



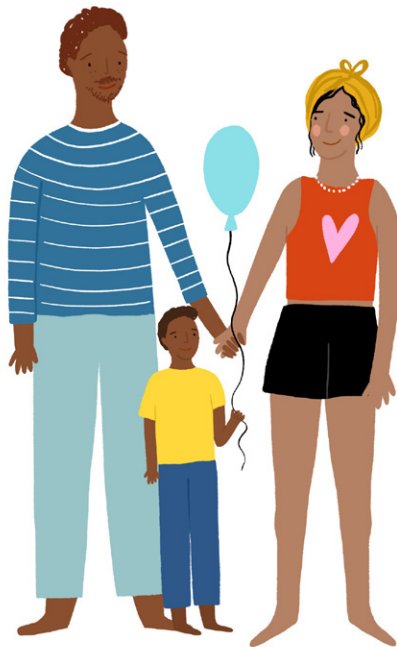
Telford & Wrekin  
Co-operative Council

Protect, care and invest  
to create a better borough

## COMMUNICATING BETTER

Relationships are key,  
positive communication is what we want to see

#gettingonbetter



Amity  
Relationship Solutions

## Good quality relationships are a right not a privilege.

For many families, stress is a large part of everyday life and stress is often the reason relationships feel strained and communication is poor. Whilst it can be hard to eliminate stress from everyday life, we can work towards improving the way we react, by communicating in more constructive ways.

When supporting families, you have a unique opportunity to enable communication in a more positive manner as opposed to in a way that ultimately damages their relationship.

Whether the relationship you are supporting is that of an intact couple, a co-parenting relationship, or a relationship between a parent and extended family member, they are all likely to experience conflict and arguments in very similar ways.



People may stop getting along and find communicating with each other challenging, because they have stopped listening they don't acknowledge other people's thoughts and feelings and they get drawn into wanting to win rather than resolve. It's easy to get stuck in this destructive cycle and then poor communication and a lack of closeness and harmony in the relationship becomes normalised.

This all too familiar situation is avoidable and it doesn't require you to be a counsellor in order to facilitate some change. Your role is not to 'fix' but to ask the kinds of questions that will motivate people to reflect, take responsibility and identify how they might communicate in a different way. A way that is not only healthier for them but most importantly for their children.

This booklet will take you through a few tools that you might find helpful to use when working with those who are finding their relationships challenging. They stop you from being tempted to slide into 'fix it' mode and provide a starting point to get parents and carers to begin to reflect on some key elements of the ways they communicate.

By working in a solution focused way you can guide people towards working out what better, looks like for them. This is a more effective strategy than offering your own advice and solutions. This can be easier said than done, when someone clearly has the expectation that you are going to tell them what to do next.

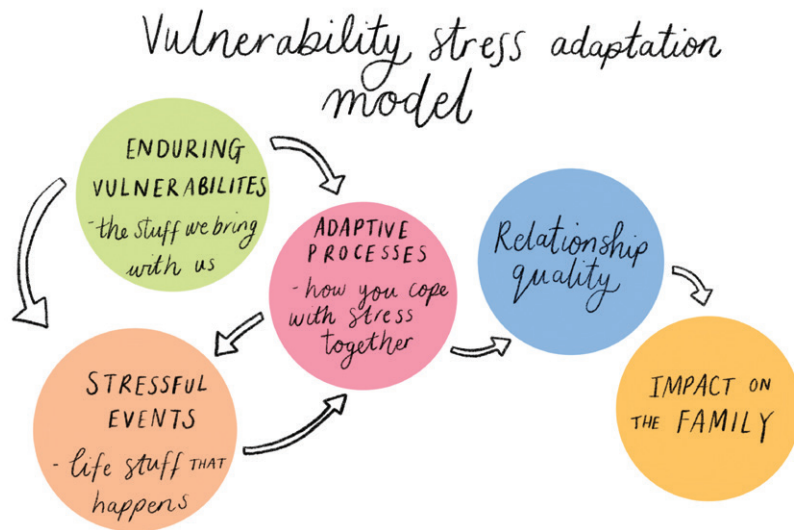
*Please note that these tools are not designed for use where there is any Domestic Abuse present in the relationship*

**Good relationship support is about asking good questions, not about giving good advice.**

## RELATIONSHIP TOOL NUMBER ONE

Respecting people's experiences, enables us to make allowances, adapt, improve communication resulting in healthier relationships

Understanding one another's life experiences and making allowances for it enables better adapting, better communication and a healthier relationship. Coping with the life experiences means finding a way to meet each other's needs in a balanced way.



Karney and Bradbury (1995)

## Vulnerability Stress Adaptation Model

As a human, what you do and what you think is largely influenced by your past experiences, the 'stuff' you bring with you. This stuff consists of many different things such as:

- The way you were parented
- The culture and community you have lived in
- Your genetic make-up, your personality
- The socio-economic environment you have lived in
- Your past relationships, romantic and family

It is your experiences, some of which is helpful and some of it is not. Some of your experiences helped you become more resilient and some of it has made you more vulnerable.



You bring all of your experiences with you into any relationship. A significant event may occur, such as bereavement, job loss, or a new baby, putting pressure on a relationship. The way relationships function overtime, can change, with new responsibilities and priorities. Being able to adjust well together, sharing what makes you feel vulnerable and what you feel able to cope with, you will adapt more successfully.

Communicating with each other becomes key, rather than blaming encourage listening and responding to each other with empathy. Responding with empathy is made easier if you're able to understand another person's perspective. This in turn helps to prevent the significant situation, having an impact on the quality and stability of the relationship.

Being able to recognise other's experiences may help you to understand why they are responding to situations of change in a particular way, providing you with the chance to feel less resentful towards their reaction.

Understanding one another's life experiences and making allowances for it enables better adapting, better communication and a healthier relationship. Coping with the life experiences means finding a way to meet each other's needs in a balanced way.

Stepping back and reflecting on this process can be an extremely valuable exercise for anyone in any type of relationship. To understand how to pivot together at the point of needing to adapt is a hard earned skill within a relationship and one that, if achieved, will impact greatly on it's quality, stability, and security.

Put in very simple (metaphorical) terms....it's about learning to hula hoop! Think about it, if two people were stood in a hula hoop together trying to keep it moving round their waist, to achieve this they would need to be in synchronisation, they would need to find a rhythm together that took into account their different heights, ability etc.

Successful, healthy relationships are ones where each person concerned has worked out a way of meeting the other persons needs in a way that is achievable and acceptable to them both. That is what being a team is, using each others strengths and supporting each others vulnerabilities at times of stress and adaptation which means that you are hoola hooping well. The best outcome of mastering the relationship hoola hoop is the positive impact it has on the children involved.

## It's all about the hula hooping!



Take the opportunity if possible to explore with the people you are supporting

**What is in their back pack?**

.....

**What is causing them stress?**

.....

**How well are they hoola hooping?**

.....

Once you have learnt more about the answers to these questions you are able to ask them to start to think about what they might do next that would be valuable?

**What have they learnt about the other person?**

.....

**What could they do together that would improve their hoola hooping?**

.....

(Please note that you may need to use a different analogy if hula hooping is not familiar or relevant to the person you are speaking to).

**What life experiences has each person brought with them into their relationships that has an impact on how they behave?**

.....

**How might these experiences be affecting how they communicate and cope with stress?**

.....

**How might you find out this useful information as a practitioner?**

.....

## RELATIONSHIP TOOL NUMBER TWO

Anyone would acknowledge that discussion is a normal part of human life. What we don't often recognise is the kind of communicator we can be under stress, or at least we don't reflect on it or necessarily realise the impact it has on anyone else. However, people often diagnose themselves as either good or bad at arguing. If you see yourself as good at arguing you may be more relaxed about engaging in a disagreement and on the flip side if you feel 'out manoeuvred' by others in arguments you might feel less inclined to wade into one. This can be part of the relationships you have and children have a front row seat to how this all plays out.

You can describe 3 main ways of behaving, sulking, walking and pushing. Encouraging someone to reflect on which behaviour applies most commonly to them, can be extremely helpful. Obviously how you engage with the argument can depend on who it is and what it is about and where you are.

### Arguing Styles

Everyone has their own way in which they respond to conflict.

How a person behaves during conflict is obviously going to have a significant impact on whether a resolution is found. The reasons for behaviour may be misunderstood. For example, a 'Walker' may need to create physical space in order to process the situation. However, if the person they are in conflict with is a 'Pusher', they may feel walking away is disrespectful and want to push their partner into a discussion. This may ultimately make the situation worse.

Misunderstanding a person's behaviour during conflict can be a key contributor to more frequent and unresolved arguments. Taking responsibility for how we behave and the effect that it has on others is a positive step towards better communication.

## Sulker

A person who uses silence and withdrawal to get what they want. They often feel resentful and are trying to gain sympathy from others to get a certain outcome that suits them. Some people are capable of long periods of sulking.

Often the partner of a sulker can't stand the atmosphere so will give in to the demands being made in order to restore peace.

## walker

Walking away from conflict is a self-preservation strategy a lot of the time. You feel overwhelmed by the conflict and are struggling to find a resolution, walking away provides the opportunity to process what is happening and hope that things calm down so a more productive conversation might follow later on.

## pusher

Pushing for discussion, for the other person to engage and 'get things sorted out' in the moment is a common arguing style. This behaviour is often what causes the other person to walk away. The need for discussion to be immediate, to see things through at the time that they happen feels important but that feeling may not be shared by the other person.

## ACTIVITY:

### How might you use this knowledge about arguing styles?

Ask each person to identify which style they think best describes how they engage with conflict. Then facilitate a discussion between them about the affect of their style on one another.

For example: A pusher style finds a walker infuriating as they see the walking away as solving nothing and disrespectful as they are not listening so often a pusher will follow a walker...this is not helpful!

Sulking can be a manipulative strategy to try and get what you want, it avoids any resolution so contributes to poor communication.

When they are able to be open about how they engage with conflict it can help communication in a more constructive way.

You are not trying to be a counsellor, but just facilitate a conversation about their behaviours that may be useful.

## RELATIONSHIP TOOL NUMBER THREE

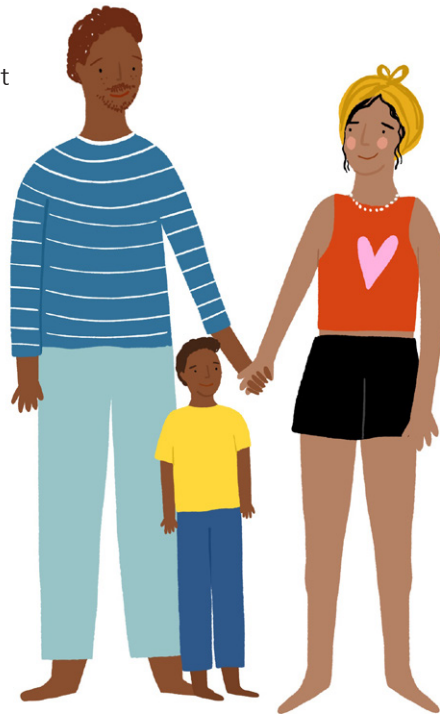
There are many motivations for wanting to improve a relationship including, mental wellness, harmony in the home/family, closeness, and an improved bond. But the one that as practitioners you are most interested in is the positive impact that a healthier relationship has on outcomes for the children involved.

Children do better if they are surrounded by healthy relationships, but this focus can get lost in relationships that have become ingrained in unhelpful communication, e.g., shouting, blaming and criticism has become common place.

### To improve this situation for all requires reflection and action.

Invite the people you are working with to reflect. Ask them to be honest and to think about how it affects the children when there is unresolved arguing in the house.

This example, uses the couple relationship, but it applies for reflection within any relationship that has an impact on a child.



## 5 things our child/children think and feel when we argue

When in the middle of arguing with your partner it can be easy to forget the impact on children



Thinking about the experience your child is having may not feel comfortable but many people find it a great motivator for change. No one chose for their child to have a bad experience because of something they have done.

You can support each other to do things differently, to keep in mind your child's needs and what they are being exposed to, is it helpful or harmful?

What things do you think your children think and feel when they see you arguing or know that there has been an argument?

E.g. they probably feel anxious and unsure of what might happen next

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....

People often say things like this...

'Well it's ok, we only argue when the children have gone to bed.'

What do you think about that statement?

We know that children pick up on the atmosphere of their parent's and families relationship, positive or negative. It is often easy to see the impact in their behaviour at home or at school for example.

Children need to learn communication skills from their parents and significant others. This can include how to listen, show respect, accept another person's view even if you don't share it, how to disagree without doing damage to a relationship. They don't need a front row seat to shouting, blaming, criticism and sarcasm, if that's what they see then that's what they learn.

*What we are going to try and change.....*

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

*How will we know if we are communicating in a way that is more helpful for our children than harmful.....*

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

## TOP TIPS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN GIVING SUPPORT TO STRUGGLING RELATIONSHIPS:

Don't assume you know what is going on, explore both parties' thoughts and feelings

Be curious, like an inquisitive toddler!  
What is really going on?

Encourage a culture of appreciation between the people you are supporting.  
Kindness wins over blame every time

Remember that not everyone feels able to change, all you can do is offer your support but someone needs to want things to be different in order to make change happen

It's normal to feel uncomfortable sometimes talking to someone about their relationship, but it will be fine if you stick to the golden rule of NOT trying to fix things or give advice but instead ask thoughtful, open questions





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