

Hartlepool Better Relationships, Better Parenting

Practitioners toolkit for supporting
inter-parental relationships

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Originally created by Hertfordshire County Council
and developed for Hartlepool by the
Healthy Relationships Partnership

Supporting families in conflict



If you work with families across Hartlepool, it is likely you will come across parents in conflict, whether they are together or separated.

This toolkit aims to provide you with practical information and advice on how to support parents in conflict, as well as giving you knowledge about some other local services that could provide support.



This guide includes information on:

- Why it is important to support families in conflict
- The four R's
 - Recognising conflict
 - Responding to conflict
 - Reviewing progress
 - How and when to refer
- Pathways to support parents in conflict
- Understanding conflict
 - Tips and advice when talking to parents in conflict
- Resources
 - Resources to use with parents or for parents who want to self help
 - Resources for practitioners
- Relationship support services directory

Supporting families in conflict

Why is it important
to support families
in conflict?



Children's exposure to conflict between their parents, whether the parents are together or separated, can put a child's mental health and long term life chances at risk.

Parental conflict can have a negative impact on a child's:

- School readiness
- Engagement with one or both of the parents
- School engagement and performance
- Physical health
- Relationships with others
- Mental health (including emotional and behavioural difficulties)
- Social, emotional and cognitive development



The four R's

Brief Encounters® model provided by [OnePlusOne](#)



The most effective way to recognise whether parents are going through conflict is simply to ask them. Make it part of the initial conversation you have with a parent – to ask them about their relationship.

- “How’s your partner at the moment?”

There are also various signs which might indicate that parents are going through conflict. These include:

- Looking sad or withdrawn
- Not talking about their partner as much as they used to
- Changes to their physical appearance for example gaining or losing weight
- They might have recently separated or divorced which may create conflict, especially around the child.

As well as looking out for these signs there might be a time when someone will come to you for support. The moment they turn to you for support may be subtle, it could be an offhand comment at the end of an appointment or they might bring up an unrelated issue in the middle of an appointment. It is important at this

point to acknowledge their concerns.

When you recognise that there is a conflict, depending on how much time you have available, you have a few options:

- After acknowledging their concerns you should be clear about the support you can offer and when. If you are busy now, say that you can offer your time later.
- It is important to be clear about what you can offer, for example:
 - When will you be available for them to discuss their relationship concerns?
 - How long will you be able to discuss it with them?
 - Where will you meet?
 - What can you provide them? Are you just offering them an opportunity to talk or can you give them more support?
 - Can you refer them to counselling/mediation?

Once someone has opened up to you about their relationship it is important to listen and try to help them to improve it.

- Use motivational interviewing and active listening techniques to help parents think about how they can improve their relationship
- Encourage them to particularly think about the effect their conflict may be having on their child/children
- Keep in mind how your personal experience might affect the support you can give. You might want to avoid certain discussion or have some biases. Take some time out to reflect on your work.



After your client has had a chance to discuss their concerns, consider how you can support them further. This could include:

- Helping the couple set goals. Remember these goals should be set by the couple, however you can support them with this prompt list:
 - The thing I love most about our relationship is...
 - The thing I like least about our relationship is...
 - I would like to work on improving our relationship, focusing on...
 - I would like to do this by...
 - In the future I would like our relationship to look like...
- Making sure they are able to move forward and are happy with the outcome of the discussion
- Making them aware you are available for future discussions or support

- Show them [Click One Plus One's](#) digital platform which provides relationship information and support. This includes online tools and videos which can be used to support a parent's understanding of conflict. There is also information created and adapted specifically for Hartlepool on the Healthy Relationships Partnership website.



Some couples may benefit from more intensive support to resolve conflict in their relationship. This may also be the case if you feel you don't have time to give them the support they need. In these cases you can refer parents to a more specialist service for additional support.



How to decide what best suits a family

Mediation

- ✔ Suitable for parents who:
- Are separated and need help to reach agreements around child contact arrangements or financial issues

- ✘ Not suitable for parents who:
- Do not have a legal issues to reach agreement about. For example child contact arrangements of financial disputes.
 - Parents who are still in a relationship with each other.
 - Are in a crisis
 - Relationships where there is domestic violence and abuse.

- 🗨️ What to tell parents:
- Mediation is a space to listen to everyone's views, where you can focus on the present to help improve the future
 - It will help you understand what needs to happen to resolve your differences
 - It will help you to settle specific ongoing disputes and find your own solutions
 - You will be offered an individual meeting first
 - The mediator will ask you both to explain your point of view and will help you explore options
 - The mediator won't judge you, take sides or tell you what to do
 - Mediation is an opportunity for parents to make decisions about their arrangements, rather than have these decisions made by family courts.

Changing Futures North East Moving On (Reducing Parental Conflict)

- ✔ Suitable for parents who:
- Are together or separated
 - Want to reduce the conflict with their child's other parent
 - Want to communicate better and understand each other and the needs of their children.

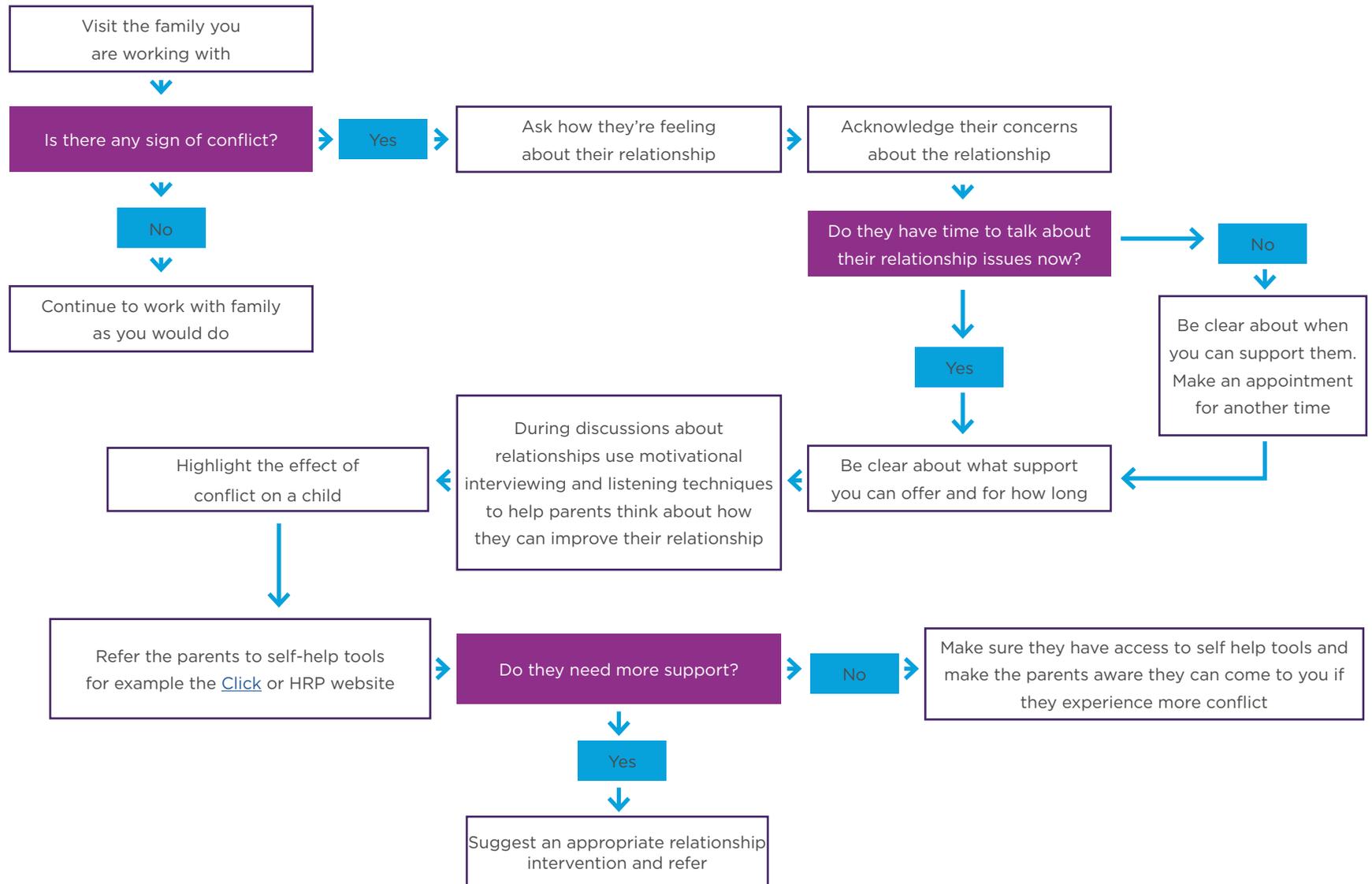
- ✘ Not suitable for parents who:
- Have a specific legal issue which could be agreed with mediation.
 - Are at crisis point
 - Relationships where there is domestic violence and abuse.

- 🗨️ What to tell parents:
- You will be offered a specific programme or course that meets your needs best.
 - It will help you to understand each other better so you have fewer arguments and get on better
 - You will be supported to make the most of the opportunity and support.
 - The practitioner in the intervention won't judge you, take sides or tell you what to do
 - This would be a blend of practical support that can be made, and understanding the feelings behind some of the difficulties that cause conflict.

You can find details of mediation and other support services, in the [Resources](#) section of this toolkit. It is important to be careful how you bring this up with the family, as both parents will need to be willing to engage for it to work.

Pathway to supporting
parents in conflict





Domestic abuse

Harbour works with families and individuals who are affected by abuse from a partner, former partner or other family member.

More information about their services and how to refer is available on their website

www.myharbour.org.uk

Or call 01429 268600



Understanding conflict



This section includes some more detailed tools for understanding couples in conflict and working with them.

Conflict spiral

Breakdown in communication
More emotional, less rational

WAR
No backing down.
Belief there can never
be a resolution

Injury
Conflict bad for
mental, emotional and
physical health

Casualties
Children will be affected
negatively. Innocent
bystanders

Conflict management types

Each of us have a natural reaction to conflict and how we deal with it, however this can be changed, and we can learn more effective ways of managing conflict.

- The turtle

Turtles withdraw into their shells to avoid conflict. They will give up their personal goals and try to stay away from people or issues where there is conflict. A turtle believes that it is easier to withdraw (either physically or psychologically) from conflict rather than face it.

- The shark

Sharks assume that a conflict can only be settled with one side winning and the other losing. They will overpower opponents by forcing them to accept their solution, often by attacking, overwhelming and intimidating their opponent. For a shark, winning will give them a sense of pride and achievement whereas losing makes them feel weak and like a failure.

- The teddy bear

A teddy bear thinks the relationship is more important than their own goals or needs. They will avoid conflict because they believe it will damage or ruin their relationship, they want to be liked and loved by everyone. A teddy bear will give up their needs to preserve their relationship, accepting a loss.

- The fox

Foxes are prepared to give something up if they can persuade the other person to give them what they want.

This is fine as long as it is done openly, rather than being sneaky and not letting the other person know that the fox expects something back.

- The owl

Owls see conflict as a problem to be solved. They will seek to find a solution that will meet their needs and the other person's needs. By finding a solution that satisfies themselves and others, owls maintain the relationship. They look for a solution that will be a positive outcome for everyone.

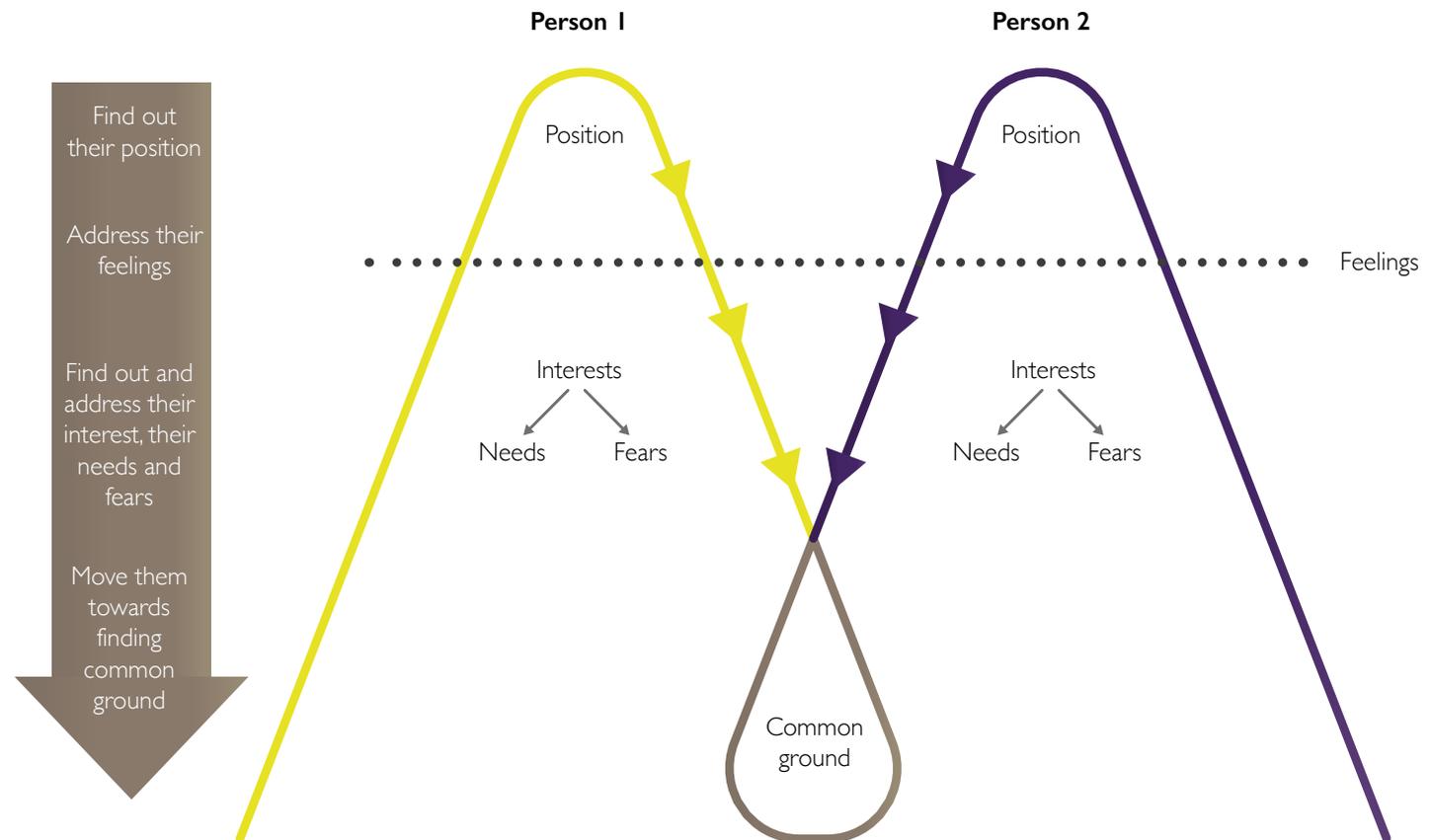
When working with families in conflict look out for these styles and adapt your approach accordingly. For example a shark will see 'compromise' as losing and a turtle will be more difficult to engage with conflict resolution.

Remember people need to learn how to resolve conflict; our natural instinct is to attack or retreat. How parents deal with conflict will impact how their children deal with conflict!

Positions and interests

When working with families in conflict it is important to understand everyone's positions and interests. A position is a fixed stance taken up and offered as the only solution, for example "I won't let him see the children anymore". An interest is a person's needs, fears, desired and basic concerns underlying their position for example "He always turns up late to pick the children up, which makes them upset".

The aim is to move people away from their positions so they can deal with their interests and concerns. In order to move from positions to interests it is important that you deal with the feelings first. Anger is often because of an unmet need.



Tips for talking to families in conflict

You must also be fair to each party when trying to resolve conflict. If you ask one party a question, make sure you ask it of the other.

Use active listening – you should be asking questions and staying non judgemental

- Do not agree or disagree
- Use more open questions rather than closed questions
 - Closed questions – who, where, when
 - Open questions – what, why, how
- Avoid ‘why’ – this can force people to justify their position and become defensive
- Try changing ‘why’ to ‘what’
- Use language similar to the speakers but be yourself
- Focus on the feelings as well as the facts.
 - How has a situation made the speaker feel?
 - “So what effect has all of this been having for you?”
- Active listening includes:
 - Encouraging – you can do this by reflecting back a word or phrase to encourage them to carry on
Client : “I’ve been finding it really difficult lately”
Practitioner: “Difficult....?”
 - Acknowledging – show that you have some understanding
“That must have been difficult”
 - Checking – you can show you’ve been listening by asking questions, this helps reinforce that you have an interest in what is being said
“How did that make you feel?”
“What happened after you said that?”
 - Clarification – if you find that your client is skirting around an issue you can encourage them to clarify points, this will not only help yourself but is likely to help them too.
“Tell me more about...”
“... sounds like a difficult area for you”
 - Empathy
 - Summarising – this shows you’ve listened and understood what’s been said. It also gives them a chance to correct you if you’ve misunderstood
“I’m hearing you say that you’re feeling upset with your relationship because...”

'I' statements

Try to encourage parents to use 'I' statements as this focuses on the feelings of the speaker rather than the blaming the listener. 'You' statements often come across as an accusation and will make the listener feel defensive, by using an 'I' statement it will enable the speakers to be assertive without making any accusations, making the listener feel less defensive.

'You' Statement		'I' Statement
You just don't understand me	▶	I feel like I'm not being understood and it's making me feel upset
Why are you always late?	▶	I feel anxious and worried when you don't come home on time
You don't do anything when you get home in the evening	▶	I feel overwhelmed when I get the children ready for bed
You never think of me	▶	I feel like I'm being forgotten and that I'm not important

Talking to people in conflict

- Find out how they want to/like to be called. Calling a 'Ben' Benjamin will create a barrier.
- Volume of voice - if they are angry and loud, bring your voice level just under their voice level and use your voice to bring their voice down.
- Be a SOLER listener:
 - Square - turn your body towards the speakers (check your feet are pointed towards the parent not away)
 - Open - avoid folded arms
 - Lean - towards the speaker. Do not lean back or slouch
 - Eye contact - give the speaker the appropriate amount of eye contact
 - Relax - your body should not be hunched or tense
- Try not to take notes while talking to parents in conflict as this can create a barrier, it is more important that they feel they are being listened to.



Resources



Relationship support services directory



Changing Futures North East

Changing Futures North East works with children and families to enable positive and healthy relationships which allow children and parents to thrive, succeed and be happy. CFNE promotes all healthy relationships in children's lives but especially the relationship between a child's parents which can be protective and nurturing, and which provides a solid and stable foundation for children as they grow and develop. They work to help parents reduce and better manage conflict between them, improve their communication with one another and increase their awareness of what children need from their relationship with the child's other parent.

Call 01429 891444 or visit www.changingfuturesne.co.uk



Tees Valley Mediation

TVM work with parents to reduce the effects of separation on children by reducing conflict and improving communication. Mediation is a process where two people can meet in a safe, neutral place to talk about and negotiate any issues following on from their separation or divorce.

Call 01429 869247 or 07983 475 946 or visit www.teesvalleymediation.co.uk



Relate

Relate are a national provider of relationship support. In Hartlepool Relate deliver relationship counselling services. Their website also carries an online live chat service with a counsellor.

www.relate.org.uk



OnePlusOne

OnePlusOne are a national organisation aiming to help people build stronger relationships. Their relationship support web platform Click Relationships. Click is a unique service providing early intervention relationship support from a mobile-friendly platform..

<https://www.oneplusone.space/>

<https://clickrelationships.org/>



Healthy Relationships Partnership

The HRP website offers resources for parents in Hartlepool to help strengthen their relationship and deal with relationship issues.

www.hrphartlepool.co.uk



Hartlepool and East Durham MIND

Hartlepool and East Durham Mind helps people who are suffering emotionally. They deliver talking therapies for a range of emotional wellbeing issues and also teach skills for managing challenging feelings and behaviour through the MINDskills recovery college.

Call 01429 269303 or visit <http://www.hartlepoolmind.co.uk>



Hartlepool Carers

Hartlepool Carers exists to improve the quality of lives of Carers throughout Hartlepool and the surrounding villages. We do this by providing advice, information and support services. Hartlepool Carers can offer support and information on issues connected with your caring role.

Call 01429 283095 or visit <http://www.hartlepoolcarers.org.uk/>



Hartlepool Council Children's Hub

The Children's Hub provide information, advice and guidance on services and support for children, young people and families.

Call 01429 284284



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