### **How police officer ask about conflict in Nottingham**

Nottingham Police are one of the police forces already working to respond to parental conflict - watch a short video here, created in collaboration with Walsall Council and 1242 studios, on how police officers ask about parental conflict:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8PrbZQsnUo>

#### **Talking with families about parental conflict:**

This short guide and accompanying video provides practitioners and leads in local areas with practical tips on how to talk to families about parental conflict, and how to alleviate negative feelings about relationship support: <https://foundations.org.uk/our-work/resources/talking-with-families-about-parental-relationships-practical-tips-and-guiding-questions/>

Staff such as **Detective Inspectors (DIs)**, can raise awareness among the police workforce of the reducing parental conflict agenda. Police staff in Foundations’ stakeholder engagement project reported engaging with key local authority contacts, particularly those in the Supporting Families



programme<sup>2</sup> and Family Hubs. These contacts helped direct them to training opportunities, including short bespoke programmes specifically for police staff. Sharing these opportunities with police teams through websites, newsletters, and other communications, was a way that DIs built parental conflict knowledge and competency in their forces.

**Police staff at management level** are well placed to support, have oversight of, and be the point of contact for police teams working to respond to parental conflict. They can also form and strengthen connections with Reducing Parental Conflict Leads in local authorities. Annual research with local authority leads has showed that local authority staff are keen to engage and work more collaboratively with their police service. However, they sometimes face challenges in identifying and connecting with the right contacts in their local police force to move efforts forward.

Police representation on local multi-agency reducing parental conflict screening/triage panels and steering groups is also a key way to ensure involvement. **Police at management level** will be well placed to identify staff at the right level and remit in their forces to take on this role and make those connections happen. **At the most senior levels** – for example **Chief Inspectors** – strategic engagement in local or regional reducing parental conflict work is needed to drive involvement forward. Foundations' stakeholder engagement work with police highlighted the importance of senior staff buy-in on reducing parental conflict work to ensure cohesive and sustained action. Senior staff can lead on police involvement in local authority reviews and audits of how parental conflict is recorded and managed, including how data is shared with and between agencies to ensure that police can play a more integrated role.

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<sup>2</sup> Since this engagement project, Supporting Families will formally end as a specific, single and separate programme from 31 March 2025. The whole family working practice championed through the programme will be mainstreamed through Family Help and Child Protection reforms.



## CASE STUDY

### Embedded RPC training and senior level buy-in

In one local area, an Inspector from the local constabulary, who is also the police coordinator for Supporting Families, has a key role in reducing parental conflict work. They:

- established a multiagency reducing parental conflict group.
- work with the Early Help reducing parental conflict lead to screen parental conflict referrals and decide on the most suitable support.
- Act as a point of contact and offer policing advice to the local authority.
- Oversee police reducing parental conflict training.

Training for police in reducing parental conflict in this area is:

- mandatory for all new police constables.
- introduced with a half hour session which acts as a taster for the full training day.
- part of multi-topic training carousels held at police headquarters.
- a bespoke co-designed session based on real police cases and video clips.
- focused on impacts of parental conflict, identifying, responding and signposting.
- delivered one to two times per year by the local authority reducing parental conflict trainer and police workforce development team.

Neighbourhood teams were identified as the best placed to lead on parental conflict in this local authority, having the right resources, capacity, skills and roles. To open conversations, understand the parental relationship, and offer advice and signposting, there is an emphasis on: having conversations with families who are having difficulties; and asking key questions: 'This must be really tough. How are you managing that?'

"We have oversight from senior managers who want this work done and want us to be involved...and that's why it's continuing the way it is."

The Neighbourhood Inspector has sufficient seniority to be able to drive forward the work, and has an overview of community support teams, PCs, and Sergeants for the neighbourhood teams.

Senior buy-in has been critical to the success of work in this local authority through:

- support from a newly appointed Chief Constable.
- Senior police representatives on the strategic partnership and governance board.
- A regional reducing parental conflict network and website of 88 local authorities.



## How to get more involved in work to respond to conflict between parents

There are many ways you can get involved in local work to tackle relationship conflict between parents. To help get you started, you might want to consider the following actions:

<b>Ask...</b>	who leads on parental conflict in your police team or service, and who is a reducing parental conflict champion?
<b>Learn...</b>	about training opportunities and resources in your area and share these with your team.
<b>Find out...</b>	about referral pathways, and how parental conflict is recorded in your area.
<b>Talk...</b>	to other police and local authority staff with a reducing parental conflict role or interest.
<b>Contact...</b>	your local Early Help teams and local authority Reducing Parental Conflict Leads to find out how police can get involved with multi-agency strategic boards, steering groups and networks that focus on parental conflict.
<b>Plan...</b>	to keep important reducing parental conflict contacts alive. If you or a colleague who leads on this is moving to another police team, or an important local authority contact is leaving their post, make sure replacement contact staff are introduced before you go to continue the good work.
<b>Review...</b>	the work that your team or service do in relation to reducing parental conflict, how cases are recorded, and what data you provide local authority leads and other key stakeholders.