

# Harmony at Home

working  
with parents  
in conflict



HARMONY  
AT HOME



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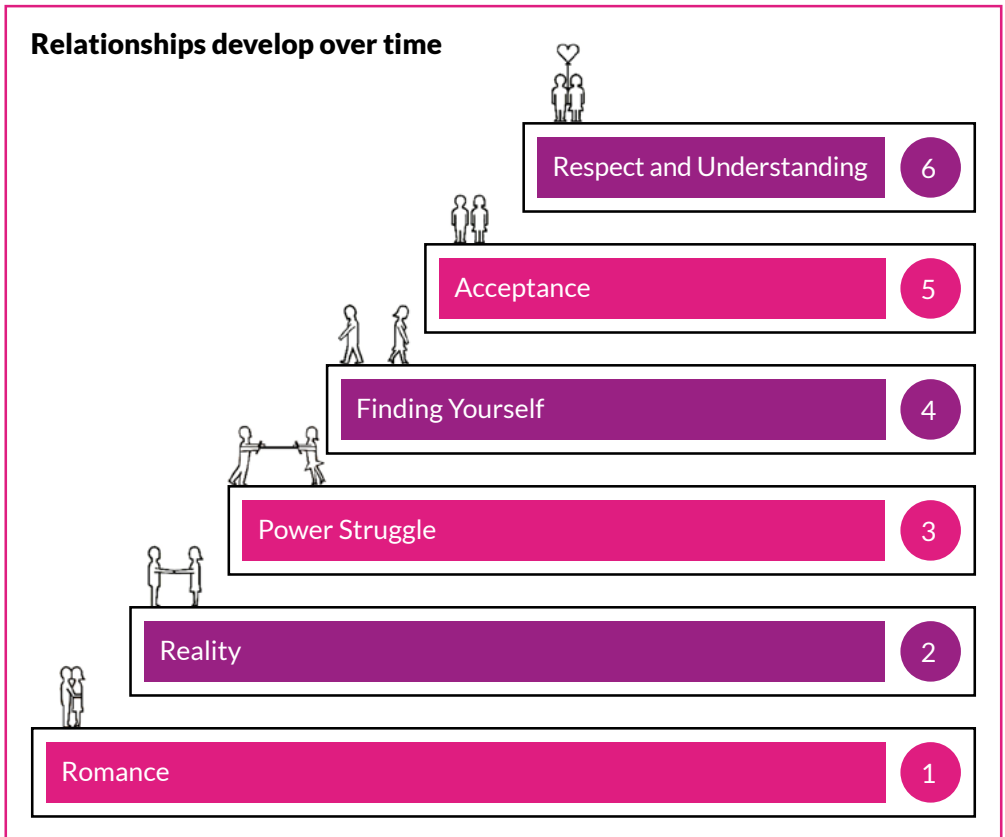
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# 1.1 What is Parental Conflict and how does it impact on children?

## Definition from the Department for Work and Pensions:

Parental conflict, which can range from a lack of warmth and emotional distance, right through to swearing and shouting, is known to be a risk factor for poor child outcomes, particularly when conflict is frequent, intense and poorly resolved. There is growing understanding and awareness of the need to address and reduce parental conflict that sits below domestic abuse.

Conflict between parents, rather than the event of parental separation or divorce, is a key factor in explaining why some children fare better than others when parental relationships break down.



There are many factors which can affect parental relationships:



Financial pressures



Bereavement



Work / employment pressures



Health issues/ illness



Birth of a child/adoption



Moving house



Educational pressures (children starting school, moving school or sitting exams)



Other commitments (family/ caring responsibilities)



Housing insecurity or homelessness



Lifestyle changes

Parental conflict places children at risk of:

- Negative peer relationships within their community and school; with both peers and school staff, affecting academic outcomes
- Earlier involvement with drug or alcohol misuse
- Poor future adult relationships
- Lower future employability prospects which can lead to financial difficulties
- Increased risk of poor mental health in children, and into adulthood
- Negative impact on neurobiological processes, which in turn affects children's emotional development, leading to conduct disorder, poor attachment and risk-taking behaviours
- Children are also at risk of a range of health difficulties including sleep disorders, digestive problems, abdominal pains, fatigue, headaches and reduced physical growth.

## 1.2 Co-Parenting

It is important to recognise the different kinds of parenting relationships that exist:

- Parents living together
- Separated or divorced parents
- Step-families

The following resources provide information & support when working with co-parents.

[A Short Guide to Working with Co-Parents](#)

## 1.3 Principles for working with parents

- Be curious, identify what is really going on
- Avoid making assumptions
- Don't take sides
- Keep the couple focused on the task in hand – parenting together
- Be clear about how much time is available
- Stay away from “fix it” mode
- Encourage each partner to listen to the other
- If things get very heated, ask them to take time out.

Use the [Early Help Pathway](#) to identify further support for the family if the conflict cannot be resolved.



Remember you are not a couple counsellor but you can do a lot to help co-parents argue in ways that are not damaging to their children.

## 2.1 Parent problem checklist

Below is a parent problem checklist with a list of issues which parents often disagree on. This checklist will help you identify the different issues and disagreements which may be contributing towards conflict.

1. Please circle either 'Yes' or 'No' to indicate whether each issue has been a problem for you and your partner over the last 4 weeks.
2. Secondly circle a number identifying the extent to which each issue has been a problem for you and your partner in the last 4 weeks.

**Has this issue been a problem for you and your partner in the past 4 weeks?**

1. Disagreements about rules for children (eg. bedtime, play areas)	YES	NO
2. Disagreements about type of discipline (eg. smacking children)	YES	NO
3. Disagreements about who should discipline children	YES	NO
4. Fighting in front of children	YES	NO
5. Inconsistency between parents	YES	NO
6. Children preventing parents being alone	YES	NO
7. Disagreements about sharing childcare workloads	YES	NO
8. Cannot resolve arguments about child care	YES	NO
9. Discussions about child care turning into arguments	YES	NO
10. Parents undermining each other (not backing each other up)	YES	NO
11. Parents favouring one child over another	YES	NO
12. Lack of discussions between parents about childcare	YES	NO
13. Lack of discussions about anything	YES	NO
14. One parent is "soft", one parent is "tough" with children	YES	NO
15. Children behave worse with one parent than another	YES	NO
16. Disagreements about what is naughty behavior	YES	NO

**To what extent has this issue been a problem for you and your partner over the past 4 weeks?**

Not at all	A little		Some		Much	Very much
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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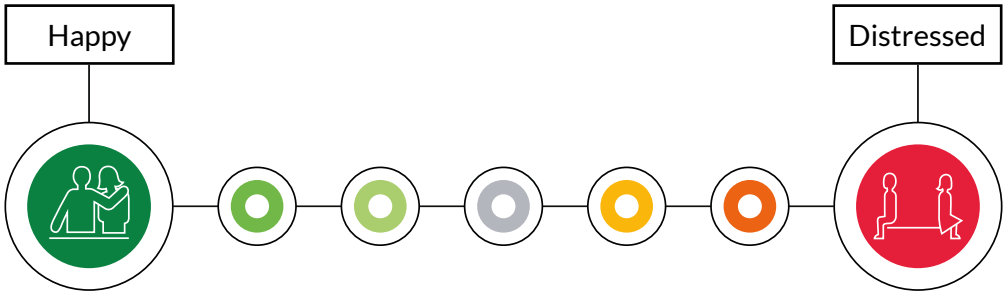
**Link to Resource:** <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Education-and-skills/Schools-and-professionals/ParentProblemChecklist.pdf>

## 2.2 Relationship scales

How does each parent rate their situation on the scale from happy to distressed?

This can highlight differences in how they are experiencing their relationship.

### How are we doing?



This resource will work well as an introduction to a discussion about the impact of parental conflict on children.

Using this scale will encourage an honest discussion between parents about where they feel they are on the scale. It will encourage parents to identify themselves the changes needed to make their relationship more harmonious and consistent for their children.

You may choose to re-visit this scale with parents as you work with them, to make changes to their relationship to identify positive change, or further work that needs to be undertaken.



## 2.3 Healthy relationships questionnaire

This questionnaire has been designed for parents to consider their relationship with each other and the strengths and challenges they may face.

Like most questionnaires and / or quizzes the outcome could change depending on how the parents are feeling when they complete it and what is going on in their life. To get the most reliable outcome, please encourage parents to think about how they feel on a day to day basis, not just right at this moment in time.

Your relationship with your partner				
Green scores 3, Yellow scores 2, Blue scores 1.	Never/ almost never	Once in a while	Frequently	Your Score
My partner makes me feel appreciated	Blue	Yellow	Green	
My partner and I get on each other's nerves	Green	Yellow	Blue	
When we disagree, we find a solution that satisfies us both	Blue	Yellow	Green	
I can get angry and frustrated with my partner	Green	Yellow	Blue	
My partner respects my opinions and feelings	Blue	Yellow	Green	
Little arguments can escalate into accusations and criticisms	Green	Yellow	Blue	
I think about what my life would be like if my partner and I weren't together	Blue	Yellow	Green	
We laugh and have fun together	Green	Yellow	Blue	
I don't feel my partner listens to me when we argue	Blue	Yellow	Green	

## Your relationship with your partner

Green scores 3, Yellow scores 2, Blue scores 1.	Never/ almost never	Once in a while	Frequently	Your Score
My partner makes me feel appreciated				

## Your relationship with your partner

Green scores 3, Yellow scores 2, Blue scores 1.	Never/ almost never	Once in a while	Frequently	Your Score
My partner makes me feel like I'm a good parent				
I feel like my share of the parenting work is more than my partner's				
We are growing and maturing together through our experiences as parents				
My partner and I have different ideas about how to raise our child				
My relationship with my partner is stronger now than before we had a child				
The stress of parenting has caused my partner and I to grow apart				
We have fun with our children together				
When I'm at my wits end as a parent, my partner doesn't give me the extra support I feel I need				
My partner appreciates how hard I work at being a good parent				

## **Add up your total score:**

If you scored in the 48 – 60 range, your relationship with your partner seems to be in good shape and you are working well together in parenting your child / children.

If you scored in the 34 – 47 range, whilst your relationship with your partner may be good, there could be a few areas you may want to work on.

If you scored in the 20 – 33 range you may want to stop and think about where the two of you are headed. Your score indicates the presence of patterns that could harm your relationship.

Now you know where your score sits, you may want to consider your next steps. Look at where you scored 'high', these will be the green boxes; these are the current strengths in your relationship. Consider where your scores are in the 'middle', these will be the yellow boxes; could small changes in these areas help to improve things? Where you have scored 'low', these will be the blue boxes; these areas will be having the biggest impact on your relationship. If you have ticked multiple blue boxes you may want to think about seeking support or asking for help.

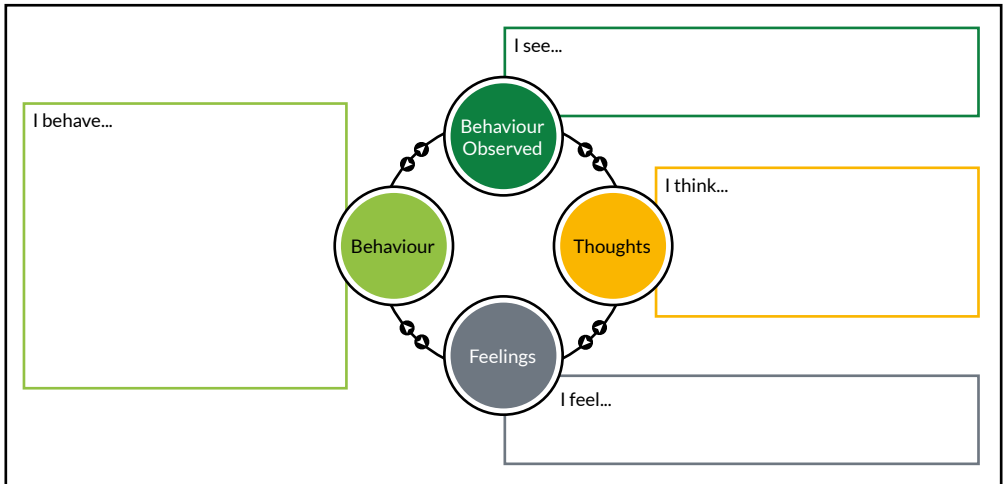
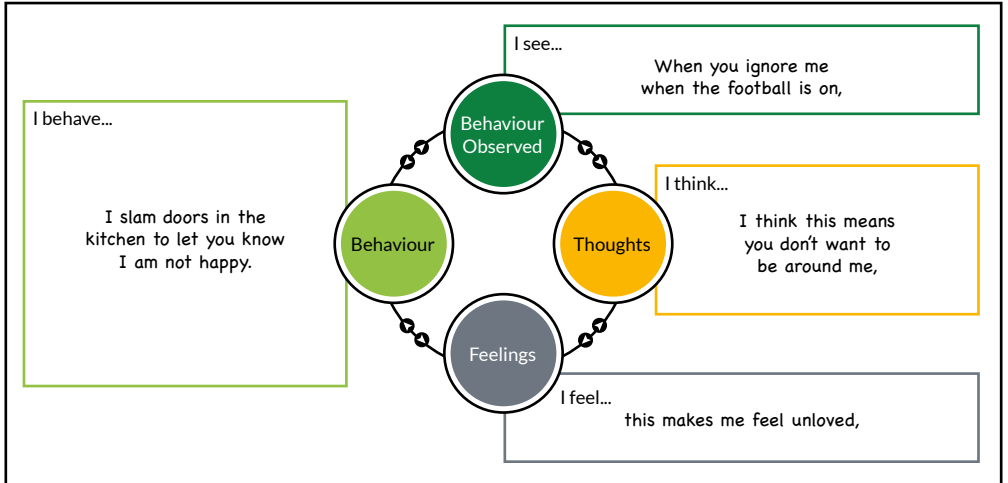
**Link to Resource:** <https://www.livewellcampaign.co.uk/app/uploads/2018/10/Healthy-Relationships-Questionnaire.pdf>

*With thanks to Essex County Council who produced this questionnaire as part of the healthy relationships project.*

## 2.4 Thoughts, feelings and behaviour exercise

This model can be used to help couples to recognise how they internalise behaviour that they observe which in turn affects how they feel, impacting on their response.

This can be used to help couples understand each others behaviour.



## 2.5 A typical day

A simple template to help families identify what and when may be triggers to conflict in their relationship.

Once identified you can work with the family to find alternative ways to behaviour that may not involve harmful conflict.

	What my day looks like	Triggers to conflict
<u>Morning</u>		
<u>Afternoon</u>		
<u>Evening</u>		
<u>Night</u>		

## 2.6 Constructive vs Destructive

### Conflict in relationships is a reality...



### How we communicate and solve problems

Natural

Damaging

Constructive Conflict

Destructive Conflict

Part of Everyday Life

Negative

Normal

Impacts Child Outcomes

Parents in conflict may be struggling to identify the destructive elements of their behaviour.

The constructive versus destructive cards, provide the opportunity to discuss behaviours with parents and if they are present in a relationship. You may choose to add more cards yourself depending on the parental relationship.

Ask the couple to think about the behaviours and place them in the always, sometimes, never columns as they apply to their relationship.

Then ask the couple/individual to identify what they would consider to be constructive and destructive behaviours.

Using solution focussed questioning, help them identify how they could change their destructive behaviour and increase the positive behaviours.

Ask for each other's point of view.

Withdrawal from the conversation as it's not going your way.

Explain how the situation is making you feel.

End an argument upset and angry.

Recognise that whilst you may not agree, your partner has a valid point.

Offer possible solutions to problems, whilst are willing to compromise and listen to other suggestions.

Raise your voice to make sure you get your point of view across.

Listen to one another's point of view without interrupting.

Accept there may be times where you disagree.

Use examples from the past to prove your right.

Use insults to make your point and share your feelings.

Allow each other to opportunity to express your views.

### In our relationship we...

Always

Sometimes

Never

## 2.7 You vs I statements

An “I” message or “I” statement is a style of communication that focuses on the feelings or beliefs of the speaker rather than thoughts and characteristics that the speaker attributes to the listener.

Construct an “I” statement which takes the phrase from accusing to disclosing.

At a basic level consider using the following framework to create I statements.

You care about work more than your own family.	<b>I feel...</b>	I feel anxious when...
You leave me to do all the tough parenting, so the kids like you more than me.	<b>Because...</b>	
You're always on the phone texting, on Facebook. You care about someone else's opinion more than mine.	<b>When...</b>	I need help with...
	<b>What I need...</b>	



## 2.8 Children in the middle

Research indicates that when parents put their children in the middle of their conflict it can be harmful.

Helping parents to identify the ways they might be doing this is an important first step in encouraging change.

When your child feels they have to be the mediator between parents, keeping everyone happy and solving problems.

The Mediator

When you criticise your parents or an ex and expect your child to judge who is right and wrong.

The Judge

When you share too much information with your child and expect them to fill the gap due to a lack of intimate communication with your partner or an ex.

The Confidant

When you ask your child to take information between you and your partner about money, contact etc.

The Messenger

When you ask your child questions about your partner or an ex and rely on them to find out what is going on.

The Spy

*Acknowledgement and thanks are given to the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) and Tavistock Relationships as owners of the intellectual property rights for some of the resources reproduced here.*

## 2.9 Harmony at Home

Harmony at Home is Worcestershire's approach to the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) initiative.

Worcestershire Children First have established a multi-agency reference group to help shape and implement the RPC initiative. We have worked collaboratively with partner agencies and organisations to develop a [toolkit full of resources](#) for practitioners to use when working with families.

The toolkit brings together a number of resources such as videos, practical activities, useful links, theory and promotional material which can be used by practitioners to support their work with families.

**We all have arguments**  
How do you resolve yours?

How might your children feel when you argue?

Harmony at Home is Worcestershire's approach to the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) initiative.

Parental conflict, can range from swearing and shouting between parents, to children feeling like they are walking on egg shells when the conflict is more silent. This is known to have a negative impact on the life chances and well-being of children and young people, particularly when conflict happens a lot, and is left unresolved.

For more information and resources to support healthy relationships please visit:  
[www.worcestershire.gov.uk/harmonyathome](http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/harmonyathome)

**HARMONY AT HOME**

**We all have arguments**  
How do you resolve yours?

We all argue - but do we always feel that arguments are resolved in a way that leaves everyone feeling ok?

With acknowledgement and thanks to parents and practitioners in Essex who originally co-produced this content.

**HARMONY AT HOME**

## 2.10 Useful links and additional resources



[See it differently](#)



[Withdrawal](#)



[Chores](#)



[Hair cut](#)



[New Trainers](#)



[Brene Brown on Blame](#)



[Brene Brown on Empathy](#)

This booklet has been produced in collaboration with our partners:

