

Levelling up begins at home: the urgent need to support relationships and families in post-pandemic Britain



Why research relationships?

At Tavistock Relationships we have been **Improving Lives for Generations, because strong relationships improve our lives, families and mental health.**

As part of our charitable mission to increase the availability of couple-focused support, we wanted to find out how the UK's relationships have fared during perhaps the most seismic event since 1945, the pandemic. We therefore commissioned a YouGov survey in July 2021 of more than 2,000 UK adults, just over half of whom were in a relationship.

The questions were designed to provide insights into the impact of the pandemic and social restriction on the relationships of couples, families, parents and children, and to consider how this had affected the nation's mental health. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,093 adults, of whom 1,401 were in a relationship. Fieldwork was undertaken between 22-23 July 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of UK adults (aged 18+).

What did the survey tell us?

The results of our survey paint a picture of the state of relationships and families in the UK post-pandemic. It is extremely worrying to find that levels of stress and conflict that existed prior to the pandemic have been exacerbated during this period, with particular sections of the population reporting levels of distress and relationship conflict significantly higher than the average.

For example, while it is troubling enough that that four in ten of respondents feel that the pandemic has caused additional stress for their children and wider family.

It is especially concerning that separated or separating couples have particularly struggled, with 68% of these saying the pandemic had caused additional family difficulties.

“It is especially concerning that separated or separating couples have particularly struggled.”

The survey also found 18-24 year olds almost twice as likely to have experienced extra conflict between themselves and their partner than the average across all demographics (46% v 24%).





In addition, the impact of the pandemic on parents seems to have been particularly stark, with couples with children being nearly twice as likely as the average to consider splitting up as a result of lockdown and the pandemic (14% v. 8%). This finding provides a timely reminder as to why the Government should continue to fund work such as its highly successful Reducing Parental Conflict programme to help people have stronger, healthier relationships.

Our survey also showed, unsurprisingly perhaps, that the pandemic created a great deal of hardship in the job market with the finding that 39% of unemployed respondents said the Covid situation had caused extra conflict in their relationship is striking when compared to the average for the population of 24%.

The impact of inter-parental conflict on children

Respondents demonstrated a broad understanding of some of the negative impacts of conflict between parents on families, with 82% recognising that rows between parents can negatively impact children's sleep, and 83% understanding that inter-parental conflict can negatively affect children's schoolwork and overall academic attainment.

The survey also gauged respondents' views around parental conflict and its impact on children, with arguments between parents being ranked as the third biggest cause of negative children's behaviour – more than issues to do with both exam pressure and family income.

83% of respondents understand that inter-parental conflict can negatively affect school attainment

These findings are congruent with a huge body of evidence which shows that these, and other negative impacts, can be the consequences for children of exposure to frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict between their parents (Harold et al., 2016).

Interestingly, however, a majority of respondents (58%) stated that 'shouty' arguments upset children more than unspoken ones (e.g. one partner giving the other the silent treatment or the 'cold shoulder'). Research clearly shows us that the negative impacts of parental conflict are in fact felt across the entire range of that conflict – that is from 'silence to violence' – if it is intense, occurs frequently and does not get adequately resolved.

This finding is related to results which showed a difference of opinion regarding arguing “in front of the children”, with almost half (47%) believing that – as long as arguments are properly resolved – it can be beneficial for children to witness disagreements between their parents. However, a similar proportion (40%) thought that it is preferable for arguing parents to give each other the cold shoulder (or walk away from each other), rather than to have a big row in front of their children.

And while it is clear therefore, from these survey results, that respondents recognised the damage which inter-parental conflict can have on children in relation to life chances, it is interesting also to see that they understand the benefits that relationship support can bring to their own relationships and mental health, and the wellbeing of their children.

So much so, in fact, that 45% of the survey sample believe that relationship support should be available, free of charge, through the NHS.



“**The public understand the benefits that relationship support can bring to their own relationships and mental health, and the wellbeing of their children.**”

This finding links to another from the survey which found that nearly three-quarters of people believe that children could be helped if their parents were to seek relationship support. The link between helping parents in order to improve the wellbeing of children has been one which policy-makers and service providers have been slow to recognise, so it is noteworthy that people understand this linkage so clearly.

Respondents also recognised – having had to live through the pandemic – just how important their relationships are to them, with 66% saying that the experience has made them value having a relationship with their partner.

The pandemic has been a scarring experience for many of course, and this is reflected in survey results which show 42% believing that the pandemic will have a long term effect on their mental health.

Interestingly, people understand that relationship health and mental health are very much entwined, according to these survey results. For example, 46% believed that relationship support could improve the mental health of one or both partners in distress, as well as the benefits it can bring to their own relationships and mental health and the wellbeing of their children.

In summary, the results of this survey tell us that the British public value relationships and want them to receive more support. To them, it is clear that strong relationships between adults are good for children.

Some sections of the population have fared particularly badly as a result of the pandemic. Our survey shows that people appreciate this, and understand that demand for mental health and relationship support services will soar.

The message seems increasingly clear: relationships deserve support from the state every bit as much as does our mental health.

For the Government's levelling up agenda to have lasting and meaningful results, we must support relationships and the mental health of all families, particularly those who have suffered differentially badly as a result of the pandemic.



“Family relationships are under strain, and people believe that couple and family relationships need support now, just as our mental health does. Indeed, the experience of the pandemic has brought home to us what research has long shown: in many respects relationship health is mental health.

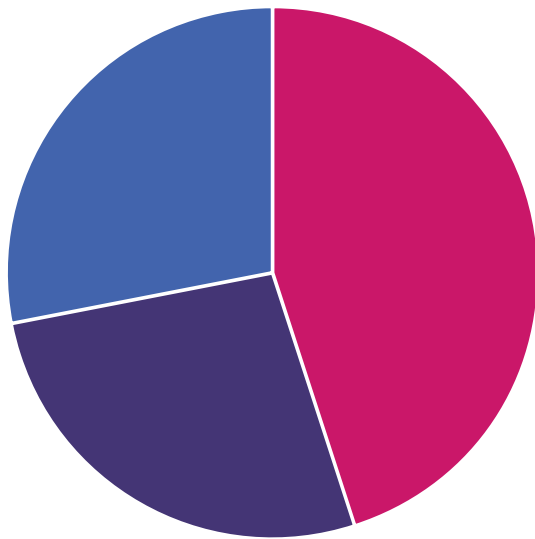
We have effective interventions to help couples experiencing relationship distress and mental health problems; we therefore renew our call to the Government to ensure that funding is made available to deliver these nationwide to help all couples in distress.”

Andrew Balfour, CEO, Tavistock Relationships

45% support free relationship support

45% of the survey sample believe that relationship support should be available, free of charge, through the NHS, approaching double (27%) that who stated it should be a paid for service.

Which one of the following statements comes closest to your view? (Base: All UK Adults: 2093)

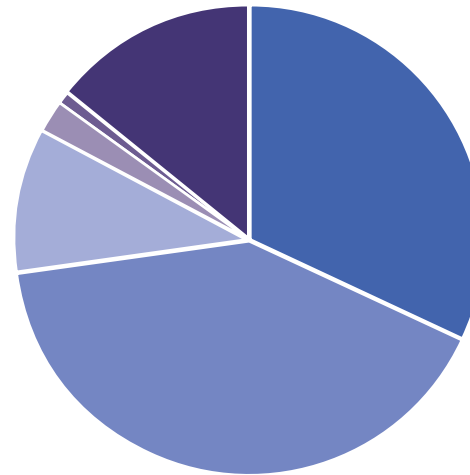


45%
Relationship support should be freely available in the UK

27%
Relationship support should be a paid for service in the UK

73% agree parents in conflict can be helped by relationship support

To what extent do you agree, or disagree that children in families where their parents are in conflict could be helped if their parents seek relationship support (i.e. relationship counselling, friends, family, etc.)? (Base: All UK Adults: 2093)

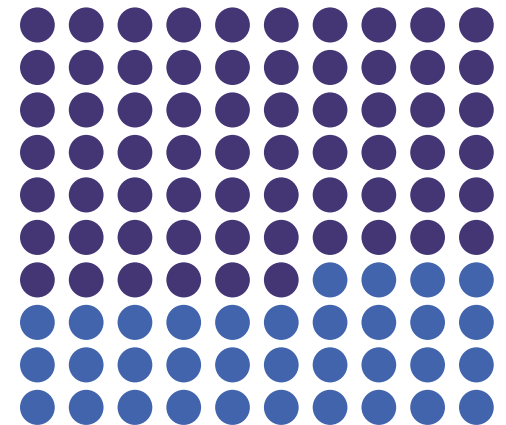


Key

- Strongly agree – 32%
- Tend to agree – 41%
- Neither agree nor disagree – 10%
- Tend to disagree – 2%
- Strongly disagree – 1%
- Don't know – 14%

66% say the pandemic has made them value their relationship

The public also recognise – having had to live through the various and extended privations of the pandemic – just how important their relationships are to them, with 66% of respondents saying that the experience has made them value having a relationship with their partner.



About Tavistock Relationships

Tavistock Relationships provides more than 20,000 therapy sessions to individuals and couples every year, online and in person.

The charity is a leading authority on couple psychotherapy, undertaking research and providing training, as well delivering programmes to support couples and families in crisis – including the Government's Reducing Parental Conflict programme.

Tavistock Relationships also trains NHS practitioners in the NICE-recommended talking therapy Couple Therapy for Depression.

Tavistock Relationships, Registered Charity Number: 211058.
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The Tavistock Institute of Medical Psychology.

Certain photos posed by models for illustrative purposes.

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