

Parents' views on relationship support in Hartlepool

When it comes to relationships you're kind of left out there on your own...



A report by



Partnership Hartlepool

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With thanks to...

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- The Healthy Relationships Partnership
- Hartlepool Volunteer Relationship Advisors
- Belle View Centre

This research was conducted in partnership with Joseph Rowntree Foundation and was partly informed by a number of the reports they have created or commissioned on the link between relationships and finances.

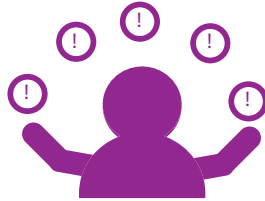
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Brief Summary

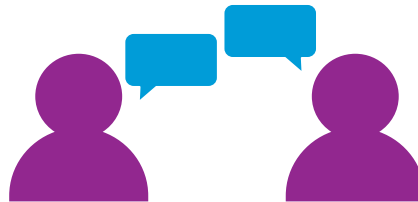
Parents have many different priorities

Parents often have a large list of multiple priorities both as individuals and as part of a family unit that can be prioritised before their relationships. Some of these priorities such as financial issues are seen as more critical than the quality of their relationship.



There is a stigma around talking about relationships

Parents fear what people will think about them as a person and as a parent if they open up about their relationships. Some also worry about the response they will get from others if they open up and for the potential for services to get involved as a result.



Lack of awareness of relationship support

Parents are unaware of what's available in Hartlepool to support their relationship, particularly to prevent their relationship reaching 'crisis point'.



Impact of Gender and Generations

Men feel less able to open up and often feel services are catered more towards women. Some parents also talked about the impact of learned behaviours and attitudes to their relationships from their own parents and their awareness of passing on their own behaviours and attitudes to their children.



Our research

What did we want to know?

We wanted to find out who parents talk to about their relationship with their partner or co-parent and what knowledge they had of services that are currently available (or their opinions on what should be available) in Hartlepool to support parental relationships. We also aimed to understand how members of the community can be supported to have the confidence and skill to offer support to their own friends and family if they had difficulties in their relationship.

Whilst we covered various topics with parents we focused most questions around answering the following:

- What is it like being a parent?
- How do partners and co-parents cope with the ups and downs of family life?
- Where would parents go for relationship support?
- What do parents think is available in Hartlepool to support their relationship and what should be available?
- What would be a helpful response from someone if parents spoke to them about difficulties in their relationship?

What did we do?

To find out about peoples views and experiences we undertook a community research project using a number of methods to involve local parents:

- Participatory research methods with groups and individuals to facilitate conversations
- In depth interviews and focus groups
- Online surveys

We used various methods of recruitment:

- Word of mouth
- Use of clients and members of partner agencies, community organisations and groups
- Social Media
- Local newspaper and radio



Picture from a Community Research session: Pants and tops exercise exploring the good things (tops) and the challenging things (pants) about life as a parent.

Who took part?

48 parents living in Hartlepool contributed to our research:

38 parents spoke to us through in depth face to face interviews and focus groups
10 parents submitted their responses to us through an online survey

Of the 37 parents we spoke to face to face:
67% were female and 33% were male

Age range from 23 to 62 with a average age of 38.

59% separated from their childs parent,
41% were still in a romantic relationship with their childs parent

Number of children ranged from 1 to 6 with an average number of 3.5 children

What did parents say?

Parent's Priorities

Parents can have multiple priorities to deal with both personally and within their family unit that can prevent them from talking about, tending to and seeking support for their relationship.

Financial Problems

Many parents shared their struggles with money and benefits. For some of the parents we spoke to financial issues were identified as a cause of conflict.

(What is needed in Hartlepool)
Some sort of signposting facilities. Certainly to help with debt crisis, that kind of thing...money is a massive thing.

(Arguing about finances)
Getting stressed and worrying about it, keeping it up...all that sort of thing, it was just too much.

Most of our arguments boiled down to, we were having financial troubles, at the time. I wasn't working and I'm thinking it's all my fault without actually talking to her.

Research shows a link between poverty and stress¹. Stress puts a huge amount of pressure on parental relationships.
25% of British adults who have been in debt say it had a negative impact on their relationship².
The current financial situation is difficult for many families in Hartlepool due to recent changes in benefit entitlement.

'Hartlepool has a 40% greater need in relation to mental illness compared to England and 14% higher need in relation to common mental health problems'³.
Research has found that poor quality or unhappy relationships have a negative influence on both physical and mental health⁴.

Parents Mental Health

Adult mental health issues, particularly depression, anxiety and stress, were raised as a challenge to life as a parent.

Responses from parents confirm that conflict in parental relationships can worsen existing mental health issues and supportive relationships can help adults cope.

My son is aware I have depression but, and in some cases I have to put on a brave face which is not what I want.

They've both seen me...although I've tried to hold it together where they are and I compose myself now and I've improved a lot.

I think the mental issues I had, combined with the mental issues she had and having a little boy that had various issues as well. It all just mixed up and made life an absolute living hell.

Some people think, depression, is catching, 'they're going to make me in a horrible mood' but you really need something to uplift you and drag you out of yourself.

Child Behaviour, Mental Health and Needs

Life as a parent of a children with special needs can leave some parents feeling unsupported and positive relationships can be a big resource to help parents cope. Without this support parents can feel overwhelmed. For some parents issues with children's behaviour can put strain on their relationship with their partner or co-parent due to disagreements over parenting styles. Meeting the needs of children can be a challenge on parental relationships.

When you've got a six year old and one a year and a half and they really need both parents and it sort of saps all your energy and we nearly went through a break up.

One of my kids is autistic so the way he behaves can be misconstrued as well. I don't know if that's the reason why maybe I'm a bit more sensitive to what people say and what people think? Because we're kind of always on our guard with what people think of the way he behaves.

He wants the contact and all the good things but won't do all the hard work I do.

I think it helps that we do communicate quite a lot anyway. We HAVE to because of the way the kids are, what's going on in the kids life and my life and generally we do communicate quite well.

Employment

Struggles with working patterns and being able to balance this with being a parent and maintaining a relationship was named as a challenging. The need to work extra hours to support the family financially could be particularly challenging and stressful both individual and to the parental relationship.

We don't get an awful lot of time with just us either so it's trying to make that time sometimes 'cos it can be quite an effort, especially with kids going here and there, 'cos he works.

Me and my husband, we nearly had a break up when he was out working all the time.

It's hard to balance work and being the kind of parent I want to be.

(About what can cause arguments with partner) I think recently it was probably the amount I was working. Working full time and picking up a few other shifts as well because of the time of year. Just felt like we weren't spending much time as a family. But unfortunately sometimes it's the way it's got to be.

For some parents there was a link between these other priorities and conflict in their relationship. For example, arguing about money, work patterns or different parenting styles.

Awareness of relationship services

The vast majority of parents contributing to this research expressed that they were unaware of what services were available locally to support their relationship with their partner or co-parent. Some comments reflected parents' feelings that finding out what's available to support them and their children can be very difficult and services to support relationships aren't well publicised.

A lot of the things I think it's knowing where to look and knowing they're going to have all the information.

Any support that is available isn't well publicised and therefore I would assume that some people are missing out.

And it's just 'Well I thought you would have known about it, I thought someone else would have told you' and that's always the case. Someone always thinks someone else will tell you.

It's hard to access support if you're not already part of services.

Some parents were aware of services that may become involved with a family if there is domestic violence in a relationship but believed there was nothing available to support relationships if the conflict doesn't result in violence. It was also acknowledged that it's very difficult to know when parents should

look for help as some people may not recognise they have a problem before it reaches crisis point.

Everyone's got their own boundaries. And so, like I say, for me if he ever smacked me, if he hit me in the face or whatever, I would know it's crisis point and we need somebody. Where would the level come when you say 'we might need help' or 'we might not need help? It's kind of that...at crisis point it's obvious.

I mean generally you don't really hear of anything for relationships. There's a lot there for the kids, as I'm finding out. There's a lot there for if you've got benefits or like an issue with your money but when it comes to relationships you're kind of left out there on your own.

I think people don't realise they've got a problem in their relationship until your bags are packed and you're walking out the door. To me that's the point where people go 'hold on we need help here'. It's like 'I'm doing it for the kids but after the kids are gone his bags are packed and he's gone' rather than sit down over a cup of coffee and talking to each other about it.

If you're about to tell me something different then fantastic but as far as I knew...its more crisis kind of thing.

(About who they think relationship support is aimed at)
People who are in desperate need. Last resort kind of thing.

Stigma

Relationships are still considered a taboo topic and many parents fear opening up about their relationships to others. This stigma can be seen to affect attitudes towards relationship services, with many parents feeling uncomfortable about involving services in something they consider to be private.

The last thing you want is someone else thinking there's something going on when it isn't. And I think it's the idea of having to justify it to somebody else.

We're not in a domestic violence relationship or anything like that but it's that angle. The last thing I want is anyone thinking that I was.

There's the risk that the kids will be taken away, the fear about childrens services.

People don't tend to talk publicly about their relationships either, that's the other thing.

That's probably half the reason I wouldn't sort of say to one of the Mams at the school 'do you know if there's any services around for people who are...' because I don't want people to think my marriage is breaking down.

Your relationship is a lot more intimate and a lot less public.

The stereotypical thing is you talk about your problems and you're weak somehow.

(About what stops people talking about relationships) Pride. Fear of being judged. You do get people like myself who don't talk about problems until they're...the corks ready to pop, if you like.

(About if stigma would prevent seeking help for parental relationships) I think it probably would. Because I would probably be concerned that someone would take it the wrong way.

Whilst many parents are comfortable speaking to others about the needs of their children there is a definite discomfort around speaking to anyone about their own relationships. Perception of stigma can prevent parents from talking to anyone about their relationship, not just professionals. Many parents worry about what others will think and about being seen as a bad parent.

Barriers to accessing services

In addition to the stigma associated with talking about relationships parents also identified a number of barriers to accessing services that may mean they can't get the support they need at the earliest stage.

It's the having to go through it though really isn't it, it's BOTH of you. One party can't go 'I need to go to this' without the other party agreeing to it because the other party might think 'well, that's not the way it is, this is the way it is' which causes it to come to a head.

Times of services exclude some parents.

Hard for working parents to get support because they have to pay for it.

Flexibility of services is an issue.

Gender and Generations

Gender

The differences between attitudes and coping strategies for men and women were discussed by the majority of parents we spoke to. Many of the Dads who took part felt services excluded them and that more needed to be done to make support more accessible to Dads. It was also felt that it was difficult for men to talk about their feelings and relationships because of traditional gender stereotypes.

There's nothing specifically for Dads in Hartlepool.

He won't engage, I will try anything but he won't get involved with services.

But generally he just tends to let it fizzle out. He's not very big on confrontation with me, normal kind of bloke I suppose.

I'm from a military background and talking about that sort of thing just doesn't happen.

(About previous support from services from a male point of view)
What we found when we were both arguing and at each other throats, it seemed to be the man that was obviously the horrible so-and-so, he started it, he did everything. If they already think you're the horrible so-and-so you're not going to speak to somebody. You're going to be in fear of what could potentially happen.

Yeah, we live in a world now where everyone's meant to be able to open up and talk but blokes don't.

It's actually getting blokes to go 'I have a problem' or 'I'm having a bit of difficulty', not even that I've got a problem, just a bit of difficulty or even a bloke saying 'I'm finding this a bit rough with our lass at the minute like', even that one sentence, that one realisation is going to help you. It's just getting blokes to actually admit that to begin with, especially when they're in a couple.

Generations

In addition to gender playing a very big part in attitudes to coping with relationship problems and getting help there was also views around how parents have learned from their own parents and also what their children learn from them.

My dad was a very old school man, grew up in the 40's. Blokes my age, we grew up in a different time to now. These days it's all about social media and actually trying to open up to people.

It's learned behaviour. You, as a parent, are maybe not the single but definitely are the biggest variable in bringing up children.

Kids just absorb and they think that's normal but actually it's not normal.

I had a good upbringing and a good family life so I think 'I want that for my children'. It's all about the relationships we've had with our parents.

A lot of people look at their kids, 'The little buggers, I'm sick of them doing this and they never settle down' and all you hear is 'I'm sick of this', well what do you expect, look what they're learning.

Impact on Children

A number of parents discussed their efforts to prevent children picking up on difficulties in the hopes of protecting them. There was a general agreement that children can pick up on problems in their family, particularly conflict in the parental relationship, and that this can have a lasting impact on them.

The main focus is ensuring the children do not pick up on the stresses.

You make such compromises to make sure they get enough of Mum whilst also getting enough of Dad. So hopefully they become 'well-rounded'.

When we first got married she (step-daughter) did still try to use the 'my dad would have still been with my mam if you hadn't married him' and she was 7 then. I thought, 'that's not the words of a child, she's heard that, she's listened to that'.

I can see that my son is still impacted by the divorce and it's been nearly 5 years.

They don't like it when we argue.

Social Media

The rise in popularity of Social Media means that parents have a new way of communicating and for some parents this could be problematic and cause conflict in their relationships.

Facebook causing conflict with ex and his partner. It's hard to hide from my ex partner, whatever you put on social media they can find.

We nearly went through a break up and I'll tell you, I went through Social Media. That interferes a lot.

So if there is a big issue, like every now and then, it's usually over messenger where the kids can't hear us argue. We've had so many arguments over text and things like that.

Yeah, I mean, personally there's stuff on Facebook that I think shouldn't be on there. Whether that's you're annoyed with your other half or your other half done whatever, the world doesn't need to know about it. You're not going to do yourselves any favours.

It was also acknowledged that Social Media can give a false impression of relationships.

I've got a couple of friends who will do nothing but rant (on Social Media), they won't put the good things on but they'll put 'My husband is terrible, blah blah blah' and you're sat there thinking 'oh she's on one again' but they won't say anything positive. And then you've got the ones who are the opposite, they'll go 'oh my god, my husband went out and bought me this and he's done all the housework so I don't have to lift a finger' and you think yeah but he can't be that perfect.

However there was also some good points identified to Social Media, such as helping people to open up about how they feel and also being a good source of information for parents who look at local pages to find out what's available near them.

These days it's all about social media and actually trying to open up to people.

A lot of the information I get comes from Facebook, from other parents who have shared things or I've shared.

Who do parents talk to?

There was a general agreement that most parents prefer to talk to someone they know about their relationships such as family or friends.

With my friends I've kind of got different levels I suppose. There are one or two I've known for years and I can tell them anything.

Previously would have gone to my parents but they're in ill health now. Now I'd go to the friends I've made through the community drop in, other mums.

However parents also acknowledged that sometimes family or friends might be biased, take sides or judge and that sometimes it's better to talk to someone 'impartial'.

I wouldn't go and speak to my parents anyway about issues I was having with my ex-wife, because they wouldn't give me an objective view.

Sometimes you don't want to open up to your family. They're not always the best place to turn.

For those parents who were regular attenders at community venues some expressed that they would speak to specific staff they trusted in these venues with whom they have built strong and trusting relationships. There were some responses that indicated that whilst parents may not feel completely comfortable with accessing support from

professionals they felt that in some situations a professional may be the best person to speak to as they would be impartial and more qualified to offer advice.

What do parents want?

Many parents felt services and signposting that are community based and 'informal' would appeal to them.

If you could have a drop in where doors are open and people can come in, individually, not even as a couple so people can come in and offload.

(About previous positive experiences with support in the community) When I was feeling overwhelmed there was always somebody there that could kind of say 'It's normal, you're fine, it's OK to feel like this, you're not a bad parent'. If there was a service like that available for relationships it would probably help."

Parents also felt signposting services would help to address the issue of raising awareness.

Some sort of signposting facilities or some sort of website...With either a list of phone numbers, emails or even something silly like instant messaging. They may not get back to you straight away but there's the chance there for you to reach out and make contact with somebody that can say 'try that number' instead of going 'what do I do?'

When speaking about relationships parents had different views on what would be the best response for them personally. Some parents liked to be given advice and guidance, depending on who they were speaking to but some parents felt they wouldn't expect advice from someone unless they were a professional. Many parents expressed the need for conversations to be confidential and non-judgemental. One thing that was expressed by the majority of parents was the desire for someone who would simply listen to them when they wanted to offload about their relationship.

Listen, give advice and to keep it confidential. Most importantly empathy and not being judgemental.

Without any professional background, a friend or family member would, in my opinion, just be there to listen. Acting on their advice without any experience could make a situation worse.

Confidentiality is crucial. sometimes we need someone to listen but sometimes advice is also helpful.

Sometimes I think I just need justification that I'm not being some kind of drama queen. Sometimes it's nice to hear someone go 'I know what you mean'.

Reflections

There is still a stigma around talking about relationships in Hartlepool and the perception that there are a large number of barriers getting in the way of parents accessing support. Many of the parents taking part in this research expressed concern about what people would think if they spoke about problems in their relationship.

There appears to be a number of very personal and complex factors that influence parents perception of their ability to talk about relationships and seek help:

- Parents worry about attracting attention from services or being judged as a bad parent and this can prevent them from accessing the support they need.
- Parents perceive numerous barriers to accessing services.
- Services are too 'formal' to meet their needs, don't feel approachable or are not flexible enough.
- Not wanting to speak to somebody about something as 'personal' as their relationship.
- The difficulty of needing to have consent from both parents to move forward with certain types of support for parental relationships when one parent may not be willing to take part.
- Not knowing where to go for support due to lack of signposting and no publicity of services.

- Gender stereotypes and learned behaviour from generation to generation have an impact on parents attitudes and coping.

- Difficulty knowing when is the appropriate point to access support before problems in a relationship reach 'crisis point' as some people may not recognise there is an issue in their relationship until much later on.

- Resolving relationship difficulties can come after a range of other complex priorities that parents feel they must put first in their family life.

What happens next?

Based on what we have learned from the parents we have spoken to we feel there are a number of things that can be done to address the challenges identified:

- **Reduce the stigma**

By running the **#ThroughTheirEyes** campaign to raise awareness of the impact of parental relationships and putting across a strong message that relationship problems are common and parents aren't alone we aim to encourage conversation about relationships so that more parents in need of support can feel comfortable to speak out. Organisations and individuals in Hartlepool can join us in achieving this goal by spreading the word through word of mouth and social media as well as becoming part of our future activities through volunteering and working alongside the Healthy Relationships Partnership.

- **Make relationship support more accessible**

Integrating relationship support into

existing services and community venues already accessed by parents across Hartlepool by creating a **Family Relationship Network** of organisations who are committed to supporting parents relationships and are helped by the Healthy Relationships Partnership. We aim to increase the skills and confidence of staff to work with parental relationships and make support available from a number of venues within the community to reduce the barriers identified by parents. As part of this we are in the process of building a group of **Volunteer Relationship Advisors** who will be based in Family Relationship Network venues. They will be trained and available to speak to parents, listening and offering information and signposting to services. This follows on from the suggestions from parents regarding what should be available in Hartlepool to reduce barriers to relationship support.

- **Raise awareness of services**

In response to the majority of parents reporting a lack of awareness of where they could go or who they could talk to about issues in their parental relationship we want to publicise the support available in Hartlepool. With the help of the local community and organisations we want to spread the word about the support available as well as by providing information specific to parents in Hartlepool on our website.

- **Further work to understand the context of help seeking for parental relationships in Hartlepool**

By looking at multiple different perspectives locally as well as further research to understand what a 'healthy relationship' means to people. We hope to

continue our work speaking to parents as well as a wide range of organisations and staff who support parents in many ways including financial support services, mental health services and drug and alcohol services.

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To find out how you or your organisation can support parental relationships in Hartlepool visit our website www.hrphartlepool.co.uk or email enquiries@hrphartlepool.co.uk



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Report by Katie Cramphorn

Future reports can be found at www.hrphartlepool.co.uk

For further information on the issues raised in this report or to be part of future research contact katie.cramphorn@hrphartlepool.co.uk