UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF ADULTS (PARTICULARLY PARENTS) REGARDING RELATIONSHIP SUPPORT

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At a Relationship Summit in London in December 2008, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families announced a three-point plan which focused attention specifically on bolstering adult couple relationships. It included more support for new and first-time parents, more support for children involved in family breakdown, and new relationship support pilots and funding to co-ordinate services for separated parents.

To help inform this plan, in spring 2009 the DCSF commissioned Newcastle University, with the Family and Parenting Institute, to undertake a qualitative study with the following objectives:

1. To enhance understanding of how adults form and manage relationships, the emotional, social and economic stressors which can damage these relationships at various times, and how adults cope with these stresses.

2. To identify the relationship support needs of adults in different personal circumstances, and in a variety of relationship types, including intact relationships, relationships which were ending, and those which had ended.

3. To gather evidence which can guide the development of new policy initiatives to support adult couple relationships, particularly those of parents.

Key Findings

• People want relationships to last for life but all relationships are demanding and have to be worked at.

• Having a baby, miscarriages, juggling the demands of work and childcare, ill health and money worries can put extreme pressure on couple relationships.

• The complexities of modern family life can leave little time for partners to talk together about the things that really matter.

• A clear difference between couples who are together and those who separate lies in the way they deal with everyday pressures and their ability to resolve arguments.

• Couples whose relationship had broken down had tended to put their relationship ‘on the back burner’, rather than making time to be together, talk with each other and foster the relationship.
Most couples had not recognised the downward spiral in their relationship until it was too late - with hindsight, over half of those who had separated believed they could have spotted problems earlier and dealt with them better.

There is still stigma attached to seeking help with troubled relationships - popular understandings about when to seek help need to change.

Most people thought that learning about and preparing for relationships should start as early as possible - in primary schools - and continue throughout life.

Targeted support for particular problems, such as depression or substance abuse, should include consideration of the impact of the problem on the couple relationship.

Many people agreed that government should:

- provide more support for new parents
- provide more support for children whose parents split up
- train professionals to spot relationship problems, ensure services such as counselling and parenting support are available, and involve men as well as women
- do more to help couples build stronger and lasting relationships

**Study Design**

Between May and November 2009, over 1,100 women and men (aged 17 to 88) in all kinds of adult couple relationships, including those whose relationships had ended in separation or divorce, and from all walks of life, shared their experiences about: the issues they had faced; the problems and difficulties which had put a strain on the relationship; coping strategies and ways to foster healthy couple relationships; the reasons relationships had broken down; and the support that they had sought and received, and that is needed at different times and in different situations.

This qualitative study was conducted in two phases. The first (May-July 2009) focused on investigating the experiences and needs of adults, primarily parents, whose relationship had broken down and ended in separation or divorce; and the second (August-November 2009) focused on adults who were currently in a committed relationship. In each phase of the study people were invited to participate via the Sun newspaper, the Fatherhood Institute, Marriage Care, family mediation services affiliated with National Family Mediation, Bounty, Gateshead Children’s Services, the Family and Parenting Institute’s parents’ panel, and a range of websites.

Data were collected in each phase via a qualitative e-survey, personal interviews and focus groups. In total, 1,007 people from across the UK and elsewhere contributed to the e-surveys. Because the study was designed to inform policy in England we have included data only from those living in England (669 people) in the analyses undertaken for this report. Interviews were conducted with 132 people (86 women and 46 men) and 78 people attended focus groups in various locations in England. More women than men took part in the study and over 90 per cent of participants were parents. Overall, a good cross-section of participants in terms of marital status, living arrangements, socio-economic characteristics and religious and faith affiliation were included in the study. The relationships they talked about had lasted between one and fifty-two years.

Findings are presented in respect of three groups of participants: those who were separated or divorced; those planning to separate; and those in intact relationships, some of which were not first-time relationships. The 669 e-surveys have enabled us to note patterns and trends in the responses from these groups to a wide variety of questions, although not everyone answered every question. The percentages reported, therefore, are not meant to be representative of a wider population but illustrative of similarities and differences between the groups.

**Forming Couple Relationships**

Although some people had drifted into their relationship, for the vast majority deciding to live with a partner and/or get married were significant decisions which had marked a number of important transitions in the formation and consolidation of couple relationships. They indicated that the relationship was serious, that people had made a specific commitment to each other, and that the relationship was expected to be long-lasting. Individuals’ decisions to move in with their partner had been influenced by a number of factors:
• meeting societal expectations
• easing financial pressure - one home is cheaper than two
• needing more security
• starting a family
• spending more time together

Most people who had married several decades previously had experienced an orderly process from courtship to engagement to leaving home and getting married, while those who had formed their relationship more recently had usually cohabited prior to marriage. Getting married is still a significant milestone in many couple relationships. In the past, it was a necessary step for couples who wanted to live together. For couples who had married more recently, the decision whether to marry had been influenced primarily by factors such as religious beliefs, the need for security, and having children.

Couples, with and without children, had rarely thought through the implications of moving in together and were not always fully prepared for the inevitable changes. Moving in together could be a complex process for people with children from previous relationships who were forming stepfamilies. Decisions about where to live, contact arrangements and finances could put stress on relationships at a very early stage. Couples spoke about the difficulty of striking the right balance between the needs of children and their own needs as a couple. Worries about children and problems with ex-partners had frequently caused stresses and strains, which often continued.

Expectations of marriage and cohabiting relationships continue to be high, yet frequently turned out to be unrealistic. Few people had discussed their individual expectations with their partner when they had made a commitment to live together, which they had expected would be for life. Adapting expectations to match the reality was often challenging, and while some people could adapt and accept their partner, faults and all, others found this difficult. Most couples had not received any advice or preparation before moving in together or getting married.

Couple Relationships and Children

Participants were asked to describe the life events, challenges, problems and pressures that had impacted on their relationships. The most frequently identified life event was the transition to parenthood with the associated pressures of having children. Thirty-seven per cent of separated parents, 27 per cent of those planning to separate and 61 per cent of those in intact relationships described difficulties linked to the transition to parenthood. Tensions related to:

• whether and when to start a family or have more children
• unexpected and difficult pregnancies
• miscarriages and postnatal depression
• changing roles and responsibilities
• coping with childcare
• financial pressures resulting from having children
• caring for children with special needs
• resentment about the changes in routine that disrupted the couple relationship and the time spent caring for a new baby
• juggling work and childcare

Moreover, 50 per cent of those who had separated, 43 per cent of those planning to separate and 29 per cent of those in intact relationships had argued about parenting responsibilities. Many of those whose relationship had ended cited stresses relating to parenthood as having contributed to the demise of the couple relationship.

Problems and Coping Strategies

While the transition to parenthood was the most widely discussed source of difficulties in couple relationships, a number of other events and problems had put pressure on relationships:

1. Work pressures, such as working long hours and managing demanding jobs, frequently meant that there was little time to foster the relationship. Twenty-one per cent of people who had separated, 28 per cent of those planning to separate and 59 per cent of people in intact relationships had experienced difficulties relating to work issues. Women in particular complained about having to juggle childcare and employment.
2. **Financial worries** emerged as problematic in many relationships: over half the participants in both phases of the study had experienced financial difficulties. There were distinct differences between the accounts of those who had separated and the accounts of those still together: while those in intact relationships talked about the need to budget, sharing the load and mutual reliance, those who had separated tended to blame debts on their partner, and describe mistrust, resentments and overreactions to financial pressures as having damaged the relationship.

3. **Affairs** were often a response to escalating arguments and a growing lack of effective communication. Most people looked for intimacy and fidelity in relationships, and when these were lost relationships tended to disintegrate. More of those who had separated or were planning to separate referred to sexual difficulties as problematic than those in intact relationships.

4. **Arguments** were regarded as problematic in themselves. People who had separated or were planning to do so had argued far more frequently than those in intact relationships and were far less likely to resolve arguments. Over 50 per cent of people in phase 1 said they had never or rarely resolved arguments, as against 13 per cent of people in phase 2. The arguments were often about household tasks, money, work, doing things together, friends, family, lifestyle choices, parenting and children. People in intact relationships said that when arguments occurred they were usually settled quickly.

People in intact relationships were better able to cope with money worries and life events such as bereavement and illness, because they were able to view them as shared troubles and provide mutual support when it was needed. By contrast, many people whose relationships had ended referred to the debilitating impacts of mental illness, alcohol abuse and violence on their relationships, and many of these impacts had emerged when relationships had been in trouble.

Eighty per cent of couples in intact relationships said that there had been times when the relationship had not been working so well, but the majority of the partners talked to each other about problems, and described communication between each other as good or excellent.

Effective coping strategies included:
- talking about problems and not letting them escalate
- making time to be together as a couple (not putting the relationship on the back burner)
- developing and fostering trust and respect and demonstrating them in the relationship
- sharing responsibilities and sharing a positive outlook
- learning to give and take
- using humour to relieve tension

**Ending Relationships**

While some couples had managed to work through difficult times and had often strengthened the relationship thereby, others had failed to resolve their problems. People described their relationship as having ended in one of three ways:

1. Relatively gently after a protracted period of dwindling intimacy, growing dissatisfaction and cyclical arguments, during which partners simply grew apart and lived separate lives.

2. After relationships had sustained incremental damage as a result of couples lurching from one crisis to another, escalating incidents of, for example, drinking and domestic violence and recurring problems. Eventually, the final straw had been arrived at, it being clear that the relationship was not going to recover.

3. Suddenly, and as an unforeseen event initiated out of the blue by one partner.

The breaking point for about 40 per cent of interviewees in phase 1 involved the disclosure or discovery of an affair or infidelity, but most people identified a range of pressures and problems - the burden of childcare, household duties, financial difficulties and work demands - that had destroyed the relationship, alongside a lack of time to talk and poor communication.

The presence of children impacted on decisions to end a relationship - parents worried about the impacts and some stayed in unsatisfactory relationships for the sake of the children. Most people, however, had experienced a cluster of problems, many of which had got worse after the relationship had ended. Periods of ill health and unemployment took their toll, and making
arrangements for a life apart frequently exacerbated these problems. It had taken months and years for some couples to reach closure and establish separate lives.

The barriers to seeking help before, during and after the break-up included:

- one or both partners not wanting to admit to having troubles
- covering up, putting on a brave face and pretending all was well so as to prevent the children from discovering their parents had problems
- not wanting to talk to strangers about personal, private problems
- believing that nothing and no one could help
- preferring to stick it out and cope alone
- not knowing what services exist or what they do
- the stigma attached to seeking help

However:

- 60 per cent of separated people and 24 per cent of those planning to separate had wanted to save the relationship
- both groups thought they could have dealt with their relationship problems better (57% of the separated group and 62% of the planning-to-separate group)
- two-thirds of people in both groups (66% and 62% respectively) had not found any helpful ways of dealing with their relationship difficulties
- 64 per cent of the separated group and 48 per cent of the planning-to-separate group, as well as 21 per cent of those in intact relationships, said that they would like more help with relationship problems

Seeking Help

Forty-two per cent of those who had separated, and all those planning to separate, had sought some help with their relationship difficulties, as against 27 per cent of those in intact relationships. Most people had received support from family and friends. Talking to friends had been important for people in long-term relationships, but people who had separated remarked that talking to friends could add another layer of difficulty for relationships in trouble because friends (and family) might take sides. Talking to family members about relationship problems was easier once a relationship had ended, but tended to be difficult while the relationship was ongoing. Not wanting to admit to having problems or be disloyal to a partner prevented people from sharing their concerns more widely with family and friends.

Print media and websites were accessed widely. Nearly 40 per cent of e-survey respondents had browsed websites to seek information. Both men and women regarded web-based information as convenient, anonymous and easily available, and its use as non-stigmatising. People were not always sure, however, whether to trust the information they accessed.

Support from skilled professionals was preferred above help from family and friends when relationships were in trouble. Although many interviewees had visited their GP when they were separating not all had found the GP helpful. Most people had not talked to a health visitor or a member of a faith group about their relationship. However, 20 per cent of the separated group had tried relationship counselling, as had 13 per cent of the intact group, and a small number had tried online counselling. Over half the people in each phase of the study thought that they might try online counselling.

Most people in the study had heard of Relate and recognised it as the first port of call for professional help with relationship problems. Many of those who had used Relate counselling were positive about the services it provides, but, inevitably perhaps, couples who stayed together were more positive than those whose relationships had ended. Those who were negative about Relate referred to:

- it having an old-fashioned image
- long waiting lists and restricted appointment times
- high costs
- counsellors being of variable quality

Relatively few of those who had separated or were planning to do so had been to family mediation to settle disputes and make arrangements for the future. Those who had used it were positive, but many had been unable to try it because their partner had refused to attend or because they had been concerned that their partner would browbeat them. People who had
separated, particularly fathers, tended to think that family mediation should be mandatory: all couples in dispute should be required to attend so as to think about the options and ways forward which could avoid adversarial legal proceedings. Some called for post-separation parenting classes and better support for children.

Support That Would Be Helpful

Over 50 per cent of people who had separated thought that they might attend relationship preparation courses if they were available and some said they might look for help in choosing a partner. Over 60 per cent showed interest in relationship-building classes. Substantial numbers of those who had separated and those in intact relationships said they would be prepared to learn about:

- problem-solving
- conflict management
- parenting
- ways of improving communication
- anger management

Many participants wanted more opportunities to access peer group support in order to help them deal with life events such as ill health, pregnancy difficulties and miscarriages, bereavement or becoming a parent, and to cope with domestic violence issues.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Although the pathways into couple relationships are more varied and less clearly defined than in times past, most people have high expectations that their relationship will last for life. Some of the most critical stressors on relationships involve common life events and experiences, and greater recognition is needed of the damage these can cause and the kinds of support people need to deal with them.

Couples in intact relationships have usually developed a range of coping strategies which enable them to weather the storms and pull together. These strategies seemed frequently to have been absent in relationships that had broken down.

Throughout the study, people of all ages and in different kinds of relationships indicated that in order to help people develop and sustain strong couple relationships there is a need for:

- relationship education to start early in life
- support services to engage with men as well as with women
- better signposting to targeted advice, help, and support services
- more peer support - meeting and talking with people in similar situations and who have experienced the same kinds of difficulties (e.g. the death of a child, ill health)
- more use to be made of resources such as parenting advisers in Children’s Centres and other community-based resources, including the provision of support in the workplace
- more support and advice at the point when relationships are in difficulty, to help couples make informed choices about options for their relationship and the well-being of their children

Additional Information

Further information about this research can be obtained from Steve Smith, Children and Families Directorate, 1 FL, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT

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The views expressed in this report are the authors’ and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.