

Little Changes. Big Impact.

Strengthening Families and Reducing Family Breakdown through Relationship Education

Harry Benson

Bristol Community Family Trust

Summary

- The cost of family breakdown to the UK taxpayer is conservatively estimated at £20-24bn per year¹. High proportions of lone parents receive state support. 60% receive housing benefit² and 40% receive out of work tax credits³, compared to 10% of couple parents in each case. The £11,500 average cost per year of the UK's 1.9m lone parent families is a proxy for the marginal cost of each additional lone parent family.
- Government therefore has a huge incentive to reduce family breakdown where possible. Relationship education is an effective low cost way to strengthen families, prevent and reduce conflict and family breakdown⁴.
- Low-cost relationship education programmes have the potential to access 150,000 families at key life stages of marriage and parenthood each year, based on existing local schemes than can be made available nationally.
- Two national schemes implemented through voluntary sector networks would cost a net £4m per year, equivalent to a tiny investment in prevention compared to the ultimate costs of treatment. For example, the proposed post natal scheme would pay for itself if only 0.7% of those who would have split up stay together. That's 78 couples nationwide. The actual improvement in family stability is likely to eclipse this undemanding requirement by a huge margin.
- Other preventive schemes can and should also be implemented, for example in the military and prisons, with similarly high potential.
- Although the best relationship education programmes derive from a large worldwide body of prediction and outcome research, little of this research has been conducted in the UK. An accompanying research programme is essential to demonstrate both the immediate impact on attending couples as well as the longer term impact on national family stability.

¹ Callan, S., Benson, H., Coward, S., Davis, H., Gill, M., Grant, H., Percival, D., & Rowthorn, R. (2006). *Breakdown Britain: Fractured families*. London: Social Policy Justice Group.

² DWP (June 2010) *DWP Statistical Summary*.

³ HMRC (April 2010) *Child and Working Tax Credit Statistics*.

⁴ Stanley, S. & Rhoades, G. (2009). *Marriages at risk: Relationship formation and opportunities for relationship education*. In H. Benson and S. Callan (Eds.), *What works in relationship education: Lessons from academics and service deliverers in the United States and Europe* (pp. 21 - 44). Doha, Qatar: Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development.

Relationship education

- A well-established body of predictive research shows that common patterns of behaviour amongst couples in the early stages of relationship distinguish couples who do well from those who do less well⁵.
- A growing body of outcome research shows that couples who learn about these changeable patterns subsequently have more positives, fewer negatives and less conflict in their relationship, and reduced divorce or separation rates⁶.
- This has now been demonstrated using a broadly similar approach amongst engaged couples⁷, unmarried new parents⁸, and prison families⁹.
- Arguably the most robust recent study, using a randomised control design, showed that divorce rates amongst military couples who attended a 12 hour programme were significantly lower after one year than amongst those who did not (2% vs 6%)¹⁰.

Lay educators

- One of the major advantages of preventive relationship education is that professional or counselling expertise is not required.
- Outcome studies show that lay educators with minimal training produce similar or better results compared to university trained educators¹¹.
- Almost all evidence-based programmes are now “taught out of the box” by ordinary parents, usually after observing a demonstration of the programme.

Access

- There are two main life stages where family breakdown is most concentrated.
- Amongst couples getting married today, one third of the 45% of couples who will eventually divorce do so between their second and seventh anniversary.
- Amongst couples having a baby, 9% of married couples and 35% of unmarried couples will separate before their child’s fifth birthday.
- In terms of efficiency and potential impact, any preventive programmes should be focused on these two access points: marriage and childbirth¹².

⁵ Stanley, S. (2001). Making the Case for Premarital Education. *Family Relations*, 50, 272–280.

⁶ Carroll, J. & Doherty, W. (2003). Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, 52, 105-118.

⁷ Stanley (2001)

⁸ Wood, R., McConnell. S., Moore, Q., Clarkwest, A., & Hsueh. J. (2010) Strengthening Unmarried Parents’ Relationships: The Early Impacts of Building Strong Families. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica.

⁹ Einhorn, L., Williams, T., Stanley, S., Wunderline, N., & Markman, H. (2008). PREP inside and out: Marriage education for inmates. *Family Process*, 47, 341-356.

¹⁰ Stanley, S., Allen, E., Markman, H., Rhoades, G., & Prentice, D. (2010). Decreasing divorce in US Army couples: Results from a randomized controlled trial using PREP for Strong Bonds. *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 9, 149-160.

¹¹ Laurenceau, J-P., Stanley, S., Olmos -Gallo, A., Baucom, B., & Markman, H. (2004) Community-Based Prevention of Marital Dysfunction: Multilevel Modeling of a Randomized Effectiveness Study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72, 933-943.

¹² Benson, H. (2010) Married and unmarried family breakdown: Key statistics explained. Bristol Community Family Trust.

Pre-marriage

- Most of the outcome research on the effectiveness of relationship education has been conducted with engaged couples. The key finding is that divorce rates in the first five years tend to be around 30% lower amongst newlyweds who attend some form of well-organised relationship programme¹³.
- A criticism of this research has been that the more stable outcomes might be due to some as-yet-unidentified characteristic amongst attenders. However a randomised control trial amongst only couples marrying in church showed that relationship education programmes benefit couples¹⁴.
- In the UK, two thirds of weddings are conducted by civil registrars and one third by churches and religious bodies¹⁵. Currently only a handful of registrars signpost relationship education of any kind whereas around one quarter of churches offer “marriage preparation”, which may or may not include relationship education. In recent years, the **National Couple Support Network** has had some success in bringing together various local organisations and individuals who deliver marriage preparation programmes. For example, 3-5% of all couples getting married in Bristol attend a programme within this network. There is therefore enormous scope for increasing access to couples and availability of programmes.
- A national scheme that accessed just 10% of civil weddings and 20% of religious weddings would cost £6m per year and could potentially save £18m per year. Scheme costs can be almost entirely funded by a £20 increase in wedding fees, with a 100% discount as an incentive to attenders and a course cost of £100 per couple. At this level of 14% take-up, the scheme would be expected to cost a net £1m per year and reduce family breakdown by 1,500 couples every year¹⁶.

Post-natal

- A recent large scale US community study has shown that unmarried new parents can benefit from good quality relationship education¹⁷. Since 35% of UK unmarried new parents are likely to split within five years, even small increases in stability would have a significant impact.
- In Bristol, a shortened programme called **Lets Stick Together** now consistently accesses 30% of all first time mothers in the local area. Access is via health visitors, existing post-natal groups, health clinics and Surestart Childrens centres. There are no outcome studies yet for this one hour programme. However Lets Stick Together is a condensed version of the best available 12 hour programmes used in the US community study cited above. Evaluation results are overwhelmingly positive amongst married, cohabiting and single parents¹⁸.

¹³ Stanley, S., Amato, P., Johnson, C., & Markman, H. (2006). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random, household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 117-126.

¹⁴ Stanley, S., Markman, H., Prado, L., Olmos-Gallo, P., Tonelli, L., St. Peters, M., Leber, B., Bobulinski, M., Cordova, A., & Whitton, S. (2001). Community based premarital prevention: Clergy and lay leaders on the front lines. *Family Relations*, 50, 67-76.

¹⁵ Office for National Statistics, Series FM2.

¹⁶ Callan, S., Benson, H., Coward, S., Davis, H., Gill, M., Grant, H., Percival, D., & Rowthorn, R. (2007). *Breakthrough Britain: Family breakdown*. London: Social Policy Justice Group.

¹⁷ Wood et al (2010)

¹⁸ Benson, H. (2010) *Lets Stick Together*. Oxford: Lion Hudson.

- A UK national scheme based on the Bristol model could access some 125,000 first time mothers per year. Of these, 6,000 married mothers and 5,000 cohabiting mothers will separate before their child's fifth birthday, at a cumulative cost of £330m before year five only. The cost of a national post-natal scheme, including start-up, would be £2.4m per year.
- This scheme is cost effective if it achieves even a fraction of the impact of longer programmes, reducing family breakdown by 0.7%. This is equivalent to 78 couples staying together out of the 11,000 couples who would have otherwise split. Put another way, the scheme still pays even if 5% of the couples who would have split during the following year delay for a year¹⁹.

Other schemes

- Breakthrough Britain outlined a series of viable relationship education schemes using other access points that would also reduce family breakdown²⁰. These include prison families and military families.
- Offering programmes to prison couples in particular improves the potential to reduce rates of reoffending, which are lower when there are family visits during the sentence and family links on release²¹. Established programmes are run mostly by the charity **Time for Families** in a dozen or more prisons.
- One of the most robust predictors of family breakdown amongst military families is the personal experience of combat (not separation as is often assumed)²². The latest and best designed studies of relationship education have specifically demonstrated the benefit of relationship education to military families²³.

A brief description of relationship education

- The strongest predictors of success in the early years are our negative behaviours or bad habits. In later years, the positives tend to matter more. In Lets Stick Together, we teach both.
- The simplest way to understand relationship education is to apply these ideas to the way you relate to your own loved ones.
- So for bad habits, we use the acronym **STOP signs**: S=Scoring points, T=Thinking the worst, O=Opting out, P=Putting down.
- Relationship education is about changing the things that you can change. STOP is not what your spouse or partner does to you. You can't change them. It's about identifying how you sometimes react when you feel tired or under pressure. Each STOP sign is a little warning to check your attitude. By noticing your STOP signs, you can nip them in the bud, often simply by apologising or talking about it. When you change yourself, the relationship will change automatically for the better.
- Pick one of the STOP signs that you tend to do automatically and see what happens when you decide to do it a little less often next week.
- For more information, see www.letssticktogether.com

¹⁹ Benson calculations done for this paper

²⁰ Callan et al (2007)

²¹ Pellew, S. (2007) Building Stronger Families Theory Manual. Time For Families.

²² Ruger, W., Wilson, S., & Waddoups, S. (2002). Warfare and welfare: Military service, combat, and marital dissolution. *Armed Forces and Society*, 29, 85-107.

²³ Stanley et al (2010)