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## Case study title: Development of the Healthy Relationships Parental Offer

**Date: 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024**

There is vast evidence to show, where parents, whether together or separated, who are in conflict, which is frequent, intense and poorly resolved, puts children's mental health and long-term life chances at risk. The Family Hub and Start for Life Programme also lists parental conflict support as one its service expectations:

*'Staff in the Family Hub identify it, can distinguish it from domestic abuse, and provide universal level support and initial early support, providing or connecting to moderate support, where required, whether this is on or off site. This support is available to parents who are together, separating or separated.'*

The Reducing Parental Conflict Project began during 2020 and 2021 with Northumberland commissioning training from One Plus One to be delivered to Family Help Workers and Family Hub Practitioners with a total of 60 staff completing this training during this period. One Plus One was among the expert partners commissioned to establish the best way of embedding the vital knowledge about parental conflict into existing local services.

Working in partnership with One Plus One, Northumberland licensed and launched the digital offer in October 2021 that would last for 3 years, and provided the three pathways of digital learning:

1. Me, You and Baby Too (MYBT) - aimed at expecting and new parents.
2. Arguing better - aimed at couples who are together.
3. Getting it Right for Children (GIRFC) - aimed at couples who are separating or have separated.

Northumberland responded to parents that told us for some of them this self-guided learning was not helping to improve their relationship alone. Parents wanted a space to learn from other parents and a chance to reflect on learning with a trained practitioner. In addition to this gap, we were unable to gather and record data to show the impact on individual families, not knowing who had completed the digital learning. We listened and responded by providing group or one-to-one support, using the digital tools. This intervention was provided by our Family Hub team who had attended training.

In October 2022, DWP grant funding was spent on practitioners who would project lead, evaluate, monitor, and improve the project to ensure this offer would be a success.



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### Healthy Relationship Panels

It was very important that Healthy Relationship and Domestic Abuse leads worked in partnership. When the offer was launched, over 60% of referrals were inappropriate. It was clear referrers required support to distinguish conflict from domestic abuse. The three managers, or project leads attended the Healthy Relationship Panel to assess the appropriateness of referrals and case files every two weeks. This panel provided the mechanism to have consultations with staff who were referring families for Parental Conflict where there was reported abuse and understand why they were not using the correct pathway.

We learnt there was a lack of understanding and confidence about pathways of support and having open and honest conversations with families. This tool resulted in the implementation of Northumberland's screening tool. This allows practitioners to assess relationship quality before a referral is made. The feedback reported has shown that this tool has helped practitioners to have conversations with parents and gain a deeper understanding of the families' needs to enable them to fully accept the relationship support that is offered. Now this panel is managed by one person as on average 18% of referrals are inappropriate.

### Relationships are Everyone's Business

A clear message given in Northumberland is that relationships are key and should be talked about at the first opportunity. Healthy Relationships training remains a core part of the Early Help training offer which now extends to 0-19 health staff, children's services, early years, libraries, social prescribers, mental health teams, SEN and school staff, police, midwives and many other teams. Over 1200 staff have attended Parental Conflict training sessions on our Learning Together platform.

In February 2023, we hosted a Relationships Summit where 160 partners across Northumberland attended. We had guest speakers: Honor Rhodes, Mark Williams, Kate Stanley and 'Andy's Man' who all celebrated the different types of relationships and why healthy relationships matter.

In May 2023, Northumberland implemented 15-minute mini bitesize sessions delivered bi-monthly, that are a proven success. Over 500 staff are invited to each bitesize session to empower internal and external staff to build upon knowledge and confidence. Each session is themed, for example, how to reduce barriers to engagement, the inclusion of fathers, having difficult conversations, the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, etc.

### Communications

Healthy Relationships produced a social media and communication plan to ensure correct messaging was used and shared between teams. [Click here to visit the Healthy Relationships webpage](#). Which was created and QR codes were added to all posters to ensure families knew where to get help.



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We use systems to track engagement of the use of the website and our social media posts. From the 19th of July to 15<sup>th</sup> October 2024, the website has had 157 views. Our social media campaign had a total of 24 published posts between this period showing:

- Total Reach: 11, 353
- Total Impressions: 12,192
- Total Engagement (likes, comments): 109

It is important that it is everyone's business to share and offer this service to families. We ensure our partners have this information too. The Healthy Relationships Project Team collaborated with HDFT midwives and health visitors where they produced a video offering one of the parenting support programmes available. This was shared by HDFT staff during Parentcraft sessions at week 20 of pregnancy. [Click here to watch video](#)

In January 2023, we worked closely with mum and dad and Northumberland's Media Communications Advisor to produce a news article to share the impact having 1-1 relationship support can have. This allowed us to showcase to the Northumberland community that what we offer helps and it is a universal service for all - arguing is normal.

[Click here to read the article](#)

[Click here to watch Youtube Parental Feedback](#)

### Having Conversations about Relationships

A range of practitioners would attend our Community of Practice group - a virtual forum allowing the team to give feedback and listen to Healthy Relationships updates. There was a common theme that parental conflict can be a sensitive topic for families and our workforce. This was creating a barrier and impacting on the volume of referrals we were expecting even after all the training and communications that had been implemented.

In September 2023, the COP came together to produce a 'Getting on Better' bag. These bags are for practitioners to use to facilitate conversations with parents. The project lead would personally deliver these to professionals who had requested a bag, to offer a time to practice using the bag and build confidence to reduce barriers to having these conversations.



1.

By October 2024, over 100 bags had been distributed to a range of workers such as primary mental health teams, schools, wellbeing workers, education welfare, assistant social workers, family hub staff and many more. The voice of the child activity has



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been popular and allowed children's views to be heard, and to motivate parents to understand the impact arguing has on children.

### Working Regionally

Reducing Parental Conflict Local Coordinators around the Northeast areas meet regularly to share progress and ideas. This has been celebrated and recognised as good practice by the Department of Work and Pensions. Working regionally has helped raise the profile of relationships. Together we have produced a regional website, a regional logo and have a joint twitter page.

The most notable achievement was our decision to deliver Parenting when Separated. Parenting when Separated is a practical and positive evidence-based programme for parents who are preparing for, going through, or have gone through a separation or divorce. It helps parents develop co-parenting skills, listen to, and focus on their children's needs to help them cope and thrive. Due to the emotive nature of some of the topics and discussions, parents cannot attend the same group, therefore there will be two groups delivered close in time: group A and group B.

Four of the local RPC Coordinators agreed to work together and offer a virtual delivery of Parenting when Separated (PWS). Each region did not have enough referrals to have fill a group themselves, meaning it was not productive for practitioner's time or effort for the minimal uptake. To remove what was a postcode lottery of support for separated parents, this was planned as a pilot that began in May 2023. Due to the outstanding feedback from parents and practitioners during this pilot stage, in June 2024, Northumberland trained 12 Family Hub and Family Help Practitioners to provide this as part of the new Healthy Relationships offer in September 2024.

### The New Healthy Relationships Offer

In September 2024, our digital offer was due to end. The evidence told us that it was not rewarding enough for us to take out this new license. On average only 6.6 parents completed one of the three digital courses per month, and we were unable to know which families accessed these, making it impossible to track engagement or outcomes.

More parents told us they preferred our group and 1-1 offer and this allowed us to see retention and know that the parents had managed to improve their relationship. See *table below Course uptake from October 2021 to 27<sup>th</sup> February 2024:*



Project	Projects Started	Clients Enrolled	Clients Starts	Retained	% Retained	Milestones	% Milestones
Arguing Better	13	41	34	28	82%	22	79%
Getting it Right for Children	11	27	24	23	96%	23	96%
Me, You and Baby Too	5	13	10	10	100%	10	100%

2.

Parenting when Separated was due to start in September 2024 - this ensured we had support for separated parents. It was imperative to us that we also supported intact parents too. We created a two-week Getting on Better workshop and padlet using the knowledge we had gained from research, Solihull online relationships package and the One Plus One groups. We were aware that this was a low to moderate offer and would not address the needs of families in high conflict. We commissioned Relate to provide COPE (Co-parenting Everyday) offering 10 places for one-to-one intervention for parents who remain in a family relationship and are struggling to manage conflict.

Our offer continues to thrive, meeting the needs of Northumberland families. Relationships are a golden thread that join our services together and is key in all the work we do. Appropriate referrals continue to increase as practitioners build confidence to address relationship quality sensitively and show to parents the impact it has on their wellbeing and their children. From 30<sup>th</sup> June - 30<sup>th</sup> September 2024, we had 36 referrals (5 inappropriate) 22 went on to access some support. We are confident that even in some cases where parents do not need a referral, practitioners are addressing relationship quality and building a community where, it is normal to argue and it is ok to ask for help if you are not able to resolve things, to make life better for children.

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1. *Picture: Getting on better bag with included contents.*
  2. *Table of metrics for the relationship's programmes.*