



Let's Stick Together



What is Let's Stick Together?

- Let's Stick Together is a one-hour, peer led programme from Care for the Family, that teaches relationship skills to new parents. Parents are trained to deliver the session, free of charge, via post-natal clinics, making the service universally accessible, and meeting the needs of a wide range of families, including those on low incomes.
- LST is designed to add value to health visitors/early years existing programmes. Delivery by Care for the Family's network of trained volunteers is cost-effective and ensures sustainability.
- Let's Stick Together covers three evidence-based, best-practice key principles, to strengthen couple relationships, that are easy for all parents to understand and apply, regardless of socio-economic background:
 - Bad habits to avoid
 - Good habits to build
 - Involvement of dads

Care for the Family

- Care for the Family has supported families across the UK with high quality services for over twenty-five years, delivering diverse family support services to 25,000+ families each year. It has 82 staff, 220 volunteers, 12,000+ active donors and an annual turnover of £3.3m.
- Care for the Family has a dedicated team, which trains and supports thousands of parenting educators across the UK working in local authorities, schools, social services, community and faith groups.

Why post-natal groups?

- Family breakdown is concentrated during the early years of parenthood. Amongst couples having a baby, 9% of married couples and 35% of unmarried couples will separate before their child's fifth birthday. Over 50% of parents who separate, do so within three years of having a baby¹.
- Post-natal groups are therefore the ideal access point to introduce relationship support aimed at strengthening families. Parents are also receptive to accepting support at this stage in their lives.
- The universal availability of the service drives awareness and normalises the use of preventative relationship education. Parents who attend Let's Stick Together will be encouraged to seek ongoing relationship or parenting education and support throughout their lives, thereby reducing the risk of family breakdown.

Using volunteers

- Using a peer-led trained volunteer workforce strengthens communities and enhances social cohesion. Peer volunteers are highly motivated, can speak from personal experience and their involvement helps to de-stigmatise relationship education.
- One of the major advantages of preventive relationship education is that professional or counselling expertise is not required. Outcome studies show that lay educators with minimal training produce similar or better results compared to university trained educatorsⁱⁱ.

The case for relationship education

- The cost of family breakdown to the UK taxpayer is estimated at £42bn per yearⁱⁱⁱ. High proportions of single parents receive state support. 60% receive housing benefit^{iv} and 40% receive out of work tax credits^v, compared to 10% of couple parents in each case.
- Government therefore has a huge incentive to reduce family breakdown where possible. Relationship education, based on existing local schemes, is an effective low-cost way to strengthen families, and prevent and reduce conflict and family breakdown^{vi}.
- A well-established body of predictive research shows that common patterns of behaviour amongst couples in the early stages of relationship distinguish couples who do well from those who do less well^{vii}.
- Relationship education programmes, such as PREP^{viii}, teach couples about dynamic factors that are open to change and will help couples improve their relationship quality and stability^{ix}.
- A growing body of outcome research shows that couples who learn about these changeable patterns subsequently have more positives, fewer negatives and less conflict in their relationship, and reduced divorce or separation rates^x.
- This has now been demonstrated using a broadly similar approach amongst engaged couples^{xi}, unmarried new parents^{xii}, military^{xiii} and prison families^{xiv}.
- Studies generally indicate a significant decline in marital satisfaction following the birth of the first child and the transition to parenthood^{xv}. On average, parents report lower levels of marital satisfaction than couples who are not parents, with the difference being most marked in those with younger children or larger families^{xvi}.

Research underpinning Let's Stick Together content

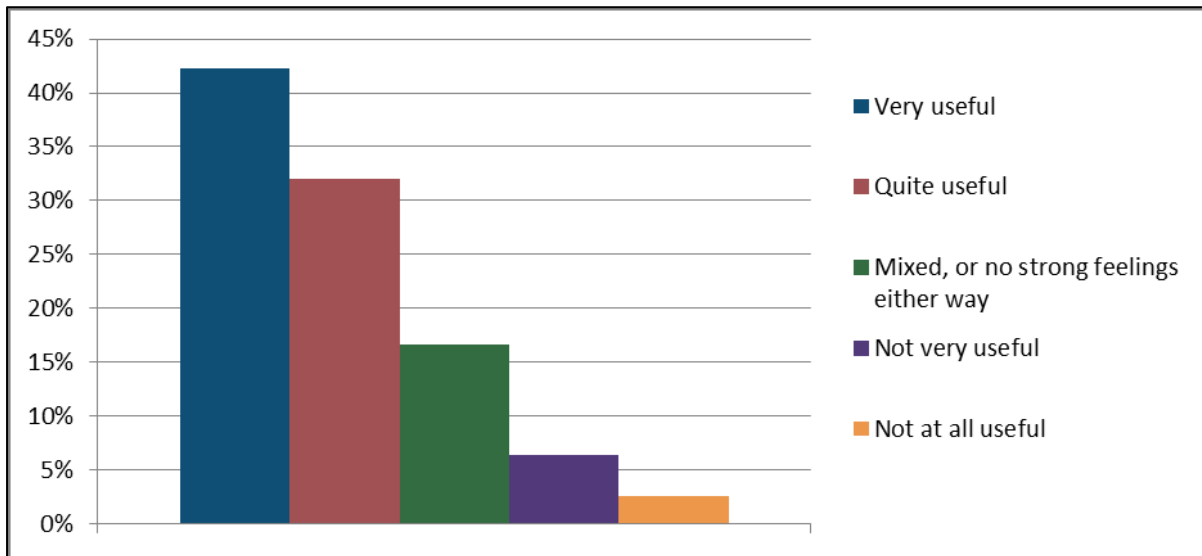
- Let's Stick Together focuses on three key predictors of relationship outcomes in the early years of parenthood: bad habits, good habits, and father involvement.
- The strongest predictor of failure in the early years of a relationship is the presence of 'negative affect'. The strongest predictor during later years, as a couple's oldest child enters their teens, is the absence of 'positive affect'. In other words, the absence of positive affect eventually takes its toll^{xvii}. Let's Stick Together teaches both.

- ‘Bad habits’, or ‘negative affect’, are operationalised as ‘STOP signs. STOP stands for Scoring points, Thinking the worst, Opting out, and Putting down^{xviii}. STOP signs are designed to help individuals and couples identify and reduce their own negative dynamic factors.
- ‘Good habits’, or ‘positive affect’, are operationalised as ‘Love Languages’^{xix}. Love languages are Time, Words, Actions, Gifts and Touch. They represent ways of demonstrating ‘positive affect’ through affection, interest and humour^{xx}. Love Languages are designed to help couples identify their preferred, and usually very different, methods of giving and receiving love.
- ‘Father involvement’ is linked to a variety of measures of mother well-being^{xxi} and child well-being^{xxii} in the early years of parenthood. Father involvement has also been shown to improve following a relationship intervention amongst new parents^{xxiii}. The third part of Let’s Stick Together helps parents identify a specific risk factor (pushing dad away) that can inhibit father involvement, and a protective factor (making time together) that can facilitate it.

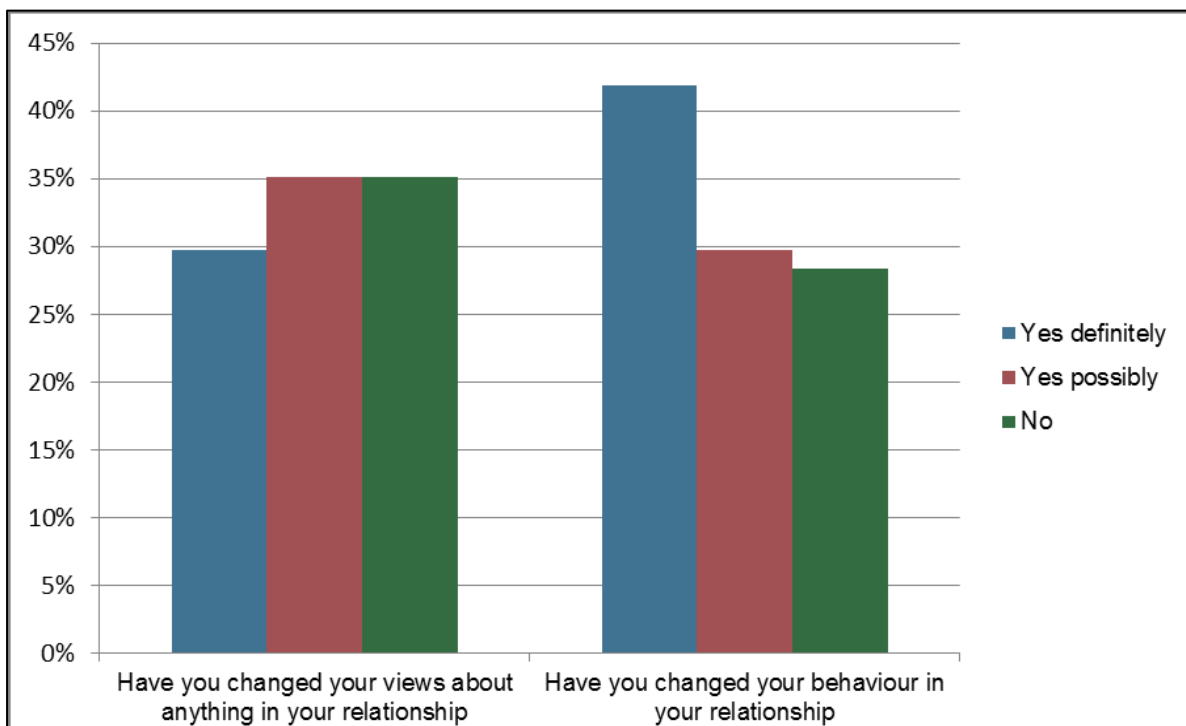
Department for Education evaluation

- The Department for Education commissioned an independent research report into Let’s Stick Together and two other forms of relationship education, as ministers were particularly interested to see how effective they were.
- The findings showed that there was a positive average improvement on all three validated scales used to measure changes in relationship quality, well-being and communication. Effect sizes ranged from $d=0.16$ to $d=0.22$. The changes were not large enough to be proven as statistically significant, possibly because of the small number of parents included in the research.
- Around a third of parents surveyed three to six months later were able to recall explicitly some of its key messages relating to what to do and not to do to foster positive relationships.
- Around two thirds of parents felt that the session had changed the way they viewed, and how they behaved in, their relationship.
- Most of the parents completing qualitative interviews were able to give examples of such changes. In particular, this included a greater awareness of how things could go wrong and what could be done to prevent disagreement or conflict and of the need to work at their relationship.
- Most of those interviewed were also able to provide concrete examples of how attending the session had changed their relationship behaviour, in respect of avoiding particular behaviours, expressing love or being receptive to different ways of expressing love, and how to involve fathers in parenting.
- The survey suggested that some parents’ experience of Let’s Stick Together had made them significantly more likely to consider accessing other types of support, including couple counselling.

- The graph below shows that around three-quarters of respondents (74%) indicated that they had found the LST session either 'very useful' (42%) or 'quite useful' (32%). Only three per cent said that it had been 'not at all useful'.



- Most parents thought that the session had made a difference to how they viewed their relationship (30% said it had 'definitely' and 35% said it had 'possibly' changed their view) and their behaviour in their relationship.



Issue: A young woman aged 28 was married to her partner of six years. However, their relationship had broken down as a result of high levels of conflict and arguments. They had a daughter who was a toddler and even though they were separated, the couple lived in the same house to help co-parent her.

Getting help: Her partner refused couple counselling, so when she heard about Let's Stick Together at her local mothers' group *'I was really keen to go to it'*.

What she thought: She really liked having space and time to *'think about why everything goes wrong [in relationships] rather than being in it and having arguments'*, as well sharing stories with others *'so it made you feel like other people are in the same boat'*. The simple messages were also easy to understand and remember day-to-day: *'like with STOP, it's good to recognise the different types of arguments and how to stop them'*.

Impact: The session itself was seen as useful, but that impact had been increased because *'I read the book and went on the website as well and there were those STOP sign videos which I found really good for my partner because he's not really a book person'*. Significantly, she thought that it had changed her own behaviour and reduced conflict in their relationship: *'I think before causing an argument, or I try to pause before arguing back'*. But the most important impact was that it *'gave us a chance for getting back together'*. Her husband has now even suggested to *'try mediation to get things going even further'*.

"I'm now more likely to think before causing an argument, or to try and pause before arguing back – like saying: 'Hang on we're not having an argument, I'm just saying the bins didn't go out'. So to try and think about it – to try and stop." (Co-parenting mother, 28, child aged >1 year).

"I've put things into practice. Not walking away is the main one. I'd started getting into a pattern of just walking out of the room when a conversation became too difficult. It was really helpful to get the session at that time. Since the session I've stopped myself from walking away lots of times. Instead I'll take a time out and discuss it more later with him." (Married mother, 33, child aged 3-6 months).

"I've been actually trying to let him have a little bit more of a go with our little girl without me having to step in. I'm the main carer for our little girl who is two on Thursday, so sometimes I know I'm guilty of the fact that I can do it quicker so I do it. And sometimes it is a case of actually: 'No, he can do it, let him have a go'." (Married mother, 33, child aged >1 year).

"We've started having date nights again, getting a babysitter. I needed a bit of a prompt and the session gave that." (Married mother, 33, child aged 3-6 months).

The researchers conclude, "Overall, the findings show how, at a period of transition in a relationship, a positive experience of relatively small relationship support interventions, such as Let's Stick Together and marriage preparation, can change individuals' and couples' attitudes towards accessing support. Such a change might result in some of them accessing couple counselling in future which, in turn, could reduce the risk of relationship breakdown and, potentially, result in significant social benefits."^{xxiv}

Internal evaluation of Let's Stick Together

- Two internal evaluations of Let's Stick Together have also been completed by Bristol Community Family Trust, where the programme began^{xxv}.
- The first survey looked at what 404 mothers thought of Let's Stick Together. 70% of the mothers were married, 24% cohabiting and 6% single/other.
- 94% said it was both 'enjoyable' and 'informative'. 93% said it was neither 'embarrassing', 'boring', nor 'scary'. 94% said the entire session was 'useful'. Only 1% said none of it was "useful".
- There were no major differences in ratings between married and cohabiting mothers. However cohabiting couples were especially likely (47% vs 29%) to use a particular pattern of STOP signs called 'Back off or Fire back'^{xxvi} that may be consistent with lower levels of commitment. Cohabiting mothers were also slightly less likely (76% vs 86%) to think their partners are "definitely willing" to discuss Let's Stick Together at home.
- Amongst single mothers, 95% found the session 'useful'.
- The other remarkable finding was that nearly three quarters of all parents, including the 'Back off or Fire back' group, said they were likely to change their behaviour.

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Note: Much of the material in this paper compiled by Harry Benson for Let's Stick Together: Background Research (July 2011)

ⁱ Benson, H. (2010) Married and unmarried family breakdown: Key statistics explained. Bristol Community Family Trust.

ⁱⁱ Laurenceau, J-P., Stanley, S., Olmos -Gallo, A., Baucom, B., & Markman, H. (2004) Community-Based Prevention of Marital Dysfunction: Multilevel Modeling of a Randomized Effectiveness Study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72, 933-943.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wong, D. (2011) Counting the cost of failure, 2011 update. Cambridge: Relationship Foundation.

^{iv} DWP (June 2010) DWP Statistical Summary.

^v HMRC (April 2010) Child and Working Tax Credit Statistics.

^{vi} Stanley, S. & Rhoades, G. (2009). Marriages at risk: Relationship formation and opportunities for relationship education. In H. Benson and S. Callan (Eds.), *What works in relationship education: Lessons from academics and service deliverers in the United States and Europe* (pp. 21 - 44). Doha, Qatar: Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development.

^{vii} Stanley, S. (2001). Making the Case for Premarital Education. *Family Relations*, 50, 272-280.

^{viii} Markman, H., Stanley, S., & Blumberg, S. (2001) *Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

^{ix} Stanley (2001).

^x Carroll, J. & Doherty, W. (2003). Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A metaanalytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, 52, 105-118.

^{xi} Stanley (2001).

^{xii} Wood, R., McConnell, S., Moore, Q., Clarkwest, A., & Hsueh, J. (2010) *Strengthening Unmarried Parents' Relationships: The Early Impacts of Building Strong Families*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica.

^{xiii} Stanley, S., Allen, E., Markman, H., Rhoades, G., & Prentice, D. (2010). Decreasing divorce in US Army couples: Results from a randomized controlled trial using PREP for Strong Bonds. *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 9, 149-160.

^{xiv} Einhorn, L., Williams, T., Stanley, S., Wunderline, N., & Markman, H. (2008). PREP inside and out: Marriage education for inmates. *Family Process*, 47, 341-356.

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- ^{xv} Belsky and Pensky, 1988; Shapiro et al., 2000; Schulz et al., 2006; Kluwer, 2010.
- ^{xvi} Twenge et al (2003) meta-analysis of 148 studies.
- ^{xvii} Gottman, J. & Levenson, R. (2000). The timing of divorce: Predicting when a couple will divorce over a 14-year period. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 737-745.
- ^{xviii} STOP represents a combined interpretation of PREP's 'danger signs'^{xviii} (escalation, negative interpretation, withdrawal, invalidation) and Gottman's 'four horsemen'^{xviii} (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling).
- ^{xix} Chapman, G. (1995) *The five love languages*. Northfield.
- ^{xx} Gottman & Levenson (2000).
- ^{xxi} Cowan, P., Cowan, C., Pruett, M., Pruett, K. & Wong, J. (2009), Promoting Fathers' Engagement With Children: Preventive Interventions for Low-Income Families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71:663–679.
- ^{xxii} Cowan, P., Cowan, C., Cohen, N., Pruett, M., & Pruett, K. (2008). Supporting fathers' engagement with their kids. In J.Berrick & N.Gilbert (Eds.), *Raising children: Emerging needs, modern risks, and social responses* (pp. 44 – 80). New York: Oxford University Press.
- ^{xxiii} Hawkins, A., Lovejoy, K., Holmes, E., Blanchard, V. & Fawcett, E. (2008), Increasing Fathers' Involvement in Child Care With a Couple-Focused Intervention During the Transition to Parenthood. *Family Relations*, 57: 49–59.
- ^{xxiv} All findings, quotes and graphs from the Department for Education report: Spielhofer, T., Corlyon, J., Durbin, B., Smith, M., Stock, L. and Gieve, M. (2014). *Relationship Support Interventions Evaluation*. Department for Education. The full evaluation report is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationship-support-interventions-evaluation>
- ^{xxv} Benson, H. (2010) *Lets Stick Together*. Oxford: Lion Hudson.
- ^{xxvi} Benson, H. (2009). Back off or fire back? Negative relationship behaviours amongst postnatal married and cohabiting couples. In H. Benson and S. Callan (Eds.), *What works in relationship education: Lessons from academics and service deliverers in the United States and Europe* (pp. 55 - 66). Doha, Qatar: Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development.