

Why everyone deserves healthy relationships

OnePlusOne's response to the Archbishops' Commission on families and households

OnePlusOne has a fifty-year history of developing evidence-based resources for couples and families. With our vision of relational capability for all, we want to see everybody equipped with the knowledge and skills to develop and maintain healthy relationships with the people in their lives.

At OnePlusOne, we value and seek to support people in all forms of relationships. Our engaging evidence-based digital interventions can be used independently by families or with the support of practitioners who have received our training. These resources help people to improve their communication and relational skills, enabling them to cope better with stress, resolve disagreements healthily, and keep their children at the heart of decision-making. We are working with a growing number of local authorities to provide this support.

In this paper, we will share real stories from two people who used our digital behaviour change interventions – Michael, a separated parent who used *Getting it right for children* after leaving an abusive relationship, and Katie, a mother of two who used *Arguing better* when she found herself in frequent conflict with her partner. These are not their real names.

The role of groups in providing access to support

Group settings can be an effective way to access support. Having fled a situation where he was the target of domestic abuse, Michael was living in accommodation for abuse survivors, and did not feel supported. He eventually found a route to support through a trusted peer group of other fathers.

Michael's social worker introduced him to *Getting it right for children*, an evidence-based intervention from OnePlusOne. This resource uses videos to help separated parents learn communication skills which can protect their children from harmful conflict. Michael was so encouraged by it that he shared his learning with other dads in the group, helping to overcome his fear of uncertainty.

Michael's experience highlights the value of group settings and is worth bearing in mind – many faith groups are also community groups, where people can gather and support each other. They are in an ideal position to promote positive messages and share information about available support. They can even offer relationship education in the form of group sessions or courses, coinciding with key transitional times such as in pre-marriage programmes, or during the transition to parenthood.

They can offer support to people like Michael, for whom staying in a relationship is not the best solution. Separation can be a difficult process, particularly when children are involved, and faith groups are well placed to support parents adapting to a new role as co-parents. They can share advice and guidance, encouraging parents to focus on their children's best interests and come to agreements about important decisions.

OnePlusOne's digital resources and professional training can equip community leaders to better support families by recognising issues and offering help where it's needed. There is currently no centralised funding system for this work, creating a 'postcode lottery' of where we can make our resources available. We would welcome the opportunity to work with faith groups to equip staff and volunteers with the confidence, skills, and resources to support families.

Identifying support needs

Katie and her partner had been together for fifteen years and they had been arguing to the point where they were both on the defensive, awaiting the next eruption. They had tried traditional counselling but found that the costs added pressure to their situation. Going through lockdown only made things worse.

When Katie found *Arguing better* – available through OnePlusOne’s package of digital interventions and free on point of service – it provided an opportunity to learn new skills independently. Katie recognised the links between stress and conflict, with thought-provoking content that allowed her to reflect on her own behaviour and how this might be influencing her interactions with her partner.

Katie was fortunate to come across this intervention at a time when it was fully funded and freely available across the country. Government funding for this work has since been localised, meaning it is only available in certain local authorities. Unlike Katie, most people will be introduced to these resources by a professional like an Early Help worker.

Faith groups can play an important role in identifying when support is needed and what might be beneficial to their communities. They can even assist with co-creating and distributing new resources, ensuring people receive relatable help via trusted and accessible routes. OnePlusOne has experience of collaborating with faith groups to develop culturally sensitive resources that are relevant to local communities. These groups can be sanctuaries where people are able to ask for help without being judged, and co-created resources can open pathways for signposting without fear of stigma.

Learning new skills

When Michael used *Getting it right for children*, he was introduced to relatable video scenarios with families that reminded him of his own. By engaging with these clips and the lessons around them, he learned valuable skills for regulating his own emotions or, in his words, “*playing it cool*”. He is now able to step back and consider how he might be coming across, and he thinks carefully about how to word his messages to his ex-partner.

Katie also picked up new skills to use when communicating with her partner, including offering emotional support before trying to solve problems. They were able to discuss this idea for the first time, noticing and acknowledging where they could be more supportive. Katie practised using ‘I’ statements, expressing how she feels in a disagreement rather than apportioning blame. This allowed her to further reflect on her own emotions, taking time out from a heated discussion to calm herself down, slow her thoughts, and prevent an argument from escalating.

Public policy

Faith groups can play a part in promoting what a healthy relationship looks like, to adults and children alike. This might include important communication skills like navigating difficult conversations, speaking up for yourself, and constructive conflict, all of which reach beyond romantic or parental relationships. Children learn how to argue from watching their parents, so we need to help children and adults to argue better.

The pandemic has put increased pressure on many families, and the developing cost of living crisis presents a worrying future. This can put a strain on relationships, with a greater risk of breakdown and a risk of wider costs to society beyond the families involved. Accessible early support is more important than ever.

Being able to respond to this kind of need when it arises is essential and we know how difficult this can be. Part of the challenge is to break down stigmas around issues like work-life balance, separation, and parental leave, making it safe to talk about relationships and parenting.

We want to empower people like Michael and Katie with the relational capability skills they need to navigate stressful times, and to be able to speak with their partners about problems so that they can cope together effectively. There are several ways faith groups can support this need, including:

- Encouraging people to talk openly about relationships and their challenges.
- Offering information about where to seek help.
- Actively providing a support network in the community.

A combination of these measures could help to support relationships for couples, parents, family members, friends, and even colleagues at work.

A joined-up approach

When Katie found support, she felt less isolated. *"You watch the videos," she said, "and you think 'everybody's going through the same thing and I'm not terrible'... it's a confidence boost because you've found something that can help you".*

Since using *Arguing better*, Katie has felt more able to share responsibility for her relationship with her partner, rather than shouldering the burden alone. There have been challenges, but their dynamic is slowly adjusting. Katie benefitted from having access to an online resource where she could learn independently without having to attend a face-to-face session.

Michael was able to get a new perspective on his children's experience of his conflict with his ex-partner: *"The decisions you make, and the consequences of those actions, last a lifetime for your children."* He also learned healthier ways to communicate: *"It's given me the tools – that moment where you stop and take a breather."* Michael is now in a new relationship and he and his ex-partner share care of their children.

The relationships we have with others are a fundamental part of our lives, with a direct impact on our development, wellbeing, and mental health from birth through to adulthood. Helping people to develop skills that enable them to cope effectively with family challenges and external stress offers the best chance of positive, long-lasting outcomes.

Faith groups can play a key role in supporting this. We would support a joined-up policy approach spanning government departments such as the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Department for Education, recognising the importance of relationships in society and the need for affordable, accessible support for all.