

Understanding Parental Conflict and Its Impact on Child Outcomes

How can I use the
evidence base to support
parent relationships?



Introduction

Conflict between parents happens and is a normal process that occurs in all relationships, however, if the conflict is frequent, intense and unresolved, this can have a damaging impact on children. Professionals who come into regular contact with children and/or families are well placed to identify, explore and support those experiencing destructive conflict and reduce this potential negative impact.

By understanding the evidence and research around parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes professionals are better placed to recognise when parental conflict is an issue for a family and begin thinking about what support they may be able to offer.



Medical research shows that **child brain development** is affected by parental conflict.

More than **1 in every 4 children** who live with two parents who do not work, live in a home where there is distressed parental relationship. This is 3 times as many children than live with both parents who do work

While the family experiences that children have early in their lives (e.g. levels of inter-parental discord, positive versus negative parenting practices) have been identified as playing a significant role in affecting long-term outcomes, accumulating evidence suggests that a complex array of family and individual-level factors may congregate to explain why some children experience significant difficulties as a result of early family experiences, while other children show little or no such difficulties.

What the evidence tells us:

Parental conflict (whether parents are together or separated) places children at risk of poor social, emotional and educational outcomes.

Improvement can be achieved through early intervention and if parental conflict is corrected.

Those who work closely with families are in a prime position to help identify couples and parents who may be at risk of or who already are experiencing conflict in their relationship.

When parents first meet with front line practitioners, in any field, they may feel anxiety, shame, or embarrassment about their relationship status and may choose to say very little about it. It is important for you to think; where is the couple in this relationship?

Conflict can be triggered by complex or specific causes for example, “money issues” could include arguments over maintenance payments in step families; lack of work or conversely excessive work or overtime; spending habits i.e. money spent on shopping, smoking, drinking, gambling etc.

The evidence also shows that it is the frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict which has the most impact on outcomes for children with issues around performance at school, mental health etc. and thus early intervention to support co-parenting couples to resolve conflict constructively has the greatest opportunity for successful outcomes.

1.4 million

families in the UK are **distressed**

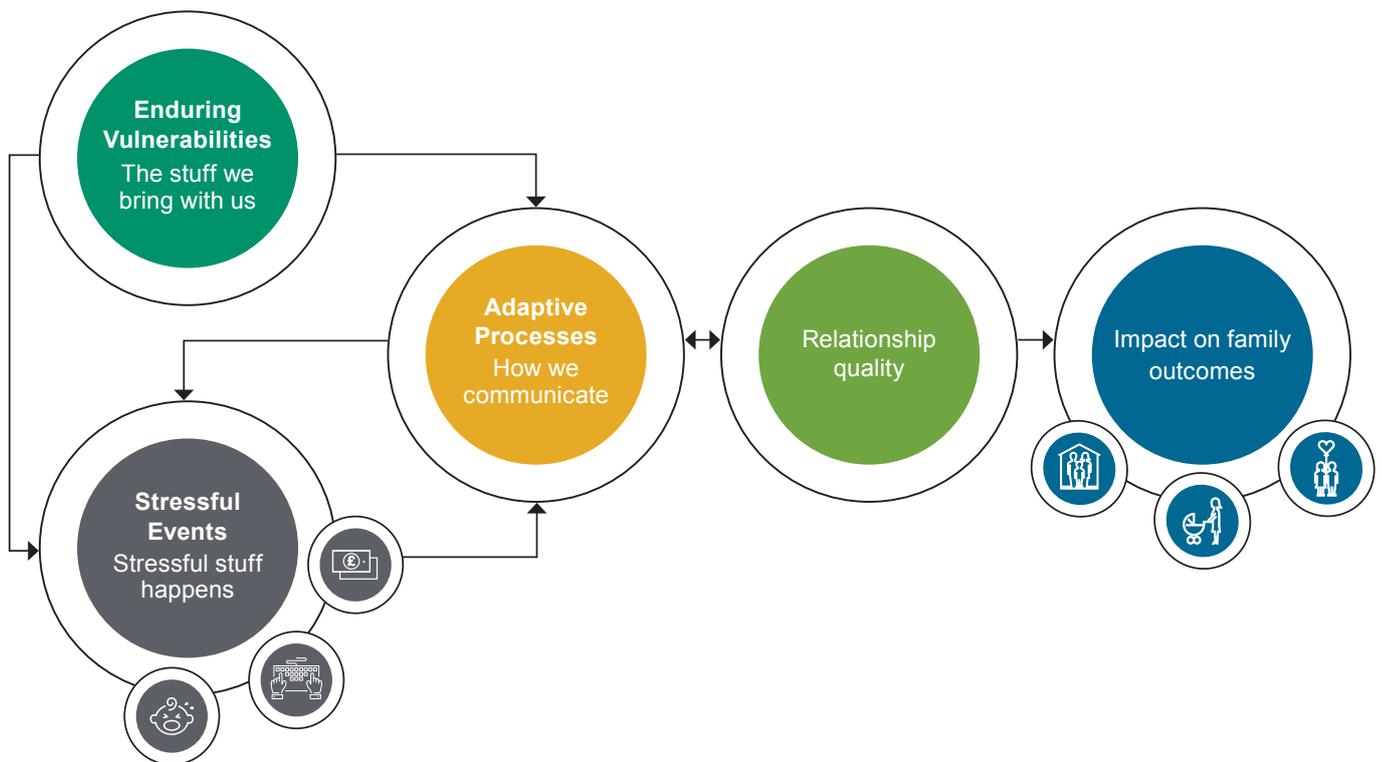
Vulnerability Stress Adaptation

In brief, the Vulnerability Stress Adaptation model helps us to understand the impact of stressful life events in the context of individuals' past histories and the methods they use to adapt in these circumstances:

- **Enduring vulnerabilities** – Personal traits and past experiences that each person brings to the relationship.
- **Stressful events** – The life events they encounter, such as having a baby, illness and unemployment, increase partners' need for support at the same time as reducing their capacity to provide it.

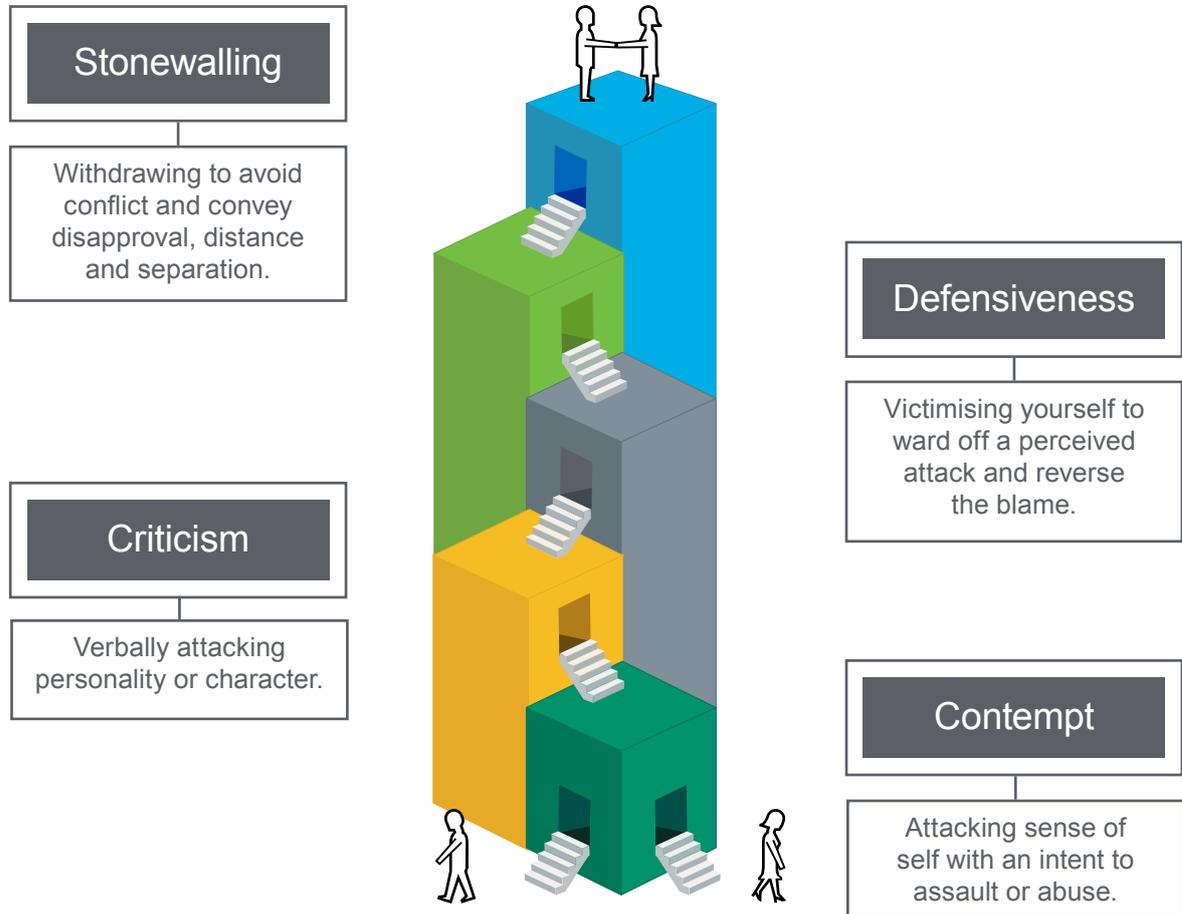
- **Adaptive processes** – How the couple communicate, behave, and cope during difficult times.

Each partner is likely to have enduring vulnerabilities which influence how they cope with one another and with stressful events.



Relationship Insight

Relationship breakdown is often a result of destructive conflict behaviours that drive a couple apart



Signs of impact on children

A survey of over 42,000 children being seen in Children and Young People's IAPT services has shown that 'family relationship problems' are the biggest single presenting factor, being implicated in over 50% of referrals.

Evidence reviewed by the Early Intervention Foundation shows that young people who are exposed to conflict between their parents that is frequent, intense and poorly resolved are likely to suffer increased levels of:

- anxiety
- depression
- aggression
- in addition, they may struggle to achieve at school.