


## **Helping families access support**

Relate provides a wide range of therapeutic services to children, young people, adults, couples, families, friends and colleagues. Using a range of digital and in person applications we are reaching across wider communities to support and promote our belief that by 'relating well' with ourselves, each other and the different groupings within which we all move, we can all contribute to a healthy, functioning society that values respect, mutuality and support for those vulnerable members of our communities.

Relate is though only one of many organizations and agencies whose brief and mission statement reflects similar ideals. Some of these are faith based, others adopting secular approaches but all united in the consideration of how we might individually and collectively improve and enhance our various supportive frameworks for families.

Helping families and households to flourish is a time and resource rich activity. Many charitable concerns work with limited resources which inevitably affects the scope of their work. But by joining hands and adopting a co-creational approach we all have the opportunities to maximize what we can do to best advantage. This approach should include as equal partners those whom we seek to support. 'Top down' interventions are usually seen as invasive, unhelpful and indicative of a lack of understanding of what is actually required by those families and households' most needing help and support. By providing information, seeking discourse and agreeing potential ways forward we can often secure improved outcomes.

Faith groups have a unique opportunity to work collaboratively with their congregations. Raising and supporting awareness on key topics and actively enabling safe spaces in which all views are appreciated helps individuals, couples and families to more openly share problems and as a result seek advice and support. Up to date and accurate information on local resources is an essential component. So too is engaging in discussion about the component parts of healthy relationships. Family structures based on hierarchical concepts of male superiority are characteristic of some faith groups. Whilst the object of any intervention is to be respectful and supportive of tradition and belief, enabling individuals to share concerns about domestic and sexual abuse and their impact on individuals and families is vital. Where groups of people come together to worship there is an opportunity for ancillary discussion, resourcing, focus groups

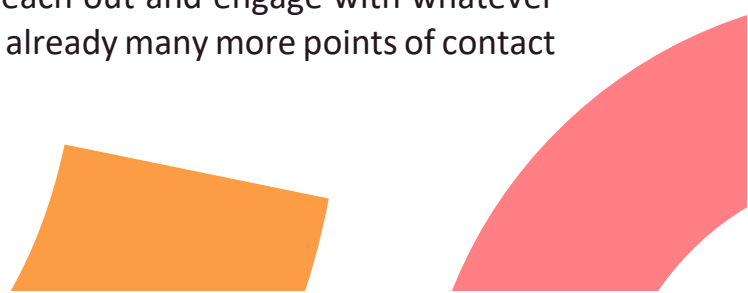


and supportive 'spaces' for quieter voices to be heard. Faith leaders and ancillary staff can play a key part in normalising open conversations. Our work on Reducing Parental Conflict has made us more aware of the practical problems people face when trying to access help. The lack of child care, access to digital resources and finding confidential places to share information are all barriers to getting support when it's most needed. By working on increasing interagency collaboration we increase the potential for reducing those barriers.

Relate clients often seek therapeutic intervention at a point of crisis. Faith groups, in common with other organizations have a unique opportunity to encourage an appreciation that by seeking help earlier rather than later, many relational issues may be better managed or potentially resolved. Inviting facilitators from organizations like Relate to attend faith group meetings would help to embed that non-judgemental help and guidance is easily available. This would also provide the opportunity for discussions about the difference between parental conflict and aspects of domestic abuse such as coercive control. We know from our own therapeutic work that for many people the manifestation of coercive control is poorly recognized. By increasing general understanding of how such behaviours might be more easily recognized two things become apparent, there is more possibility of victims taking the first tentative steps for themselves and any children towards becoming safer and secondly it begins to hold perpetrators of coercive control and violence to account for their actions.

It isn't all about talking though. Individuals, couples and families sometimes need to 'test the water' by seeking out information before deciding whether to engage with or accept help from an agency or organization. The importance of up to date information cannot be overestimated because the courage so often needed to take those first steps towards seeing support can easily be dashed when a resource or signposting leads to a dead end. Agencies and faith groups could potentially consider how might universally relevant information and self-help tools relevant to families might be shared, kept up to date and be easy to access across a range of mediums.

Increasing the opportunities for family members to ask for help is fundamental to supporting the earliest opportunity to reach out and engage with whatever help is needed. It is probably fair to say that already many more points of contact



for families such as ante natal classes, midwifery services and so on are asking whether there are any concerns within the family, particularly around domestic abuse. Domestic abuse however is only one of many problems and by increasing the breadth of curiosity plus providing those who are asking with the soft skills necessary to allow any questions to seem collaborative as opposed to interventionist encourages a shared belief that people care, would like to help and won't judge. Relate's Reducing Parental Conflict work and the subsequent 10001 days initiative indicate that asking people at the earliest opportunity about their relationships in a collaborative, empathic and accessible manner normalises a potential problem solving approach to family and couple problems.

The current cost of living issues mean that access to food banks and warm spaces are likely to become even more important. Practical support such as these provide further opportunities to engage with service users about family relationships and provide easy access information about where to get direct or self-help information and support.

Public policy needs to maintain a focus on highlighting the impact on children and young people of family breakdown. The immense financial reserves required to support the outcomes of family break down mean that we are often reactive as opposed to proactive in our approaches. Channelling money into early preventative solutions provides the best outcomes for families at risk of breakdown. All too often respective agencies and faith groups (whilst wanting to help as much as possible) work in silos so local and national policy that actively resources collaborative approaches clearly means that more families benefit from easy access help and support.

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