

**What interventions strengthen family relationships?
– A review of the evidence –**

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Introduction: strengthening family relationships

Family relationships have important influences on child outcomes, independent of economics, education and health. Three relationship variables – family stability, parental conflict and parenting style – are especially influential on child outcomes.

The aim of this paper is to highlight for relationship educators and policy makers key interventions that have already demonstrated the ability to improve these variables significantly.

Since it is now known that family relationships can be strengthened, public policy must take these interventions seriously.

- **Family stability.** Children tend to do better in families where both parents live and stay together (*Brown, 2004, McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994*). In most cases this means married families. Family stability can be increased – and family breakdown reduced – through public policy, relationship skills or mentoring programmes.
- **Parental conflict.** Children tend to do better in families where conflict is low level (*Booth & Amato, 2001*). Parental conflict can be reduced or constrained through relationship skills programmes.
- **Parenting style.** Children tend to do better in families where parents use an authoritative parenting style (*Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Marsiglio & al, 2000*). Authoritative means both warm and structured. Parents can be helped to become more authoritative through parenting skills programmes.

Family stability

Income, education and well-being. Couples are more likely to stay together if they are employed (Marsh & Perry, 2003), better educated (Bumpass & al, 1991), and healthy (Downey & Coyne, 1990). Because much government policy is already aimed at improving economics, education and health, I shall not address these issues.

However it is worth remembering that these variables are themselves outcomes as well as causes. For example, children born to unmarried parents tend to lead “*less advantaged lives than their contemporaries who are born to married parents*” (Kiernan & Smith, 2003). In other words, they are already more likely to have more problems at school, work or with their well-being. An exclusive public policy focus on economics, education and health has almost totally overlooked the vital influence of relationship variables.

Time. Couples today are far more likely to break up in the early years of marriage than the later years. Divorce rates amongst those who married in 1986 peaked at about 3% per year during years 3-6 before fading towards 2% in year 10 *see Fig 1* (Ermisch, 2001). Comparison with those who got married in previous decades suggests that divorce rates amongst this group will continue to decline over time.

By extending Ermisch’s divorce trajectory charts and bearing in mind that overall divorce rates have changed little during the last 25 years (ONS, 2004 & other years), I estimate that the lifetime divorce risk for anyone getting married after 1980 is about 45% *see Fig 2*. The risk is lower for first marriages and higher for re-marriages. For those wishing to know “*the divorce rate*”, 45% is therefore a current best guess. Most marriages still last a lifetime.

Comparing the cohorts that married in 1986 and 1966, two thirds of the increased risk of divorce takes place during the first five years of marriage. Almost all of the increased risk takes place during the first ten years. Amongst married couples at least, it is therefore clear that stability would be increased dramatically if the first five or ten years of married life could be stabilised.

Family structure. Family stability varies a great deal depending on whether parents are married or not. Numerous studies show that cohabiting couples are far less stable than married couples (e.g. Marsh & Perry, 2003; Boheim & Ermisch, 1999). Nearly one in two unmarried parents will have split up before their child’s 5th birthday compared to one in twelve married parents *see Fig 3* (Kiernan, 1999). More recent data from the Millenium study confirm this discrepancy in stability between married and unmarried parents (Kiernan, personal email communication).

Divorce rates may not have changed much in 25 years. Yet during this same period there has been a huge national trend away from marriage. 5% of births in 1960 were

to unmarried mothers, 12% in 1980 and 41% today (ONS, 2004). By combining data on births with data on break-up rates, I can estimate the annual number of children under five whose parents split up. An astonishing 75% of all family breakdown with young children now involves unmarried parents *see Fig 4*.

Child outcomes. A recent study of 36,000 US families (Brown, 2004) was the first to compare outcomes amongst children from cohabiting & married biological parents as well as cohabiting & married step-parents. The study found that primary school children from unmarried families tend to do worse at school, although their well-being depends more on economic & parental resources. Secondary school children from unmarried families tend to do worse behaviourally & emotionally. However there were no differences in outcomes between children from single parent families, stepfamilies or either type of cohabiting families. The conclusion is that not only does it matter that children live with both parents, it matters that their parents are married.

Selection or relationship effect. Researchers and policymakers have debated for years whether the benefits and protections found in married families are the result of selection (people who do better get married) or relationship (people who get married do better). A number of recent well-designed longitudinal studies strongly suggest the presence of a relationship effect. Selection is no longer an adequate explanation.

- **Well-being.** Getting married lowers rates of depression. Moving in together does not. Whether people are depressed in the first place does not appear to influence the odds of getting married (Lamb & al, 2003).
- **Behaviour.** A seven year study found that lower rates of alcoholism amongst married compared to cohabiting women – and depression amongst men – could not be due to selection effects (Horwitz & al, 1996).
- **Relationship quality.** Many studies have found a link between pre-marital cohabitation and subsequent marital problems. This effect was explained away as characteristics of the minority of couples who cohabited in the 60s/70s. However similar differences persisted amongst couples marrying in the 80s/90s, when cohabitation had become more common, arguing instead for a relationship effect (Kamp Dush & al, 2003).
- **Stability.** A study of 3,000 low income families found that breakdown was significantly more likely amongst cohabiting parents, even after taking hardship and other economic factors into account (Marsh & Perry 2003).

Family stability: Successful interventions

Despite the popularity of couple counselling & more recent emergence of relationship education, remarkably few interventions to date have been shown to improve couple stability. One major review even concluded that couple counselling may be no more effective than placebo (Gottman, 1998). Success stories reported by enthusiastic practitioners may reflect availability bias more than widespread benefit. However a handful of studies show that public policies and preventive programmes can improve family stability.

Public pro-marriage policies. In 1986, the first Community Marriage Policy (CMP) was established amongst community leaders in Modesto, California. The aim of the CMP was to provide proactive support to engaged and married couples through relationship education and mentoring. Twenty five years later, the divorce rate in Modesto had halved while teenage pregnancy and truancy rates had also fallen by one quarter. Was this a chance phenomenon or did the CMP really make a difference? A recent study looked at divorce rates before and after signing amongst 122 CMPs (Birch & al, 2004). Divorce rates fell 2% p.a. faster for the seven years after signing a CMP compared to adjacent counties with similar divorce trends. The authors point out that this finding is remarkable not for the size of the change but because this public policy influenced private behaviour at all, considering the variability in actual practical project implementation.

Couples skills programmes. Three controlled studies have shown a reduction in divorce by 50-80% up to five years later amongst couples taking the best researched skills programme, PREP, compared to control couples (reviews by Stanley, 2001; Carroll & Doberty, 2003). This is remarkable for a 12 hour educational programme. But it fits with prediction research. Couples who have more negative behaviours and less positive affection when they get married tend to do less well later on (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Bradbury & Karney, 2004). By teaching bad habits to avoid and good habits to build, it's unsurprising that the best programmes do have the desired effect

Relationship inventories. 10-15% of couples taking a pre-marital inventory – either PREPARE or FOCCUS – cancel their weddings (Fowers & Olson, 1986; Williams & Jurich, 1995). The profiles of these couples are similar to those who end up divorcing anyway. Since the UK divorce rate over the first five years of marriage is 14%, it may be that the simple use of an inventory can “weed out” almost all of those couples headed for divorce. The claims of abnormally low divorce rates in US churches using pre-marital inventories (www.marriagesavers.org) look increasingly credible. Pre-marital mentoring using an inventory is also a central component of CMPs (Benson, 2005).

Parental conflict

It is often assumed that what is good for the adults will be good for the children. For example, if the parents are unhappy, the kids will be unhappy and the relationship is best ended. One of the most robust longitudinal studies in the US undermines this assumption. Parental conflict – not happiness – is as important for children's well-being as family stability (Booth & Amato, 2001).

The 20 year Marital Instability Over the Life Course study interviewed 2,000 adults and their children every four years about their relationships. The study found that child well-being was highest either during a low conflict marriage or after a high conflict marriage that ended in divorce. Child well-being was lowest during a high conflict marriage or after a low conflict marriage that ended in divorce *see Fig 5*. They also found that low-conflict marriages headed for divorce one to two years later – the majority of divorces – are largely indistinguishable in terms of relationship quality and problems from those in non-divorcing low conflict marriages.

From the point of view of a child, these findings discredit the presumed benefit of “amicable divorce” following a low conflict marriage. Divorce following a low conflict marriage is as detrimental to child well-being, relationship with parents and peers, as remaining in a high conflict marriage.

From the point of view of intervention, this major study highlights the importance of finding ways to reduce conflict as well as sustaining low-conflict marriages.

Parental conflict: successful interventions

Amongst many studies of couple interventions, only a handful has specifically demonstrated reduction in conflict levels. There are indications this may reflect limitations of the research rather than a weak hypothesis. Since outcome studies typically report improvements in communication, problem solving and positive behaviours following the intervention, a reduction in conflict may reasonably be inferred. One further limitation of existing research is that most outcome studies start with couples who are getting married, even though the same or similar programmes are commonly used with already married couples as well. The evidence below is therefore good but not bullet-proof.

Couples skills programmes. A recent review of relationship education programmes for couples reported that “premarital prevention programs are generally effective in producing significant immediate gains in communication processes, conflict management, and overall relationship quality, and that these gains appear to hold for at least 6 months to 3 years” (Carroll & Doberty, 2003). Several studies in this review show improvements in conflict management and

reduction in incidences of conflict amongst couples who complete a programme. For example, men who completed the PREP programme were significantly less likely to resort to physical violence five years later (Markman & al, 1993). Several studies also show that completion of the PREP programme reduces negative interactions between couples (e.g. Stanley & al, 2001).

Parenting style

Four parenting styles are commonly described in research literature *see Fig 6*.

- *Authoritative*: high degree of warmth, responsiveness and structure
- *Disengaged*: low degree of warmth or structure
- *Authoritarian*: low warmth, high anger and structure
- *Permissive*: high warmth, low structure

Developmentalists consistently indicate that *authoritative* parenting predicts the best outcomes for children in terms of academic success, social integration, behaviour problems, and well-being (Marsiglio & al, 2000). Children of *authoritative* parents tend to be more socially and cognitively competent. The reverse is true for children of *authoritarian* parents (Hetherington & Parke, 1986). As one striking example of the link, father warmth at age 5 predicted offspring relationship success as an adult 36 years later (Franz & al, 1991).

Parenting style: successful interventions

There are a number of different routes to improving authoritative parenting. Individual parent attitudes, expectations and well-being influence inter-parental cooperation, conflict and happiness which in turn influence individual parenting style (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Potential interventions could therefore address either individual issues, marital relationship, parenting technique or – perhaps ideally – all three.

Both parents. Gottman & Notarius (2000) report only one controlled preventive marital intervention study that covers the transition to parenthood for both parents. A programme of 24 hours of group support during pregnancy produced multiple benefits (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Compared to other new parents, intervention couples showed a reduced drop in marital satisfaction, fewer divorces and improved parenting quality up to 3 ½ years later. At 5 year follow-up however these differences had disappeared.

One parent. There is good evidence that parenting programmes can improve both adult skills and child outcomes amongst both clinical and non-clinical populations (Moran & al, 2004). However there is considerable variation in programme effects. Some interventions appear to benefit children but not parents (e.g. Scott & Sylva, 2003). Others benefit parents but not children (e.g. Hewitt & al, 1991).

There are also reservations. The evidence for whether an intervention can improve parenting style or child outcomes beyond one year remains equivocal (Barlow & Coren, 2004; Stewart-Brown & al, 2003). And when only one parent attends a course, it can be difficult to enlist the support of the other parent, leading to increased parental conflict (Mockford & Barlow, 2004). The deterioration in marital quality amongst those unable to agree on coparenting (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998) may even render the intervention counterproductive.

Post-divorce. Post-divorce parenting programmes for mothers have produced encouraging results (Haine & al, 2003). Interventions have led to improved children's outcomes in terms of behaviour, well-being, and academic performance, with programme effects lasting up to 6 years (Wolchik & al, 2002). There appears to be no additive benefit of including the child in the intervention.

With post-divorce interventions, there are more serious limitations. Amongst non-resident fathers, authoritative parenting is also associated with positive child outcomes (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). But authoritative parenting by non-resident fathers is rare (Marsiglio & al, 2000). No post-divorce intervention has yet demonstrated either an improvement in father-child relationship, better coparenting, or a reduction in parental conflict (Haine & al, 2003). Moreover contact with non-resident fathers can even add to children's behaviour problems where parental conflict is high (Amato & Rezac, 1994).

Strengthening family relationships: summary of successful interventions

As Carroll & Doherty (2003) point out in their review of premarital education programmes, the evidence for their effectiveness can be viewed as a glass half-full or half-empty. This analogy applies to most research to date on family interventions. For optimists and enthusiasts, there is more than enough evidence to show that family relationships can be strengthened and hence child outcomes improved. For pessimists and sceptics, the research findings are not yet sufficiently conclusive nor robust to draw broad conclusions.

However, as more findings emerge, the sceptical approach is increasingly untenable. Three interventions in particular have already shown real promise.

Pro-marriage policies. Improving family stability necessarily means making a public policy shift back in favour of marriage. If even a small scale Community Marriage Policy implemented inconsistently by non-professionals with limited media coverage and minimal funding can have a measurable impact on private behaviour, a coherent national policy promoting marriage and relationship education should have a far bigger effect.

It is reasonable to ask whether this kind of policy will transfer from the US to the UK. Community Marriage Policies have already been implemented on a small scale in the UK – in Bath, Bristol, Swindon and Newport. Unfortunately it will prove almost impossible to measure any impact until the government chooses to publish local marriage & divorce data.

Relationship education. Relationship stability and conflict are both major factors influencing child outcomes. The precursors of relationship success or failure are well-known to researchers. Skills-based programmes based on the more dynamic precursors have been shown to improve both relationship quality and stability as well as to reduce relationship conflict over a period of several years. Use of inventories also increases relationship stability.

Relationship education, mentoring and inventory programmes are increasingly available throughout the UK via programme providers, other marriage & relationship organisations and Community Family Trusts.

Parenting education. Parenting education programmes can undoubtedly steer more parents towards the authoritative style of parenting associated with improved child outcomes. These interventions appear to work best when both parents are involved. Programme effects tend to last months rather than years.

Off-the-shelf educational programmes for parents of toddlers, primary school and secondary school children are readily available via organisations such as Positive Parenting and Family Caring Trust.

Conclusion

Many of the factors present in couples headed for future trouble are dynamic and changeable (*Stanley, 2001*). This makes preventive relationship education an ideal potential intervention.

Family interventions have been almost completely disregarded in public policy to date. There is no longer any excuse. Not only are there known interventions that work, the evidence from prediction, survey, and outcome research all points the same way. In Stanley's words, "*we know enough to act and we should take action to know more*".

Fig 1: Divorce rates, annual

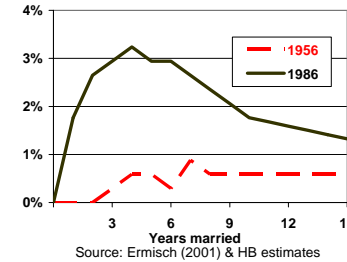


Fig 2: Divorce rates, cumulative

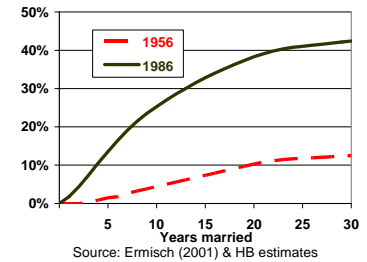


Fig 3: Break-up rates, over 5 years

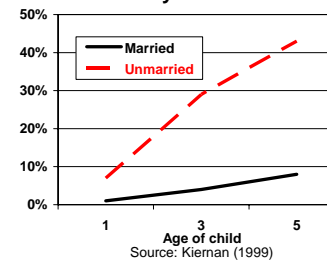


Fig 4: Family breakdown, children under 5

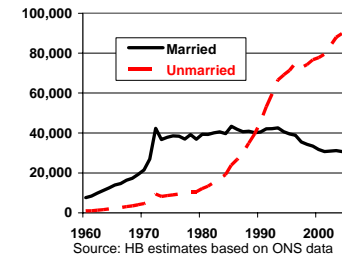


Fig 5: Conflict, divorce & child well-being

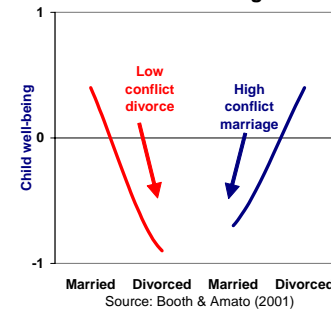
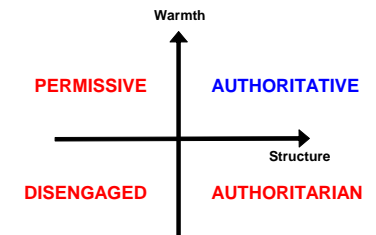


Fig 6: Parenting styles



Source: Cowan & Cowan (1992)

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