

Let's Stick Together

Background research

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The case for relationship education

- The cost of family breakdown to the UK taxpayer is estimated at £42bn 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 £21,000 average cost per year of the UK's 2m 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, based on existing local schemes, is an effective low cost way to strengthen families, prevent and reduce conflict and family breakdown nationally⁴.
- 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.
- Relationship education programmes, such as PREP⁶, teach couples about dynamic factors that are both open to change and will help couples improve their relationship quality and stability⁷.
- 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 rates⁸.
- This has now been demonstrated using a broadly similar approach amongst engaged couples⁹, unmarried new parents¹⁰, military¹¹ and prison families¹².

¹ Wong, D. (2011) Counting the cost of failure, 2011 update. Cambridge: Relationship Foundation

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.

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

⁶ Markman, H., Stanley, S., & Blumberg, S. (2001) *Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁷ Stanley (2001)

⁸ Carroll, J. & Doherty, W. (2003). Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A metaanalytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, 52, 105-118.

⁹ Stanley (2001)

- 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 within only those marrying in church showed that couples still benefited from the relationship education programme¹⁴.
- Arguably the most robust recent study, using a randomised control design, showed that divorce rates amongst military couples who attended a twelve hour programme were significantly lower after one year than amongst those who did not (2% vs 6%)¹⁵.
- Low-cost relationship education programmes have the potential to access large numbers of families of marriage and parenthood each year. Preventive schemes can and should be implemented at key life stages and specific populations that include pre-marriage, post-natal, military and prison.
- 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. A new UK research programme using the randomised control design is essential to demonstrate both the immediate impact on attending couples as well as the longer term impact on national family stability.

The case for 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 educators¹⁶.
- Almost all evidence-based programmes are now “taught out of the box” by ordinary parents, usually after observing a demonstration of the programme.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Einhorn, L., Williams, T., Stanley, S., Wunderline, N., & Markman, H. (2008). PREP inside and out: Marriage education for inmates. *Family Process*, 47, 341-356.

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 Stanley et al (2010)

¹⁶ 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.

Key access points

- 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 childbirth¹⁷.

The case for post-natal relationship education

- A recent large scale US community study has shown that unmarried new parents can benefit from good quality relationship education¹⁸. Since 35% of UK unmarried new parents are likely to split within five years, even small increases in stability would have a significant impact.
- Let's Stick Together is an introductory relationship education programme that consistently accesses 25% of all first time mothers in the Bristol area. Access is via health visitors, post-natal groups, health clinics and Surestart Childrens centres.
- There are no outcome studies yet for this one hour programme. However Let's 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 parents (see below)¹⁹.
- A national Let's Stick Together scheme based on the Bristol post-natal model could access up to 80,000 first time mothers per year. At current rates based on Millennium Cohort Study data²⁰, 6,000 married mothers and 5,000 cohabiting mothers would be expected to separate before their child's fifth birthday, at a cumulative cost of £400m before year five alone.
- The cost of a national post-natal scheme, including start-up, would be around £2m per year. The scheme is cost effective if it achieves even a fraction of the impact of longer programmes, delaying family breakdown by 2% or preventing it altogether by 0.5%.
- This is equivalent to 100 couples out of the 5,000 couples who would have split during that first year delaying their break-up by just one year. Or 50 couples out of the 11,000 who would have split during that five years avoiding break-up altogether²¹.

¹⁷ Benson, H. (2010) Married and unmarried family breakdown: Key statistics explained. Bristol Community Family Trust.

¹⁸ Wood et al (2010)

¹⁹ Benson, H. (2010) Lets Stick Together. Oxford: Lion Hudson.

²⁰ Benson, H. (2010) Family breakdown in the UK: It's not about divorce. Bristol Community Family Trust.

²¹ Benson calculations done for this paper

Research underpinning Let's Stick Together content

- Let's Stick Together focuses on three key predictors of relationship outcomes in the early years of parenthood: "*bad habits*", "*good habits*", and "*father involvement*".
- The strongest predictor of failure in the early years of a relationship is the presence of "*negative affect*". The strongest predictor during later years, as a couple's oldest child enters their teens, is the absence of "*positive affect*". In other words, "*the absence of positive affect eventually takes its toll*".²²
- In Let's Stick Together, we teach both.
- "*Bad habits*", or "*negative affect*", are operationalised as "*STOP signs*". STOP stands for Scoring points, Thinking the worst, Opting out, and Putting down. STOP represents a combined interpretation of PREP's "*danger signs*"²³ (escalation, negative interpretation, withdrawal, invalidation) and Gottman's "*four horsemen*"²⁴ (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling). STOP signs are designed to help individuals and couples identify and reduce their own negative dynamic factors.
- "*Good habits*", or "*positive affect*", are operationalised as "*Love Languages*"²⁵. Love languages are Time, Words, Actions, Gifts and Touch. They represent ways of demonstrating "*positive affect*" through affection, interest and humour²⁶. Love Languages are designed to help couples identify their preferred, and usually very different, methods of giving and receiving love.
- "*Father involvement*" is linked to a variety of measures of mother well-being²⁷ and child well-being²⁸ in the early years of parenthood. Father involvement has also been shown to improve following a relationship intervention amongst new parents²⁹. The third part of Let's Stick Together helps parents identify a specific risk factor (pushing dad away) that can inhibit father involvement and a protective factor (making time together) that can facilitate it.

²² Gottman, J. & Levenson, R. (2000). The timing of divorce: Predicting when a couple will divorce over a 14-year period. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 737-745.

²³ Markman et al (2001)

²⁴ Gottman, J. (1994). What predicts divorce? The relationship between marital process and marital outcomes. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

²⁵ Chapman, G. (1995) The five love languages. Northfield.

²⁶ Gottman & Levenson (2000)

²⁷ Cowan, P., Cowan, C., Pruett, M., Pruett, K. & Wong, J. (2009), Promoting Fathers' Engagement With Children: Preventive Interventions for Low-Income Families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71: 663–679.

²⁸ Cowan, P., Cowan, C., Cohen, N., Pruett, M., & Pruett, K. (2008). Supporting fathers' engagement with their kids. In J.Berrick & N.Gilbert (Eds.), *Raising children: Emerging needs, modern risks, and social responses* (pp. 44 – 80). New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁹ Hawkins, A., Lovejoy, K., Holmes, E., Blanchard, V. & Fawcett, E. (2008), Increasing Fathers' Involvement in Child Care With a Couple-Focused Intervention During the Transition to Parenthood. *Family Relations*, 57: 49–59.

Evaluation of Let's Stick Together

- Two internal evaluations of Let's Stick Together have been completed by Bristol Community Family Trust³⁰.
- The first survey looked at what 404 mothers thought of Let's Stick Together. 70% of the mothers were married, 24% cohabiting and 6% single/other.
- 94% said it was both "*enjoyable*" and "*informative*". 93% said it was neither "*embarrassing*", "*boring*", nor "*scary*". 94% said the entire session was "*useful*". Only 1% said none of it was "*useful*".
- There were no major differences in ratings between married and cohabiting mothers. However cohabiting couples were especially likely (47% vs 29%) to use a particular pattern of STOP signs called "*Back off or Fire back*"³¹ that may be consistent with lower levels of commitment. Cohabiting mothers were also slightly less likely (76% vs 86%) to think their partners are "*definitely willing*" to discuss Let's Stick Together at home.
- Amongst single mothers, 95% found the session "*useful*". Most other ratings were positive but on average slightly lower than for married/cohabiting mothers. For example, 77% of single mothers said Let's Stick Together was "*informative*", compared to 96% of married mothers and 92% of cohabiting mothers.
- The second survey looked at how 236 mothers related to the key ideas in Let's Stick Together.
- Mums were more likely than dads to Score Points (62% vs 46%), Think the worst (47% vs 33%), and Put down (42% vs 20%). Dads were more likely than mums to Opt out (58% vs 44%).
- The classic "*demand/withdraw*" pattern, where one parent Scores points or Puts down and the other Opts out, is associated with relationship problems³². Amongst 45% of couples in this evaluation, women demand and men withdraw. But amongst 31% of couples, it was the other way round.
- Amongst Love Languages, Time, Words, Actions and Touch were equally popular amongst mums, each attracting between 36% and 42% of strong preferences. Only 17% of mums went for Gifts. For dads, Actions and Touch both attracted 46% of strong preferences, followed by 28% each for Time and Words and only 10% for Gifts.
- One of the most interesting findings was that only 6% of couples share the same combination of Love Languages, confirming that almost all couples are different.
- The other remarkable finding was that nearly three quarters of all parents, including the "*Back off or Fire back*" group, said they were likely to change their behaviour. An outcome study will find out if their intentions become reality.

³⁰ Benson, H. (2010) Lets Stick Together. Oxford: Lion Hudson.

³¹ Benson, H. (2009). Back off or fire back? Negative relationship behaviours amongst postnatal married and cohabiting couples. 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. 55 - 66). Doha, Qatar: Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development.

³² Christensen, A. & Heavey, C. (1990). Gender and social structure in the demand/withdraw pattern of marital conflict. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59, 73-82.