

# The Relationships Manifesto:

## Strengthening Relationships

October, 2014



# The Relationships Alliance

Our vision is a future in which strong and stable couple, family and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society.

The Relationships Alliance's mission is to develop and support strong and stable couple, family and social relationships by:

- Championing the importance of relationships so that they are valued in all aspects of public policy and across national and local government
- Helping the media, politicians, policy makers and public service providers to understand how relationships matter
- Generating and disseminating high quality information, insight and research on the importance and impact of supporting relationships
- Growing the market place for relationship support so that more relationships are supported in more ways
- Developing the capacity of the local relationship support sector so that they are able to adapt to rapidly changing public policy.

The Relationships Alliance consists of Relate, Marriage Care, OnePlusOne and The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships. Every year, over one million people access information, education, support and therapy from the members of the Relationships Alliance. We know that many more people could benefit from our support.

The Relationships Alliance works with the Relationships Alliance Network, which is a collection of third sector organisations who believe in supporting relationships.

This document sets out the Relationships Alliance's manifesto; each of the four core members of the Relationships Alliance contributed to the content. The document was written by Chris Sherwood and Patrick Sholl of Relate. The Relationships Alliance would like to thank Ellen Broome for her generous support in the development of our manifesto, and the members of the Relationships Alliance Network who gave up their time to debate the ideas presented here.

For more information about this manifesto or the work of the Relationships Alliance more generally, please contact Chris Sherwood: [chris.sherwood@relate.org.uk](mailto:chris.sherwood@relate.org.uk)



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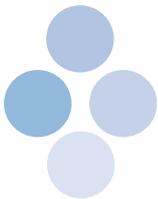
## Introduction

Relationships impact on every aspect of people's lives. They are fundamental to people's general wellbeing and sense of self. This isn't limited to romantic or couple relationships, but also people's relationships with their families, friends and colleagues. Good quality couple, family and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society and are the cornerstone of good economic and social recovery and prosperity.

Couple, family and social relationships are increasingly taking centre stage in public policy. The role and experiences of families are likely to play a significant part in the policy debate in the run up to the 2015 General Election – especially the situation among families facing the combined pressures of stagnant wages and increases in housing, energy and food costs as a result of the recent global recession.

This manifesto, the first of its kind from the Relationships Alliance, sets out a range of policy ideas to take public policy about relationships from the margins to the mainstream. We will only create the necessary conditions for relationships to thrive if they are put at the heart of public policy and here we outline twelve policy ideas to enable this to happen.

Clearly, government policy can only go so far, and it requires collective action from citizens, business, civil society and government to create the condition for people's relationships to flourish. Everyone will benefit from strong and stable couple, family and social relationships, which are the basis of a thriving society.



*Everyone will benefit from strong and stable couple, family and social relationships, which are the basis of a thriving society.*

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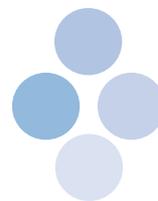
## Why relationships matter

It doesn't take much to see the importance of relationships, whether couple, family or social. One glance at artistic endeavours such as music, literature and films highlights how we prize relationships as a society; and the evidence shows there's good reason for this value, with good quality, strong and stable relationships having huge impacts on a wide range of outcomes.

Poorer relationship quality is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes for adults and children. It has been shown to lead to poorer physical and mental health (see Meier, 2013 for an overview), poorer employment outcomes (Doumas et al., 2003) and higher levels of negative health behaviours such as smoking and substance abuse (Homish et al., 2010). Couple, family and social relationships can act as shock-absorbers; they see people through good times and bad and provide support that helps individuals in times of need. However evidence shows that life changes and transitions (for example changes in health (Manne et al., 2013), starting a family (Kluwer, 2010), or negative changes in economic circumstances (Kneale, Marjoribanks, & Sherwood, 2014; Kneale & Walker, 2013)) can precede and compound instances of conflict and strain in relationships. It is clearly important not to take the benefits which accrue from high quality relationships for granted; if the strain mounts too high, we can lose these shock-absorbers and sources of support.

Relationship quality also has a considerable impact on children; poor quality relationships between parents are associated with worse parenting behaviours and weaker parent-child relationships (Reynolds et al., 2014). Those who grow up experiencing lower levels of parental conflict have better outcomes than children who are exposed to higher levels of conflict; this remains true regardless of whether their parents are together or separated (for example Reynolds et al., 2014; Coleman & Glenn, 2009). Children who live in more harmonious households experience better physical and mental health (Meltzer et al., 2000), are more likely to succeed at school (Harold et al., 2007), and are found to have higher levels of emotional wellbeing (Harold et al., 2011).

Furthermore, poor relationship quality takes its toll on society, even from a purely fiscal perspective. In addition to the research outlined above, poor relationship quality can lead to family breakdown, which has been estimated to cost the taxpayer in the region of £46 billion a year (Relationships Foundation, 2014). Correspondingly, good relationship quality can have a positive impact on society; with research showing a positive association between relationship quality and work engagement, even when other factors are taken into consideration (Burnett et al., 2012). In addition, approximately 5.8 million people in England and Wales (i.e. one in ten of the population) provide unpaid care which is estimated to amount to 3.4 million working weeks in 2011 alone (White, 2013). While the benefits extend far beyond this to society, such examples provide good reason as to why we should value relationships on a societal level.



*Children who live in more harmonious households experience better physical and mental health.*

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Given the fundamental importance of relationships, there's a clear incentive for people, both in their personal lives, but also from a political and professional perspective, to do what they can to strengthen and support relationships. The next questions are: first, what forms can relationship support take? And secondly, what works?

## Relationship support

Relationship support refers to the provision of information, education, support, counselling, and therapy intended to strengthen or improve couple, family, and social relationships. Relationship support can help to improve the quality of people's relationships, and help to strengthen and stabilise them. Similarly, it can help people to negotiate the end of a relationship and develop the skills necessary for future relationships.

Relationship support includes help from friends, family, and peers, as well as from more structured services and activities that promote relational capability, prevent relationship distress at key transitions and support people at times of identified relationship distress. This support extends to people not currently in a relationship and to the quality of the co-parenting relationship between those who are separated.

The Relationships Alliance views relationship support as encompassing a range of sources and operating through three areas (Coleman & Stoilova, 2014):

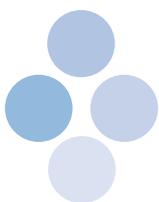
- Promoting relational capability (in other words the ability of individuals to initiate and maintain relationships influenced by early life experiences and the social and public policy context)
- Preventing relationship distress at key transitions (for example, from youth to adulthood and first time parenthood)
- Protecting people at times of identified relationship distress (for example, through relationship counselling and therapy when the relationship is in crisis).

There's extensive evidence as to the positive impact that relationship support can have. For example, couple counselling has been found to be effective in a number of international reviews

in improving relationship quality, relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution skills, as well as wellbeing and mental health (for example Shadish & Baldwin, 2005; Lebow et al., 2012; Klann et al., 2011). Evidence also shows that relationship support can be associated with positive behaviour change, which is sustained over time (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Recent evidence shows that marriage preparation and relationship counselling offered by members of the Relationships Alliance had positive effects on the wellbeing of participants and communication between couples, as well as on the quality of the couples' relationships and was associated with a substantial cost benefit (Spielhofer et al., 2014). This study found that Relate's couple counselling and Marriage Care's marriage preparation services deliver £11.40 and £11.50 of benefit respectively for every £1 spent (this is calculated by looking at what costs are saved by reducing the likelihood of relationship breakdown).

So with it being clear that relationships are of extreme importance, and the evidence demonstrating that relationship support interventions work, it's clear why every year over one million people access relationship support from the Relationships Alliance. However, given that it is also apparent that many more people could benefit from our support; the question remains as to why they do not access it.

The Relationships Alliance has identified three broad and interconnected barriers that are preventing people from strengthening their relationships. We outline these below, and then call on government to help overcome these barriers and move towards our vision of a future where strong and stable couple, family and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society.



*Relationship support can help to improve the quality of people's relationships, and help to strengthen and stabilise them.*

## Relationship Support Framework



### Cultural barriers

The cultural stigma that is associated with seeking help for relationships acts as a significant barrier that prevents couples, families and individuals from accessing relationship support services. This can lead to people not accessing services, or only accessing them when required to do so, or once their relationship has reached a crisis point. Alternatively it can lead to people accessing support which they feel is non-stigmatising and anonymous, such as online support (Spielhofer et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2010).

### Financial barriers

The cost of accessing relationship support is increasingly a barrier for couples, individuals and families. While not true for all forms of support, many more established forms, such as relationship counselling, can be prohibitively expensive, especially for those on low incomes. Evidence

from Relate practitioners shows that couples are increasingly delaying accessing support, or they are not finishing their sessions of support because of money worries (Hill, 2012).

### Systemic barriers

There are also institutional and structural barriers to accessing relationship support. The clearest evidence for such barriers is that those who are often in the best position to recognise relationships as an asset, identify relationship distress, screen for domestic violence and abuse, as well as signpost people to support, often are not aided or enabled to do so. GPs and employers are the most salient example of this - too often they are unaware of what services they can refer to, or feel that it is not their place to do so (Walker et al., 2010). This then feeds off and perpetuates the existing cultural stigma.

## Priorities for policy

The Relationships Alliance here outlines twelve policy ideas to take relationships from the margins into the mainstream of public policy. These policy ideas are structured around three interdependent themes: **promoting culture change** so that accessing relationship support is seen as normal and accepted; **developing and extending access to relationship support** so that more people can access help in more ways that work; and finally, **improving the impact of relationship support and measuring its value**.

### Promoting culture change

In order to overcome the cultural and systemic barriers encountered, it will be important to normalise relationship support through promoting culture change. While change is best effected across society as a whole, there are three beginning points which would be most effective places to start this process: at a governmental level, in frontline public service provision, and in schools. To achieve this:

# 1

**A cabinet-level Minister for Families and Relationships with a dedicated Whitehall department should be introduced.** This minister should have responsibility for leading on a comprehensive cross-government couple, family and social relationships strategy. They should actively look to raise the awareness and profile of relationship support, and also play a key role in championing the recently announced Family Test for public policy that will be introduced across Whitehall from Autumn 2014.

# 2

**All frontline practitioners delivering public services should receive training about relationship support** so that they are able to: recognise that relationships are assets; identify relationship distress; sign-post to relevant support services; and screen for domestic violence and abuse. This should take into account couple, family, social and workplace relationships. Key examples of frontline practitioners are GPs, health visitors, nurses, the antenatal workforce, social care, employers, housing associations, social workers, foster carers and Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) practitioners.

# 3

**All children and young people should have access to Relationships and Sex Education, which should be a compulsory part of the national curriculum and taught by experts such as relationship support organisations and specialist teachers.** This could be part of compulsory Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) provision in schools. As part of this, the Department for Education should develop key standards and competencies for those delivering Relationships and Sex Education and an expectation should be set that schools embed a culture which recognises that developing relational capability is an important function of education.

## Developing and extending access to relationship support

Over one million people access relationship support services each year, but it is clear that many more people would benefit from help with their relationships. Developing and extending access to relationship support by addressing cultural, financial and systemic barriers is critical. To achieve this:

4

**Family and Relationship Centres should be piloted and established in the UK, as has been done in Australia.** Family and Relationship Centres should offer a range of services, designed for people across the life course, at all stages of their relationships, including for intact, separating and separated families. These services should include the full spectrum of relationship support services including relationship counselling, relationship education, and dispute resolution services. These Centres should be developed out of the existing infrastructure in local communities including Children's Centres and relationship support providers.

5

**Central government should launch a £5 million "Strengthening Relationships Fund" to engage local authorities to develop and extend relationship support at the local level.** This fund should focus on developing and extending evidence-based relationship and parenting support in local communities, particularly targeting those on low incomes or those most at risk of relationship breakdown. The fund should look to stimulate local demand for relationship support services and could complement the work of the Troubled Families Programme.

6

**Central and local government should ensure that services designed to help at life transition points include a focus on couple, family and social relationships.** Life transition points can include getting married, becoming a parent, becoming a carer, retiring or being bereaved; these changes can place additional pressures on people's relationships. Services for people at these points should include a focus on how to maintain relationship quality, how to manage conflict and the impact of relationship distress on wellbeing.

7

**Central government should match-fund 10% of the cost of the transferable tax allowance for married couples and civil partners on an annual basis and invest it in strengthening couple, family and social relationships.**

This investment could be established as a national relationship support fund and should be targeted at those most at risk of family breakdown or those on low incomes where the cost of accessing support can be prohibitive. The fund would involve match-funding of approximately £70 million per year based on 10% of the total cost of the transferable tax allowance for married couples and civil partners<sup>1</sup>. The additional funding would enable thousands more couples and families to access relationship support each year.

8

**The Department of Health should expand the delivery of couple therapy for depression within the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme and ensure that this NICE-recommended therapy is available to all who need it.**

<sup>1</sup> Calculated by the Institute of Fiscal Studies. See Joyce (2013).

9

Relationship education should be incentivised through local government waiving the £35-per-person (£70 per couple) fee to those giving notice to marry at their local register office if they have taken part in an accredited relationship education programme.

## Improving the impact of relationship support and measuring its value

An important part of strengthening relationships and overcoming barriers to relationship support requires understanding what interventions are most effective and cost-efficient. It also involves ensuring that relationship quality is appropriately measured so that the value of services is adequately understood. This would help target interventions, and help ensure that the most effective interventions are used, guaranteeing value for money to the taxpayer as well as individuals and couples who bear most of the cost currently. To achieve this:

10

The Cabinet Office should expand its What Works Network to include a What Works Centre for Families and Relationships. This would ensure that evidence is captured and shared about relationships throughout the life course. In turn this would encourage evidence-based programmes of work, identify where there is a need for services and inform and shape public policy. As part of its role, the centre should develop a set of standardised measures of couple, family and social relationship quality and stability<sup>2</sup> to underpin its work and a cross-government approach to strengthening relationships.

11

Directors of Public Health should be required to measure the quality and stability of couple, family and social relationships to inform policy and commissioning by local authorities and clinical commissioning groups.

This measurement could build on the positive steps taken by the Department for Work and Pensions through their Family Stability Indicator, which works at the national level. Improving measurement at the local level will enable support to be better targeted and to enable the impact of services to be measured. The data should also be reported on annually to allow for better local scrutiny of the action taken by local public services to improve the quality and stability of couple, family and social relationships.

12

The expanded Troubled Families programme should include a focus on supporting and measuring the quality and stability of couple, family and social relationships. Relationships need to be appropriately reflected in an updated *Financial framework for the Troubled Families programme's, payment-by-results scheme for local authorities* (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012) to ensure that local providers are incentivised to strengthen relationships and funding is released at the local level for evidenced-based interventions such as *Parents as Partners*, couple counselling or couple therapy for depression.

<sup>2</sup> This should expand upon the work of the government's existing Family Stability Indicator, but to include more comprehensive measures of quality, and to broaden it so that it doesn't only include parents who are living together.

## Conclusion

This manifesto sets out the Relationships Alliance's vision for how couple, family and social relationships in Britain can be strengthened and how relationship distress and breakdown can be reduced over the next Parliament. We've provided 12 policy ideas that would help overcome the barriers to relationship support through promoting culture change, developing and extending access

to relationship support, and improving the impact of relationship support and measuring its value. Through this we can move towards strengthening and stabilising our relationships and, as a result, thrive as a society. We call on whoever is in government over the next Parliament to take action, so as to realise this vision.

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