

FAMILIES, PARENTS AND CARERS
RESEARCH REVIEW 2

Improving children's outcomes by supporting parental and carer–couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence



Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services

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C4EO works with a consortium of leading national organisations: National Children’s Bureau, National Foundation for Educational Research, Research in Practice and the Social Care Institute for Excellence.

The Centre is also supported by a number of strategic partners, including the Improvement and Development Agency, the Family and Parenting Institute, the National Youth Agency and the Institute of Education.

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Summary

This research review tells us what works in improving children’s outcomes by supporting parental and carer couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence. It is based on a rapid review of the research literature involving systematic searching of literature and presentation of key data. It summarises the best available evidence that will help service providers to improve services and, ultimately, outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Researchers based at the Family and Parenting Institute and at the University of Newcastle carried out this review on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services (C4EO). The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) conducted the data work.

What did we find out?

Key messages from our research review

- A good deal of information about families is kept in the national archives but there are gaps in the evidence base with regard to the incidence of domestic violence and the incidence of divorce among couples with children (as opposed to all couples).
- More negative outcomes for children, including lower educational attainment, conduct problems and emotional difficulties, are associated with the experience of parental divorce. However, the majority of children with this experience develop well.
- The most negative outcomes for children of divorced parents emerge from difficulties that pre-date the relationship breakdown.
- Negative outcomes can also be associated with children from intact families, especially where parental or carer relationships are characterised by conflict and/or violence.
- A substantial minority of children who witness domestic violence have parents or carers who have additional difficulties that compromise their parenting capacity.
- Children and most couples show signs of stress, with poorer parenting in the two to three year period around the time of relationship dissolution. Although these symptoms usually disappear, for some individuals, effects can be long-lasting and professional support can be valuable at this time.
- Boys tend to show more signs of disturbance than girls, particularly where conflict between parents has involved physical violence and where the

conflict persists after the breakup. There is a lack of consensus among researchers on the question of whether there are gender differences associated with the long-term impact of exposure to violence.

- Quality of contact post-separation is more closely associated with good outcomes for children, than quantity of contact post-separation.
- There is a lack of relevant research and large gaps in the evidence base concerning which interventions work best in the UK for individual families affected by violence, conflict and relationship breakdown.
- Couples in the UK tend not to seek professional help for relationship difficulties except as a last resort – providers need to find ways to change attitudes towards seeking help, across all minority ethnic communities.
- Teaching children about relationships, from an early age, may be the best way to effect change. According to user feedback, services that facilitate anonymous access to information and advice are very popular, for example, web- and media-based services. More research is needed to assess the role and effect of these services.
- There is evidence that better training of health and other professionals can increase the likelihood of problem identification and facilitate earlier access to appropriate services.

Who are the key stakeholders?

- People of all ages with experiences of parental conflict, separation and divorce and domestic violence (including children and young people).
- Policy-makers, campaigners and those who advise them.
- Practitioners working with children and families.
- All couples and couples-to-be and all people caring for children.

Their contributions are valuable in the process of improvement

People of all ages with experiences of parental conflict, separation and divorce, and domestic violence (including children and young people)

It is vital to constantly consult with all those affected as their perceptions of services and their views on what helped or hindered them in getting appropriate help are key to tailoring services appropriately. Wherever possible, it will be valuable to include children and young people in this consultation process. It is particularly important to ensure that services take account of the needs of individuals from families in communities that discourage help-seeking. These include, among others, white families in low-to-middle income groups and those in upper middle income groups as well as minority ethnic families.

Policy-makers, campaigners and those who advise them

The actions of policy-makers, campaigners and their informants will be more effective if they are aware of gaps in the knowledge base and are able to take steps to ensure that more accurate and relevant information is recorded and made publicly accessible.

Practitioners working with children and families

With more relevant information, particularly about the cost and effectiveness of interventions for work with individual families, and more training to enable early problem identification, practitioners in all settings (i.e. all organisations in the private, community and voluntary sectors as well as those in local and central government-funded sectors) should be better equipped to set up early screening procedures, and to directly provide and signpost to appropriate services.

All couples and couples-to-be and all people caring for children

More effective couple relationship support services will be of benefit to the whole population of adults and children, and to the wider society too.

What data is available to inform the way forward?

Much data is available on characteristics of family composition in Great Britain. Divorce rates and trends are available by gender of adults, and data is available on family composition including age and number of children (in families overall – no separate records are kept on families where parents or carers have separated). This information can be found in the National Statistics' population and social trends. Data on mental health outcomes by family type is available at the national level, as is data on the qualification levels of seventeen year olds. Data on educational outcomes by family type for younger children is not available. Data on links between family characteristics and outcomes for children is therefore sparse.

Although there is national data on domestic violence by adult gender, the data is not available by family composition. There is data available that local authorities can use to measure their progress towards the two national indicators relating to decreasing the incidence of domestic violence, national indicator 32, 'Repeat incidents of domestic violence' and national indicator 34, 'Domestic violence – murder'.

C4EO's interactive data site (www.c4eo.org.uk/data) enables local authority managers to evaluate their current position in relation to a range of key national indicators and to easily access publicly available comparative data relating to families, parents and carers.

The evidence base

There is a large body of information available to inform this review and the questions it poses. Because the field is so well-established, most of the evidence comes from syntheses of research findings. Researchers in these fields have become

increasingly sensitive to methodological and definitional issues, which has created a move toward more precise use of terms as well as more careful examination of multiple co-occurring influences in the lives of conflicted families.

However, there is still a need for more research to separate out conclusions that relate only to couples as opposed to parenting couples. These gaps in the evidence base could be filled if records of divorce and domestic violence routinely included information about the parent/carer status of the adults involved.

There is also a lack of documented information about interventions for families affected by divorce and domestic violence in the UK and a need for more information about how these work for families in different circumstances and from different cultural communities.

Although some small-scale qualitative studies exist, there is a need for more information, from larger samples that reflect all UK communities, from the perspective of children and young people affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict.

Research review methods

Research literature was identified through systematic searches of relevant databases and websites, recommendations from our Theme Advisory Group, a group of experts in families, parents and carers policy, research and practice, and considering studies cited in identified literature ('reference harvesting'). The review team used a 'best evidence' approach to systematically select literature of the greatest relevance and quality to include in the review. This approach attempts to eliminate bias in the selection of literature, to ensure that the review's findings are as objective as possible. More information, about the nature of the search process and inclusion criteria for the research review, can be found in Appendix 1.

Data contained within the data annexe was obtained by a combination of search methods but primarily by obtaining online access to known Government publications and access to data published by the Office of National Statistics.

Next steps

An updated version of this review is due to be published in Spring 2011. This will include validated practice examples and views from children, young people, parents, carers and service providers.

Two other C4EO reviews are available on the C4EO website as part of C4EO's review work on 'Families, Parents and Carers' work:

- Improving the safety, health and wellbeing of children through improving the physical and mental health of mothers, fathers and carers.

- Improving children’s and young people’s achievement, behavioural and emotional outcomes through effective support and intervention with mothers, fathers and carers of 7–19 year olds.

Local decision-makers and commissioners working in local authorities and children’s services may also find it helpful to read the Families, Parents and Carers Directors’ Summary, which presents the key messages from all three reviews.

C4EO is using the main messages from the three Families, Parents and Carers reviews to underpin its knowledge sharing and capacity building work with those working in children’s services, and through them the full range of professions and agencies working to support couples and children in families experiencing conflict, including domestic violence.

1. Introduction

This review aims to draw out the key ‘what works?’ messages on families, parents and carers. It addresses four questions, which were set by the C4EO Theme Advisory Group (TAG), a group of experts in families, parents and carers policy, research and practice. These questions are:

- 1 What proportion of parents and carers experience conflict and/or separation and what are their characteristics? Please include consideration of household composition and characteristics i.e. gender, age, ethnicity, social/economic class.
- 2 What is the relationship between parental and carer conflict and/or separation on parenting and children’s emotional, behavioural, educational and health outcomes?
- 3 What are: a) the support needs of mothers, fathers and carers affected by separation, divorce or conflict; b) the nature and effectiveness of support available and; c) the barriers to uptake?
- 4 What are: a) the support needs of children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict b) the nature and effectiveness of interventions available and; c) the barriers to uptake?

The following reviews are also available on the C4EO website: Improving the safety, health and wellbeing of children through improving the physical and mental health of mothers, fathers and carers; and Improving children’s and young people’s achievement, behavioural and emotional outcomes through effective support and intervention with mothers, fathers and carers of seven to 19- year- olds.

The review is based on:

- The best research evidence from the UK – and where relevant from abroad – on what works in improving services and outcomes for children and young people; and
- The best quantitative data with which to establish baselines and assess progress in improving outcomes.

C4EO will use this review to underpin the support it provides to those working in Children’s services to help them improve service delivery, and ultimately outcomes for children and young people. It will be followed by a knowledge review, which will update the research evidence and also incorporate:

- the best validated local experience and practice on the strategies and interventions that have already proved to be the most powerful in helping services improve outcomes, and why this is so; and
- stakeholder and client views on ‘what works?’ in improving services.

Definitions of key terms

The Theme Advisory Group provided the following definition:

The definition of ‘**conflict**’ includes interparental arguments/discord, domestic violence and abuse.

It was further stipulated that the review should look at potential issues of heightened risk in relationships, such as: loss of employment, financial/work stress, parental physical or mental illness or disability, drug/alcohol abuse, accidents, unwanted pregnancy, the arrival of a first baby, caring for a sick or disabled child, losing a child.

Searches were to include work from six English-speaking countries (Canada, the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland), children in the age range of 0 to 19 years and all relevant literature from 1990 onwards (with the exception of demographic literature which was to be limited to 2005 onwards).

Cross-cutting issues were to include: Child poverty, equality and diversity, workforce development.

Methods

The research included in the main body of this review was either identified in the scoping study “Improving children’s outcomes by supporting relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence” (Chang *et al* 2010), was cited within the research items identified, or suggested by the Theme Advisory Group (TAG). The research team ruled out obviously irrelevant research studies by screening study titles. Remaining research studies were then coded on the basis of their abstracts. Coding took account of each study’s features – including research design, relevance to the scoping review questions and country of origin – to identify the key items to be included in the forthcoming main review. The review team has appraised these key items to ensure that the evidence presented is the most robust available.

Further supplementary data relevant to the review, was identified by the NFER data team from publicly available national datasets. The results of their search are presented in the Data annexe to this report.

Strengths and limitations of the review

Strengths of the review include identifying the best available evidence from research and national datasets to inform specific questions; comprehensive and documented searching for relevant information; an analysis of the quality and strength of evidence; and guidance from an advisory group on the issues of greatest importance in early childhood research, policy and practice.

Limitations of the review include the very tight deadlines which the review had to meet, which limited the ability of the team to extend and develop the evidence base

through reference harvesting and hand searching; and the fact that the review was limited to English-speaking countries only.

2. Context

Policy context

The key theme of this review – improving children’s outcomes by supporting parental and carer couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence – reflects recognition of the need to find solutions to problems that emerge when family units break up.

Three million children in the UK will see their parents separate during their childhood and approximately one in four will have experienced life in a single parent family at some point by the time they reach the age of sixteen. The potentially negative impact of parental separation on children’s emotional, behavioural, educational, health and financial outcomes, is well documented. In addition, the quality of life of thousands of children whose parents or carers remain in violent or high conflict relationships can be adversely affected. At least 750,000 children a year witness domestic violence (DH 2002) and this has been linked with an increased risk of behavioural problems and emotional trauma as well as to mental health difficulties in adult life.

In the Children’s Plan (DCSF 2007) the former government pledged to do more to support those affected by family breakdown and support the couple relationship. In 2008, the first ‘Relationship Summit’ was held with increased funding for family support initiatives announced. Local authorities, primary care trusts and voluntary sector organisations were expected to work in partnership to address the needs of parents with conflicted and disrupted relationships through services such as relationship counselling and family mediation. However, research suggests that while there is a high demand for services, provision is very variable across local authorities in the UK. Since this Summit, a new coalition Government has come into being, with its election manifesto focused on addressing the needs of the ‘fractured families’ in ‘Breakdown Britain’ at the same time as finding ways to address an enormous budget deficit.

In the decade since September 1997 when the, then, Ministerial Group on the Family was set up, policies have reflected a drive to make services more visible to parents, to encourage parents to seek help, and to alter the profile and status of the parenting work force. All these measures were taken in line with a conviction that parents can and should provide the care and support that children need if they are to develop into young people and adults who can, in turn, contribute to the wellbeing of society. Just as *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003), New Labour stressed that *Every Parent Matters* (DfES 2007). In *Every Parent Matters*, the emphasis was on parents’ needs for support and for help with accessing support so that they could be more effective in their role as enhancers of their children’s wellbeing: ‘*Parents and the home environment they create are the single most important factor in shaping children’s wellbeing, achievements and prospects. We know that the overwhelming majority of parents want to do the very best for their children.*’ (DfES 2007 p 1). *Every Parent Matters* was seen as marking the beginning of a national debate, ‘*what I hope will be a national debate with parents, children and young people, as well as service planners, commissioners, and providers as to how parents can best be supported and engaged.*’ (p 1).

During the time of the previous government, plans were laid to shape services so that they could increase the capacity of parents to provide well for their children, include health-led projects to support parents during pregnancy and early years, improve publicity for services, introduce initiatives designed to increase parents' engagement in their children's education and, amongst other things, improve couple relationship support services by funding research into the needs for support among parents from diverse backgrounds across various stages of family development. A number of initiatives set out to prevent or remedy family difficulties, including government-funded early intervention programmes, family intervention projects for families in difficulty, targeted youth support which aims to improve teen-parent relationships, and a variety of other forms of parenting education and support.

In the new Coalition's Programme for Government, a commitment has been made to develop a new approach to supporting families with multiple problems. Ministers are currently in the process of working with officials to review the evidence available, including that relating to cost-effectiveness, in order to build on the many local projects that work with this group of families.

3. The evidence base

This chapter is informed mainly by the systematic search for literature, which was carried out independently of the data search reported in the data annexe. The conclusions that we draw are based on both exercises.

Although there is a vast literature on couple relationships, parental separation and domestic violence, this information tends not to be focused specifically on parents or on people caring for children. Instead, particularly in respect of the stages through which relationships develop and the demographic characteristics, adult couples are referred to as though there is no distinction to be made between couples with children and those without. This point pertains both to the research literature that we reviewed and to the datasets explored in the data annexe.

There are gaps, therefore, in the evidence base concerning incidence of domestic violence among parents and carers (as opposed to all adult couples). Similar gaps arise in relation to divorced and separated parents who are often subsumed within the larger group of divorced and separated couples. Relatively little is known about numbers of couples who are separated as opposed to divorced although there is a substantial amount of information about couples in the process of separation.

More information is needed about the effectiveness of interventions for parents, carers and children affected by parental conflict, separation and divorce, including domestic violence. There is a lack of documented relationships support services and of well-designed evaluations of the effectiveness of these services and programmes. Due to methodological problems and a lack of systematic evaluation and monitoring, findings with respect to the value of interventions are often not reliable while longer term follow-up is rare in the UK. There is also a lack of research on how best to facilitate relationships support for different minority ethnic communities. More research is needed from the perspective of children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict. Although some small-scale qualitative studies exist, there is a need for more information about children's experiences, support needs and help-seeking approaches from a representative sample of children.

Evidence base for question 1: What proportion of parents and carers experience conflict and/or separation and what are their characteristics?

More information about key items for question 1 (section 4 of this report) can be found in Appendix 5. Most of this literature derived from studies carried out in the UK, with the exception of three items that derived from US studies: two literature reviews and a literature review which preceded an evaluation. The UK literature was comprised of three literature reviews; seven reports based on secondary analysis of national survey data (one of which also contained a literature review; two syntheses of studies and one commentary). All of the literature reviews were reviews of studies conducted both inside and outside of the UK. There is more information relevant to question 1 in the data annexe.

Evidence base for question 2: What is the relationship between parental and carer conflict and/or separation on parenting and children’s emotional, behavioural, educational and health outcomes?

A total of 34 items was selected as relevant to review question 2 (section 5 of this report). Most of the items selected for review Question 2 consisted of literature reviews or syntheses of research findings (systematic or meta-analytic reviews¹ or compilations of findings) although we also included some documents written by leading workers in the field of divorce. Seventeen items were focused on effects of divorce and the same number were focused on effects of domestic violence. A number of items referred to parental conflict and divorce. More detailed information about the nature and derivation of these key items can be found in Appendix 5. Some information about educational and mental health outcomes, derived from national datasets, can also be found in the Data annexe.

Evidence base for question 3: What are a) the support needs of mothers, fathers and carers affected by separation, divorce or conflict, b) the nature and effectiveness of support available and c) the barriers to uptake?

38 items were used to inform our answer to Review Question 3 (section 6 of this report). Eighteen were identified at the scoping review and coding stage; one was recommended by the TAG team and 19 were followed up through reference harvesting. They were equally split between literature reviews, syntheses of research findings and meta-analyses (18 items) and primary research (15 items). Two items were a combination of primary research and literature review, two were mappings of services and one was a practice guide. Twenty-three items were based on work in the US and one on work in Australia. Of the 14 items produced by workers based in the UK, eight were reviews of international studies. More detailed information about the nature and derivation of key items for question 3 can be found in Appendix 5.

Evidence base for question 4: What are a) the support needs of children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict, b) the nature and effectiveness of support available and c) the barriers to uptake?

The evidence base for the fourth review question (section 7 of this report) consisted of 14 items. Eight items were reviews or syntheses of research studies, four were research/data and a further two were a combination of research and review. One study was from the US, one from Canada and the rest from the UK. More detailed information is provided in Appendix 5.

¹ *The terms ‘systematic’ and ‘meta-analytic’ reviews are not always clearly defined in the literature – for the purpose of this report, we have adopted authors’ own descriptions of their work.*

4. Incidence: Proportions of parents and carers who experience conflict and/or separation, and their characteristics

This section focuses on the following review question:

What proportion of parents and carers experience conflict and/or separation and what are their characteristics? (including household composition and characteristics i.e. gender, age, ethnicity, social/economic class.)

Prior to carrying out the research review, it was agreed that reports based on UK national census or survey data would be accessed by the NFER data team. These are relevant to this question and the findings from the data search exercise are presented in the annexe rather than in the main body of this report. Where appropriate, we draw attention to the existence of additional information in the Annexe.

The evidence base for this question consists of a total of 16 documents. Nine were focused on separation and/or divorce and five on domestic violence. Two were on related but not directly relevant issues, namely non-resident parent contact rates and comparisons between cohabiting and married couples (more details are provided in the Evidence Base section and Appendix 5 of this report).

Key messages

- There is a need for more information about the incidence of conflictual relationships and relationship breakdown in relationships where there are children (as opposed to all relationships).
- It is estimated that approximately 45 per cent of marriages will end in divorce.
- Divorce rates are highest among young couples though differences between age cohorts appear to be on the decline.
- Intimate partner violence² is more common in cohabiting relationships than in marital relationships, especially in short-lasting cohabiting relationships.
- Married women with children are more likely to stay in a violent relationship than childless married women.
- A substantial minority of children exposed to domestic violence will also have parents or carers who have other difficulties that compromise their parenting capacity.
- Reports of domestic violence are more common in very low-income families, in lower socio-economic groups and in urban communities (though reporting biases may mask actual prevalence).
- Divorce rates are higher among urban and low socio-economic groups, and lower in some minority ethnic communities.

² The term 'intimate partner violence' (IPV) is currently used to describe violence between partners who may or may not be married.

Of the 12 items initially identified as evidence for this chapter, eight were identified through the scoping review, three through the research review process and one via a TAG recommendation. However, it transpired that only one item was directly pertinent to the research question. The others were either of limited relevance, because their findings were not drawn directly from the UK population specified, or were of questionable reliability. However, through reference harvesting, we did come across references to four more relevant documents. This raised the number of items reviewed for this question to 16.

Finding reliable information about prevalence in the UK

Although some of the documents we initially selected as relevant to the first review question were useful as pointers, most were not directly focused on the question of incidence in the population of interest to this study, i.e. couples with children. Some referred to relevant studies but we needed to go back to their original sources before we could determine their accuracy.

Incidence of domestic violence

A chapter by Humphreys and Houghton (2008) referred to two reports published by the Department of Health (Cleaver *et al* 1999; DH 2002). The first report suggested that, each year, at least 750,000 children in England and Wales live with domestic violence while the second noted that a substantial proportion of these children will also have parents or carers who are abusive or who have problems such as addictions or poor mental health. The Humphreys and Houghton (2008) chapter also cites a British Crime Survey (Walby and Allan 2004)³ which contains a small amount of information about the incidence of domestic violence. Again, this report was not specifically focused on parents and the details presented are not easy to unravel. It indicates that intimate partner violence is more common in cohabiting than in marital relationships though the highest rate of prevalence is among single and separated women. Where there are children in the relationship, the rate among married women is twice as high.

Humphreys and Houghton (2008) also describe a survey carried out by the NSPCC of 2,869 18 to 24 year-olds in England (Cawson 2002). The NSPCC study shows that 26 per cent of the young people surveyed said that they had witnessed violence between parents or carers on at least one occasion while five per cent described these experiences as frequent or constant. This frequency appeared to be linked to socio-economic status (SES), with more than twice as many young people in lower than upper SES groups reporting frequent or constant episodes when they had witnessed violence. This is one of the largest studies to be carried out in the UK to

³ More information about the British Crime Survey and the incidence of domestic violence among adult couples can be found in the data annexe.

date and provides some indication of the scale of these problems. However, findings need to be treated with some caution: the sample was not nationally representative and appears to under-represent both minority ethnic communities and people from lower socio-economic groups. It also relies on self-report which is not a dependable source of information: research has consistently shown that males under-report difficulties and that there may also be social group differences in willingness to talk about negative family experiences. There is a possibility therefore that the actual prevalence may be higher. Interestingly, though, Humphreys and Houghton draw attention to remarkably similar findings from a contemporaneous Australian study. They also give evidence of distinct gender differences, with almost nine out of ten reported domestic violence incidents involving male perpetrators (though, again, they acknowledge possible reporting biases).

Incidence of divorce

Given these limitations, we followed up leads through reference harvesting and located two studies, in addition to the Walby and Allan (2004) study and the Cawson (2002) study mentioned above, that appeared to be relevant to the question of incidence (Smallwood and Wilson 2007; Wilson and Smallwood 2008). Both reports are secondary analyses of UK national survey data and provide information about family formation and divorce patterns over the last decades. Some of the information from the earlier Smallwood and Wilson document (2007) is displayed and discussed in the data annexe to this review. It also contains material of relevance to review question 2 which we discuss in a later section of this report. Here we examine the arguments put forward by the later article (Wilson and Smallwood 2008).

Research carried out mainly outside the UK (e.g. in the USA and in Australia) has suggested that divorce may be more common among couples with experience of parental divorce and among those who are relatively young when they marry. It is also more common where marriages are characterised by premarital pregnancy, by financial difficulties, or by behavioural and mental health problems. Further, there is some evidence that higher incidence of divorce may be associated with urban rather than rural living. However, as O'Halloran and Carr (2000) comment, the relationship between these factors and divorce tends to be only weak to moderate: a substantial minority of couples exposed to some or all of these 'risk factors' do not divorce.

Several of the documents selected for this review included analysis of national records. These, as Wilson and Smallwood (2008) explain, need careful interpretation. Records of marriages and divorces supply information about numbers of couples in any one calendar year but, on their own, do not give an accurate picture of trends across longer time periods. Readers will find charts showing numbers of marriages and divorces (Figures 3, 4 and 7 to 10), along with charts indicating proportions of the population who are married (Figure 2) in the data annexe to this review. It may be tempting to conclude from the patterns observed that, for example, the dramatic rise in numbers of divorces that occurred in the UK in the 1970s (coincident upon changes in legislation that made it less difficult to obtain a divorce) indicated a shift in attitudes towards marriage, or an increase in marital disharmony, or even the breakdown of family values. Establishing what was really happening is more of a challenge: no research documents whether this change

facilitated more amicable divorces, whether it reduced the likelihood of couples prolonging poor family relationships, whether it changed expectations of relationships, whether it discouraged ‘working through’ difficulties, or whether, in fact, it had no substantial influence on the quality of couple relationships.

Besides changes in the legislative context of marriage, Wilson and Smallwood (2008) highlight the importance of taking into account factors such as migration and deaths when trying to interpret raw figures. Updating and refining work carried out by Haskey (1996), they used information gathered through Labour Force Surveys as well as other national sources to calculate how rates and lengths of marriages as well as rates of divorce have been changing across successive years and between successive cohorts and/or generations of couples. Taking into account changes due to death and migration, and noting potential effects of legal and fiscal influences, they reached a number of conclusions which have been widely cited and currently still carry considerable authority.

They concluded that:

- Around 45 per cent of marriages are likely to end in divorce and almost half of these divorces will happen before the couples’ tenth wedding anniversary.
- Couples who marry younger (e.g. before their mid-twenties) are more likely to divorce than couples marrying later (e.g. after thirty).
- This difference between age cohorts may be gradually fading out.
- Being divorced in the past increases the likelihood of engaging in a relationship that ends in divorce.
- By the year 2065, 10 per cent of couples marrying in 2005 will be alive and celebrating their diamond (60th) wedding anniversary, death will have ended 45 per cent of marriages and 45 per cent of marriages will have ended in divorce.

All of these conclusions were based on the assumption that, by 2065, patterns of migration, divorce and mortality will not have been changed, for example, by major national events or legislation. It is important, though, to bear in mind that, while being based on some of the best empirical evidence currently available, these conclusions are, nevertheless, speculative and so potentially prone to error. It remains to be seen whether they will be borne out in reality.

5. Effects on children of parental conflict and divorce

This section focuses on the following review question:

What is the relationship between parental and carer conflict and/or separation on parenting and children’s emotional, behavioural, educational and health outcomes?

This chapter is based on a review of 34 documents: 17 relevant to effects of parental separation on children and 17 relevant to effects of exposure to parental/carer conflict. Among the documents focused on parental separation, several were also relevant to the issue of parent/carer conflict as they also contained discussion of type of parental separation and whether violence was involved. Five of the parental separation documents and three of the couple conflict documents mentioned effects on parenting as well as on outcomes for children.

Key messages

- Although there are overall group differences between children from intact and non-intact families showing a tendency for children from non-intact families to do less well, resilience is the normal pattern and most children with divorced parents develop well.
- Some of the most negative outcomes for children have been traced to persisting adverse conditions that pre-date relationship breakdown.
- Parental separation can improve outcomes for children if it facilitates the end of violent or very intense parental conflict.
- Most children, and their parents and carers, show signs of stress around the time of relationship dissolution – these symptoms usually abate within two to three years.
- Parenting capacity can be compromised around the time of the breakup, regardless of the usual quality of carers’ parenting skills.
- Boys tend to show more signs of disturbance than girls, particularly where conflict between parents has involved physical violence and where the conflict persists after the breakup.
- Quality of contact post-separation is more closely associated with good outcomes for children, than quantity of contact, with good outcomes for children.

Within the domestic violence literature there is an emphasis on the dynamics of adult couple relationships rather than specifically on relationships between parents. Even so, there is also now a huge body of research exploring the effects of violent couple

relationships on outcomes for children. Likewise, there are an enormous number of studies devoted to exploration of the effects of parental separation on children.

Because both these bodies of literature are so large and date back so far, in order to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible, most of the documents identified as relevant to this review question consist of syntheses of research findings - literature reviews and meta-analytic⁴ reviews – as opposed to single case studies. Also reviewed was the work of some of the main pioneers in the field e.g. Hetherington, Kelly and Amato and research on specific aspects such as the role of grandparents, the views of children, non-resident parent-child relationships and juvenile delinquency. The majority of studies were based on research conducted in the United States.

Before discussing this literature, it seems important to comment briefly on some of the methodological and definitional problems that researchers have highlighted in both areas. They particularly stress the difficulties associated with trying to separate out individual influences and point out that problems often occur at the same time, for example, abusive relationships between parents may exist alongside other difficulties that can lead to poor parenting, such as financial, social or health problems; there is also a lot of evidence of an overlap between male intimate partner violence and child abuse (e.g. Holt *et al* 2008). Where conflict between parents has led to separation and/or divorce, researchers stress how difficult it is to accurately determine how much children may have been affected by the conflict, the separation, a combination of both, or other, perhaps related, factors.

Researchers also emphasise the need for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to specify very precisely what they mean by the terms they use, for example, whether ‘violence’ refers to verbal as well as physical abuse, whether ‘conflict’ includes arguments as well as other negative interactions such as derogatory comments, whether ‘parental separation’ means parental divorce or other earlier stages or types of separation. Some inconsistencies and controversies have arisen due to failures to address these fundamental definitional and methodological issues.

Child outcomes associated with divorce/separation

In the literature we reviewed, we found a general recognition of popular views, commonly found in the work of authors writing from clinical or psychoanalytic perspectives, that children whose parents divorce or separate do not do as well as children with experience of intact families, in terms of emotional and physical health, behaviour and educational attainment. This also tends to be the overall impression that, on first inspection, appears to emerge from the data collated by authors of the

⁴ There is no formal convention on use of the terms ‘systematic review’ and ‘meta-analytic review’ and some people argue that the distinction between the two is not tenable. Both attempt to collate findings from similar studies in order to form an overall picture. Meta-analytic reviews often include an attempt to pull together quantitative results from a number of separate studies in order to reach an overall conclusion whereas this is rarer in systematic reviews.

annexe to this report. For example, children of divorced or separated parents are more likely than children with experience of intact families to:

- grow up in households with low incomes and poor housing
- have behavioural and psychological problems
- have difficulties getting along with other children
- perform poorly at school and gain fewer educational qualifications⁵
- need medical treatment
- leave school and home at a young age
- become sexually active, pregnant or a parent earlier
- report anxiety, depression and low self-esteem⁶
- smoke, drink and use drugs during adolescence and adulthood.

Among researchers familiar with larger and longer-term empirical studies, there was a general consensus that differences are not nearly as clear-cut as earlier, less rigorous studies have suggested. While it is acknowledged that children of divorced parents may be at increased risk and will almost universally be seriously upset about the breakdown of their parents' relationship, research indicates that the majority of children do not develop serious personal difficulties attributable solely to their experience of parental separation. Instead, the normative pattern is one of resilience and, for some children, in the absence of additional stresses, there is an increased capacity for social competence.

Researchers are still divided over the nature of links found between juvenile delinquency and the experience of divorce. Most, like Collishaw *et al* (2007), now tend to the view that, while there may be an association, it seems unlikely that there are any simple or direct causal links between the two phenomena. Rather, they occur together in the presence of multiple risk factors and in the absence of sufficient protective factors.

Similarly, some of the differences initially attributed to parental separation or divorce are often now more accurately attributed to independent influences. Pressures, such as financial difficulties, substance misuse, and so on, may often have pre-dated the divorce and so contributed toward the breakdown (Price and Kunz 2003). It is relatively rare for problems that emerge around the time of the breakdown to persist long enough to be linked with adverse outcomes for children, although this may be the case for a very small minority.

Mavis Hetherington, one of the foremost US researchers in the field, represents the majority of experienced researchers in saying:

'When I began studying divorce, like most investigators I had a pathogenic model of divorce [i.e. a view that divorce was inevitably damaging]. I was

⁵ Further discussion of the relationship between educational outcomes and family composition can be found in the data annexe.

⁶ Further discussion of the relationship between mental health outcomes and divorce can be found in the data annexe.

focused on the deleterious consequences of divorce for families and especially for children. Now, after 35 years of studying divorced families, what impressed me is not the inevitability of adverse outcomes, but the diversity of adjustment in parents and children in response to marital dissolution.'
(2003 p 217)

She nevertheless acknowledges that, overall, there are small but noticeable differences between groups – that is, as a group, children and young people in families whose parents have divorced tend to do worse. However, there is a big overlap between groups and, for the majority of children from both types of family, there are no differences in outcomes. Where parents in intact families have unsatisfactory relationships, outcomes for these children can be negatively affected.

Which children are negatively affected by relationship breakdown?

There is now, therefore, considerable agreement that mechanisms underpinning effects of divorce on children are complex. Few of the authors in the documents reviewed appear to subscribe to the view that simple models of behaviour, like social learning or conditioning theories, can account for the way children are affected by divorce. These models suggest that learning occurs only or mainly through direct experience, so that children are most likely to learn to behave in the same way as the adults caring for them. Most of the authors reviewed suggested a more complex model in which any negative effects of divorce are mediated and/or moderated by a number of interacting influences. This fits better with a 'stress-diathesis' model of development, in which stressful experiences can act as a kind of 'last straw', exposing or stretching to the limit any weakness; at the same time, available resources may also be creatively called upon and put, perhaps, to new uses.

These interacting influences can be broadly described as:

- attributes of the child (for example, age, gender, personality, temperament and intelligence)
- attributes of the parents/carers
- the family's social make-up, cultural context and support network
- the nature of the relationship and the break-up.

Child attributes linked with adjustment difficulties include:

- The younger children are at the time of parental separation, the greater the impact of divorce, possibly because younger children find it more difficult to understand what is happening (this finding applies to pre-school children, aged around three, rather than to much younger babies).
- There is some evidence that boys tend to show more signs of disturbance than girls after parental divorce particularly where the separation has involved

high levels of interparental violence and conflict that continue after the divorce (e.g. Trinder *et al* 2008).

- Findings are mixed about whether boys or girls actually have more difficulty adjusting to parental divorce and family transitions (Lansford 2009).
- Children who already face biological or psychological challenges, such as a history of prenatal or perinatal problems, low IQ, and so on, cope less well with parental divorce.
- Where children have poor pre-divorce relationships with parents, these relationships tend to deteriorate further after divorce.
- Perhaps surprisingly, length of time in contact with non-residential parents is not associated with children's adjustment, though quality of relationship can be (Flouri 2006).
- Children with 'easy' temperaments and a positive self-image fare better.
- Children exposed to early life stresses, e.g. abuse or bereavement, may cope less well than children without these earlier challenges.

Parental attributes that have been found to cushion children against adverse effects include:

- ability to communicate and to encourage calm, open discussion about fears and feelings
- ability to form a warm, supportive relationship, or secure attachment relationship, with the child
- not being overwhelmed or preoccupied with their own difficulties; being able to manage conflict without resorting to self- or other-destructive behaviour
- ability, as separated parents, to set firm, but not rigid, boundaries, to be consistent with each other and to monitor the child/children adequately (Price and Kunz 2003)
- an ability to preserve their parenting role when the spousal role has broken down and to work in cooperation with the ex-partner.

Another issue that features in all the literature on parental conflict and divorce, including intimate partner violence, concerns the way couples parent in these situations. Some research points to the fact that, compared with childless couples, couples with children report higher levels of psychological and mental health problems in the period leading up to and immediately after the split. This stress can impact on the quality of parenting at this time by:

- reducing the amount of time and energy parents have to devote to their children (Coleman and Glenn 2009)

- producing more erratic and inconsistent care, with some parents resorting to harsher, more neglectful, or less child-centred styles of care rather than more optimal warm, responsive and authoritative styles
- the need to juggle new roles and the demands of new partners, work and family can cause stress; which, if linked with increased mental health and social identity problems as well as greater susceptibility to physical ailments, and/or addictive behaviour, will impair parenting capacity (O'Halloran and Carr 2000)
- non-communication, conflict and using children as go-betweens or as a means for fuelling arguments can signify the emergence of potentially very damaging parental influence.

Although, around the time of the split, these problems are common, the disruption to parenting abates for the majority of parents within two to three years. Parenting problems that persist longer than this often pre-date the break-up.

The composition and social context of the family is also important. Children tend to fare better if they have:

- other adults who can act as confidants or 'safe havens' at times of stress, for example, grandparents (Ferguson *et al* 2004), or other extended family members and friends
- good relationships with new stepfamily members (Dunn *et al* 1998; Dunn 2002)
- stepfamilies where most of the children are related to the same mother (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 1999)
- good friends in whom they can confide (Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001)
- siblings who may provide a buffer or at least a partial buffer (Dunn *et al* 1998).
- parents who do not continue to fight after they have separated.

There is still considerable debate about whether attitudes towards marriage within the child's community facilitate or complicate adjustment after parental divorce. Researchers have attempted to examine whether children cope better with divorce in communities where divorce has become a more common experience. In the UK, Sigle-Rushton *et al* (2005) used data from the follow-up of the 1958 and 1970 British birth cohorts and did not find any evidence to suggest that the experience of parental divorce was getting any easier. However, they acknowledged that their design may not have been sensitive to differences for a number of reasons, for example, the time difference between cohorts may not have been long enough for changes in attitudes to be discernible. Other studies, both in the UK and the US, have also failed to find any evidence that children in communities where divorce is more commonplace find it easier to cope than children in communities where divorce is rare (Ely *et al* 1999; Gruber 2004).

The nature of the separation

Several aspects of the process of separation have been linked to better or worse outcomes for children but perhaps the most important are those already hinted at above:

- whether or not conflict between parents or carers continues after the separation
- the extent to which problems that were present before the relationship breakdown continue to impact on the lives of the children and whether problems are resolved by the separation so that children's lives improve
- how easy it is for the children to make sense of the relationship breakdown and obtain the support they need to come to terms with what is going on.

In a minority of cases, the breakdown of parental relationships has long-term effects, for example, there is a slightly higher chance that children with divorced parents will themselves divorce, and, where parenting has also been poor, there is also a greater risk that children will not develop optimally. Again, it is difficult to separate the effects of divorce from the effects of poor parenting.

Domestic violence

With regard to the impact on children of witnessing domestic violence, the consensus among researchers again leans towards a complex multi-factor picture as opposed to one of simple linear causal chains. Negative consequences of living with domestic violence and witnessing violence between parents and carers depend both on the type of conflict involved and the child's perception of the nature of that conflict. This is why, although children in the same family may witness exactly the same incidents, the way they respond can vary tremendously. While one child will appear unaffected and will develop well both socially and psychologically, another can be quite different.

There was some evidence of an association between witnessing domestic violence and externalising behaviour (such as conduct disorder, physical aggression and juvenile delinquency) for boys but not for girls. Boys in middle childhood (approximately seven to 12) are particularly at risk. There do not appear to be any sex differences with respect to 'internalising' problems, i.e. feeling sad, depressed, anxious, etc. (Amato 2001; Holt *et al* 2008).

Research by Hetherington and colleagues (e.g. Hetherington 1999; Hetherington and Kelly 2002) suggests that some kinds of parental conflict are relatively benign and do not appear to affect children's development. This can include, for example, debates about what is the best way to rear children. They identified parental conflict about or directly involving the child, conflict in which the child feels torn between parents and conflict that is physically abusive or violent, as most closely associated with more negative outcomes.

Summary

In summary, the research reviewed here suggests that the majority of children with divorced parents adapt well although most find the actual break-up very stressful. The most negative outcomes for children can usually be traced to persisting problems that pre-date the relationship breakdown and that often characterise the post-separation parental relationship too, so that conflict and its potential negative effects do not end with the end of the relationship. These problems, which can stem from a wide variety of sources, can create family dynamics that, for some children, have long-lasting negative effects. There is some evidence that boys may be more susceptible to adverse outcomes than girls, though more research is needed to explore this aspect.

6. Meeting the support needs of parents and carers affected by parental conflict, separation and divorce

This section focuses on the following review question:

What are; a) the support needs of mothers, fathers and carers affected by separation, divorce or conflict; b) the nature and effectiveness of support available and; c) the barriers to uptake?

This section draws on 38 items. Sixteen items are classed as Reviews/Syntheses, 15 items are research/data, two items are meta-analyses, two, services mapping, one practice guide and a further two studies are a combination of research and review. Twenty three items are from the US, one from Australia and the rest from the UK.

Key messages

- The transition to parenthood is a difficult time for many couples.
- Most couples need extra support when problems arise in their relationships, especially around the time of splitting up.
- Couples in the UK tend not to seek professional help except as a last resort.
- There have been positive short-term effects of preventative interventions, such as marriage preparation, but there is little evidence that effects last.
- Booster sessions or relationship enhancement programmes can be helpful.
- Some transition to parenthood interventions have shown lasting benefits.
- With appropriate training, health professionals can signpost to services, to screen for difficulties and, sometimes, to deliver services.
- Interventions for couples in violent relationships need to be individually tailored.
- Services that preserve anonymity are popular though their effectiveness is hard to evaluate.

To assist the flow of the discussion, parts (a) and (c) of this question are addressed simultaneously, as they are closely interlinked.

Support needs and barriers to support

Couples whose relationships are characterised by violence or other kinds of conflict that lead to relationships breakdown are not a homogeneous group (Jouriles *et al*

1998; Kelly 2000). During the time immediately around separation, the majority experience distress and a diminution in parenting capacity. Cracks in the relationship often appear long before this (Walker *et al* 2010). Stanley (2001) has categorised the most common problems as stemming from either partners' individual backgrounds and relationship history (static factors) or as having been generated by the relationship itself (dynamic factors).

Salient static factors that can contribute to relationship strain include: a whirlwind romance and a rush into marriage; marrying young; (pre)marital pregnancy; teenage pregnancy; premarital cohabitation; having parents who divorced; having been married before; neuroticism and other personality traits, such as aggression or moodiness; religious dissimilarity; women's employment and income⁷; (poverty; learning difficulties and low educational attainment (Walker *et al* 2010; Cowan and Cowan 2000); Hetherington and Kelly 2002; Larson and Holman 1994). As these factors are sometimes, though not inevitably, linked with attitudes that contribute to relationship difficulties, it is important, when assessing couples' support needs, to take note of their presence.

Dynamic, relationship-generated factors, or unhelpful interactive strategies include: poor communication (especially, not being able to express and talk about painful or potentially difficult topics); inadequate problem-solving; negativity; hostility (as opposed to warmth and humour); causing problems to escalate; being defensive; withdrawal; having dissimilar attitudes; and not recognising the partner's alternative perspective (invalidation) (Walker *et al* 2010; Larson and Holman 1994).

The extent to which both background factors and distinctive dynamics feature in relationships is closely tied to the intensity of conflict, the couple's ability to manage their differences, and how their behaviour impacts on care of the family. Interventions usually aim to modify how couples perceive each other as well as how they behave so, when assessing their support needs, it is good practice to explore these aspects, so far as possible. However, the biggest challenge faced by most providers is that couples either fail to seek help or seek help only when problems have become irreversibly entrenched (Walker *et al* 2010).

Research (Chang and Barrett 2009; Walker *et al* 2010; Izzidien 2008; Goodwin and Cramer 1998) has suggested that couples in difficulty fail to seek or access help for a whole range of reasons, including:

- reluctance to discuss private relationship problems
- denial or failure to recognise the seriousness of problems
- not knowing what support is available or how to find it
- having negative experiences or perceptions of services (e.g. counsellors or mediators who are judgemental and/or take sides)
- limited access to or non-availability of services (long waiting lists, restricted appointment times, long distances to travel, clash with other care commitments)

⁷ Increased financial independence among women has been consistently linked to increased likelihood of relationship breakdown.

- prohibitive costs (high costs of counselling and mediation sessions, childcare and travel).
- unwillingness to give the impression of shared responsibility for what has gone wrong in the relationship.

Particular difficulties can also arise for:

- fathers if providers appear to fail to offer a gender-inclusive service
- couples whose relationships are characterised by violence - who may also fear the consequences of letting outsiders know that their relationship is putting their capacity to parent their children at risk
- couples from minority ethnic communities who may either fear disclosure within their community or who may perceive service providers as lacking insight into their particular predicament.

Nature and effectiveness of support available

Couple relationships support in the UK is most often offered through voluntary sector services (Corlyon and Clay 2008; DCSF 2010), such as Relate and Marriage Care. For this support to be easily accessible, it is recommended that systems are put in place so that local practitioners can signpost couples, including parents and carers, to relationship support services (DCSF 2010).

Below, we briefly describe and evaluate some of the services on offer for parents. They include:

- relationship preparation or enrichment programmes
- programmes targeting parents at the transition to parenthood (known to be a time when many couple relationships hit serious difficulties)
- a range of counselling and therapy services
- mediation services
- parental divorce education programmes
- more services such as helplines, media and written materials
- interventions specifically targeting people with experiences of domestic violence.

Marriage/relationship preparation and enrichment programmes

There are three types of programme:

- (1) Information and awareness sessions where couples discuss topics including communication, conflict management, expectations, money and sexuality, for example.
- (2) Diagnostic inventory-based approaches, where a lengthy questionnaire (inventory) is used to identify characteristics that are likely to affect couple relationships.
- (3) Skills-based courses where couples learn specific skills, (for example, problem-solving and managing conflict) to improve and sustain their relationships.

Evaluations of these programmes indicate:

- short-term positive effects on overall relationship quality and communication skills
- that effects appear to wane, although few well-controlled follow-up studies have been carried out (Carroll and Doherty 2003; Hawkins *et al* 2008; Chang and Barrett 2009)
- periodic booster sessions may be of benefit to some couples (Renick 1992)
- there is an overall lack of ethnic and economic diversity in most studies and not much evidence yet to show that these programmes work for economically disadvantaged couples or for people from minority ethnic backgrounds (Carroll and Doherty 2003; Hawkins *et al* 2008; Chang and Barrett 2009)
- some evidence (one study) that couple interventions can benefit low-income minority ethnic populations, increasing marital satisfaction over at least 18 months and reducing parenting stress (Cowan *et al* 2009)
- that in the UK, there would appear to be a low uptake of this kind of programme though some, largely anecdotal, evidence that some couples benefit (Mooney *et al* 2009; Chang and Barrett 2009; Walker *et al* 2010).

Transition to parenthood programmes

Transition to parenthood is the life event most frequently identified as causing stress in couple relationships (Walker *et al* 2010). Mainly from US projects, there appears to be some evidence of positive effects of interventions around this time, as the following examples indicate:

- **The Becoming a Family Project** is a group-based intervention for expectant and new parents in California (Cowan and Cowan 2000). Two members of staff (usually a man and a woman) work with participating couples to explore topics such as relationship strain, dilemmas and enjoyment. Although, in the long term, marriages may break down, there appear to be short term gains in terms of better parenting, less relationship disruption than is common in the transition to parenthood and greater marital satisfaction (Schulz *et al* 2006).
- **The Schoolchildren and Their Families Project**, a similar intervention for parents of four-year-olds, produced similar positive effects that lasted until the children were at least 10 years old (Cowan and Cowan 2000).
- **One Plus One's Brief Encounters training course** for health visitors and other primary care personnel aims to help professionals identify relationship difficulties and guide couples towards appropriate services, again, around the time of transition to parenthood. Evaluations have been positive (Simons *et al* 2001, 2003) and findings suggest that health professionals can successfully play a frontline role in getting support to couples with relationship problems.

Medical professionals (e.g. GPs, health visitors, midwives) are identified as key referral agents who can play an important role in supporting and educating pregnant or post-natal couples and helping them to normalise their fears and concerns about

the change in their sexual relationship (Foux 2008; Walker *et al* 2010). They can also play a vital role, through screening and routine enquiry processes, in identifying domestic abuse in pregnant women and new mothers (Jasinski 2004; Carpenter and Stacks 2009).

Counselling and therapy⁸ services

There are different types of therapeutic approaches such as psychodynamic therapy⁹, systemic therapy¹⁰ and cognitive behavioural therapy¹¹ and most therapists use a mixture of therapeutic approaches (Chang and Barrett 2009). Reviews of effectiveness of couple therapy using randomised clinical trials conclude that fewer than 50 per cent of couples treated in therapy will move from distress to non-distress status (Christensen and Heavey 1999). However, very few follow-up evaluations go beyond one year and it is not clear that there are long-term benefits (Chang and Barrett 2009).

Evaluations of couple counselling services (such as Relate) indicate that, while counselling can improve relationship quality for some couples and/or save some relationships, this is not the result for the majority of couples. The main reason for this appears to be that, in the UK, the norm is for counselling to be seen as a last resort. By this time, relationship problems have often become entrenched and the task for counsellors may then be to help parents to be able to separate in a way that does least damage to their children.

Mediation

When relationship breakdown is inevitable, mediation services aim to help parents to come to agreements and manage conflict and co-parental relationships.

Evaluations suggest that:

- When compared with more adversarial processes, mediation helps parents to reduce conflict and to improve behaviours such as communication and cooperation.
- Use of mediation services can be associated with more contact and involvement between non-resident parents and their children 12 years after divorce (Kelly 2000).

⁸ The terms ‘counselling’ and ‘therapy’ are used interchangeably depending on which term is used in the literature reviewed.

⁹ Psychodynamic therapy stresses the importance of the unconscious and past experience in shaping current behaviour.

¹⁰ Systemic therapy aims to change the pattern of how members of a system (such as a family) interact with each other.

¹¹ Cognitive behavioural therapy combines behavioural approaches (which are based on the belief that behaviour is learnt in response to past experience and can be unlearned, or reconditioned, without analysing the past to find the reason for the behaviour) and cognitive approaches (which use the power of the mind to influence behaviour).

- All-issues mediation¹² appears to be more effective in reducing parental conflict and reaching agreements than child-focused mediation (McCarthy and Walker 1996).
- Both parties need to commit to mediation process for outcomes to be positive.
- Involving children directly in mediation may be valuable (Hawthorne *et al* 2003).

Parental divorce education programmes

According to Geasler and Blaisure (1998), topics covered in parental divorce education programmes vary a lot, and might include personal adjustment, coping with change, parenting, the divorce process, information about grief and loss.

Some positive effects have been found, including less conflict between parents (Pruett *et al* 2005; Cookston *et al* 2007) and improved mother-child relationships (Wolchik *et al* 2000). McIntosh and Deacon-Wood (2003), however, argue that, where problems are entrenched, divorce education programmes, which are essentially information-giving, are not enough. They suggest that therapeutically-oriented approaches may be more appropriate.

Telephone helplines, print media, websites and online services

Support and information for mothers, fathers and carers affected by separation, divorce or conflict is also available via telephone helplines (such as the Samaritans and Relate), printed media (for example, self-help books), websites and online services (such as Gingerbread, Couple Connection, and Relate online). The nature of the direct, and non-stigmatising, anonymous support is welcomed (Walker *et al* 2010). However, the question of where and how to find good quality and accurate information remains an issue (Walker *et al* 2010; Hawthorne *et al* 2003).

It is particularly difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of services like these as often the only available outcome measure is users' rating of satisfaction, such as that outlined above.

Services specifically for parents affected by domestic violence

Women's Aid and other women's refuges, advocacy and outreach services operate a network of services that provide accommodation, information and support to women and children affected by domestic violence (Humphreys *et al* 2000). We found very little research evaluating the satisfactoriness or effectiveness of these services.

One two-year follow-up study of a 10-week community-based advocacy intervention for women with abusive partners produced positive results, with women reporting fewer depressive symptoms, increased social support and less intimate partner violence experience (Sullivan and Bybee 1999). Advocacy and outreach work is thought to be most effective when tailored to the needs of the individuals (Sullivan and Bybee 1999; Hester and Westmarland 2005).

¹² i Mediation that seeks to address not just parental disputes over arrangements for child care but other disputes too, such as financial arrangements, housing, etc.

Reviewing six studies of interventions aiming to reduce domestic violence, Stith *et al* (2003) concluded that couple therapy can be effective but that it is only effective in cases where couples are committed to staying together and where the violent partner has agreed to no-harm contact. They also stress the importance of an initial assessment for treatment suitability.

Work with perpetrators, such as the work of the NSPCC Cardiff Domestic Violence Prevention Service (Izzidien 2008), is extremely limited in the UK (Morris *et al* 2008). As Holtzworth-Munroe *et al* (2002) conclude, it is not yet clear whether any of the programmes currently in use are effective.

Summary

Relationship difficulties are common and most couples need extra support at some time. Marriage preparation, relationship enrichment and booster courses can be helpful although they reach only a small proportion of couples and the long-term effects have not been proven. It is well-established that the transition to parenthood can be a challenging time and may be a good opportunity for professional input. Given adequate training and scope for effective relationship-building, health professionals could help to identify problems at early stages, to sign-post appropriately and, perhaps, to deliver interventions.

7. Meeting the support needs of children affected by parental conflict, separation and divorce

This section is focused on the following review question:

What are a) the support needs of children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict, b) the nature and effectiveness of support available and c) the barriers to uptake?

This section draws on 14 items. Eight items are classed as Reviews/Syntheses, four items are research/data and a further two studies are a combination of research and review. One item is from the US, one from Canada and the rest from the UK.

Key messages

- Support from close family and friends can be all that many children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict need to manage their initial upset.
- Support needs to be easy to access (for example, through school, via emails or telephone helplines), confidential, provided without stigma and age appropriate; children need to be informed of available support.
- Most children affected by domestic violence say their greatest needs are to be safe and to have someone to talk to.
- Professionals need more training on how domestic violence affects children and how to deal with disclosure.
- Most services/interventions for children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict have not yet been rigorously evaluated.
- Some evaluations of school and community-based projects and telephone helplines have shown short-term positive effects.
- Systems need to be in place to ensure that information provided through leaflets, websites, booklists and books, audio-visual, CD-ROM and games is accessible, accurate and appropriate (to children's age, gender, cultural and linguistic status).
- Relationship education at school should start as early as possible and should include discussion of domestic violence.
- Support and advice to ethnic minority communities should be tailored to suit the specific cultural context.
- A multi-agency, holistic approach may be the most effective way to provide support for children exposed to domestic violence and persistent conflict – this should aim to address the support needs of both children and their carers.

Much of the literature on children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict includes discussion of domestic violence. Although the support needs of children affected by the kinds of parental disharmony that lead to separation and divorce are broadly similar to those of children affected by domestic violence, the latter also have specific needs and difficulties that must be taken into account.

Support needs of children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict

Children tend to prefer informal over formal support and, when dealing with the initial upset associated with the breakdown of their carers' relationships, most manage well with only support from parents, close family and friends (Wade and Smart 2002). Nevertheless, parents struggling to cope with the separation themselves at the same time as providing support for children often demand and welcome more support for their children (Walker *et al* 2010). Mooney *et al* (2009) recommend independent child-centred support (such as school-based programmes) that can effectively address children's needs. This gives children direct access though must be provided in a way that doesn't make them feel singled out or stigmatised. A survey of children affected by domestic violence showed that what most children most want is to be kept safe and to have someone to talk to (Mullender *et al* 2002).

Summarising the points made by the authors reviewed (Wade and Smart 2002; Hawthorne *et al* 2003; Mullender *et al* 2002; Houghton, 2008; Humphreys and Houghton 2008; Statham 2004), support for children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict must have the following characteristics:

- Children need to feel that they are taken seriously, listened to, believed and are fully informed and involved in important decisions.
- Building trust with children is important and can take a lot of time.
- Services need to be flexible and, ideally, accessible at all times (including evenings and weekends).
- It is vital to fully inform and reassure children about the support available.
- Confidentiality is paramount and can be especially important for ethnic minority children or children in close rural communities.
- Services need to be where children already go (especially schools) and want to be.
- Specialist school staff or specialist staff who visit the school, are helpful.
- A named trust support worker, offering one-to-one support for children exposed to domestic violence, is of most help to children unable to access more informal support.
- Some children need to access services anonymously so that they cannot be identified.
- Groupwork programmes can help some, but not all, children.
- A variety of formats is needed, such as actual and/or web-based one-to-one support by email and helplines.

- All children, whatever their family circumstances, can benefit from learning effective coping strategies and conflict management skills.
- After relationship breakdown, children may need help to maintain contact with non-resident parents/carers, trusted peers, grandparents and relatives, who are often essential sources of support; contact with a violent parent requires careful assessment.
- Professionals working with children and families need training, to understand how domestic violence affects children and how to deal with disclosure.
- The most effective campaigns/advertising concerning domestic violence use language that children can relate to easily.
- Particular attention needs to be given to children moving into refuges to make sure that they understand what is happening, to them and to their possessions.
- Multiagency approaches are needed to ensure that the needs of the whole child/family are addressed as opposed to being compartmentalised and fragmented.

The latter point was particularly stressed by Statham (2004) who reviewed services available for children in a number of circumstances including exposure to domestic violence. Noting that few services were specifically designed for this group of children, she nevertheless found evidence that the most promising approaches to support appear to involve a holistic, multi-agency approach. This kind of approach enables all aspects of the child's needs to be addressed, that is, their social, educational, health and care needs, within the specific family context where they arise. Integral to this approach is a recognition that services need to be developed so that the support needs of children and their carers are addressed in tandem. Failure to do this usually means a failure to address the whole problem.

Nature and effectiveness of interventions

In this section, we briefly describe a range of services available for children in the UK, as mentioned by authors in our review, including school and community-based support, telephone and other electronic helplines and written material.

School and community-based support and interventions include:

- school-based projects aiming to support children with a wide range of emotional and behavioural difficulties (for example, A Place to Be)
- school-based programmes that specifically address issues for children affected by family change (The Dawn Project for example, Hawthorne *et al* 2003)
- school counselling services (which may be delivered by external staff)
- group-based child-focused intervention programmes for children with separated/divorced parents
- relationship education in schools, including class discussions.

Evaluations suggest that:

- For maximum reach, school-based interventions need to be offered both on a one-to-one basis and/or in a group; there also needs to be flexibility around timing and format.
- Adequate assessment of needs is necessary to gauge what will best suit individual children.
- School counselling services need to have trained staff and the capacity to refer children for more specialist help.
- Including parallel training work with parents, focused on listening and discipline skills can enhance the effectiveness of child-focused programmes (O'Halloran and Carr 2000).
- Whole-class activities such as drama, discussion, or Circle Time (a non-threatening, inclusive, participatory teaching and learning approach) are popular with children and help children to get information as well as to learn skills such as relaxation, anger management and so on (Wade and Smart 2002).
- Relationship education at school should begin as early as possible (Walker *et al* 2010).
- Domestic violence should be included in the school-based preventative work (Ellis 2008).
- Effective preventative programmes on domestic violence need to be delivered both through whole-school and cross-curricular approaches (Ellis 2008; Hester and Westmarland 2005; Izzidien 2008).
- In group work, it is important to make sure that children from different backgrounds are not marginalised and any discriminatory behaviour is challenged (Izzidien 2008).

Children with experiences of counselling enjoy physical activities and games designed to help express feelings; and also appreciate learning practical skills such as relaxation exercises rather than talking to adults, which is less popular among many young children (Wade and Smart 2002)

Some of the benefits of school-based interventions are:

- Effective psychosocial interventions, for both violence-exposed children and their mothers, have shown significant improvements in children's behaviour problems and anxiety levels, and in mothers' general distress (Cohen *et al* 2006).
- Group work with children affected by domestic violence can produce positive changes, including less aggression, lowered anxiety and increased self-esteem, increased understanding on safety issues and better relationships between mothers and children (Humphreys and Houghton 2008).
- Domestic violence interventions can increase children's knowledge and understanding of the nature and extent of domestic violence; most children reported that lessons in school on domestic violence were positive and worthwhile (Ellis 2008).
- Group-based child-focused intervention programmes, combining supportive psycho-education with problem-solving training, social skills training and stress management training can be effective in the short term in reducing divorce-

related distress and in facilitating adjustment at home and school (O'Halloran and Carr 2000).

It is nevertheless important to note that there is a need for more systematic evaluation of all school-based interventions. Few evaluations employed control groups, there was little follow up and high drop-out rates.

Telephone helplines and emails

Telephone helplines such as ChildLine, NSPCC and Child Protection Helpline can be a valuable source of support because children can access helplines directly and they are guaranteed confidentiality. Some websites such as The Dawn Project¹³ offer support and advice via email but how well they are used is unknown (Hawthorne *et al* 2003).

Izzidien (2008) highlighted the importance and particularly the unique nature of the NSPCC Asian helpline where 'bilingual practitioners were able to provide both a language service and cultural knowledge to relate to the barriers South Asian people faced' (p 49).

Staff training and supervision has been found to be particularly important for helplines offering counselling but, in general, there has not been much evaluation of this type of provision (Humphreys and Houghton 2008).

Leaflets, websites, booklists and books, audio visual, CD-ROM and games

Information for children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict can also be provided through leaflets, websites, booklists and books, and audio-visual, CD-ROM and games (Hawthorne *et al* 2003). The content of this information tends to depend more on the aims of the organisations or companies concerned than on the specific needs of children. There has been very little evaluation either of the effectiveness of these products or of how widely they are used.

Hawthorne *et al* (2003) recommend that providers should bear in mind the accessibility, accuracy (of information) and appropriateness (for example, age, gender, cultural and linguistic diversity) of their products and put in place systems to monitor all three aspects.

Barriers to uptake of services

From the material reviewed (including Ehrenberg *et al* 2006; Mullender *et al* 2002; Houghton 2008; Wade and Smart, 2002), we identified the following barriers to children's uptake of services:

- fear of stigma and shame
- negative messages from peers

¹³ Information about this project can be found at www.dawnproject.org.uk

- being overwhelmed by negative feelings about the divorce
- denying or not recognising their need for help
- not wanting to face the reality of their situation
- lack of support and/or opposition from parents/family
- loyalty to the family/wanting to protect them
- not knowing what help is available and how to access it
- not having support services available, particularly in rural areas
- fear of talking to strangers or people they do not trust
- difficulty finding a language to use, especially about domestic violence
- fear of being taken into care as a result of disclosures
- fear of retaliation by perpetrators
- a sense that help is inadequate: for example, some children felt that practitioners, including teachers, did not know enough about domestic violence.

Izzidien (2008) described the following barriers to help-seeking among South Asian women and children experiencing domestic violence:

- lack of recognition of domestic abuse
- lack of English or fluency in English language
- lack of support from extended family
- experiences of discrimination (i.e. racism)
- immigration status which limits access to public funds or services
- cultural beliefs, e.g. the belief that problems in the family should remain in the family
- lack of services and signposts to services
- lack of outreach workers or people who could support to gain access to services
- lack of knowledge about help available.

Summary

In summary, the most effective form of help for children experiencing parental conflict and divorce, including domestic violence, involves working with the whole family as a team, with professionals from different disciplines communicating closely to address the needs of the whole child. Few interventions for children of divorced parents have been rigorously evaluated but there is evidence at least of immediate benefits for most participants. The research suggests the need for a variety of interventions in order to meet the needs of children in a wide range of different family circumstances. More professional training would be valuable if the needs of children affected by domestic violence are to be adequately met. Most children affected by domestic violence say their greatest needs are to be safe and to have someone to talk to. It is recommended that relationship education at school should start as early as possible and should include discussion of domestic violence. Care needs to be taken to ensure that interventions are accessible, appropriate and acceptable to children and their families from all ethnic backgrounds.

8. Conclusions and main messages

A lot of information about parents, carers, children and families in the UK exists in, for example, national surveys, birth cohort studies, opinion polls and attitude surveys. Records of births, marriages, deaths, and crime and health records provide information about population trends over time. Within these data sets, there is some information about differences between minority ethnic groups although definitional problems often complicate interpretation of this data.

Gaps in the evidence base

In spite of this wealth of information, there are distinct gaps in the evidence base with regard to information about the incidence of domestic violence among couples with children and about the incidence of divorce among couples with children. The data available in national records routinely fails to differentiate between couples with children and those without. Within the research literature, there are inconsistencies, too, that can make it difficult to compare between studies where researchers have used varying definitions of terms or where terms have not been defined clearly enough, for example, in the use of the term ‘conflict’ which can refer to many different sorts of actual behaviour.

Outcomes for children when parents separate or divorce

A key message that emerges from the literature on parental divorce is that outcomes for children of separated/divorced parents tend to be worse than for children whose parents stay together, in all spheres. They have more emotional difficulties, more health problems, get along worse socially, achieve less well at school, are more likely to be involved in crime, and engage in sexual relationships at a younger age. Alongside this message, though, researchers in this long-established field stress the importance of paying attention to what is going on in families before relationships break down. This is because it is often the case that poor relationships between parents and between parents and children are caused by multiple stressors, with negative consequences for children being traceable to influences that pre-date relationship breakdown. In other words, the differences found between children from intact and non-intact families do not stem from the family breakdown but from the nature of the family environment before the parents’ or carers’ relationship dissolved. Effect sizes for differences are weak to moderate, that is, they show that most children from non-intact families do as well as children from intact families but that a minority do not.

Most children, and their parents and carers, though they can experience considerable distress and though the stressfulness of events at the time leading up to relationship breakdown can give rise to psychological and physical symptoms, recover well from relationship breakdown. Resiliency is the norm and, for a substantial number of families, dissolution of the couple relationship represents the

less damaging outcome. Even so, for a minority, if there is no additional therapeutic input, negative effects can be long-lasting.

When couples seek help

Research shows that couples in the UK are generally reluctant to ask for professional help. Some perceive services as gender-biased and many find services inconvenient and expensive. As a result, couples tend to approach counselling services only when problems have become deeply entrenched. There are not enough evaluations of the effectiveness of UK interventions for children and carers affected by parental conflict and relationship breakdown, particularly where domestic violence is an issue. The evaluations that are available tend to be methodologically flawed and rarely include follow-up measures. There is, nevertheless, some indication that most kinds of intervention can be effective, at least in the short term, for example, in encouraging couples to resolve differences and to work together to meet the needs of children, and in helping parents to become more sensitive to their children during the transition period.

Messages for professionals

The biggest challenges for practitioners appear to be how to identify couples who are having difficulties early enough for interventions to be useful, how to create conditions that encourage couples in trouble to seek appropriate help and how to ensure that the right help is available. These are all enormous problems but there is some evidence that health professionals may be in a good position to implement early screening practices, particularly around the transition to parenthood period and that this is a time when couples may be less reluctant to seek help. Evidence that programmes designed to support parents in the transition to parenthood can be effective came, in the main, from studies conducted outside the UK but there was also some evidence from UK research of the effectiveness of these programmes, for parents of diverse backgrounds (Barlow *et al* 2004).

The review emphasises the importance of offering a range of services, using different formats, with multiple access points. It also highlighted the value of multi-agency, inter-disciplinary, holistic approaches to work with children exposed to parental conflict involving violence. These facilitate optimal safeguarding practices as well as affording good opportunities for parent and child input, and for professionals to work supportively together in looking at the needs of the whole family, as opposed to splitting and compartmentalising adult and child systems, or related aspects such as health and educational needs.

Data annexe

Key messages

- Much data is available on characteristics of family composition in Great Britain. However, data on links between family characteristics and outcomes is sparser. Data on mental health outcomes by family type is available at the national level, as is data on qualifications levels of seventeen-year-olds. Data on educational outcomes by family type for younger children is not available.
- The proportion of children living in couple families between 1972 and 2003 fell. Divorce rates in England and Wales have increased sevenfold in the last fifty years, but steadily fell between 2003 and 2008.
- National data gathered from 2001 and 2008 indicate that a larger proportion of children from Asian or Asian British and Chinese ethnic backgrounds were living in married couple families than children from other ethnic backgrounds. Larger proportions of black or black British children or those of mixed ethnicity were living in lone parent families than children from other ethnic backgrounds.
- From data available on rates of domestic violence, there appears to have been a decrease over last few years. However, no dataset provides information about how many of the people who have experienced domestic violence have dependent children.

Introduction and availability of data

The main focus of this priority is ‘improving children’s outcomes by supporting parental and couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence’. One of the four aims of this review is to answer the question ‘what proportion of parents and carers experience conflict and/or separation and what are their characteristics?’

This annexe presents discussion about publicly available data on:

- trends in divorce
- the characteristics of families who have experienced divorce, including whether they have dependent children
- the prevalence and onset of mental disorders amongst children and young people in different types of family.

The data annexe also provides:

- a summary of the search strategy for identifying data
- an overview of the nature and scope of the data found
- charts on the characteristics of family composition and prevalence of mental disorders amongst children and young people by family type.

Data search strategy

There are a number of archival databases in the UK, such as the National Digital Archive of Datasets (NDAD) and the UK data archive, some of which have services that facilitate searching or access to macro- and micro-datasets (including Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) International). Even so, searching for current and recently published data cannot yet be conducted in the same way as searching for published research findings. Access to newly published data is not supported by comprehensive searchable databases in the same way that literature searches are supported.

Data for this annexe was obtained by a combination of search methods including obtaining online access to known government publications (such as the Statistical First Releases from the Department for Education, DfE¹⁴); access to data published by the Office for National Statistics, the Department of Health and other government departments; data published by the National Health Service and other national, regional and local bodies; and online searches following leads emerging from these publications. It should be noted that links to statistical sources that were live at the time of searching may not remain live after publication.

Nature and scope of the data

There are a number of data sources that provide information about the proportion of divorces in Great Britain. Most of the data referred to in this annexe is from the Office for National Statistics' population and social trend data. Among these datasets, we found the following information that relates to family composition: data on family type, data on family type by ethnic breakdown, and data on divorce rates by age and gender. We found no data about the relationship between family type and socio-economic status.

There is data available that local authorities can use to measure their progress with regard to the two national indicators relating to the incidence of domestic violence: national indicator 32, 'Repeat incidents of domestic violence', and national indicator 34, 'Domestic violence – murder'. Of all crime victims, domestic violence victims most frequently experience repeated incidents ([DCLG 2007](#)). Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) have been introduced to enable joint working and safe information sharing between local authority services, health agencies and the police to help protect those who may be at risk of repeat harm and to create a risk management plan. Progress towards national indicator 32 is measured by a reduction in the number of repeat victimisation cases that are being managed by MARAC. In this annexe, we have drawn on national data from the Home Office (2008) to illustrate the proportion of adults who have been subject to repeat domestic violence. Local data measuring progress with regard to national indicator 34 is collected from police crime data.

¹⁴ Formerly the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

Also of interest to this review is the impact of parental divorce and/or of living in a lone parent family on the educational attainment of children and young people. The National Pupil Database contains several measures that indicate differences in attainment. These include pupils' eligibility for free school meals, numbers of pupils with special educational needs and numbers of ethnic minority pupils. Family type is not recorded in the National Pupil Database¹⁵ and it would be complex to record both because family types are not stable and because this is a sensitive area in which to collect data. Therefore, attainment by family type is not recorded in any national statistics or published by the DfE. Nevertheless, there is some secondary data about the relationship between family type and educational outcomes at age 17 in Great Britain, collected through the 2001 Census data and the General Register Office for Scotland (Smallwood and Wilson 2007). We present this later in this annexe.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) carried out surveys focusing on the health, development and emotional wellbeing of young people in Great Britain (also known as CPM: Children's Psychiatric Morbidity) between 2004 and 2007. We refer to findings from these surveys in our discussion of the prevalence and onset of mental disorders in children and young people.

¹⁵ The NPD is a 'data warehouse' which brings together pupil background characteristics along with value-added national performance data, pupil-level information from the Pupil Level Annual Schools Census (PLASC). It links pupil performance in Key Stage (KS) 1, 2 and 3 assessments to GCSE/GNVQ results, thereby providing the means to identify pupil performance at a given point in time and progress from one key stage to the next, taking important pupil characteristics into account.

Characteristics of family composition and children and young people’s outcome data

This section contains information about:

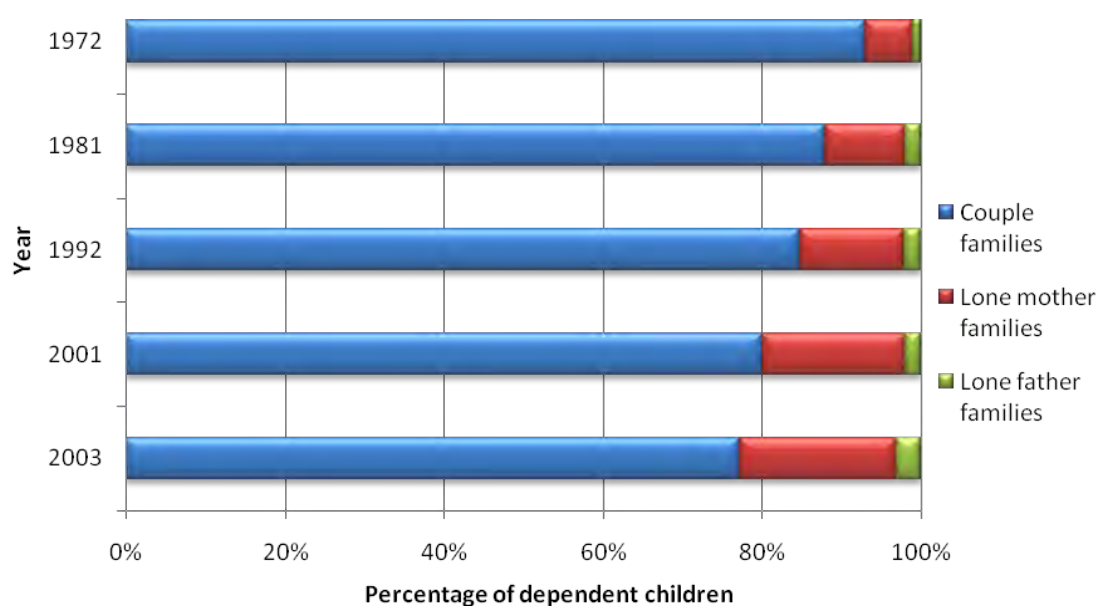
- characteristics of family type
- divorce trends of couples with dependent children
- domestic violence
- educational outcomes by family types
- mental health of children and young people by family type.

Characteristics of family composition

Characteristics of family type

As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of children living in different family types has changed over the last three decades. Since the early 1970s, the percentage of children living in families headed by a couple has decreased and the percentage living in lone parent families has increased. In Spring 2003, 78 per cent of children lived in a family headed by a couple compared with 92 per cent of children in 1972. In the same time period, the proportion of children living in lone mother families has doubled, while the proportion living in lone father families has tripled. The majority of lone parent households (nine out of 10) were headed by mothers in 2003. According to ONS (2006), the increase in lone mothers up to the mid-1980s was due to a rise in the proportion of divorced mothers, while more recent and faster rates of increase have been due to a growing proportion of births outside marriage.

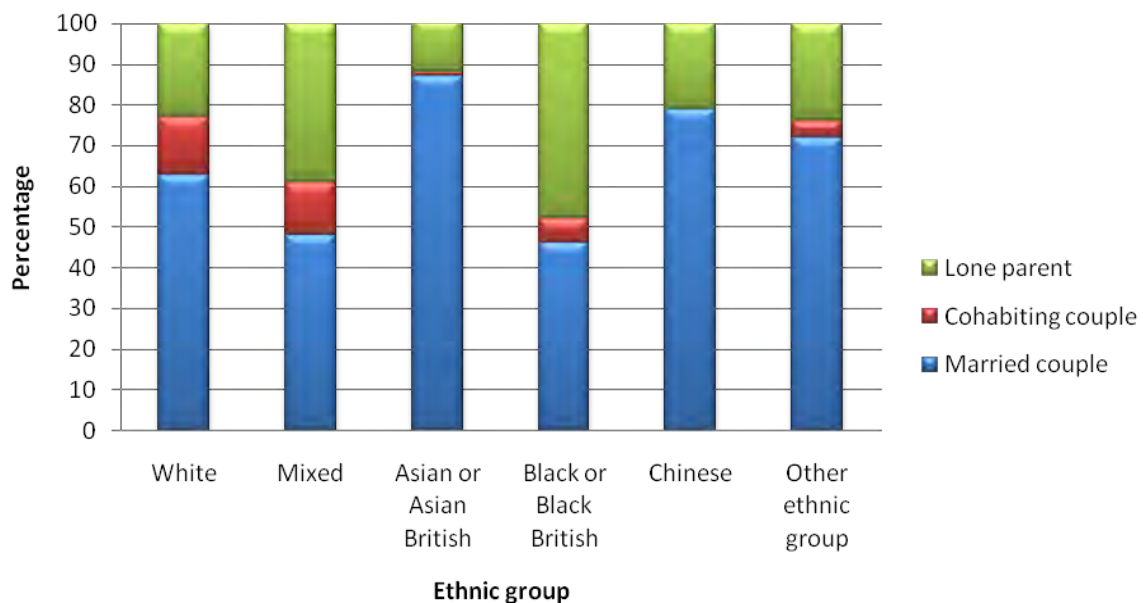
Figure 1: Percentage of dependent children living in different family types, 1972–2003



Source: Summerfield and Babb 2004

As Figure 2 shows, the pattern of family types with dependent children varies across different ethnic groups. In 2008, Asian or Asian British children were more likely than children from other ethnic groups to be living in families headed by a married couple (87 per cent lived in married couple families), while nearly half of black or black British children lived in a lone parent family (48 per cent).

Figure 2: Dependent children: by family type and ethnic group, 2008

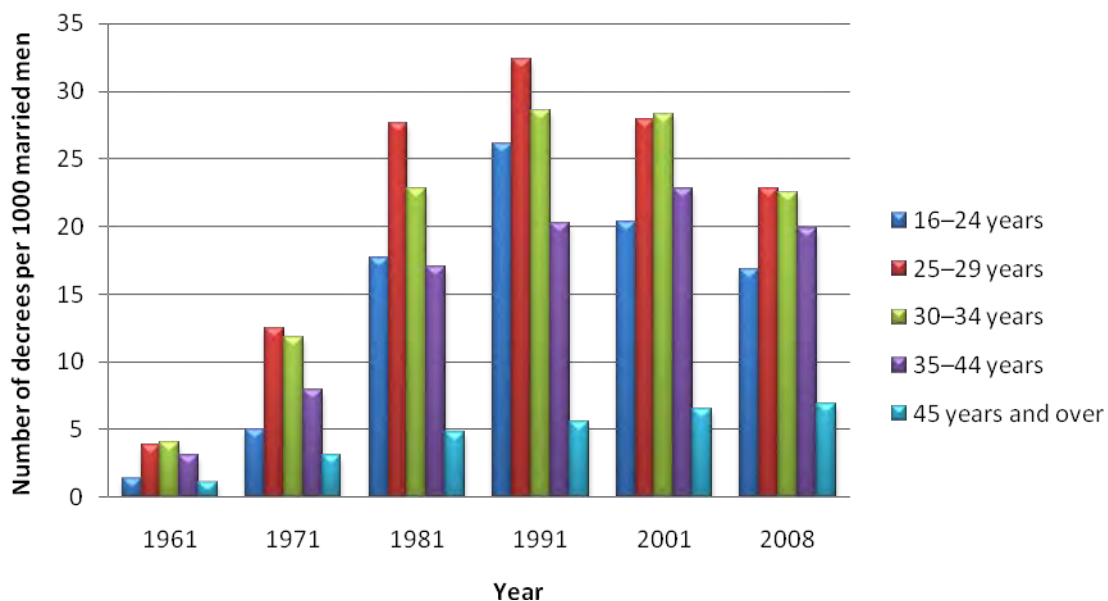


Source: Hughes 2009

Divorce rates

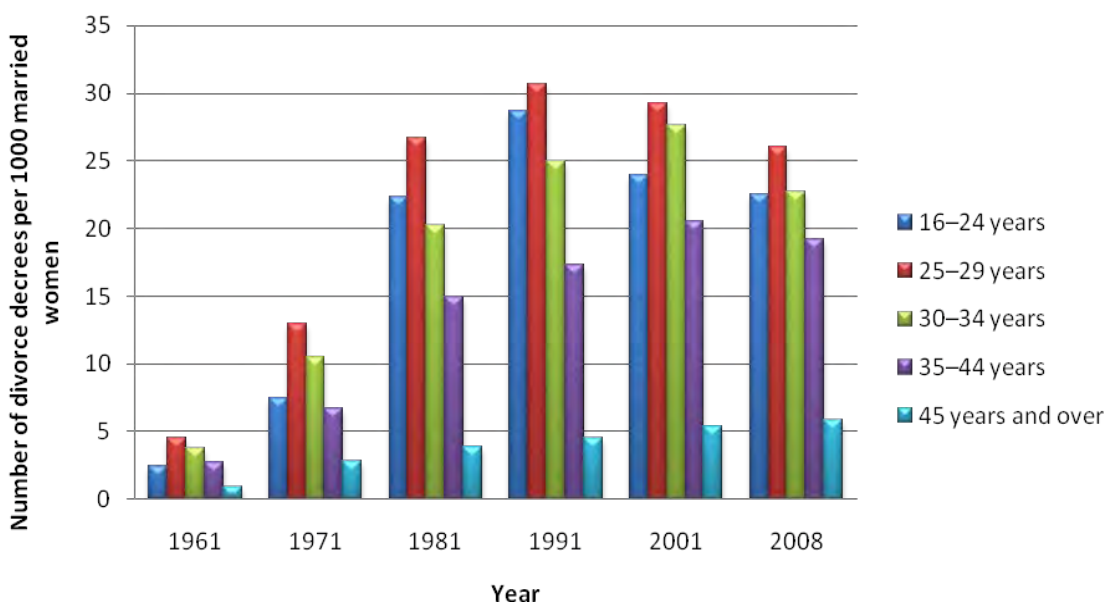
There were 121,779 divorces in 2008 compared with 128,232 in 2007. This is the fifth consecutive year that the number of divorces has fallen (from a peak of 153,176 in 2003) and is the lowest number since 1975, when there were 120,522 divorces (ONS 2010b). Nonetheless, divorce rates are now seven times higher than half a century ago. The following charts (Figures 3 and 4) show the numbers of divorce decrees per 1,000 of the population by age group. Male and female divorce decrees are presented in separate charts for clarity. Among 16 to 24-year-olds the male divorce rate in 2008 was 12 times that in 1961. For 16 to 24-year-old women it has increased by around nine times over the same time period. For the other age groups the divorce rate increased by around five to seven times. Over this period, for both males and females, divorce rates were highest amongst 25 to 34-year-olds and lowest in the 45 years and over age group.

Figure 3: Divorce decrees per 1,000 married men by age group, 1961–2008



Source: ONS 2010a

Figure 4: Divorce decrees per 1,000 married women by age group, 1961–2008

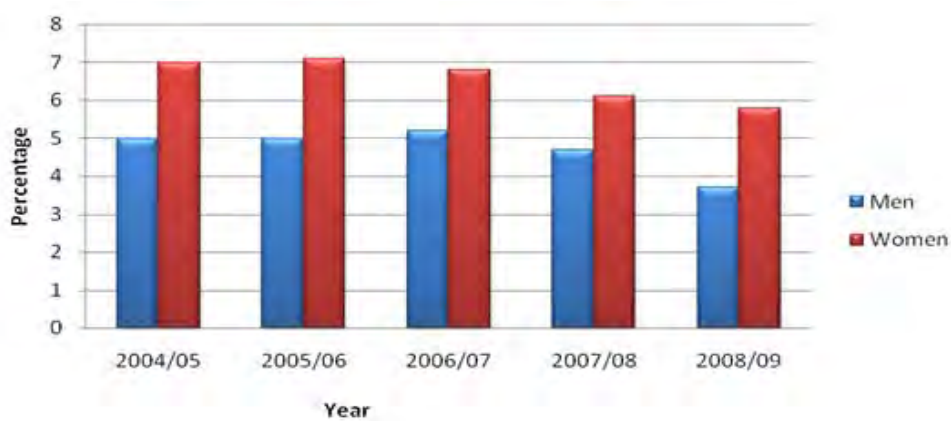


Source: ONS 2010a

Domestic violence

The proportion of men and women experiencing intimate violence in the last year has decreased slightly (see Figure 5). In 2008/09, 28 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men had experienced domestic abuse (any emotional, financial or physical abuse, sexual assault or stalking by a partner or family member) since the age of 16. Women were more likely than men to have reported intimate violence across all these types of abuse. No national data on domestic violence records whether domestic violence has occurred in families with dependent children.

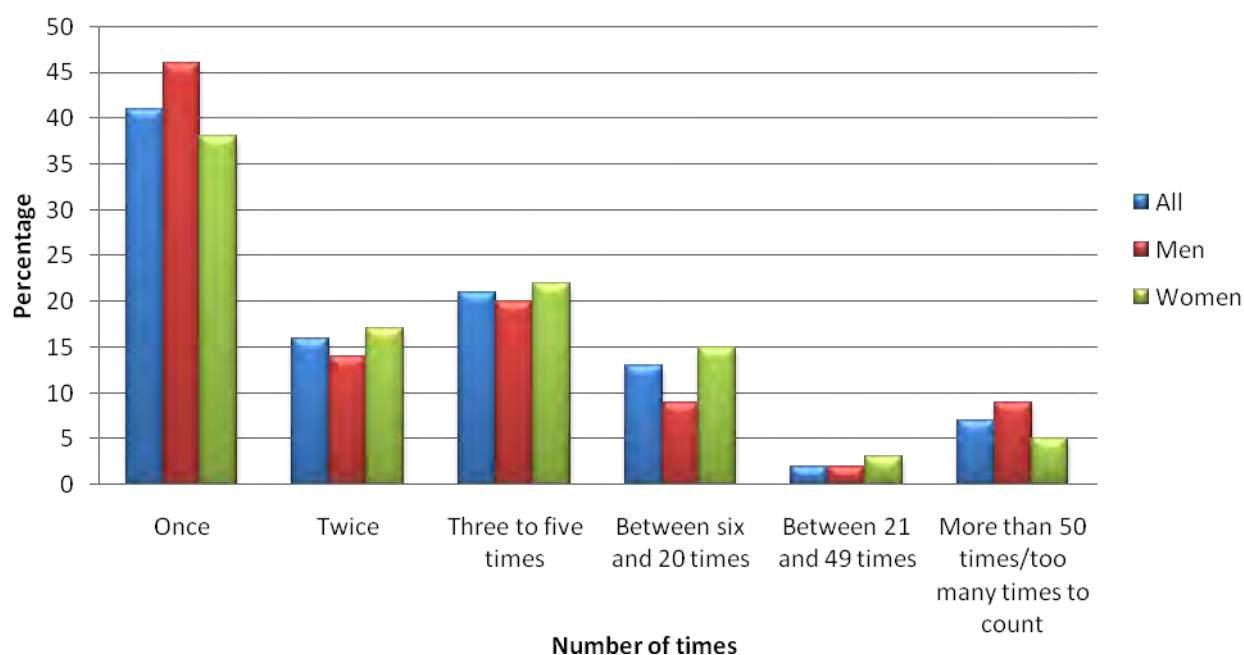
Figure 5: Prevalence of intimate violence in the last year among men and women aged 16 to 59 (2004/05 to 2008/09)



Source: Smith and Flatley 2010

As figure 6 shows, just over half of all adults had been subject to partner abuse, including physical force, threats, non-physical abuse, sexual abuse and stalking, on more than one occasion in the past year in 2004/05. Women were especially likely to be repeat victims, with around two thirds of victims experiencing more than one incident in the past year compared with just over half of men.

Figure 6: Proportion of adults who had been subject to partner abuse in 2004/05: by number of times and gender

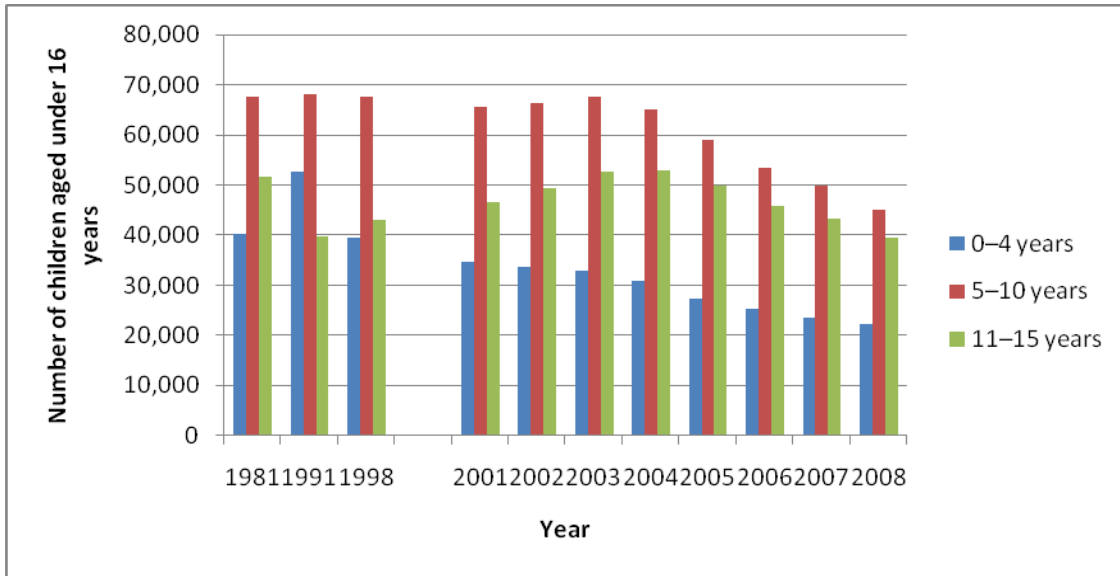


Source: Povey 2008

Children affected by divorce

Half of couples divorcing in 2008 had at least one child aged under 16. There were 106,763 children aged under 16 in families where the parents divorced in 2008, a decrease of 29 per cent from 1998 when there were 150,129 children. 21 per cent of the children in 2008 were under five and 63 per cent were under eleven. In 2008, there was an average of 1.76 children under 16 per divorcing couple (that had children aged under 16) (ONS 2010b). Figure 7 shows the number of children under the age of 16 years whose parents have divorced for 1981, 1991, 1998 and 2001 to 2008.

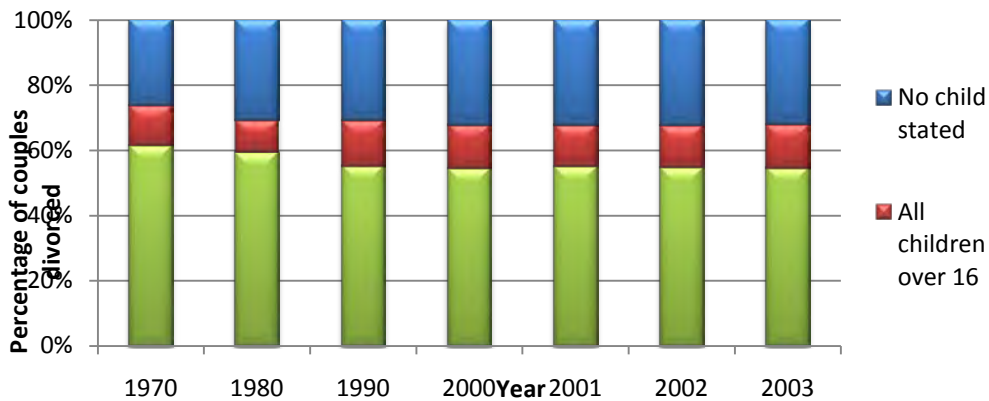
Figure 7: Numbers of children of divorced couples by age, 1981–2008



Source: ONS 2010b

Figure 8 shows that both the proportion of divorced couples with at least one child under the age of 16 years, and those with all children over the age of 16 years, have remained largely constant from 1990 to 2003.

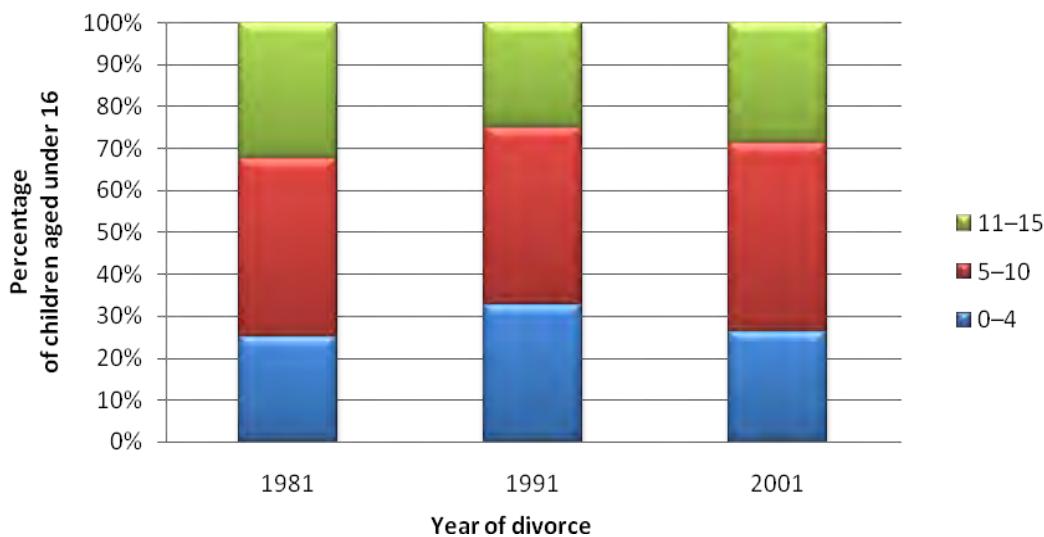
Figure 8: Percentage of divorced couples by children age, 1970-2003



Source: ONS 2006

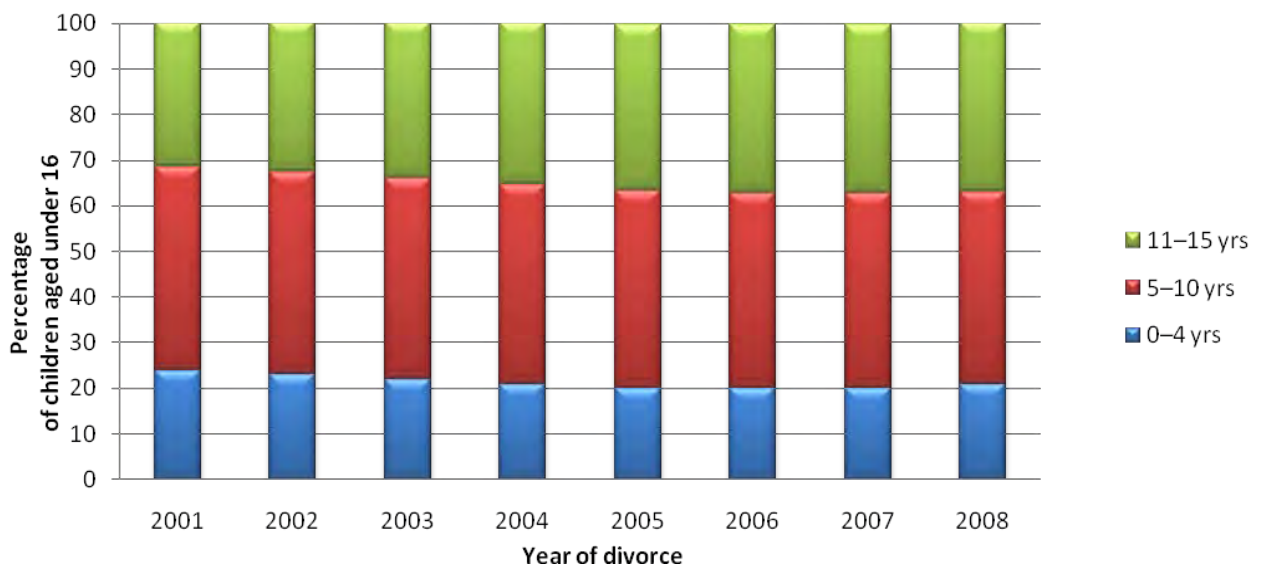
Figures 9 and 10 present trend data on the percentage of children of divorced couples by the child’s age group. Figure 9 covers years 1981, 1991 and 2001; Figure 10 focuses on 2001-2008. The data shows that from 1980 to 2008, five to 10 year olds made up the largest proportion of children under the age of 16 years whose parents divorced. Between 2001 and 2008 there was a five percentage point increase in the proportion of children and young people between 11to15 years whose parents got divorced and a decrease in the proportions of children between five and 10 years (two percentage points) and 0 to four years (three percentage points) whose parents got divorced.

Figure 9: Children of divorced couples by age, 1981, 1991, 2001



Source: ONS 2010b

Figure 10: Children of divorced couples by age, 2001–2008



Source: ONS 2010b

Children and young people’s outcome data

In this section of the data annexe, we address the research question: ‘What is the relationship between parental and carer conflict and/or separation on parenting and children’s emotional, behavioural, educational and health outcomes?’

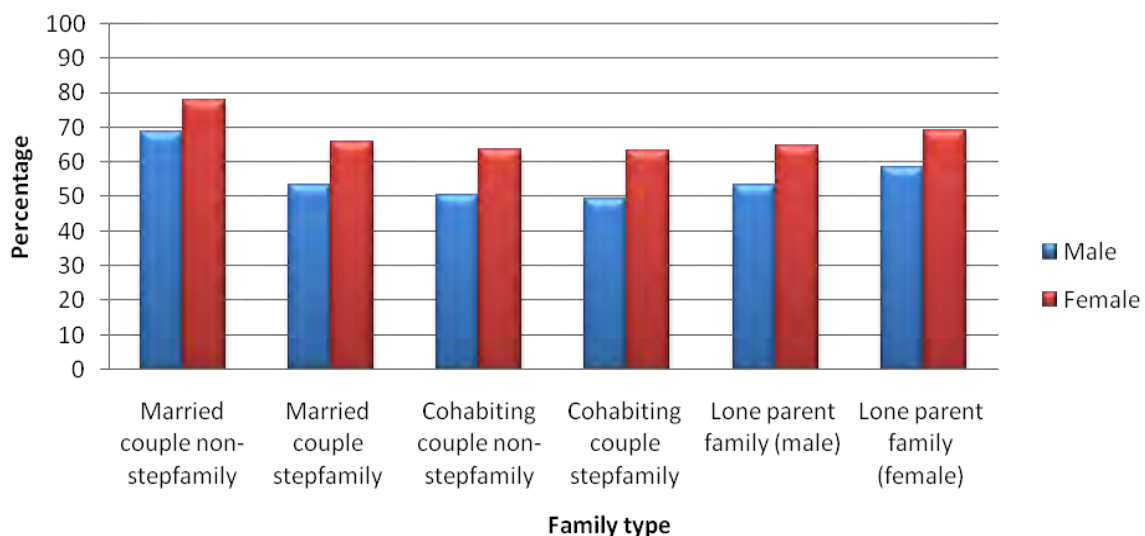
As mentioned in the ‘Nature and Scope of the data’ section, there is some secondary data available about family type and children’s educational outcomes as well as data on children’s mental health. Although these data provide some information about relationships between family composition and outcomes for children, no national dataset appears to contain records that can throw much light on the nature of the relationship between family composition and parental conflict or violence. The studies discussed in Chapter 5 of this review are therefore, to our knowledge, the only available source of information on this subject.

In the following section, we present and discuss data available on educational and mental health outcomes with a special focus on links between these outcomes and family composition.

Educational outcomes

The following chart (figure 11) is created using the data from Smallwood and Wilson’s (2007) study and shows the relationship between family type, qualifications and full-time education among 17-year-olds. It does not include the small proportion of 17-year-olds who had already set up their own homes (2.7 per cent) or who were not living in family units (7.5 per cent)

Figure 11: Percentage of 17-year-olds (who are not lone parents, and are living within families) in full-time education, 2001: by family type and gender

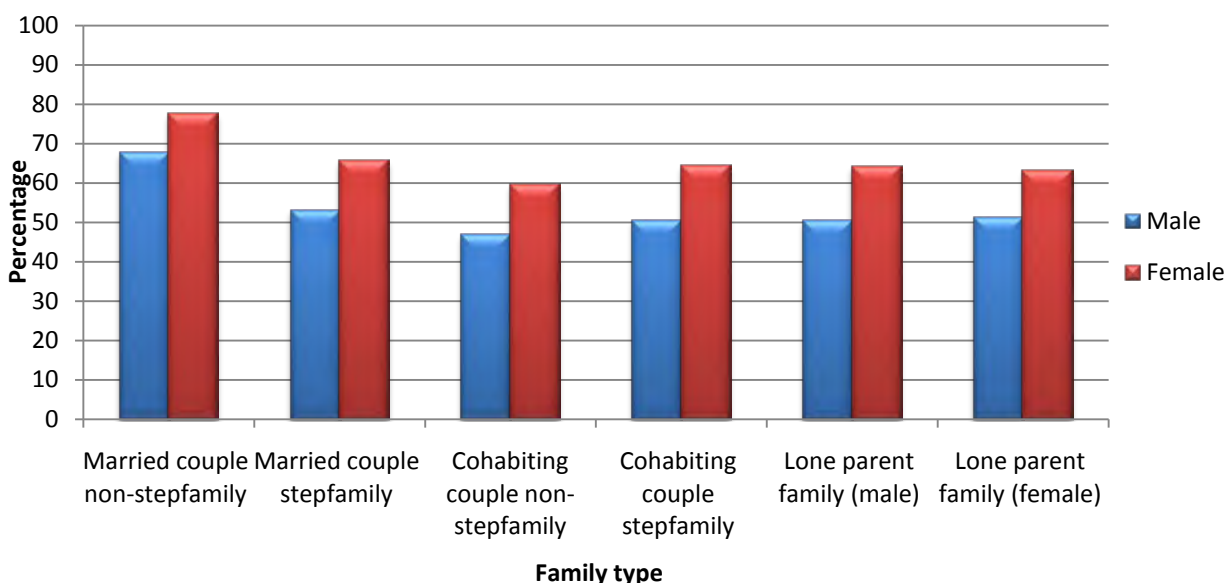


Source: Smallwood and Wilson 2007

This survey of 17-year-olds recorded two educational outcomes: full-time education and qualifications at Level 2¹⁶ or higher. More 17-year-olds living in married couple, non-stepfamily households were in full-time education than 17-year-olds living in other types of households. A higher proportion of 17-year-olds living in married couple non-stepfamily households also had qualifications at Level 2 or higher than 17-year-olds in any other type of household (see Figure 12). Girls in all types of household setting attained more highly than boys. Perhaps most interestingly, girls in female-headed lone parent households seemed to be faring as well as boys in married couple non-stepfamilies: similar proportions of these girls were in full-time education and almost as many had the same level of qualifications as boys in married couple non-stepfamilies (Figure 12).

Smallwood and Wilson (2007) note that these findings need to be treated with caution as, for methodological reasons, they cannot be said to indicate causal relationships between family type and educational outcomes. Rather, they represent only a ‘snapshot in time’. Further research would be needed to establish causal links and to find out whether patterns persist over time or with other samples of 17-year-olds.

Figure 12: Qualifications at Level 2 or higher for 17-year-olds 2001: by family type and gender



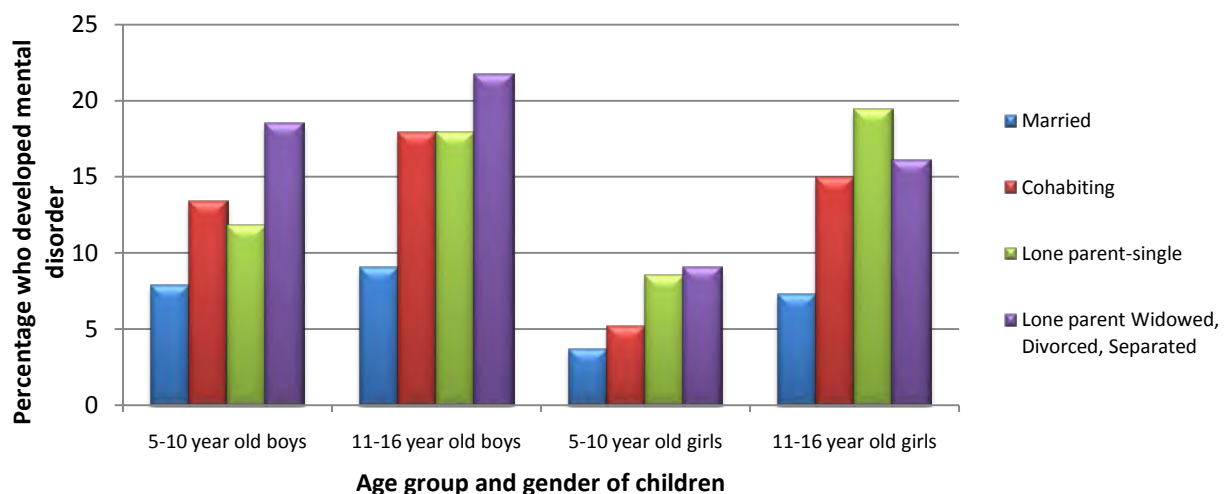
Source: Smallwood and Wilson 2007

¹⁶ Level 2: five or more ‘O’ levels; 5+ CSEs (grade 1); five or more GCSEs (grade A – C); 1+ ‘A’ levels/‘AS’ levels; NVQ level 2; Intermediate GNVQ; or equivalents. (Smallwood and Wilson 2007 p 97)

Mental health of children and young people by family types

The final section of this data annexe focuses on mental disorders among children and young people by family type. In 2004, children from lone parent and cohabiting couple families were about twice as likely as children of married couples to have a mental disorder (16 per cent and 13 per cent respectively compared with seven per cent). This pattern was evident for girls and boys in both age groups (five to 10-year-olds and 11 to 16-year-olds) and all types of mental disorders. However, no causal links have been established between the presence of psychological and behavioural problems and parents' relationship status. Modelling analysis by the Office for National Statistics shows that, when other variables, such as family income, parents' age, education and occupation, are taken into account, children of cohabiting couples are no more likely to have a mental disorder than those of married couples.

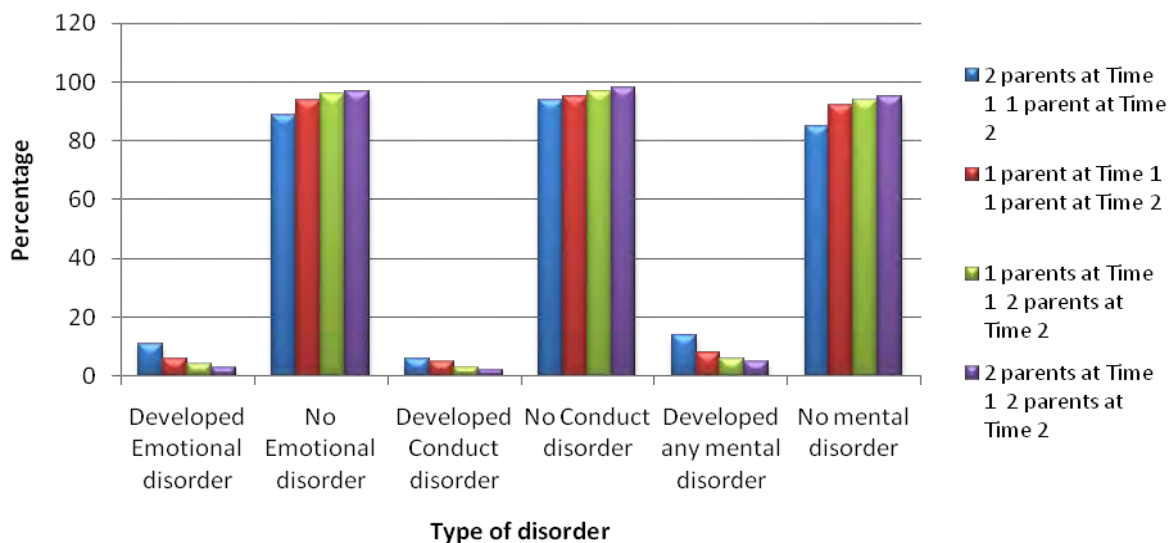
Figure 13: Prevalence of mental disorders among children and young people by family type, 2004



Source: Green et al 2005

With regard to the onset of mental disorders among children and young people, some data is available for the period 2004 to 2007 by family composition. The 2004 ONS survey of children's mental health detailed above (Green *et al* 2005), included interviews with 7,977 children and young people aged five to 16 years. (Children under five were excluded, primarily due to under-developed assessment instruments for this age group.) Three years later at follow-up (Parry-Langdon 2008), these children and young people were aged eight to 19 years. Onset of mental disorder is defined as 'a mental disorder which was not present at Time 1 (2004) but was present at Time 2 (2007)'.

Figure 14: Onset of mental disorders between Time 1 and Time 2 by change in family composition between Time 1 and Time 2



Source: Parry-Langdon (2008)

Of the original sample of 7,977 almost all, 7,275 children and young people were selected for a follow-up study. Figure 14 indicates the onset of emotional or conduct disorder as well as showing the proportion of children who do not have a disorder. More than nine out of 10 children do not develop any mental disorder. Amongst those children and young people who develop a mental disorder of any type, children whose family composition changes from two parents to one are the most at risk (14 per cent). This is also true for specific emotional or conduct disorders (11 per cent and six per cent respectively). Having reported this, the authors also note that external factors such as a stressful life event may have contributed to the distress the child was experiencing at the time of the study.

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Appendix 1: Research review methods

The review includes literature identified by a C4EO scoping study (Chang *et al* 2010) as being relevant to the review questions. The scoping study used systematic searching of key databases and other sources to identify literature, which was then screened and coded (see Appendices 2 to 4 for the parameters document, search strategy and coding frame). Apart from reference harvesting and TAG suggestions, no further searching for material other than that located by the scoping review was undertaken for this review.

The review team used a ‘best evidence’ approach to select literature of the greatest relevance and quality for the review. This entailed identifying:

1. The items of greatest relevance to the review questions
2. The items that came closest to providing an ideal design to answer the review questions
3. The quality of the research methods, execution and reporting.

The team reviewed all priority items and summarised their findings in relation to the review questions. The reviewer also assessed the quality of the evidence in each case. In judging the quality of studies, the team was guided by principles established to assess quantitative research (Farrington *et al* 2002) and qualitative studies (Spencer *et al* 2003).

The criteria used to determine whether or not items should be included in the review are outlined in detail in the grid below.

Table 1. Inclusion criteria

Criterion	Note if present
Written in English	
Carried out in the specified English-speaking countries (Canada, US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland)	
Contains empirical evidence, or information about empirical evidence in the case of reviews	
Contains information about the incidence of parental conflict/domestic violence or parental separation (n.b. must identifiably relate to parents as opposed to adults more generally)	
About outcomes relevant to the impact of parental conflict/domestic violence or parental separation for children and young people aged 0–19 (i.e. identifiably about parents as opposed to couples/adults more generally)	
About support needs of parents, carers and children in families affected by parental conflict/domestic violence or parental separation	
About interventions and/or support and their effectiveness for children and parents in families affected by parental conflict/domestic violence or parental separation	
About barriers to support-seeking and uptake by children and parents in families affected by parental conflict/domestic violence or parental separation	
Single case studies and small-sample qualitative studies will be included where findings appear to have potential relevance to wider populations of children and parents in families affected by parental conflict/domestic violence or parental separation	
Published after 1990 or after 2005 in the case of articles relevant to Review Question 1, which aimed to identify the most up-to-date information about prevalence in respect to parental conflict, separation and divorce, and about demographic characteristics of families in the UK	
Is the most recent and/or comprehensive account of a study or series of studies on divorce/separation by a prominent research group	

Appendix 2: Scoping study process

This appendix contains the overview of the search results, the search strategy and the information of items classified as relevant to the Review Questions.

At the first stage in the scoping review process, the Theme Lead identified areas of interest and the Head of Reviews devised review questions and search parameters in agreement with the Theme Lead (see Appendix 3 for the full set of parameters). The list of databases and sources to be searched was also agreed with the Head of Reviews. Sets of keywords were selected from the Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA) and were supplemented with free text phrases. The sets comprised a population group set covering a range of terms describing parents, carers, families and children; a set of terms relating to relationships qualities, difficulties and breakdown, and a set of terms relating to relationships support and resolution. The keywords were adhered to as far as possible for all bibliographic databases, with closest alternatives selected where necessary. Web-based databases were searched using a more limited number of terms enabling a good and relevant coverage due to the nature of the web-based databases.

A list of websites considered relevant to the search was compiled by the scoping team. Current research was specifically searched for in CERUKplus (education and children's services research) database, in the Research Register for Social Care, in Making Research Count and on websites of key organisations. Members of the Theme Advisory Group (TAG) were invited to suggest relevant documents, networks and websites.

In the next stage, searches were carried out across the specified databases. These were conducted by an information specialist in the scoping team. Initial selection took place on website and database searches before importing items into the Eppi-Reviewer unless searcher yielded more than 1500 items. Where more than 1500 items were identified on databases, all items from these databases were imported directly into the Eppi-Reviewer for later screening. Initial screening removed obviously irrelevant items and items that did not meet the search parameters. The records selected after the initial screening and from the databases that had more than 1500 items found were loaded into the EPPI-Reviewer database, duplicates were removed and missing abstracts sourced. The scoping team members used information from the abstract and/or the full document to assess the relevance of each piece of literature in addressing the key questions for the review. They also coded the characteristics of the text, such as the type of literature, country of origin and relevance to the review question. A 15 per cent sample was randomly selected and checked for accuracy by another member of the scoping team.

The numbers of items found by the initial search, and subsequently selected, can be found in the following table. The three columns represent:

- items found in the initial searches
- items selected for further consideration (those complying with the search parameters).
- items considered relevant to the study by a researcher who had read the abstract and/or accessed the full document.

Table 2. Overview of searches

Source	Items found on databases/portals ¹⁷	Items selected for consideration	Items identified as relevant to this study
Databases			
Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)	3163	3163	124
Australian Education Index (AEI)	450	214	5
British Education Index (BEI)	214	33	3
Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC)	501	305	16
PsycINFO	1851	1851	65
Internet databases/portals			
British Education Index Free Collection (BEIFC)	36	9	1
CERUKplus	0	0	0
Educational Evidence Portal (EEP)	5	0	0
Making Research Count	0	0	0
Research in Practice	5	5	5
Research Register for Social Care	2	2	1
Social Care Online	2370	2370	91
Organisations (including TAG recommended organisations)	n/a ¹⁸	113	23
The work of Sarah Galvani (TAG recommendation)	n/a ³	2	1

¹⁷ Initial selection took place on website and database searches before importing items into the Eppi-Reviewer unless searches yielded more than 1500 items. Where more than 1500 items were identified on databases, all items from these databases were imported directly into the Eppi-Reviewer for later screening.

¹⁸ n/a = Sources are browsed websites and not database/portals

Search strategy

The following section provides information on the keywords and search strategy for each database and web source searched as part of the scoping review.

A brief description of each of the databases searched, together with the keywords used, is outlined below. The search strategy for each database reflects the differences in database structure and vocabulary. Smaller sets of keywords were used in the more specialist databases and for those databases which provide non-UK coverage. The abbreviation ‘ft’ denotes that a free-text search term was used. Keywords were not automatically ‘exploded’ to search on all narrower terms in those databases offering this facility due to the very high volume of items found and time limitations. However, wherever possible and appropriate, narrower terms were included and have been listed in the search strategy.

All searches were limited to the years 1990 to 2009, in English language only.

Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)

(searched via CSA 12/12/2009)

ASSIA is an index of articles from over 600 international English language social science journals.

Parents, carers and children set

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| #1 absent fathers | #23 separated fathers |
| #2 adolescent fathers | #24 separated mothers |
| #3 adolescent mothers | #25 separated parents |
| #4 adolescent parents | #26 single fathers |
| #5 battered women | #27 single mothers |
| #6 broken families | #28 single parent families |
| #7 children | #29 single parents |
| #8 couples (ft) | #30 stepfamilies |
| #9 custodial parents | #31 stepfathers |
| #10 divorced fathers | #32 stepmothers |
| #11 divorced mothers | #33 stepparents |
| #12 divorced parents | #34 unmarried fathers |
| #13 expectant fathers | #35 young fathers |
| #14 fathers | #36 young mothers |
| #15 grandparents | #37 #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6 or |
| #16 kinship foster carer | #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or |
| #17 mothers | #12 or #13 or #14 or #15 or #16 or |
| #18 noncustodial fathers | #17 or #18 or #19 or #20 or #21 or |
| #19 noncustodial mothers | #22 or #23 or #24 or #25 or #26 or |
| #20 noncustodial parents | #27 or #28 or #29 or #30 or #31 or |
| #21 parents | #32 or #33 or #34 or #35 or #36 |
| #22 reconstituted families (ft) | |

Relationships qualities, difficulties and breakdown set

#38	abusive relationships	#50	marital stress
#39	divorce	#51	parental conflict
#40	domestic violence	#52	parental divorce
#41	family breakdown	#53	parental separation (ft)
#42	forced marriage (ft)	#54	relationship breakdown (ft)
#43	marital breakdown	#55	transition to parenthood (ft)
#44	marital conflict	#56	#38 or #39 or #40 or #41 or #42 or #43 or #44 or #45 or #46 or #47 or #48 or #49 or #50 or #51 or #52 or #53 or #54 or #55
#45	marital dysfunction (ft)	#57	#37 and #56
#46	marital problems		
#47	marital quality		
#48	marital satisfaction		
#49	marital stability		

Relationships support and resolution set

#58	advocacy groups	#78	premarital counselling
#59	advocacy services	#79	psychoanalytic marital therapy
#60	behaviour marital therapy	#80	relationship counselling (ft)
#61	child contact (ft)	#81	relationship education (ft)
#62	conciliation	#82	relationship support (ft)
#63	conflict resolution	#83	shared parenting (ft)
#64	coparenting	#84	support groups
#65	couple therapy	#85	systemic couple therapy
#66	custody after divorce	#86	systemic marital therapy
#67	divorce education (ft)	#87	#58 or #59 or #60 or #61 or #62 or #63 or #64 or #65 or #66 or #67 or #68 or #69 or #70 or #71 or #72 or #73 or #74 or #75 or #76 or #77 or #78 or #79 or #80 or #81 or #82 or #83 or #84 or #85 or #86
#68	family support	#88	#87 and (#37 or #56)
#69	family therapy (ft)	#89	#57 or #88
#70	imago relationship therapy		
#71	joint custody		
#72	marital therapy		
#73	marriage enrichment (ft)		
#74	marriage guidance		
#75	mediation		
#76	parenting after separation (ft)		
#77	parenting programmes (ft)		

Australian Education Index (AEI)

(searched via Dialog Datastar 19/12/2009)

AEI is Australia's largest source of education information covering reports, books, journal articles, online resources, conference papers and book chapters.

Parents, carers and children set

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------|-----|---|
| #1 | adolescent fathers | #13 | one parent family |
| #2 | adolescent mothers | #14 | parents |
| #3 | battered women | #15 | reconstituted family (ft) |
| #4 | child caregivers | #16 | single fathers |
| #5 | children | #17 | single mothers |
| #6 | couples (ft) | #18 | single parents |
| #7 | early parenthood | #19 | stepfamily |
| #8 | fatherless family | #20 | #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6
or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or
#12 or #13 or #14 or #15 or #16
or #17 or #18 or #19 |
| #9 | fathers | | |
| #10 | grandparents | | |
| #11 | motherless family | | |
| #12 | mothers | | |

Relationships qualities, difficulties and breakdown set

- | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------|-----|---|
| #21 | divorce | #29 | parental conflict (ft) |
| #22 | family problems | #30 | parental separation (ft) |
| #23 | family violence | #31 | relationship breakdown (ft) |
| #24 | forced marriage (ft) | #32 | #21 or #22 or #23 or #24 or #25
or #26 or #27 or #28 or #29 or
#30 or #31 |
| #25 | marital conflict (ft) | | |
| #26 | marital instability | | |
| #27 | marital quality (ft) | #33 | #20 and #32 |
| #28 | marital satisfaction | | |

Relationships support and resolution set

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------|-----|---|
| #34 | advocacy | #45 | parent education |
| #35 | child contact (ft) | #46 | parenting after separation (ft) |
| #36 | child custody | #47 | relationship support (ft) |
| #37 | conciliation (ft) | #48 | shared parenting (ft) |
| #38 | conflict resolution | #49 | social support groups |
| #39 | coparenting (ft) | #50 | #34 or #35 or #36 or #37 or #38
or #39 or #40 or #41 or #42
or #43 or #44 or #45 or #46 or
#47 or #48 or #49 |
| #40 | divorce education (ft) | | |
| #41 | family counselling | #51 | #50 and (#20 or #32) |
| #42 | family support (ft) | #52 | #33 or #51 |
| #43 | marriage counselling | | |
| #44 | marriage enrichment (ft) | | |

British Education Index (BEI)

(searched via Dialog Datastar 19/12/2009)

BEI provides information on research, policy and practice in education and training in the UK. Sources include over 300 journals, mostly published in the UK, plus other material including reports, series and conference papers.

Parents, carers and children set

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------|-----|---|
| #1 | battered women | #10 | mothers |
| #2 | child caregivers | #11 | one parent family |
| #3 | children | #12 | parents |
| #4 | couples (ft) | #13 | reconstituted family (ft) |
| #5 | early parenthood | #14 | stepfamily |
| #6 | fatherless family | #15 | #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6
or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or
#12 or #13 or #14 |
| #7 | fathers | | |
| #8 | grandparents | | |
| #9 | motherless family | | |

Relationships qualities, difficulties and breakdown set

- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|-----|---|
| #16 | divorce | #24 | parental conflict (ft) |
| #17 | family problems | #25 | parental separation (ft) |
| #18 | family violence | #26 | relationship breakdown (ft) |
| #19 | forced marriage (ft) | #27 | #16 or #17 or #18 or #19 or #20
or #21 or #22 or #23 or #24 or
#25 or #26 |
| #20 | marital conflict (ft) | #28 | #15 and 27 |
| #21 | marital instability | | |
| #22 | marital quality (ft) | | |
| #23 | marital satisfaction (ft) | | |

Relationships support and resolution set

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------|-----|--|
| #29 | advocacy | #40 | parent education |
| #30 | child contact (ft) | #41 | parenting after separation (ft) |
| #31 | child custody | #42 | relationship support (ft) |
| #32 | conciliation | #43 | social support groups |
| #33 | conflict resolution | #44 | #29 or #30 or #31 or #32 or #33
or #34 or #35 or #36 or #37 or
#38 or #39 or #40 or #41 or #42
or #43 |
| #34 | coparenting (ft) | #45 | #44 and (#15 or #27) |
| #35 | divorce education (ft) | #46 | #28 or #45 |
| #36 | family counselling | | |
| #37 | family support (ft) | | |
| #38 | marriage counselling | | |
| #39 | marriage enrichment (ft) | | |

British Education Index Free Collection (BEIFC)

(searched 30/12/2009)

The free collections search interface of the British Education Index (BEI) (formerly the British Education Internet Resource Catalogue) includes access to a range of freely available internet resources as well as records for the most recently indexed journal articles not yet included in the full BEI subscription database.

Parents, carers and children set

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------|-----|--|
| #1 | battered women | #10 | mothers |
| #2 | child caregivers | #11 | one parent family |
| #3 | children | #12 | parents |
| #4 | couples (ft) | #13 | reconstituted family (ft) |
| #5 | early parenthood | #14 | stepfamily |
| #6 | fatherless family | #15 | unmarried mothers |
| #7 | fathers | #16 | #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6
or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or
#12 or #13 or #14 or #15 |
| #8 | grandparents | | |
| #9 | motherless family | | |

Relationships qualities, difficulties and breakdown set

- | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------|-----|--|
| #17 | divorce | #25 | parental conflict (ft) |
| #18 | family problems | #26 | parental separation (ft) |
| #19 | family violence | #27 | relationship breakdown (ft) |
| #20 | forced marriage (ft) | #28 | #17 or #18 or #19 or #20 or #21
#22 or #23 or #24 or #25 or #26 or
#27 |
| #21 | marital conflict (ft) | #29 | #16 and #28 |
| #22 | marital instability | | |
| #23 | marital quality (ft) | | |
| #24 | marital satisfaction (ft) | | |

Relationships support and resolution set

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------|-----|--|
| #30 | advocacy | #41 | parent education |
| #31 | child contact (ft) | #42 | parenting after separation (ft) |
| #32 | child custody | #43 | relationship support (ft) |
| #33 | conciliation | #44 | social support groups |
| #34 | conflict resolution | #45 | #30 or #31 or #32 or #33
or #34 or #35 or #36 or #37 or
#38 or #39 or #40 or #41 or #42
or #43 or #44 |
| #35 | coparenting (ft) | #46 | #45 and (#16 or #28) |
| #36 | divorce education (ft) | #47 | #29 or #46 |
| #37 | family counselling | | |
| #38 | family support (ft) | | |
| #39 | marriage counselling | | |
| #40 | marriage enrichment (ft) | | |

CERUK Plus

(searched 30/12/2009)

The CERUK Plus database provides access to information about current and recently completed research, PhD level work and practitioner research in the field of education and children's services.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| #1 couple relationships (ft) | #7 divorce (ft) |
| #2 domestic violence | #8 forced marriage (ft) |
| #4 marital conflict (ft) | #9 relationship support (ft) |
| #5 parental conflict (ft) | #10 relationship counselling (ft) |
| #6 relationship breakdown (ft) | #11 #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6
or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 |

Educational Evidence Portal (EEP)

(searched 30/12/2009)

EEP provides access to educational evidence from a range of reputable UK sources using a single search.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| #1 couple relationships (ft) | #7 divorce |
| #2 family violence | #8 forced marriage (ft) |
| #4 marital conflict (ft) | #9 relationship support (ft) |
| #5 parental conflict (ft) | #10 relationship counselling (ft) |
| #6 relationship breakdown (ft) | #11 #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6
or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 |

Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC)

(searched via Dialog Datastar 23/12/2009)

ERIC is sponsored by the United States Department of Education and is the largest education database in the world. Coverage includes research documents, journal articles, technical reports, program descriptions and evaluations and curricula material.

Parents, carers and children set

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------|-----|---|
| #1 | battered women | #10 | mothers |
| #2 | child caregivers | #11 | one parent family |
| #3 | children | #12 | parents |
| #4 | couples (ft) | #13 | reconstituted family (ft) |
| #5 | early parenthood | #14 | stepfamily |
| #6 | fatherless family | #15 | #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6
or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or
#12 or #13 or #14 |
| #7 | fathers | | |
| #8 | grandparents | | |
| #9 | motherless family | | |

Relationships qualities, difficulties and breakdown set

- | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------|-----|---|
| #16 | divorce | #24 | parental conflict (ft) |
| #17 | family problems | #25 | parental separation (ft) |
| #18 | family violence | #26 | relationship breakdown (ft) |
| #19 | forced marriage (ft) | #27 | #16 or #17 or #18 or #19 or #20
or #21 or #22 or #23 or #24 or
#25 or #26 |
| #20 | marital conflict (ft) | #28 | #15 and 27 |
| #21 | marital instability | | |
| #22 | marital quality (ft) | | |
| #23 | marital satisfaction | | |

Relationships support and resolution set

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------|-----|---|
| #29 | advocacy | #42 | mediation |
| #30 | child contact (ft) | #43 | parenting after separation (ft) |
| #31 | child custody | #44 | premarital counselling (ft) |
| #32 | conflict resolution | #45 | relationship education (ft) |
| #33 | coparenting (ft) | #46 | relationship support (ft) |
| #34 | couples therapy (ft) | #47 | shared parenting (ft) |
| #35 | divorce education (ft) | #48 | support groups |
| #36 | family life education | #49 | #29 or #30 or #31 or #32 or #33
or #34 or #35 or #36 or #37 or #38
or #39 or #40 or #41 or #42 or #43
or #44 or #45 or #46 or #47 or #48 |
| #37 | family support (ft) | #50 | #49 and (#15 or #27) |
| #38 | family therapy (ft) | #51 | #28 or #50 |
| #39 | joint custody | | |
| #40 | marriage counseling | | |
| #41 | marriage enrichment (ft) | | |

PsycINFO

(searched via Ovid SP 23/12/2009)

PsycINFO contains references to the psychological literature including articles from over 1,300 journals in psychology and related fields, chapters and books, dissertations and technical reports.

Parents, carers and children set

#1	adolescent fathers	#13	parents
#2	adolescent mothers	#14	reconstituted family(ft)
#3	battered females	#15	single fathers
#4	caregivers	#16	single mothers
#5	children (ft)	#17	single parents
#6	couples (ft)	#18	stepfamily
#7	expectant fathers	#19	stepparents
#8	expectant mothers	#20	unwed mothers
#9	expectant parents	#21	#1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6
#10	fathers		or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or
#11	grandparents		#12 or #13 or #14 or #15 or #16
#12	mothers		or #17 or #18 or #19 or #20

Relationships qualities, difficulties and breakdown set

#22	divorce	#31	partner abuse
#23	domestic violence	#32	relationship quality
#24	forced marriage (ft)	#33	relationship satisfaction
#25	intimate partner violence	#34	relationship termination
#26	marital conflict	#35	transition to parenthood (ft)
#27	marital satisfaction	#36	#22 or #23 or #24 or #25 or #26
#28	marital separation		or #27 or #28 or #29 or #30 or #31
#29	parental conflict (ft)		or #32 or #33 or #34 or #35
#30	parental separation (ft)	#37	#21 and #36

Relationships support and resolution set

#38	advocacy	#51	mediation
#39	child contact (ft)	#52	parenting after separation (ft)
#40	child custody	#53	premarital counseling
#41	conflict resolution	#54	relationship education (ft)
#42	coparenting (ft)	#55	relationship support (ft)
#43	couples therapy	#56	shared parenting (ft)
#44	divorce education (ft)	#57	support groups
#45	family life education	#58	#38 or #39 or #40 or #41 or #42
#46	family support (ft)		or #43 or #44 or #45 or #46 or #47
#47	family therapy		or #48 or #49 or #50 or #51 or #52
#48	joint custody		or #53 or #54 or #55 or #56 or #57
#49	marriage counseling	#59	#58 and (#21 or #36)
#50	marriage enrichment (ft)	#60	#37 or #59

Making Research Count

(browsed 11/12/2009)

Making Research Count is a collaborative national research dissemination network based regionally in the social work departments of nine UK universities. *Research news*, a newsletter which highlights recent or current research undertaken within the Making Research Count network, was browsed.

Research in Practice

(browsed 11/12/2009)

Research in Practice is the largest children and families research implementation project in England and Wales. It is a department of the Dartington Hall Trust and is run in collaboration with the Association of Directors of Children's Services, the University of Sheffield and a network of over 100 participating agencies in the UK. The 'evidencebank' and 'our publications' sections were browsed.

Research Register for Social Care

(searched 30/12/2009)

The Research Register for Social Care provides access to information about ongoing and completed social care research that has been subject to independent ethical and scientific review.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| #1 couple relationships (ft) | #7 forced marriage (ft) |
| #2 domestic violence | #8 relationship support (ft) |
| #3 marital conflict (ft) | #9 relationship counselling (ft) |
| #4 parental conflict (ft) | #10 #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6 |
| #5 relationship breakdown (ft) | or #7 or #8 or #9 |
| #6 divorce (ft) | |

NB Student research excluded

Social Care Online

(searched 30/12/2009)

Social Care Online is the Social Care Institute for Excellence's database covering an extensive range of information and research on all aspects of social care. Content is drawn from a range of sources including journal articles, websites, research reviews, legislation and government documents and service user knowledge.

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| #1 marriage breakdown | #4 domestic violence |
| #2 divorce | #5 #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 |
| #3 forced marriage | |

Organisations

A list of key organisations was recommended by the Theme Advisory Group and then supplemented with others considered relevant by the scoping team. The following websites were browsed for additional sources not already found in the database searches. This entailed browsing through the publications and/or research and policy sections.

Table 3 Web searches of key organisations

Organisation	URL	Records initially selected
British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect	www.baspcan.org.uk	0
Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion	sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case	4
Centre for Research on Families and Relationships	www.crfrr.ac.uk	10
Centre for Social Justice	www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk	5
Demos	www.demos.co.uk	1
Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)	www.dcsf.gov.uk	5
Department of Constitutional Affairs (now Ministry of Justice)	www.dca.gov.uk	4
Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)	www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRC/CIInfoCentre/research	1
Family and Parenting Institute	www.familyandparenting.org	2
Fatherhood Institute	www.fatherhoodinstitute.org	6
Home Office	www.homeoffice.gov.uk/science-research	4
Institute for Social and Economic Research	www.iser.essex.ac.uk	6
International Commission on Family and Couple Relationships	www.iccfr.org	4
Joseph Rowntree Foundation	www.jrf.org.uk	10
Ministry of Justice (previously Department of Constitutional Affairs)	www.justice.gov.uk	1
National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)	www.natcen.ac.uk	2
Gingerbread/One Parent Families	www.gingerbread.org.uk	5
One Plus One	www.oneplusone.org.uk	31
Relate	www.relate.org.uk	0
Relationships Foundation	www.relationshipsfoundation.org	3
Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships	www.tccr.org.uk	9

Items classified as relevant to the Review Questions

A total of **335 items** were assessed as relevant to the review questions. Table 4 shows the number of items judged to be relevant to the four review questions (note that these are not mutually exclusive).

Table 4 Review question relevance

Relevance to the review questions	Number of items
Review Question 1	15
Review Question 2	133
Review Question 3	97
Review Question 4	125

The smaller number of items relevant to Question 1 was anticipated, because of the later exclusion date set for items relevant to this question and because we had expected that the chief source of information relevant to this question might be databases and sources independently scrutinised by the NFER team.

Table 5 shows the types of literature and the number of sources classified within each type. The majority of sources were based on **empirical research** (188), although a significant number of sources were literature reviews or evidence syntheses (100).

Table 5 Type of literature for relevant sources

Type of literature	Number of items
Research/data	188
Reviews/syntheses	100
Opinion/discussion pieces	18
Practice descriptions	9
Policy	2
Theory	1
Other	7
Inadequate information	24

Among items coded as research/data, 91 abstracts provided inadequate details of the research design used. Among the remaining abstracts, it seemed that 57 had involved quantitative studies through non-experimental designs, 6 described experimental designs,

24 were mixed methods, in 12, performance or attitudes had been assessed using non-experimental (e.g. post-test designs); 18 were qualitative studies.

Table 6 shows that there was inadequate information in the majority of abstracts to determine where studies had been conducted. Among those where this information was provided, the majority had been carried out in the USA (112).

Table 6 Country/area involved

Country of origin	Number of items
USA	112
UK – England	49
UK – not England	16
Australia	12
Europe (additional to UK)	5
Canada	5
Other (non-European)	2
New Zealand	1
Inadequate information	170

Appendix 3: Parameters document

1. C4EO Theme: Families, Parents and Carers

2. Priority 2:

Improving children’s outcomes by supporting parental and carer couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence.

3. Context for this priority

Three million children in the UK will see their parents separate during their childhood. The negative impacts of parental separation on children’s emotional, behavioural, educational, health and financial outcomes are well documented. In addition, the quality of life of thousands of children whose parents or carers do remain in a relationship can be adversely affected by conflict and other relationship difficulties. At least 750,000 children a year witness domestic violence (DH 2002) and this has been linked with an increased risk of behavioural problems and emotional trauma, and mental health difficulties in adult life.

In the Children’s Plan (DCSF 2007) the government pledged to do more to support those affected by family breakdown and support the couple relationship. Last year the first ‘Relationship Summit’ was held with increased funding for family support initiatives announced. Local authorities, primary care trusts and voluntary sector organisations are expected to work in partnership to address the needs of parents with conflicted and disrupted relationships through services such as relationship counselling and family mediation. However, research suggests that while there is a high demand for services, provision is very variable across local authorities in the UK.

The **key ECM outcomes for this priority** are that:

- Children should be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve and make a positive contribution
- Parents and carers should be supported so that they and their children can achieve economic wellbeing

4. Research Review Questions to be addressed in this review (no more than five; preferably fewer)

[The research review will provide numerical evidence on the numbers, characteristics and educational and other ECM outcomes of children with additional needs (within the C4EO definition – see Section 6 below), relative to the rest of the school population and map gaps in the data].

1. **What proportion of parents and carers experience conflict and/or separation and what are their characteristics? Please include consideration of household composition and characteristics i.e. gender, age, ethnicity, social/economic class.**
2. **What is the relationship between parental and carer conflict and/or separation on parenting and children’s emotional, behavioural, educational and health outcomes?**
4. **What are: a) the support needs of mothers, fathers and carers affected by separation, divorce or conflict; b) the nature and effectiveness of support available and; c) the barriers to uptake?**
5. **What are: a) the support needs of children affected by parental separation, divorce or conflict; b) the nature and effectiveness of interventions available and; c) the barriers to uptake?**

5. Which cross-cutting issues should be included?

- Child poverty
- Workforce development
- Equality and diversity.

6. Definitions for any terms used in the Review Questions

The term '**conflict**' should include interparental arguments/discord, domestic violence and abuse.

The review will look at potential issues of heightened risk in relationships such as loss of employment, financial/work stress, parental physical or mental illness or disability, drug/alcohol abuse, accidents, unwanted pregnancy, the arrival of a first baby, caring for a sick or disabled child, losing a child.

7. What will be the likely geographical scope of the searches?

Work conducted in or including the following countries:
UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia.

8. Age range for CYP:

0-19

9. Literature search dates

Start year

1990

10. Suggestions for key words to be used for searching the literature.

Marital conflict, parental conflict, relationship breakdown, separation, domestic violence, relationship support and counselling, conflict resolution, family support, mediation, conciliation, pre-marital preventive programmes, couples therapy, marriage enrichment programmes, post-relationship arrangements, contact arrangements, forced marriage, support groups, advocacy services, role of grandparents, reconstituted families, parenting programmes, grandparents, kinship carers.

11. Suggestions for websites, databases, networks and experts to be searched or included as key sources.

Ministry of Justice/Dept of Constitutional Affairs
DCSF
Home Office
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Fatherhood Institute
One Plus One
ESRC
Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships

12. Any key texts/books/seminal works that you wish to see included?

Coleman, L. and Glenn, F. (2009) *When couples part: understanding the consequences for adults and children*, London: One Plus One (available at www.oneplusone.org.uk/PUBS/Publication.php?Ref=44, accessed 5 October 2010).

The work of Sarah Galvani:
<http://www.beds.ac.uk/departments/appliedsocialstudies/staff/sarah-galvani>

13. Anything else that should be included or taken into account?

Review to identify issues around diversity e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, social class.

Note on setting review questions

The review questions are important because the scoping team will use these to assess the available literature. Review questions need to be clear, specific and answerable. For example, the questions addressed might identify the following questions:

1. What is the evidence of different outcomes (in relation to ECM outcomes) for children and young people from diverse backgrounds and with different characteristics?
2. What do we know about the causes and correlates of these outcomes?
3. What works – what do we know about specific strategies, approaches and systems that helps all children and young people to achieve good outcomes?

In addition to suggesting review questions, it is important to provide definitions of key terms and concepts (for example, for 'outcomes' in the above example).

Appendix 4: National indicators and key data sources

National indicator (NI) number	National indicator (NI) detail	Source (published information)	Scale	Frequency of data collection	Latest data collection	First data collection	Link
Be healthy							
NI 50	Emotional health and wellbeing – children and young people user perception	DCSF: Local Authority Measures for National Indicators supported by the Tellus4 Survey 2009-10	National, regional and local authority	Annual	2009	2007	http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d000908/index.shtml
NI 50	Emotional health and wellbeing – children and young people user perception	Mental health of children and young people in Great Britain, 2004 Three years on: Survey of the development and emotional wellbeing of children and young people, 2007	National	Ad hoc (1999, 2004 and 2007)	2007	1999	http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_health/GB2004.pdf http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/child_development_mental_health.pdf
Stay safe							
NI 32	Repeat incidents of domestic	Homicides, Firearm Offences and Intimate Violence 2008/09 –	National	Annual since 2005	2009	2001	http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs10/hosb011

Supporting parental and carer–couple relationships and reducing conflict within families

National indicator (NI) number	National indicator (NI) detail	Source (published information)	Scale	Frequency of data collection	Latest data collection	First data collection	Link
	violence	British Crime Survey					0.pdf
Enjoy and achieve							
Additional indicators	Relationship between educational outcomes and family type	Focus on Families (2007) – secondary analysis from 2001 Census data	National	Ad hoc	2007	2005	http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compedia/fof2007/FO_Families_2007.pdf
Demographics							
Additional indicators	Family characteristics	Social trends	National	Ad hoc	2009	Trend data available for past 40 years	http://www.statistics.gov.uk/socialtrends/

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Additional indicators	Divorce rates	Office for National Statistics. Divorces in England and Wales, selected data tables	National	Annual	2008	1858	http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=14124
Additional indicators	Divorce rates	Office for National Statistics. Vital Statistics, Population and Health Reference Tables (Table 9.3 - Divorces in England and Wales: by age and sex)	National	Annual (and quarterly since 2005)	2009	1961	http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/Product.asp?vlnk=15354

Appendix 5: Evidence base – Key Items

Derivation and focus of Key Items (Review Question 1)

Source	Country	Type of literature	Focus
Scoping Review	UK	Literature review	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK	Literature review	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK	Secondary analysis	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK	Secondary analysis	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK	Commentary	Family formation
Scoping Review	UK mainly	Evidence review	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK mainly	Synthesis of studies	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	US	Literature review	Domestic violence
Research Review	US	Evaluation + lit review	Domestic violence
Research Review	UK	Literature review	Domestic violence
Research Review	US	Literature review	Separation/divorce
TAG recommended	UK	Secondary analysis + literary review.iew	Cohabitation
Reference Harvest	UK	Secondary analysis	Divorce
Reference Harvest	UK	Secondary analysis	Divorce
Reference Harvest	UK	Survey	Domestic violence
Reference Harvest	UK	Secondary analysis	Domestic violence

Derivation and focus of Key Items (Review Question 2)

Of the items focused on divorce, eight were written by researchers in the USA (five literature reviews, one a literature review preceding details of an empirical study; one systematic review and one consisting of secondary analysis of survey data); eight were written by authors based in the UK (four were syntheses of and commentaries on research findings drawn from studies conducted in the UK and elsewhere; three were secondary analyses of national survey data and one consisted of a literature review and findings from a qualitative study of children’s experiences of parental separation and divorce). One item, an international literature review, was written by authors based in Australia.

All but one of the 17 items focusing on domestic violence were written by and based primarily on studies carried out in the USA: there were 13 literature reviews, two of which were followed by presentation of information about a new empirical study, a systematic review, and three meta-analyses. One item, written by authors based in the UK, was an international literature review.

Derivation and focus of Key Items (Review Question 3)

Source	Country	Type of literature	Focus
Scoping Review	UK	Primary research	Counselling
Scoping Review	US	Literature review	Domestic violence
Scoping Review	UK	Research synthesis	Domestic violence
Scoping Review	UK	Lit review + Primary research	Domestic violence
Scoping Review	US	Literature review	Domestic violence
Scoping Review	US	Primary research	Domestic violence
Scoping Review	UK	Literature review	Family support
Scoping Review	US	Meta-analysis	Marriage/rel education
Scoping Review	UK	Literature review	Rel support services
Scoping Review	UK	Services mapping	Rel support services
Scoping Review	US	Primary research	Relationship enrichment
Scoping Review	US	Primary research	Relationship help-seeking
Scoping Review	UK	Lit review + Primary research	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	US	Literature review	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	Australia	Literature review	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK	Literature review	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK	Literature review	Sex education
Research Review	UK	Primary research	Separation/divorce
TAG suggestion	UK	Practice guide	Separation/divorce
Reference Harvest	US	Literature review	Counselling
Reference Harvest	US	Literature review	Domestic violence
Reference Harvest	UK	Mapping services	Domestic violence
Reference Harvest	US	Primary research	Domestic violence
Reference Harvest	US	Meta-analysis	Marriage/rel education
Reference Harvest	US	Literature review	Marriage/rel education
Reference Harvest	US	Literature review	Relationship predictors
Reference Harvest	US	Primary research	Separation/divorce
Reference Harvest	US	Literature review	Separation/divorce
Reference Harvest	US	Primary research	Separation/divorce
Reference Harvest	US	Primary research	Separation/divorce
Reference Harvest	US	Primary research	Separation/divorce
Reference Harvest	US	Primary research	Transition to parenthood
Reference Harvest	US	Primary research	Transition to parenthood
Reference Harvest	UK	Primary research	Transition to parenthood
Reference Harvest	UK	Primary research	Transition to parenthood
Reference Harvest	US	Evidence review	Marriage/rel education
Reference Harvest	US	Literature review	Domestic violence
Reference Harvest	US	Primary research	Domestic violence

Derivation and focus of Key Items (Review Question 4)

Source	Country	Type of literature	Focus
Scoping Review	US	Literature review	Domestic violence
Scoping Review	UK	Synthesis of studies	Domestic violence
Scoping Review	UK	Lit rev + Primary research	Domestic violence
Scoping Review	UK	Literature review	Domestic violence
Scoping Review	Canada	Primary research	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK	Lit rev + Primary research	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK	Literature review	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	US	Literature review	Separation/divorce
Scoping Review	UK	Primary research	Separation/divorce
Research Review	UK	Literature review	Domestic violence
Research Review	UK	Literature review	Domestic violence
Research Review	UK	Literature review	Domestic violence
Research Review	UK	Primary research	Separation/divorce
Reference Harvest	UK	Primary research	Domestic violence

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Improving children’s outcomes by supporting parental and carer–couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence

This research review tells us what works in improving children’s outcomes by supporting parental and carer couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence. It is based on a rapid review of the research literature involving systematic searching of literature and presentation of key data. It summarises the best available evidence that will help service providers to improve services and, ultimately, outcomes for children, young people and their families.

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