



# Why we don't Why we should and How we could

A short guide to working with co-parents

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**Established in 1948, Tavistock Relationships is internationally recognised in its field as a centre of advanced practice, study and research. Our work is geared to improving the quality of adult couple relationships, preventing family breakdown and supporting positive parenting.**

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**We publish widely on matters pertaining to relationships and undertake a breadth of research and evaluation activities to establish the evidence base for our interventions.**

**We believe in the importance of the therapeutic relationship and its ability to enhance and heal the lives of adults and children.**

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## **Acknowledgements**

With grateful thanks to the Department for Education and the Parenting Fund for funding support, and to Mick Morgan, in particular.

This guide owes its existence to a number of people, and is dedicated to them: to Susanna Abse for her good advice; to Helen Dent and Mary MacLeod for supporting my interest; to my mother, Wendy Rhodes, for showing me that struggles are worthwhile; and to the memory of Nick Reeve. Finally, it is for David Levy, who taught me that 'only connect' was not simply two small words.

**A Tavistock Relationships Publication**

Practitioner Pamphlets Series Editor: Susanna Abse

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# Starting points

*'They spend so much time hating each other they don't have a lot of time to love me.'* Nina, age 7

One striking fact about our efforts to improve children's lives is how little attention we give to the relationship between parents. A child's bond with its mother has long been a focus of our work, and increasingly we think about fathering too. Yet if a child's parents have a troubled relationship, we tend to stand back – despite compelling evidence that parental conflict harms children in a number of significant ways. Think about any parenting or family-work training you attended recently. Was the parental relationship mentioned at all? The chances are that it was not.

In picking up this guide, you are one of a small minority who are prepared to engage with the idea that the co-parenting relationship matters. This is important because, as family and parenting workers, we are in a position to help parents. The parental couple relationship is one we can help parents change – but only if we ourselves are prepared to understand why we often don't choose to attend to it. Although you may not have a specific training in couple relationships, this guide will help you work with parents who need support. It will not turn you into a therapist, but it will encourage you to listen to parents, to reflect their experience, and to be brave enough to talk to them about their relationship.

## Who are co-parents and why not use the term parental couple?

In this guide the term 'co-parents' is used interchangeably with the term 'parental couple'. In some ways 'co-parents' is preferable, since it is not limited to the idea of a heterosexual pair who are married or living together, and is appropriate whether couples are gay, lesbian, heterosexual, living together, separated or have never lived together. Today step-families are the fastest-growing family form, and this guide will help you work with them too.

## Why consider this relationship as separate and different from family bonds?

The relationship of two parents is different from other family relationships we encounter. It precedes a child's birth and must adapt and accommodate to that most challenging of changes: the move from being a couple who attend to each other's needs, to being parents who can put a tiny infant's needs before their own. It is no wonder that some couples do not survive this change, yet it is at this difficult stage that the bond between parents is most important. One parent must support the other (the primary caregiver) and allow the baby to bond strongly with its primary carer. This builds the emotional bedrock for the child's healthy development. Attending to the couple at this time counts as the earliest of early interventions, and yet we do it very little.

## Couple relationships in the spotlight: a helpful conversation

The practice of couple therapy and relationship work has a long and honourable history. Since 1938, when vicars created the National Marriage Guidance Council (now Relate), successive governments have been interested in supporting marriage and now, in more enlightened times, in supporting couple relationships however they are constituted. The work of Tavistock Relationships began when social workers at the Family Welfare Association (now Family Action) asked psychoanalysts at the Tavistock Clinic for support with some of the families and individuals they found hardest to help. In the conversation that followed, a common factor emerged as worthy of note – that each of these difficult cases was characterised by conflict or breakdown in the adult relationship. As a way of providing expert help, and to develop new approaches, the two organisations set up the Family Discussion Bureau and gave birth to the family casework model. The Bureau workers found that effective work required excellent supervision, a full training for social workers and practical, applied expertise in couple work.

## The power of past experiences

This guide is based on a working assumption that our past experiences, remembered or not, affect our emotional responses and our behaviour. Knowing this helps us to understand something about people's choice of partner and what keeps couples together or drives them apart. It gives us another language to help us understand ourselves and others.

As you will have experienced in your work, what we see on the surface of a family does not tell us the whole story. The power of what is not known (the 'unconscious') is at work in all of us, workers included. To identify the influence of your own unconscious mind, take a moment to think about a work situation that brought up in you a feeling that was surprising or strangely upsetting. It may, for instance, have been an argument with a work colleague, and what they said may have reminded you of a time when you were told off at school, or by a parent. You can probably see that your response was not a rational one. Responses rooted in our unconscious minds tend to be out of all proportion to what precipitated them, and the event that triggered them may linger, casting a shadow across our day.

These unconscious forces are also at work in the families we see, and can work their way into our relationships with members of the family. Often we ignore those feelings, or try to, but we should not do that because they help us understand more about what is going on in the family's life. Supervision can give us a chance to talk about our feelings, and is the safest place to think about our work and plan how to help families as well as we would want to.

# Why we don't

## Sensible questions about privacy and legitimacy

There are many reasons why family and parenting workers can feel reluctant to work with the couple relationship. One of the most obvious anxieties is the fear of intruding. A relationship can, quite rightly, feel like a very private matter. To make things more difficult, families rarely ask for our help with the co-parenting relationship.

On the other hand, parents do often ask for help with parenting their children, which is shorthand for changing the parent-child relationship. Perhaps parents don't ask for help for themselves because they don't know that their relationship is troubled enough to merit help, or because they don't believe they can be helped. Equally, they may not ask because they are ashamed, fearful and angry at finding themselves in a difficult adult relationship.

When workers choose not to enquire about the quality and nature of the couple relationship, we may think we are respecting the couple's privacy. We may be aware that asking questions can unleash many difficult issues we don't feel competent to deal with. Perhaps we also feel concerned that the couple relationship is no business of ours: if people need help they should see a counsellor or therapist.

We should think about this more. When families come to us for help, or we see them because there are concerns about their children's welfare, they open themselves to being asked for a mass of information. We delve into how they feed their children, spend their money, use discipline and manage their lives. Certainly, sensitivity is called for in all these areas of conversation. But as with all things in family and parenting work, when we are confident in the use of our authority, and clear as to why things should be asked about or done, most families help us to help them by giving us information and most of the answers to the problems they face. The same is true when we try to work with the co-parenting relationship.

## The absent co-parent

Readers who work only with single parents can easily assume that the co-parenting relationship is not of concern to them. The challenge is to remember that this is not the child's experience. Even if a child has never known one of its parents, it must still deal with the consequences of its parents' choices, and it will, inevitably, have thoughts and feelings about the absent parent. Some children may think about their other parent as 'lost' to them because they did something to drive them away.

The issue for us, when working with single parents, is to be aware that we can choose to talk about the absent parent. Losing them may have been a very significant event – a bereavement, perhaps, or a traumatic divorce. Such experiences can lodge in the mind and affect the other parent's life profoundly.

Whatever the circumstances, however, separation has emotional consequences, and these must be dealt with or children will continue to be affected. This is the case even when, for example, parents say they never intended to get pregnant, or maintain that when the other parent moved out it was the best thing that could have happened. An earlier separation may not feel important compared to other things going on in a parent's life, but we cannot collude in ignoring the co-parenting relationship, even if it is not a current one.

## The influence of our own experiences and issues

So far we have identified some of the reasons why we don't even think about the co-parenting relationship. There are others reasons, but they may be harder to contemplate.

All of us who work in the family and parenting field have our own experiences of growing up. Some have had parents who got divorced or never lived together, some a childhood overshadowed by a parent's death. Some of us know what it is like to be a child in a family where there is domestic abuse, or have had to endure silent parental conflict. These experiences affect us – for some the effect has been profound, for others it was a passing phase in a life where other experiences have been good. Whatever we have been through, however, those of us who work with families know that our own experiences can make it difficult to help other people. Sometimes their upsets and difficulties can trigger painful thoughts about our own childhoods. What we have been through makes us experts in our own lives but not in those of other people, so even when situations seem similar, we must work carefully to ensure that we are not importing our own feelings and emotions into the families we work with. Each family has their own story to tell, and by our attentive listening we must allow and help them to understand themselves in their own way.

Another reason we do not investigate the parental couple relationship is to avoid embarrassment – and it is strange to think how far we sometimes go to avoid asking about something that is plainly troubling a parent.

*'I knew that she was really strained, I knew that he had upped and left at the weekend. I knew all that and yet, of all the things we [could have] agreed to work on that day, we decided together that it was the kids' bedtime routines. On reflection I know that I steered her. He was never about at bedtimes because he works in a bar; this was something she'd always had to do on her own. Perhaps I felt that I was sort of acknowledging that she would be doing most of the parenting on her own now, [but] to be honest I don't think so. I had 40 minutes to attend to her, and if I'd started her off on why he'd gone and how she felt I would have been sitting there for hours.'* **Chris, Parent Outreach Worker**

One Plus One, the relationship support organisation, identified something called 'the turned to moment'. This term refers to the point when someone decides to

talk to another person about their troubled relationship and the capacity, or lack of capacity, in the listener to endure being given the information. We subtly (and usually unconsciously) give a signal that we can't listen: we look at our watch, yawn or physically turn away. Given how much courage it takes to make such a confidence, it is sad that those of us in helping professions are not better equipped to be turned to, giving someone the space and time to utter words that they may not have spoken before. This guide prepares us to be 'turned to' and to be helpful by being emotionally ready to receive what we may be told.

To find out more about 'the turned to moment', see:  
<https://www.oneplusone.org.uk>

## But I'm not a couple counsellor or a sex therapist . . .

The greatest fear, perhaps, is that this work is about sex, the most private of all our human desires. In a way most things are about sex: family life exists because of it, relationships form and break up because of it, it makes us powerfully happy and equally powerfully distressed. We are not suggesting that the family and parenting workforce become sex counsellors, but we are suggesting that by not thinking about sex and the couple relationship we are likely to avoid, through our own fear and embarrassment, one important aspect of a couple relationship. We don't necessarily need to talk about a couple's intimate sexual relationship, but we should give a thought to it when we ask the questions we need to ask. For example, when we are working with families where domestic abuse and the personal safety of children and vulnerable adults is an issue, not asking about sex in this context is a failure to protect. Many frightened people will have endured years of sexualised abuse and need to be able to talk to a helper who can endure listening. That helper may well be you.

## Perhaps it's not a couple issue

It can be difficult to get to grips with the families we work with, because the focus of their problem shifts and changes over time. Family members come and go, professional networks change around them and the family's capacity to change fluctuates as crises occur and wane. Since it can be hard just to keep families engaged enough for the work to continue, it feels onerous to be asked to think and do more. However, by asking other questions, and attending to our own emotional responses, we may be able help a family far more than we think.

Indeed a good working hypothesis, when it comes to families in trouble, is to assume that the parents' couple relationship is equally troubled, until proven otherwise. That does not mean you need to become a marriage guidance counsellor. It just means you need to know how to frame the work you do, how to describe what you see, how to help parents reflect on what they can do and how, in your work, you can model excellent, attentive and respectful relationships.

## Managing difference: working with couples who are not like us

Encountering a couple and a family who are different in shape or experience from our own can be confusing, particularly when they are from a different culture. We want to do the 'right' thing, and to understand them. In these circumstances it is usually a good idea to do some reading and talking to be well prepared: you might, for instance, have a consultation with another worker from the family's own culture to help you get ready. You may well encounter couples whose relationship is not founded on the western notion of romantic love but was arranged for them by their families. Here, again, it is important not to make assumptions about what this means. However a couple relationship starts, it must achieve the same things if it is to be useful to both partners. It must allow the emotional needs of children to be attended to and make it possible to arrange parenting tasks – who will do them and how they will be done. Over and beyond that, it must allow the couple to experience intimacy and connection, and act as a 'container' for the emotional life that belongs to adults as well as to the whole family.

You may well meet co-parents who are lesbians or gay men. How they are going about the task of bringing up their children, however they were conceived, may raise areas of unknowing for you. Equally, when we encounter parents who are living with disabilities we can experience a painful sense of ignorance. What they need from you is an approach that shows you are making no judgments and that, more than anything, you have sufficient skills to be helpful. Research and preparation is the key to meeting the challenge of difference, by allowing yourself the opportunity to be curious and to learn.

What is important is that we think about those differences and how the co-parents and wider family will experience us, since we are different from them and may be intimidating. It is always helpful to talk about the differences in an early session, and explain that you need the family's help to understand what their difference means to you. It is often best to be frank and say that you have not worked with a family like them before, but that every family you have worked with has helped you to understand them. You could add that it has been helpful for other families to understand more about who you are, in terms of your role and work.

### Should I be worried: is this relationship unhealthy?

Sometimes it is clear when a co-parenting relationship works well. But making that judgement is not always easy, and it can be hard to know whether to address the couple relationship or not. For that reason, it is worth bearing in mind what an 'ordinary healthy relationship' might look like. Knowing what might count as 'normal' conflict and difficulty helps us respond properly to what concerns us. Having a sense of what might count as normal galvanises us to ask questions and prepares us to help co-parents make the necessary changes.

A good parental couple relationship is one that has survived, and may indeed be stronger for, the arrival of children, either planned or unplanned. This transition

to parenthood is a challenge for all parents, however strong and resilient their relationship. The couple will have accepted that their families of origin, friends and work colleagues have a new view of them – as parents, rather than as adults without parental responsibility. They will also have found a meaning in the arrival of a baby that is realistic, rather than a fantasy. You may, for instance, know people who have chosen to have a baby to save their relationship, only to find that the strain imposed on them is too great and their couple relationship founders on the rocks of sleepless nights and their baby's natural emotional demands.

Healthy couples are able to form a strong alliance centred on the issues and problems parenting throws at them. They may have differences of opinion on the best way forward, but will resolve their conflicts away from the children and come to a consensus on how to manage things. Healthy couples are characterised by the ability to 'hold the child in mind', a lovely idea from child psychotherapy which means that they can put their own cares and concerns to one side in order to think together about their child's needs and attend to them. They can anticipate emotional responses and manage them, which may mean allowing their children to be angry and upset – and even hate their parents – without trying to bully or bribe the children, or retreat from them. Every child needs to be able to experience the full gamut of emotions, from adoration to deep loathing. What they need from parents is the safety of doing so in the certain knowledge that, whatever the child feels, it cannot destroy or undo its parents. By being able to contain these welling emotions, parental couples show the child that human bonds are worth striving for and can sustain them in adversity.

**Further reading: download 'How Attachment Shapes Family Relationships: a guide for practitioners', Christopher Clulow, Tavistock Relationships:  
<https://tavistockrelationships.ac.uk/training-courses/practitioner-guides-resources/400-how-attachment-shapes-family-relationships0>**

**You can also download 'Becoming Parents Together: ten things to hold in mind when working with new parents (and then some...)', Christopher Clulow, Tavistock Relationships:  
<https://tavistockrelationships.ac.uk/training-courses/practitioner-guides-resources/204-becoming-parents-together>**

# Why we should

## Couple relationships at the heart of the family

If we feel too nervous about intruding or getting it wrong, or are too fearful of stirring up our own feelings, it can be easy to ignore the one relationship in the family that regulates all the others. By not talking about the co-parenting bond, and failing to ask sensible and appropriate questions about it, we can deprive ourselves of crucial information. Because it is such a crucial area of family life, when we fail to address it we lose an opportunity to help parents make important changes – changes that could be the key to real improvements in family functioning and in children's emotional and physical wellbeing.

For evidence of why this matters so much, we need only look to Serious Case Reviews, and examine them with an eye to the parental couple relationship. At the heart of many of these tragedies is the danger posed by step-parents, or by parents who have never made the emotional transition to parenthood and so continue to serve each other's needs rather than those of their child or children. These case reviews reveal a pattern that typically sees co-parents behave in a collusive way and put their children in real danger by avoiding professional help or support when it is clearly needed.

## Research can help: what do we know about interparental conflict and children's resilience?

What follows is a brief overview of just some of the evidence to support the idea that children's emotional and physical wellbeing requires family and parenting practitioners to have some knowledge of work with couples. Full details and references are given in the Briefing Sheet that accompanies this guide.

There is now convincing evidence that interparental conflict adversely influences children's psychological development, social competence and academic achievement (Harold, Fincham, Osborne & Conger, 1997; Harold et al, 2004; Cummings et al, 2000; Cummings and Davies, 1994; Dadds et al, 1999; and many more).

There is also compelling research evidence to suggest that children who experience sustained interparental conflict are at greater risk of anxiety and depression, increased aggression, hostility and antisocial behaviour (Cummings and Davies, 2002; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey and Cummings, 2004; Jekielek, 1998; Vandewater E. and Lansford 1998).

What is also clear is that interparental conflict adversely affects parenting, and parents embroiled in hostile couple relationships are typically more hostile and aggressive towards their children (Erel and Berman, 1995; Harold, Fincham, Osborne & Conger, 1997; Lindahl et al, 1997).

These results hold good whether the families are made up of two parents at home or parents who are separated, divorced or remarried (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992; Johnson et al, 1989).

Silent and corrosive conflict can also have a profound effect on children. Parents report feelings of anxiety, irritability and preoccupation. As a result they are less emotionally available to other family members as well as less patient. They allow their conflict to spill into their interactions with their children. This, in turn, can bring on feelings of guilt and remorse, and an inability to speak about what is happening.

Pryor and Pattison (2007) researched children's experiences of silent parental conflict. The young people interviewed described feeling helpless, insecure, confused and without control in response to this elusive type of conflict. Their difficult feelings were heightened if their parents denied that such conflict was taking place, and if there was no explicit resolution. Some children blamed themselves for the situation between their parents or for their own inability to remedy it. These reports indicate that silent discord between parents may have serious consequences for children's emotional wellbeing, particularly for internalising problems such as depression and anxiety.

Given this weight of evidence, we plainly need an intervention that works in a number of ways. The aim must be to reduce parents' conflict and its damaging effects, and to improve the co-parenting relationship.

Parenting programmes such as Triple P and Incredible Years work specifically to improve parenting and support children through family change, using psycho-educational techniques and skills rehearsal. These programmes do not touch on the couple relationship, which we now know to be a vital ingredient in helping children grow up happy and well.

Very few parenting interventions have targeted the relationship between the parental couple. At Berkeley, University of California, however, Professors Philip and Carolyn Cowan investigated the effectiveness of couple-focused parenting interventions on the lives of children and young people. What they found was that their manualised parenting intervention, which focused on the adult couple relationship as well as parenting issues, was more effective in improving outcomes for children than interventions that focused on parenting issues alone. Better still, this effect continued after the intervention had finished (Cowan and Cowan, 'Working With Couples During Stressful Life Transitions' (1997) in Dreman (ed.), 'The Family on the Threshold of the 21st Century', Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, pp17-48).

It was this longitudinal research which inspired this short guide for parenting and family practitioners. Not only do we know a good deal about the adverse impact of couple conflict on children and what can be done about it, but we also know how much a positive co-parenting relationship offers to children.

A healthy co-parenting relationship also gives children some protection from the emotional consequences of parental separation and divorce. Research suggests a positive connection between achievement at school and meaningful and continuing contact with a non-resident parent, who is often their father (Amato and Fowler, 2002).

Another area we now know a good deal about is what supports resilience in children. Resilience is the ability to bounce back – and involves doing well against the odds, coping and recovering (Rutter, 1985; Stein, 2005). We are beginning, too, to understand better the different effects of interparental conflict on boys and girls (Daniel and Wassell, 2002).

Finally, it is interesting to look at a similar jurisdiction and some new approaches being used there. Australia has had Family Relationship Centres for some years now, and has generated a great deal of valuable research. The centres were first opened because the national government was concerned about the rising divorce rate, its impact on children and the economic cost of family breakdown. Family Relationship Centres have pioneered a range of techniques and materials to help co-parents manage their relationship. Among them are DVDs of children talking about their sadness and distress at their parents' relationship breakdown – astonishingly honest accounts that have been invaluable in helping even the most acrimonious couples think more about how to work together in order to safeguard their children's future health and happiness. Some of their research and materials are available to download from: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/>

**Further reading from Australia: 'Prevention and Early Intervention in Strengthening Families and Relationships: challenges and implications':**  
<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/prevention-and-early-intervention-strengthening-families-and-relationships-c>

### **So does it matter? Yes it does, and you can measure it . . .**

To sum up, research tells us that attending to the co-parenting relationship is worth the bother, and that we should ask ourselves why we would not want to learn more about it and incorporate it into our general parenting and family practice.

It's worth knowing that, once we begin to focus on co-parenting, there are ways of gauging the effectiveness of our work. We can, for instance, measure change in the problems parents are encountering in their co-parenting tasks with a tool such as the Parent Problem Checklist. (See the Briefing Sheet for details.) When it comes to the quality and nature of the couple relationship, we can use tools such as the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) or the Index of Marital Satisfaction scale (IMS). These tools, and others, are outlined in the Briefing Sheet.

**For more help in thinking about measuring, you can purchase: 'Knowing What You Do Works: measuring your own effectiveness with families, parents and children: a short guide', Honor Rhodes:**  
[https://tavistockrelationships.ac.uk/images/uploads/download\\_packs/knowing\\_what\\_you\\_do\\_works\\_short\\_guide\\_09.pdf](https://tavistockrelationships.ac.uk/images/uploads/download_packs/knowing_what_you_do_works_short_guide_09.pdf)

# How we could

## What can be done?

This section offers you a series of practical suggestions for adding a co-parenting dimension to your practice, so that the children in the families you work with can reap the rewards of your thoughtful help. While this guide cannot turn you into a couple counsellor, you may be wondering about this as a training choice – if so, the Briefing Sheet that can be downloaded with this guide suggests some training opportunities.

## Working with couples who are separate

Couples who have never lived together, or who are now separate, present a challenge to any worker. In fact they may scarcely consider themselves co-parents – but that should not stop us from thinking about them as such. It can be easy to collude with a single parent in assuming that the absent parent has no part to play in a child's life. Sadly, for some children that is how things are; but not as often as one might think. When we ask sensitive and careful questions about what relationship a child has with its non-resident parent, we can find that parent means something of real importance, even if contact is infrequent or unsatisfying. One task we can set ourselves is to ensure that the parent with care becomes able to understand that their emotional response to their ex-partner is not necessarily the same as the child's. We can help them think about how to allow the child a more positive relationship with their absent parent, and about how they could choose, with help and support, to develop a deeper, and more conflict-free co-parenting relationship.

For help with thinking about a groupwork intervention see the Briefing Sheet. This has details of the Helping Parents in Conflict training developed by Tavistock Relationships.

Some practitioners have used the Children's Beliefs about Parental Divorce Scale (CBAPS) as a way of showing parents who choose to live apart how self-blaming children can feel, and how many children nurse a secret hope that their parents may somehow, magically, come back together. This can be a powerful way to get parents talking about their child again, rather than about their anger and bitterness towards each other.

When we meet a single parent, one of the most important things we can do is to think about the absent parent. We can use family trees and ecomaps to help us draw this out.

**For more help in using assessment tools such as family trees, download 'Assessment and Tools to Use: family trees and ecomaps' from the Tavistock Relationships website: <https://tavistockrelationships.ac.uk>**

## Working with couples who are together

Even when both parents live together and are active co-parents, we can find ourselves working with only one of them – often the mother or primary care giver. By and large we are a very female workforce, and much of our delivery has historically focused on engaging the women in families. This is one reason why the work of the Fatherhood Institute presented a challenge to working practices. Rather lazily, we had adopted the idea of ‘parenting’ without, perhaps, thinking through the implications for our practice. What does working with both parents really mean? Do we have to work with them at the same time? How on earth could we do that, and is it really of value?

Focusing on both parents and their relationship helps us leap this potential mire of confusion. We can say that we will need to meet both parents. We can explain that we need to hear from them both how things are: what the problem areas are, what they have tried and what changes they can both agree to make. Despite the possible difficulties involved in managing such an interview, it is invaluable if we take time to plan properly, and to explain what we need and why we need it. Co-parents, even those with good and harmonious relationships, have different views as to the whys, whats and hows of their family life. This is one reason it can be useful to complete the Parent Problem Checklist, or the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, with each parent separately.

*‘I wasn’t looking forward to it – Mr A is a bit of big man, shouts and lays down the law – but I asked for 15 minutes with them both together, to help me make sense of what was going on for Donnie at school. They both completed the Goodman SDQ. Mr A tried to get Mrs A to score the same as him, saying things like, ‘It’s not true that he has worries, is it?’ I just reminded him that what was helpful was what they thought and it did not have to be the same. In the end they scored similarly, but Mrs A was more worried about bullying and Mr A was worried about Donnie’s friendships. It provoked a really interesting discussion between them and Mr A explained that he himself had been badly bullied at school, which was a bit of a revelation for Mrs A. We went on to talk about what they could do together as Donnie’s parents. I was surprised that they went as far as they did and as quickly. Until that point I had not got the idea that the questions themselves have the power to make a shift.’* **Kofo, Senior Parenting Worker**

## Understanding by listening to couples and ourselves

You may well have worked with co-parents where one scarcely lets the other finish a sentence, endlessly corrects the other parent’s account or appears bored and distant throughout. We can help parents work together better by enabling them to listen carefully to each other.

Whatever they do creates an emotional response in us, and our response is one of the most useful tools we can employ in understanding how we feel about the things we hear and see. Couples can leave us confused, tired, bored, fearful, gloomy or anxious. All these feelings can tell us something about what it is like to live in this particular family, and something about partners’ particular needs and family

relationships. It can be positively helpful to say, for instance: 'I feel a bit confused about who actually lives here,' or else: 'Just listening to all the things that have happened to you all makes me feel anxious about how you are going to manage to live together next week.' You can also make a more general reflection: 'Are you a couple who shout because you both like to talk at the same time?' Such reflections can help a couple gain a better understanding about how they appear to the outside world and what they need to think about and change.

By attending to your own emotional register, you are acquiring information about what it must be like to live in this family and by these rules, which will illuminate what a child's experience of their family life must be like. This is important, as empathic attention is one of the techniques we want to help parents use more, especially when they are working together as co-parents.

**For more reading on working with families using our emotional responses as a tool to understanding, download 'How to Help Families in Trouble: a short guide' from: [http://www.familyandparenting.org/our\\_work/All-Our-Publications/For Practitioners/How+to+Help+Families+in+Trouble](http://www.familyandparenting.org/our_work/All-Our-Publications/For Practitioners/How+to+Help+Families+in+Trouble)**

## Getting ready to meet: where, when, how?

Some of us work in Children's Centres and similar places where parents come and see us. Others work nearly exclusively in families' own homes. We can attend to the parental couple relationship in either setting, and both have advantages and disadvantages. If we invite parents, or a parent, into our place of work, we can control the environment in a way we cannot – and should not – in a family's home. In our meeting room we can arrange the furniture, organise a creche, have a hot drink to offer if the emotional work gets tough and summon help if we need it. We can ask a colleague to meet us afterwards to think together about what went on, and can see our manager if we are worried. The disadvantages are easy to spot. Parents may be far more reluctant to engage in complicated conversations with you in a formal setting. They may not like your Children's Centre, or they may like it a good deal but not want other parents to see them going into a room with you. On a purely practical level it requires more organisation for them to come: they may have several children and the journey could be a trial.

When we meet parents in their own home, on the other hand, we relinquish control over our working environment. We may need to negotiate for the TV to be turned off, the dogs to be put into the kitchen and the neighbour to leave. Many workers do this with little fuss and bother, and plan their visit for when the children are at school or nursery. The only rule we would use is that nothing that could create upset or distress in a parent, or parents, is discussed when children are present. I am inclined to go further and say that this includes babies and toddlers, whether sleeping in a buggy or playing in a corner. Though this may sound precious, we need to remember what we know about the impact on children of a parent's distress. It is not helpful to ask a parent to think about how their interparental conflict is affecting their children if our intervention causes the very problem we are trying to address.

We need to be honest with parents about why we would like to see them on their own or as a couple. Later, if we have made clear requests and they are not complied with, we will have gained some useful knowledge about these parents. (We might, for instance, have asked that children should be out of the house while we are working there, or that they should not be brought to an appointment at a centre.) In such circumstances we need to be firm, and remind co-parents why we wanted to see them alone. We also need to remind ourselves that when parents ‘forget’ things, this gives us an insight into how difficult talking about problems can be.

## Seeing parents together or separately

It is important to remember that we can be ‘parental-couple minded’ even when we work with only one parent. (This may be someone who does not live with the other parent or someone whose partner will simply not engage with us whatever or however we do it.)

When we can work with both parents, it is very important to see them together, or at least one after the other, when starting out. This is to make sure that each parent feels we are making a contract with them for the work we are going to do together. This joint approach is very different from seeing mothers on their own and somehow expecting fathers, or one partner in a lesbian or gay couple, to feel engaged in the work despite the fact that they are never seen. Sometimes it is not possible or practical to meet both co-parents together. Shift patterns can be an obstacle, and if a couple’s arguing is severe we may opt to see each partner separately – at least until we can help them think about turn-taking and putting their children’s needs first.

When we do work with parents as a co-parenting couple, we need to be ready for a range of emotions, both in the parents and ourselves. Think and reflect, and try out some interventions before you go into the meeting. This will help you be as useful as you can.

When you have tried to talk with a troubled couple before, you may well have felt utterly useless and unable to help those two people; you may also have found yourself siding strongly with one of the pair, in a way that will not be helpful. In relationship counselling or therapy, in fact, it is not the individuals who are considered the service users but the relationship between them. If this sounds odd, imagine a rope that is knotted and twisted, and which is being held by two people whose pulling and tugging is only making those knots much tighter. We need both partners to relax their grip and allow some slack. Once that happens, we can all work out how best to untie the knots.

## Understanding patterns of the past

When you are focusing on parents’ capacity to parent because of concerns about a child’s welfare, you are likely to ask about each parent’s history so you can start to understand what they are repeating and re-enacting from childhood. One aspect that is often not explored, however, is the relationship between each co-parent’s parents. Failing to explore those relationships is a missed opportunity, because the

patterns we learn from our parents' relationship tend to repeat themselves down the generations: they become the model for our choice of partners, our communication patterns and whether we can allow ourselves to be intimate with others or not. So if you are working with a woman suffering from post-natal depression, it is worth finding out not only if her own mother was depressed after childbirth, but how her father responded if she was, and whether her own co-parent supports her now.

This view of things may sound deterministic. It is, of course, possible for people to change, and to write a different 'family story' – complete with a different and better ending. For this to happen, though, partners need both insight and support.

## The role of detective work

To ask meaningful questions about family history, workers need to get attuned to things that don't seem to make sense, such as information that does not fully explain a family's predicament. What is really going on, for instance, when parents insist that everything between them is fine, and their only problem is their child, who will not sleep, eat, go to school or stop hanging around in a gang?

*'I could not quite believe them – it was all happy families apart from the middle child, who they seemed to believe was like a changeling, switched at birth or something. That was great for them as they had avoided, for a long time, the fact that she [the mother] had such a difficult pregnancy, and that the child was so premature that she had been in hospital for a couple of months and needed huge amounts of looking after when she came home. Finally I said that I was not quite getting it and that there was something missing, and out it all tumbled. They had not told me, at that point, that the dad had nearly left home, the oldest had to stay with the gran and the third child was an accident. We thought about all of that for quite a while and it made working with them on parenting all three children much easier as it was all more honest. At the heart of it was the mum's fear that her partner would up and leave. He spent his time reassuring her that this was not so.'* **Kelvin, Children's Centre Worker.**

## What is going on in this family? Questions to ask and thoughts to have

Like any other biological entity, families can be seen as a system; and, like all other systems, families try to maintain a 'steady state' even when crises and general mayhem occur. This can lead to complex and painful relationships, and the field of family therapy has given much thought to how a worker or therapist can best interpret what is going on in families in order to achieve positive change. For example, children's behaviour can be seen as a way of helping parents in their couple relationship, perhaps by bringing them together or forcing them apart. When a child's parents feel far apart or are in serious conflict, a child might have an asthma attack, be arrested for shoplifting or run away from home in order to bring their parents together. If a child feels excluded because a couple's relationship is too close, it may wake up regularly at night; if its parents decide that the simplest option is to bring the child into their own bed, the child has, quite literally, got in

between them. These are straightforward examples but, however one understands families and couples, it is clear that the unspoken and the 'felt' have as much influence over the family's life as what is spoken and obvious – if not more.

This is why thinking about the unconscious and the language it offers can be helpful. It helps us start to make sense of certain things that remain mysterious although we often observe them. For example, what sense are we to make of a couple's presentation where she is so calm and he is so irritable? Is that how they were born? Or have they developed this pattern of relating over the course of their relationship? We usually have a small question at the back of our minds about the real meaning of what we are seeing, as we probe and test and she becomes even calmer and he all the more cross. A couple therapist would suggest that something complicated is going on. Perhaps what is happening is that the man is 'holding' all the anger for this couple; and perhaps unconsciously they chose each other for this purpose, amongst the welter of other attractions. What we need to recognise is that every human being feels anger, so to have deposited it somewhere else – although close to hand – is not very helpful. We don't necessarily need to 'do' anything about it, but it can be helpful to hold onto this thought when we see something so unusual that it makes us perplexed.

Is all this *knowing* useful? It is, if you are gathering information at the first stages of meeting and engaging a family. It is also useful when you come to work with families on planned changes. In the past you have probably worked with many families to make good and achievable plans. For a while all seems well, and then suddenly the family tip into a crisis or seem to go backwards. Puzzlingly, they start to behave in ways you thought they had left behind.

We need to remember that change is painful and difficult, that the family system is working hard to achieve that steady state, and that change in one place (a better bedtime routine, for instance) can have unexpected and sometimes unwanted consequences. This takes us back to the Family Discussion Bureau, where workers came to understand that it is often something in the couple's relationship that affects all the relationships in the family – in ways that are not helpful and which, for some families, can be very destructive.

This is why careful parenting and family workers constantly assess the state of the co-parents' relationship throughout their work together. We can ask questions such as: *'So we have managed to sort out the going to bed routines, but you are showing me that something else is going on: what can it be? Often the families I work with make a change, but something else gets troubled, and it is often what is going on between the parents that counts. Could that be true for you?'*

Parents will often say it is not true, but show us in a different way, maybe in their tone of voice or body language. Sometimes the simple fact that you can bear to ask a difficult question encourages parents to reflect and consider. Sometimes they may choose to talk with you about it but sometimes not. In the example above, the worker's careful questioning uncovered, for the parents, a fear of being alone together. In the past they had used times when the children were not with them to

engage in upsetting arguments. Eventually, they reached a point where they could agree with the worker that they had to think of ways of sorting these problems out so that they could enjoy being together.

Family trees can reveal painful repeating patterns that help us understand the couples and families we work with. If we have taken a family history using a family tree, this may give us some useful thoughts to share with the family. Both parents may, for example, have grown up in a home where fathers left, or died, when the children reached their teens. When their children, in turn, become teenagers, this can feel terrifying. Both parents may believe they are going to separate (and may indeed look as if they will); or they may feel that they are entering unknown territory without a map to guide them. This is where our thoughts are useful, as we can be in a position to voice the profoundly difficult anxieties the couple may either be avoiding or may not have recognised.

Asking questions is an art, and one we do not prepare for enough. What matters is that you are genuinely compassionate and, most importantly, are able to hear the answers you might get, however difficult. Practise your questions with a colleague – or try them out in supervision – so you can feel as composed as you can when you need to ask them of parental couples and families.

## Co-working and issues between workers to hold in mind

Sometimes the families we work with are so complicated, or sometimes so frightening, that we need to work with a colleague. This has real advantages as it allows one worker to be the active intervener and the other to watch and listen while offering support and reflection. What matters here is that both co-workers try to remember what an ordinary healthy couple looks like and model that for the family.

What we cannot do is be under-prepared. If we walk into the turmoil of a family we can find ourselves split apart: one worker can feel co-opted onto one side of an argument or issue, while the other finds themselves allied to an opposing position. We will feel the real heat in the family for sure, but it is always more useful to adopt a position where we have a wide view, or one from a helicopter, than to be in amongst the family's emotional battles. A neat metaphor could be having one foot inside the family and the other outside. The 'inside foot' allows us to empathise and 'feel'. The 'outside' foot braces us to remain helpful and able to use that space to reflect on what is going on. Without some distance between us and the couple, we are likely to find ourselves joining in and wondering, after the meeting, what on earth went on.

In effect, we are acting as containers for the family. We are also helping them achieve changes, a sense of balance, and optimism that there can be a better future. We can do this by constantly checking what we are feeling and using these feelings as information. When we work in pairs, one worker can turn to the other and say: *'I am feeling a bit cross that the house is a tip when we agreed last time that there would be a big clearout. Is that unreasonable? Perhaps I am not able to understand yet what went on last week that stopped the clearout. Can we think about that?'* This kind of interaction allows workers to form an alliance and work on a problem together. In doing so, they give parents a chance to observe how 'couple thinking' works.

## Getting it right for the children, helping parents and workers to ‘hold the child in mind’, and what ‘mentalization’ means for our work

One of the great advances in understanding human behaviour in recent years has been the work done by neuroscientists on the development of the brain. Equally important has been the work done by clinicians and workers to interpret this research for use in clinical practice. The neuroscientists have looked at brain development in pregnancy, early infancy and teenage years, and this has helped us understand better what promotes and what undermines resilience in children and young people. We now have a strong research-led basis for the work we undertake to support children’s early attachment. A good introduction to this area can be found in Sue Gerhardt’s book *‘Why Love Matters: how affection shapes a baby’s brain’*, 2004, Routledge.

Peter Fonagy and others (Fonagy, Steele and Steele, 1991) have developed a theory and an approach called mentalization, which can help us all understand what family life is like for a child.

Put simply, mentalization is the capacity each of us needs to develop in order to make sense of other people’s thoughts and actions. It is the process of being able to think and feel about thinking and feeling. Of course you will already be doing this in your work, but knowing about it can be a powerful way of helping co-parents do the same, especially where that capacity has been lost, or perhaps was underdeveloped. Mentalization is closely linked with the capacity for empathy, something we all need in order to be sensitive and caring parents.

Work based on mentalization was first developed from research done on children’s attachments to others. People who appeared to have had disrupted childhoods were less likely to be securely attached as adults, and being insecurely attached seems to be associated with difficulty being able to mentalize. When we look at the families we work with, we can often see that parents themselves had a poor emotional start in life, and without our help may repeat the pattern with their own children.

Lots of issues can impede parents’ ability to mentalize. Perhaps they had a childhood deeply affected by a parent’s substance misuse, violence or neglect. Fear and stress affect everyone’s ability to reflect on how they are thinking and feeling. If those feelings persist, the subtler aspects of emotional exchange are lost, or feel too painful to endure. By helping parents to reflect on thinking and feeling, we are providing them with one of the most helpful ways of attending to their children’s needs. With this in mind, Tavistock Relationships has developed the Parenting Together service, which uses mentalization interventions. It is designed to help co-parents in a troubled relationship that is affecting their children’s emotional wellbeing. Parents are taught several ways of being, thinking and feeling differently, so that in times of high conflict and pre-occupation with the self, their responses can be more flexible. For information on this service, Parenting Together, and more information on mentalizing, see the Briefing Sheet.

Some mentalization techniques are useful when we are dealing with a family who find it hard to manage problems and communicate with each other. You will be

using some of these techniques already, but think about how you might use the following techniques.

**Simmering down:** helping parents to change the emotional temperature of an interchange by remarking on it and asking how it feels. We can simply change the subject when things get a bit 'hot'. If parents begin to argue, a helpful way to intervene can be to reflect back to them what it feels like for you, and wonder with them what it might be like for their children. We are not avoiding the issue but using it in a helpful way.

**Disentangling feeling states:** a helpful technique can be to ask co-parents to slow down and use the conversation as if it were a piece of video. Instructions can include *'Let's stop that there and play that in slow motion,'* or *'Let's rewind that piece of conversation and see if we can think about a more helpful way of describing what you are concerned about, and one that helps your partner understand what it is you are worried about.'*

**Naive curiosity:** you may have seen Colombo, the TV detective, whose style is so ponderous that the people he interviews mistakenly think him rather dim. In reality, he is playing a long game. His questions seem innocent and sometimes without much purpose, but in fact he is allowing himself to play with different hypotheses as to who the murderer is. You may not be out to catch a murderer, but you are in the business of gathering information and allowing co-parents to catch on too. So you could try an interjection like: *'Forgive me – I am feeling a bit slow today – but why was the row about the anniversary card played out in front of the children? Can you help me understand that?'*

**Perspective-taking and child-focused interventions:** you can help parents connect with each other's and their child's feelings by asking them to pretend for a moment to be that other parent. You could ask: *'Just for a moment, put yourself in Peter's place. Swap places with them in your mind. Pretend you are them. How do you feel about what they have just said?'* Or you might try: *'Imagine you are Samir – he is eight – and you have just heard your parents say these things to each other. How do you think he would feel?'*

## Enabling co-parents to develop and maintain a 'parental state of mind' even in adversity

We have to challenge parents who are in conflict so they not only know the serious effect conflict has on their children but what they can do to reduce any harm. We also have to be ready for the guilt some parents feel when we raise this issue. We must support them so they can plan conversations with their children, and agree what to communicate and how. We know that what children need emotionally from their parents, above all else, is to be told and shown that they are loved.

Parents must be ready to talk about changes to family life before a child has to find the courage to ask. One difficult issue is when one parent is going to leave the family home. Parents and workers may worry that by introducing such issues they are putting thoughts into the child's mind. This is rarely true, as children have

extraordinarily sensitive emotional barometers and will have known something is wrong – perhaps for longer than their parents. Avoiding difficult conversations for fear of upsetting people is, of course, a way to escape fear and anxiety. For children's future wellbeing, we must try to help parents get those hard conversations as right as they can be.

Families living with couple conflict may have a wide range of issues to face and children's distress may be evident from how they behave. Very common problems include sleep and eating problems, and poor attendance or behaviour at school. Older children may start using alcohol or drugs, and many children seem to retreat emotionally and physically, perhaps to the peace of their bedroom and an online existence in which rows and hurts are minimised.

Parents need to know that their conflict is having an effect on their children. Usually they do know this, but they may not understand the range of possible consequences. Our task is help them understand what these consequences are. In some cases a child can be filled with such sadness that he or she is in effect depressed; their anxiety and stress levels are likely to be heightened, making learning at school very difficult. We can also help parents to understand that, for some children, living with divided loyalties is too much to bear, so self harm becomes a secret relief.

All good parents would want to know this and then think through what they can do to make their children feel secure and loved despite parental conflict. Many parents do manage to separate and divorce without significant harm coming to their children. Some go on to develop good co-parenting relationships, which are characterised by a shared concern for children and an absence of blame. Research shows that good post separation co-parenting helps children through a very difficult time and continues to protect them into adulthood. Our task is to help more fragile parents develop the understanding – and the new ways of being together or apart – that others achieve without our help.

## Helping when there is rage, conflict and violence

It is hard to be helpful when we feel anxious or downright scared. Some families are very worrying indeed. We may know, or suspect, that there is domestic abuse between the couple; we may worry that the violence affects the children emotionally or that they may be physically hurt. One or both parents may be very angry and hostile to us when we meet, and we can find our stomachs knotting at the thought of that encounter. This is very important information we need to use and not ignore. Firstly, we have to put aside any feeling that we have 'failed'. Workers can sometimes blame themselves, wondering if all this anger would have been avoided had they been better trained or more skilful. (It is probable, of course, that angry people would be angry whoever worked with them.) Secondly, we need to use these feelings to consider what it must be like to be inside this family. What is a child's experience of feeling unprotected, or the quality of life for a person whose partner is very abusive when they have had a drink?

We have to focus our attention on the most vulnerable – usually the child or children, but sometimes a partner too. Adults make choices we may not understand or agree with, but they also have the power (sometimes with our help) to make changes as to who they live with and how they live. Children do not have this power and that is why child protection becomes everybody's business. We are under a profound obligation and duty to ensure that the children we work with are as safe as they can be from harm. There can be no shilly-shallying about, and we have to use the child protection procedures and processes that are in place. Referring on and telling parents that we are doing so, undertaking joint visits, attending planning meetings, having case conferences and sharing information other agencies need to know are vital parts of our work. But is it still possible to hold onto a notion of working with the parental couple even in the worst of times? We would argue that it is at just these times that using the idea of co-parenting is vital. Again, it does not mean you are being asked to undertake couple counselling, but you may be the only person in the protection system who really understands what this violent dad means to his child. You may need to ask other professionals to hear information about a child's attachment that they don't really want to hear; and you may be the person who understands the evidence of the emotional impact but still needs to argue for continuing contact. Equally, you may be the person who has seen that an abused parent cannot put the children's needs for protection first, and you may need to argue, sometimes forcefully, that children have to be removed for their continuing safety.

We can't unknow what we know and we are under a duty to use it to help every family to function safely and as well as they can. For some families (very few, but they do exist) what adults do together is their own business – we may not like it and we may try to help an abused person leave. What they cannot, however, be allowed to do is inflict their abusive relationship on children. Workers everywhere will have encountered domestic abuse; they will have worked successfully in some cases and enabled a partner, often a woman, to leave permanently. We will also have worked with families where we do the same careful work but find that the abused partner goes back into the relationship. Our frustration can – and often does – lead to a sense that the abused partner cannot be helped and is, in some perverse way, deserving of the abuse because they have returned to it. Knowing something about how our unconscious mind works can help us explain, if not truly understand, what brings people back to abusive situations. Our knowledge can allow us to continue to try to help someone whose attachment to their partner puts them in peril. Most importantly, it allows us to carry on working with desperate people, and families who are damaging, without blaming them and without ignoring or minimising behaviour that we ourselves can only consider irrational and dangerous.

### **Safeguarding workers' emotional wellbeing: training, support and supervision**

To be effective as workers we need support and continuous learning opportunities. This does not necessarily mean, in these cash-strapped times, being sent on training courses. We can learn by watching, rehearsing and thinking collaboratively with colleagues and managers.

Giving yourself enough time to read is hard, but workers who find half an hour a week to go online and read some of the vast range of free resources are in a better position to help families than those who do not. The truth is that if you are encountering a family who are perplexing, you won't be alone: somebody somewhere has probably thought about this and may have researched what works best, so you should seek out this information. It makes you a better worker and practitioner: someone who uses a thoughtful, research-rich approach rather than relying on guesswork or trying to shoehorn this family and their problems into a solution you have used before in different circumstances.

Supervision is critical. It should not just be about counting family cases open and closed, or about how many targets have been reached. All of that is important, but probably not as important to your effectiveness as a conversation in supervision about how families strike you, the feelings they leave you with and what you can do when you are met with hostility and resentment.

Look after yourself and your work is better. Think about using space in a team meeting for a case presentation so that all your colleagues can help. Allow some time for current research in your business meeting so that one person a week can talk about something they have read that seems to connect with the work your agency undertakes.

**For further reading on supervision, for supervisees and supervisors, download 'Supervising Family and Parenting Workers: a short guide':**  
<http://www.familyandparenting.org/NR/exeres/5381B588-74AE-4156-BA0C-66DD669C33A8>

## **Agencies that can help workers and agencies that can help couples and families**

Since you are likely to know which local agencies offer couple counselling or therapy, on the Briefing Sheet we have listed national organisations such as Tavistock Relationships, Relate, Marriage Care, mediation and contact services and Family Action. We have also listed research organisations, so you can read more on topics that interest and help you. We have listed some organisations that work with couples from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities, and some that have specific expertise in working with couples and families from minority ethnic communities. We have listed some trainings that might be appropriate if you would like to learn more, and where to go for consultation and specific supervision.

## **A final thought: intimacy, sex, sadness and being a pioneer**

We have not tried to turn you into sex therapists, but we have sought to give you the courage to think about sex and even talk about it when you meet parental couples. It is, after all, just an appetite just like the need to eat or sleep – all powerful driving forces in human nature that we ignore at our peril.

Equally, we have not tried to turn you into a couple counsellor, but we have suggested that we can all listen to the 'couple stuff' when it comes up. If it does not come up, we can actively seek information on it, knowing that it adds to our understanding about family life, and each partner's strengths and difficulties. By asking about the parental couple relationship we are enquiring about a family's emotional reserves. Are they in the black or very overdrawn?

We have not tried to turn you into a psychoanalyst either, but have shown you that we can all give ourselves the time and space to reflect on the feelings – like sadness – that families evoke in us. These feelings have a real place in our understanding, and we can be better workers when we notice them.

The parental couple relationship is the final frontier. Very few people are using the research and practice that have been developed from years of clinical work. We know some of the reasons why we don't, and you now know the reasons why you should.

Break some new ground and be a pioneer.



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