

Summary Report of the National Symposium - Exploring perinatal and early years risks of parental conflict – held in Birmingham on 3rd December 2024

Introduction

On Tuesday 3rd December a full room gathered at the Edgbaston Park Hotel on Birmingham University's campus to spend a day in face-to-face discussions about reducing the impact of parental conflict in the perinatal period and early childhood. The audience comprised a wide range of professionals including members of Safeguarding Partnerships, Family Hub and Early Help leads in local authorities, as well as lead nurses and public health team members, Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) programme leads and leaders of voluntary and community organisations working in this field.

Kate McKenna, an Associate of the Staff College, which conceptualised, designed and delivered the event on behalf of Foundations, the What Works Centre for Children and Families, set out the objectives of the day. These were to think about what it meant to take a systems leadership approach to safeguarding in the early years, to hear learning from organisations which had taken this approach, and to consider how we could develop cultural competence to work with all families more effectively. The aim was that the day would prompt participants to develop stronger partnerships, share learning, and encourage future communities of practice discussions.

Presentations

The day started with two presentations, from Jenny Coles, former DCS of Hertfordshire and member of the Children's Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, and from Adam Billson and Amy Jones, from the East Midlands Reducing Parental Conflict Leads Network. Sadly, Dr Robin Balbernie, who had intended to speak, was prevented from doing so by train cancellations.

Jenny Coles drew on her experience on the Children's Safeguarding Practice Review Panel to highlight the critical importance of safeguarding in the early years, pointing out that in 2022/23, 36% of serious incidents reported to the national safeguarding panel were for children under one. She outlined three keys to effective work.

Firstly, the importance of engaging the whole system, and connecting the agenda of reducing parental conflict with other strategies and initiatives such as mental health, Family Hubs and workforce development. For babies and young children, grass roots organisations such as play groups and childcare providers, including private and voluntary sector nurseries and childminders, were also critical partners, and were often missed out in discussions about how to reach families of young children.

Secondly, understanding family as a protective factor, and the value of a "Think Family" approach. This encouraged services and organisations working with adults, such as mental health services, drug and alcohol addiction services, or the justice system, to enquire whether they were parents and to ask curious questions. Across the system, there were many opportunities for professionals to identify relationship conflict issues and to connect parents to sources of support.

Thirdly, the need for an inclusive approach to families, in particular to gender and race. Jenny pointed to The National Safeguarding Review Practice Review Panel's 2021 Report, "The Myth of Invisible Men",

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6141e34f8fa8f503bc665895/The_myth_of_invisible_men_safeguarding_children_under_1_from_non-accidental_injury_caused_by_male_carers.pdf

which found that services, both universal and targeted, frequently overlooked fathers, seeing mothers as the prime, sometimes only, carer for their children. She also highlighted the challenge of race, racism and bias, suggesting the need for a multi-layered approach, considering how bias might have been and still be present in service strategy and planning, how it might affect the accessibility of services, and the importance of listening and responding to families' lived experiences.

In their presentation, Amy Jones and Adam Billson drew on their learning from the East Midlands RPC programme. They had found it helpful to keep in mind a working definition of harmful conflict as "frequent, intense and poorly resolved", and used the For Baby's Sake Trust Parental Relationships Spectrum to help practitioners to understand both parental conflict and domestic abuse. <https://www.forbabysake.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Parental-Relationships-spectrum-updated-generic-version-21-feb.pdf>

They had prioritised workforce development, and had encouraged people working in a range of services to use a consistent approach comprising the 5Rs: Reflect | Repair | Rebuild | Resilience | Review. With capacity stretched and turnover high, they had found it important to go beyond training and offer supervision, peer conversations, and senior leadership reinforcement of the key messages. They had worked to reach families where the parents or the children were neurodivergent and were finding it hard to access mainstream services. As the RPC programme drew to a close, they encouraged those in the room to spread the message, connect locally, and role model healthy relationships in their work.

Reflections

Following the presentations, Janet Grauberg, another Staff College Associate, encouraged the participants to reflect on tables about the challenges they faced in their own areas, and how what they had heard might help them address them.

Key challenges reported back included:

- Reaching families, especially where universal services for babies and young children were thin on the ground.
- Reaching early years settings, especially smaller, informal settings.
- Engaging partner agencies, including stretched health visiting & midwifery teams, and services working with adults, and connecting data and systems to support joined-up working.
- Rising demand, coupled with a shortage of funding for early intervention services such as early help, and for trainers and facilitators, leading to services only being able to intervene when situations reached crisis point.

- Developing professional understanding and confidence to address parental conflict, including professional anxiety about thresholds, conflation of parental conflict and domestic abuse, and questions about the negative implications of the “parental conflict” label.
- How best to equip practitioners to be confident to ask curious questions and hold what might be difficult conversations; how to sustain awareness, knowledge and confidence in a high-turnover sector; and how to develop cultural competence in working with a diverse range of families.

Participants also said that they had been struck by:

- The similarity of the challenges faced in each area, and the variety of approaches being taken, with a desire to learn more about who was doing what across the country, and encouragement at the passion and expertise in the room.
- The importance of partnership working, including with adult services in a “Think Family” approach, and with grass roots organisations in the voluntary, community and childcare sector, who were often absent from the strategic planning and workforce development conversations. Reducing parental conflict needed to be everyone’s business.
- The need to think about fathers, and how to create spaces for them to open up about their challenges and worries, including how this connected to race, racism and bias.
- The value of relational and strengths-based approaches, which allowed conversations with parents to be held within a trusting relationship.
- The need for more work to develop professional knowledge about tools to open conversations with parents, to understand where parental conflict was positioned on the spectrum of harmful relationships, and specifically, about the resources available through the national RPC programme.

Provocation – a sketch by Narrative Alchemy

Just before lunch, participants were treated to a performance and follow-up conversation from Sean McGrath and the team from Narrative Alchemy [<https://www.narrativealchemy.co.uk/>]. By acting out an everyday argument between parents, they helped us to feel what it would be like to be a child caught in the middle of a dad working all hours, and a mum juggling her own work, home and a young child. Words used in the discussion were “scared, anxious, worried, want to run or hide, it’s my fault, on edge.” Participants discussed how a child with special needs might feel, and how even an unborn child might experience the mother’s stress. It was a really thought-provoking way of bringing the issue of parental conflict, even for those in the room who work on this issue day in, day out.

Actions

In the discussions after lunch, the participants talked to each other about who they were going to speak to as a result of the day’s conversations, and any other actions they were going to take when they got back to their desks. The key people and groups that were going to be contacted were:

- Within their organisation – team members, senior managers in children’s and adult services, RPC co-ordinators, and training and workforce development colleagues.

- Strategic Partnerships and Boards, including early help, neglect and safeguarding children panels
- Colleagues working in health services, including public health, midwives and health visitors, and adult mental health services.
- Other statutory services such as police, education, family hub leads, kinship care services, and those running services for fathers.
- Voluntary and Community organisations, including faith groups that had reach to diverse populations, and early years childcare providers, including in the private, voluntary and independent sector.

Other actions that participants said they would undertake included:

- Continued work to raise awareness and the profile of the importance of reducing parental conflict, in particular with early years and childcare providers. Some organisations in the room were considering how their volunteers could also benefit from greater awareness.
- Renewed emphasis on offering training and resources, in person and online, and encouraging reflection on parental relationships through supervision.
- Consideration of a regional working group to share practice between local and combined authorities
- Finding out more about voluntary and community organisations in the local area
- Exploring whether and how work to reduce parental conflict was embedded in other strategies such as mental health and reviews for children in the care system.

Next Steps

In the final discussion session, participants identified issues they were interested to hear more about in the series of topical webinars, or to discuss with their peers in the communities of practice workshops being planned by The Staff College for the following year. The themes for topical webinars included:

- The impact of parental conflict on brain development in young children
- Working with parents with mental health issues or other additional needs
- Meaningfully engaging with fathers
- Effective interventions, including evaluation and system-wide outcomes
- Technology, screen use and its impact on relationships
- The perspectives of midwives or police, where early intervention has made a difference.

The themes that participants highlighted for discussion with their peers in community of practice workshops included:

- Workforce development, including hearing from families in planning staff training
- Working with fathers
- Partnership working across a range of statutory services such as health and education, and with voluntary and community organisations. This included how to share responsibility and risk across agencies, and understanding different professional language
- Effective practice interventions, including screening tools and processes, and effective service models, especially the role of Family Hubs.

Closing Remarks

The day closed with a panel chaired by Christine Wint, a Staff College Associate, and comprising Fliss Dewsbery (Pen Green Centre), Ben Lewing (Foundations), Liz Pemberton (The Black Nursery Manager), Esther Jones (National RPC Programme, DWP), Donna Prescott (HomeStart) and Pauline Melvin-Anderson (The Traveller Movement).

Each of the panel members offered their highlights and key takeaways from the day. The key points made were

- The critical importance of asking questions and intervening early. As Jenny Coles had pointed out, so many tragedies, so much child trauma, and so much family unhappiness, could be avoided by offering support and taking action early. The “Think Family” approach had resonated through the day.
- The value of relational and multi-disciplinary approaches which built trust and enabled practitioners to have difficult conversations with parents.
- The need for a co-production approach with parents, including fathers, in order to develop accessible and inclusive services.
- The questions of race, racism and bias, and how to develop services that demonstrated cultural awareness and addressed systemic racism. This was not a quick fix, it required sustained work.
- The value of sharing tools, practice and approaches – including at sessions such as this event where there was time for reflection and learning together.

Kate McKenna closed the day's discussions by encouraging participants to put their learning into action, and highlighted the forthcoming series of topical webinars and community of practice workshops, which would be informed by the discussions on the day.