

Relationships Matter:

Understanding the Needs of Adults (Particularly Parents) Regarding Relationship Support

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

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Relationships Matter Report

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Foreword

The Research Task

In spring 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned Newcastle University to lead a study of adult couple relationships. The study was designed to inform the Government's policy commitment to support couple relationships, particularly those of parents, so as to enhance the quality of family life and minimise the risks for children associated with parental separation. The objective was to extend understanding of the issues and situations which cause stress in couple relationships and consider how couple relationships can be better supported.

The study was undertaken in two phases. The first focused on couples whose relationship had broken down, resulting in separation, divorce or the dissolution of a civil partnership; the second focused on couples in ongoing relationships of varying duration. Between June and December 2009 over 1,100 men and women participated in the study. Not all of them were resident in England, however, and the information provided by those living elsewhere in the UK has not been included in the analyses undertaken for this report.

The study has been wholly qualitative, with the expressed aim of gaining in-depth insights via a range of qualitative methods: e-surveys, interviews and focus groups. The volume of data gathered has been considerable and further analyses would be required to utilise the data to the full. While we cannot claim that the findings are in any way representative, we are certain that the issues and support needs discussed by participants and presented in this report will be familiar to most people who have been or are in a committed relationship. We believe, therefore, that the findings will enable both policymakers and practitioners to consider how partners can be supported to sustain and strengthen their couple relationship at different life stages. The findings from this study confirm those of many previous studies, thereby consolidating the evidence base and providing a clear steer for future action.

The Research Team

This study has been a team effort. The research team included sociologists, psychologists and social policy specialists from the Institute of Health and Society (IHS) at Newcastle University and the Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) in London, all of whom brought a wealth of research expertise to the study. The research was directed by Professor Janet Walker (IHS), and Dr Graeme Wilson (IHS) took overall responsibility for the management of the interview samples and the fieldwork activities that took place in the northern half of England. At FPI, Dr Helen Barrett worked closely with the Newcastle team and was responsible for co-ordinating the fieldwork that she and Dr Yan-Shing Chang (FPI) undertook, primarily in the south of the country. During phase 2 Dr Barrett also assumed responsibility for the analyses of the e-survey data sets. All the members of the team were involved in facilitating focus groups, and in contributing to this report.

Several other colleagues at Newcastle University contributed to the study at various times. Karen Laing developed and managed the e-surveys until she left to take a post in the School of Education in September. She was a key member of the team from its inception and we were sorry to lose her. We record our sincere thanks to her for her commitment and dedication to the study. Dr Christine Thompson undertook a number of in-depth telephone interviews in both phases of the study and, as always, we are indebted to her for her support and helpful insights. During phase 2 Dr Conny Güll helped with interviews and focus groups and we are grateful to her for her contribution to the study. A study of this type requires considerable administrative support, and we are much indebted to Jane Tilbrook for making sure that all the elements of the study were implemented efficiently and effectively, and,

latterly, for preparing successive drafts of this report ready for publication. Our thanks are due, also, to Michael Ayton, our copy editor, who has endeavoured to ensure that our report is accessible and intelligible through his careful and thorough attention to detail in the text.

During the study we were grateful for the support of other staff at FPI and in IHS who established and maintained the Relationships Matter websites. They ensured that a wide range of people could find out about the study and contribute if they wished.

Acknowledgements

In order to conduct a study of this kind in a relatively short timescale we have needed the help and support of many people outside the research team and a number of specific acknowledgements are essential. First, we want to thank officials in the DCSF for their unwavering support throughout the study. Lizzie Sharples, Steve Smith and Annabel Burns were supportive and appreciative at all times, encouraging us to be innovative and wide-ranging in our approach. Their unswerving commitment to and interest in the study meant that we were able to achieve a great deal in a relatively short period. They constantly reviewed with us the risks and the tight timelines, making sure that we reported regularly and that feedback to the team was swift and constructive. Our thanks go, also, to Clarissa White, who was our DCSF research adviser. She challenged us wisely and constructively throughout to make sure that our research methods were both robust and appropriate to the task in hand and we appreciated her ability to look at the big picture. Other members of the DCSF, specifically Lotta Gustafsson, also provided helpful insights through a number of discussions, and we are pleased that the study was able to directly inform *Support for All: The families and relationships Green Paper*, published in January 2010. All the members of the DCSF worked hard to ensure that the study was publicised via a range of websites and that we were kept abreast of policy initiatives and decisions which were relevant to the research agenda.

The DCSF established a cross-departmental Steering Group (see Annexe 3), which meant that we were informed of policy issues relating to health, social security, family justice and child maintenance and could broaden our enquiry to embrace wider government agendas. We are very grateful to all of the members for taking the time to read our interim reports, attending presentations, publicising the study, and providing valuable ideas and feedback from the beginning of the study to its conclusion.

We were determined from the start that we wanted to involve people from all walks of life and from all parts of England in the study – to give as many people as possible a voice on a topic which matters to all adults who form committed relationships, irrespective of whether their relationships are able to stand the test of time. We invited a number of key people to form a Reference Group (see Annexe 3) and asked them to open doors to a broad sample of research participants. Everyone we approached agreed to help us and they each gave of their time to work closely with us throughout, making valuable suggestions about our approach and allowing us to use their agencies/organisations to recruit research participants. We are enormously grateful to all of them for responding promptly and with good grace to numerous requests and for providing feedback on interim findings. Our particular thanks go to Deidre Sanders and her team at the *Sun* newspaper, who allowed us to use her column as a vehicle for reaching many millions of people during the course of the study. Our thanks are due, also, to staff in Gateshead Children's Services and to the GONW for their support in arranging focus groups.

Finally, our heartfelt thanks go to the 1,100 or so people who participated in various parts of the study. Some chose to remain anonymous; others allowed us to contact them and involve them in in-depth interviews and focus groups. The majority shared their relationship history and experiences, the highs and the lows, allowing us to delve deep under the surface of

personal, private relationships. We heard many moving accounts of how relationships had floundered or had survived against the odds. All the research findings presented in this report have been derived from the information provided by people with first-hand experience of couple relationships. Their voices are evident throughout and we have endeavoured at all times to record them accurately and appropriately. We quote research participants verbatim to illustrate the key themes that emerged during data analysis and trust that we have not distorted or compromised the information they gave us.

This Report

During the study we provided regular monthly updates to the DCSF team, gave two verbal presentations of interim findings to the DCSF and members of the Steering Group and Reference Group, and submitted an interim report at the end of phase 1. This report captures all the findings from both phases, however. It is written primarily for policymakers and practitioners who are keen to understand and support couple relationships, but we hope it will be of interest also to others who have an interest in adult couple relationships, including all those who participated in the study. The report contains seven chapters and the more technical research detail is included in Annexe 2. A research briefing was published alongside the Green Paper in January 2010.

The report presents the views of the research team, which are not necessarily those of the DCSF or other Government departments. Our conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 7 reflect a common understanding in the research team of the key themes and challenges arising from the study.

Professor Janet Walker
Institute of Health and Society
Newcastle University
February 2010

Chapter 1 **Understanding Couple Relationships: Our Approach to the Study**

*An effective family policy must start with supporting strong couple relationships and stable, positive relationships within families.*¹

In December 2007, *The Children's Plan* set out an ambitious agenda for the next decade to make England the best country in the world in which to bring up children. The plan acknowledged the importance of supporting adult couple relationships in order to strengthen family life. One year on, at a Relationship Summit in London in December 2008, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families announced a three-point plan, which focused attention specifically on bolstering adult couple relationships. The three-point plan included:

1. More support for new and first-time parents, including more resources to train a range of professionals who will provide the support.
2. More support for children involved in family breakdown, particularly in schools.
3. New relationship support pilots and further funding to better co-ordinate services for separated parents.

Over £7 million is being made available between 2009 and 2011 to organisations delivering relationship support services and a further £5.5 million to fund pilots delivering better co-ordinated local support for separating couples. The announcements made at the Relationship Summit signalled an important step forward in the Government's far-reaching programme to provide better support for parents so that they can provide better support for children, and to improve the lives of all children and families in England. The importance of family and couple relationships was highlighted further in *Support for All: The families and relationships Green Paper*² published in January 2010.

In spring 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned a study to inform the Government's commitment to provide more support for parents and children and to enhance the quality of adult couple relationships. The main aim of the study was to gather evidence which could guide the development of new policy initiatives to support adult couple relationships, particularly those of parents. This report sets out the findings from that study, which has investigated the relationship support needs of adult couples in England and considered the ways in which different kinds of support might be provided in the future. Between May and November 2009, women and men in all kinds of adult couple relationships, including those whose relationship had ended in separation and/or divorce, shared their experiences and talked about:

- the issues they had faced at different times in their relationship
- problems and difficulties which had put a strain on the relationship
- coping strategies when relationships are under strain and ways to foster healthy couple relationships
- the reasons relationships had broken down and the issues surrounding separation and divorce

¹ DCSF (2007) *The Children's Plan: Building brighter futures*, Cm 7280, HMSO, p. 23.

² DCSF (2010) *Support for All: The families and relationships Green Paper*, Cm 7787, The Stationery Office.

- the support that is needed at different times and in different situations
- the support they had sought and/or received

Our aims have been threefold:

1. To enhance understanding of how adults form and manage relationships, the emotional, social and economic stressors which can damage these relationships at various times, how adults cope with these stresses and the challenges they face when couple relationships break down and result in parental separation and/or divorce.
2. To identify the relationship support needs (emotional, financial, social) of adults in different personal circumstances and in a variety of relationship types, at key transitions and at other times of stress or change, and to explore the extent to which current provision appears to meet the needs identified.
3. To assess public reaction to and support for initiatives being proposed by ministers, and gather evidence which can guide the development of new policies and practice to support adult couple relationships, particularly those of parents.

The research has been wholly qualitative, and we set out to be as inclusive as possible in our approach, involving people from all walks of life and from different backgrounds, cultures, and geographical locations.

The report is divided into seven chapters. In this first chapter we refer, briefly, to the context within which the study was commissioned and summarise the research methods employed to gather the evidence which is presented in Chapters 2–6.³ In the final chapter, we reflect on the implications of the findings for policy and practice in the future. In presenting the findings, we have endeavoured to:

- indicate the trends and patterns which have emerged from a rich and varied data set
- highlight the critical moments and crunch points in couple relationships which can place strains on those relationships and render them vulnerable
- describe the coping strategies which individuals and couples use to get through challenging times
- discern the support needs of men and women at different times and in a variety of circumstances.

In very many ways, this study confirms the findings of previous research which has drawn attention to the complexities of family life and relationships in the twenty-first century, but in addition, it underlines the high expectations people have of intimate, committed relationships, irrespective of the generational and gender differences which are often apparent in personal narratives, and the enduring belief that such relationships, when established, should last for life. In order to put the findings into context, we describe briefly the changes in family life which have prompted the renewed policy interest in England in supporting adult couple relationships, before describing our approach to the study.

³ For a fuller account of the policy context see Annexe 1. Annexe 2 contains a more detailed account of the research process.

Changing Families, Changing Relationships

While the family unit is usually regarded as the ideal human community in which a child's physical, developmental and emotional needs are met, it is important to note that family structures have been evolving and changing throughout history. Nevertheless, the last fifty years have seen unparalleled shifts in the ways in which families are formed and re-formed. Family life in the twenty-first century is fluid and diverse and families today reflect a number of fundamental changes that have occurred in the way adults manage their personal relationships. Although most young people expect to marry at some time in their lives and seven in ten families are headed by a married couple,⁴ marriage rates have declined and cohabitation has become commonplace, not only as a precursor to marriage, but also as a relationship of choice. More babies are being born outside marriage, either into cohabiting couple relationships or into single-parent households.⁵ Moreover, having children is frequently delayed by couples who want to establish their careers and create a lifestyle which meets their expectations, and family size has decreased as couples are able to choose to have fewer children than in times past.⁶

The Drivers of Change

There have been a number of drivers influencing these changes, including an increased social acceptance of alternative family forms, and greater economic independence, especially for women. The increase in opportunities for women, particularly in respect of education and employment outside the home, has undoubtedly had an impact on more traditional gender roles and the gender power balance in adult relationships. Greater independence also results in adults having more choice about how and when they form relationships, the kind of relationship they seek and the expectations they have of an intimate couple relationship.⁷ Diversity and choice in adult couple relationships can be viewed as leading to greater democracy in personal relationships, giving adults greater opportunity to find the 'right' partner, rendering expectations as to what an adult couple relationship should be like higher than ever before.⁸ Romantic love is considered to be a prerequisite for establishing an enduring marital relationship, and when marriage fails to live up to the high expectations accorded to it there are fewer of the economic and social constraints which, in the past, kept many couples together.⁹ While the vast majority of people expect a committed relationship, usually symbolised by marriage, to last for life, the reality is that increasing numbers of adult couple relationships are ended by one or both partners.¹⁰

Separation, Divorce and Remarriage

The increase in the number of families experiencing separation and divorce is almost certainly the single most important change in family life, and the one which has caused the greatest concern during the last fifty years. About 45 per cent of marriages end in divorce prior to the 60th wedding anniversary, assuming 2005 divorce and death rates.¹¹ Around half of all divorces occur within the first ten years of marriage.¹² It is estimated that one in three

⁴ ONS (2007) *Focus on Families*, The Stationery Office.

⁵ ONS (2008(a)) *Social Trends 38. Households and Families*, Palgrave MacMillan.

⁶ ONS (2009) *Social Trends 40. Households and Families*, Palgrave MacMillan.

⁷ DCSF/Cabinet Office (2008) *Families in Britain: An evidence paper*, London: Crown Copyright.

⁸ Walker, J. (2008) 'Family life in the 21st century: The implications for parenting policy in the UK', *Journal of Children's Services*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 17–29.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ ONS (2008(b)) 'The Proportion of Marriages Ending in Divorce', *Population Trends*, vol. 131, pp. 28–36.

¹² *ibid.*

children will experience parental separation before the age of 16.¹³ Moreover, increasing numbers of children face repeated disruptions in family life when their parents form new partnerships which subsequently break down. Although stepfamilies have been prevalent throughout history, primarily because of the death of one of the parents and the subsequent remarriage of the remaining parent, stepfamily formation following parental separation is one of the fastest-growing family forms in the UK: 40 per cent of all marriages are remarriages for one or both partners.¹⁴

The challenges faced by adult couples are complex, and the impacts of family change, particularly when relationships break down, are keenly felt. A number of studies have highlighted the potentially detrimental impacts of divorce and separation on children and on their parents.¹⁵ There are substantial associations between relationship breakdown and adults' physical and psychological ill health.¹⁶ Parental separation and divorce can disrupt and seriously compromise children's stability and the consistency in their care. Three consequences of family breakdown for children tend to arouse the most concern: the potential increase in child poverty, enduring parental conflict, and father absence. Not all children experience these consequences, but there is little doubt that the risk factors for all children are increased.¹⁷ A number of factors contribute to these risks, including: economic hardship; unresolved parental conflict; multiple transitions in family living arrangements, location and children's education; the loss of a parental relationship; one or both parents being unable to make a satisfactory adaptation to the ending of their relationship; and failure to keep children informed and to hear their voices. Other studies have reported strong associations between couple relationship breakdown and poor outcomes for children relating to educational attainment, behavioural problems, substance misuse, and crime and antisocial behaviour.¹⁸

The negative effects of parental separation on children are not universal, and the majority of children and young people experience short-term instability and then adjust to the changing family circumstances over time.¹⁹ A minority of children and young people, however, suffer detrimental impacts which can extend into adulthood.²⁰ These may include the risk of teenage pregnancy, increased risk of their own relationship breakdown, and criminal behaviour. Multiple transitions are particularly detrimental when children experience repeated disruptions, the effects of which may be accumulative. The younger children are when they first experience family breakdown, the greater the likelihood that they will face multiple transitions, simply because of their age.²¹

Promoting Stability in Family Life

The research evidence relating to the potentially detrimental impact of parental separation and divorce on children has led to renewed efforts to promote greater stability for children

¹³ Maclean, M. (2004) *Together and Apart: Children and parents experiencing separation and divorce*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

¹⁴ ONS (2008(c)) *Marriage Statistics 2006*, The Stationery Office.

¹⁵ Mooney, A., Oliver, G. and Smith, M. (2009) *Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-Being: Evidence review*, DCSF, RB113; Coleman, L. and Glenn, F. (2009) *When Couples Part: Understanding the consequences for adults and children*, OnePlusOne.

¹⁶ Coleman and Glenn, *ibid.*

¹⁷ Rodgers, B. and Pryor, J. (1998) *Divorce and Separation: The outcomes for children*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

¹⁸ Amato, P. R. (2000) 'The consequences of divorce for adults and children', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 62, no. 4, pp. 1,269–87.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Amato, P. R. and Cheadle, J. (2005) 'The long reach of divorce: divorce and child well-being across three generations', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 67, pp. 191–206.

²¹ Mooney *et al.*, *op. cit.*

and the kind of home environment within which children flourish. Children today live in an increasing variety of family types, but, despite the increasing normalcy of single-parent and reconstituted families and the significant shifts in attitudes and expectations regarding family life, research evidence continues to indicate that children thrive best in families characterised by predictable and consistent care.²² Such care is closely associated with stable and harmonious relationships between parents/adult carers, whether these adults are biologically or otherwise related to the children they are raising.²³ There is further evidence that a family unit headed by parents/carers who are able to negotiate flexibly within close relationships and to maintain sound, working adult partnerships is beneficial not only for children but also for the parents/carers themselves.²⁴ A significant body of research now documents benefits in psychological and physical health that are evident across the life span for people living in stable, supportive relationships.²⁵ Social advantages, such as access to more supportive social networks and advice and more effective integration into the community, also accrue from people being in stable relationships.²⁶

In parallel with research that has demonstrated that marriage appears to be protective of adult health, a recent review of the international evidence²⁷ finds an unequivocal association between couple relationship breakdown and adult ill health and mortality²⁸ and poorer mental health.²⁹ It is important to note, however, that the evidence suggests that the marital relationship must be of high quality for it to be advantageous in terms of health outcomes: poor-quality couple relationships act as a risk factor which can contribute to worsening health.³⁰ Children are also likely to experience negative health outcomes³¹ as a result of parental separation. Conversely, research has indicated that children in intact families tend to enjoy the best health.³² One of the most difficult aspects of family breakdown, both for children and for parents, is enduring conflict between the parents. Coleman and Glenn found unequivocal evidence highlighting the detrimental impact of adult relationship conflict and distress on children.³³ What appears to matter most, however, is how conflict is manifested and managed.³⁴

The moderating factors which can address the detrimental impacts of couple relationship breakdown are now well-documented.³⁵ Adults, it seems, benefit from social and economic support, the ability of each partner to forgive, and consideration being given to who initiated

²² Coleman and Glenn, *op. cit.*

²³ See e.g. Waite, L. J. (1995) 'Does marriage matter?', *Demography*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 483–507; Reynolds, J. (ed.) (2001) *Not in Front of the Children?: How conflict between parents affects children*, OnePlusOne.

²⁴ Gillies, V. (2003) *Family and Intimate Relationships: A review of the sociological research*, ESRC, Families and Social Capital Research Group, South Bank University.

²⁵ See e.g. Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K. and Newton, T. L. (2001) 'Marriage and health: his and hers', *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 472–503.

²⁶ Coleman and Glenn, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Coleman and Glenn, *op. cit.*

²⁸ See e.g. Murphy, M. (2007) 'Family living arrangements and health', in ONS (2007), *op. cit.*

²⁹ See e.g. Afifi, T. O., Cox, B. J. and Enns, M. W. (2006) 'Mental health profiles among married, never-married and separated/divorced mothers in a nationally representative sample', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 122–9.

³⁰ Robles, T. F. and Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K. (2003) 'The physiology of marriage: pathways to health', *Physiology and Behaviour*, vol. 79, no. 3, pp. 409–16.

³¹ Strohschein, L. (2005) 'Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 67, pp. 1,286–300.

³² Rodgers and Pryor, *op. cit.*

³³ Coleman and Glenn, *op. cit.* See also McIntosh, J. (2003) 'Enduring conflict in parental separation: pathways of impact on child development', *Journal of Family Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 63–80.

³⁴ Harold, A. T., Aitken, J. J. and Shelton, K. H. (2007) 'Inter-parental conflict and children's academic attainment: a longitudinal analysis', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 48, no. 12, pp. 1,223–32.

³⁵ See Coleman and Glenn, *op. cit.*

the separation. For children, continued and effective parenting may play an important role in reducing negative impacts.³⁶ Furthermore, because what matters most for children's well-being is the quality of the relationships they can maintain with both parents and the quality of the relationships within the family, strengthening couple relationships is a critical element in all kinds of family structures, and particularly when parents decide to part and go their separate ways.³⁷ The quality of adult couple relationships has direct and indirect effects on the couple themselves and on their children.³⁸ Two aspects of couple relationships appear to be important: the interaction between partners around their intimate relationship, and the way in which the partners work as a parental team. If both of these are positive, positive benefits accrue for children.³⁹ Supporting both these aspects of couple relationships is considered to be important in reducing risk factors for children and strengthening families.⁴⁰

A discussion paper launched by the Cabinet Office and the DCSF in 2008 builds on this evidence, reaching the conclusion that it is the quality of relationships in families that matters most and that healthy family stability and good relationships between partners result in positive outcomes for families.⁴¹ Hence the quest to understand more about the times when support might be appropriate for different families, the kind of support that is needed, and how best to provide it in a non-intrusive, non-stigmatising way. Not surprisingly, therefore, attention has increasingly turned towards finding ways to enhance the quality of family life and couple relationships and to strengthen the roles played by men and fathers, both in intact families and when parents have separated. Helping people to form strong, healthy adult couple relationships, to maintain and nurture them at various developmental stages, and to minimise the hurt and pain if they nevertheless break down are policy goals which this study has sought to inform.

Responding to the changes and challenges in family life and the growing evidence about the importance of the quality of family relationships for children's well-being, the Government has, in the last decade, promoted policies to eradicate child poverty, raise standards in education, and ensure that each child/young person is given the best possible start in life.⁴² A range of policy initiatives in England have sought to ensure that parents have access to advice and support when they need it, strengthen marriage and family life, and reduce the risks associated with family breakdown. These initiatives start from the position that no single family form can guarantee happiness or ensure children have successful outcomes,⁴³ and that all families are in need of support at some time or other.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Walker (2008), *op. cit.*

³⁸ Davies, P. T., Cummings, E. M. and Winter, M. A. (2004) 'Pathways between profiles of family functioning, child security in the interparental subsystem, and child psychological problems', *Development and Psychopathology*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 525–50.

³⁹ McHale, J. P., Kuersten-Hogan, P. and Rao, N. (2004) 'Growing points for co-parenting theory and research', *Journal of Adult Development, Special Issue: Coparenting*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 221–34; McHale, J. B. (2007) 'When infants grow up in multiperson relationship systems', *Infant Mental Health Journal, Special Issue: The Baby's Place in the World*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 370–92; Lewis, C. and Lamb, M. (2007) *Understanding Fatherhood: A review of recent research*, Lancaster University, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

⁴⁰ Cowan, P. and Cowan, C. P. (2008) 'Diverging family policies to promote children's well-being in the UK and US: some relevant data from family research and intervention studies', *Journal of Children's Services*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 4–16.

⁴¹ DCSF/Cabinet Office (2008), *op. cit.*

⁴² See e.g. Home Office (1998) *Supporting Families: A consultation document*, The Stationery Office; Children and Young People's Unit (2001) *Building a Strategy for Children and Young People: A consultation document*, Crown Copyright; DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters: Change for children*, DfES; HM Treasury/DfES (2005) *Support for Parents: The best start for children*, The Stationery Office; DCSF (2007), *op. cit.*

⁴³ DCSF/Cabinet Office (2008) *Families in Britain: An evidence paper*, Crown Copyright.

Our Approach to the Study

We designed the study in accordance with a specification set by the DCSF, with the explicit aim of assessing and extending the evidence available about the support needs of adults in different kinds of couple relationships, so as to inform policy initiatives which can support families and children.⁴⁴

Enhancing Existing Evidence

Although a great deal is now known about the stressors in couple relationships and their impact on relationship instability, we wanted to explore whether other issues and events also cause strains which, if they continue unchecked, can lead to the breakdown of the relationship and subsequently to separation and divorce. Research has suggested that the birth of a baby, illness in the family, caring responsibilities, the death of a family member and unemployment can all put a strain on couple relationships.⁴⁵ Such stressors are common in most relationships. Moreover, while the significant social and structural changes of the past fifty years can explain why there is now a much greater diversity in couple relationships, they do not offer explanations of why some stand the test of time and others end.⁴⁶ It is necessary, therefore, to consider the coping strategies used by couples who sustain a long-term relationship and the potential for offering more support to those couples who, for whatever reason, find it more difficult to maintain their relationship 'through thick and thin'. In the study, we wanted to know whether particular kinds of help and support can bolster coping strategies and lessen the negative impacts of everyday stressors, since less is known about what might help or hinder couples to sustain their relationship in the face of different kinds of difficulty. Evidence is more sparse, for example, in respect of the part played by religious beliefs, family background or cultural influences, attitudes to child-rearing, attitudes about the roles and responsibilities of mothers and fathers, expectations of marriage and cohabitation and beliefs about their value or sustainability, and the factors which might deter or motivate help-seeking in different circumstances. We hoped that our research would fill some of the gaps in the knowledge.

A recent and extensive review of support services in England and Wales points to the importance of helping couples to know how to recognise the early signs of relationship difficulty and motivating them to seek help.⁴⁷ Previous investigations into the effectiveness of couple relationship support services have consistently indicated that service providers perceive the failure of couples to seek help until their relationship has reached an advanced stage of deterioration as one of the biggest challenges and one of the biggest threats to determining the effectiveness of their interventions.⁴⁸ A major challenge, therefore, in the provision of relationship support is to understand what might encourage couples to:

⁴⁴ A more detailed description of the approach we took can be found in Annexe 2, including a discussion of the challenges we faced in attempting an ambitious study within a very limited time frame.

⁴⁵ See e.g. Fir, H. and Goldman, N. (2000) 'The association between health-related behaviours and the risk of divorce in the USA', *Journal of Biosocial Science*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 63–88; Butterworth, P., Oz, T., Rodgers, B. and Berry, H. (2008) *Factors Associated with Relationship Dissolution of Australian Families with Children*, Social Policy Research Paper No. 37, Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs; Mansfield, P. and Collard, J. (1988) *The Beginning of the Rest of Your Life*, Macmillan; Mansfield, P., Collard, J. and McAlister, F. (1996) *Person, Partner, Parent*, Macmillan.

⁴⁶ Gottman, J. (1993) 'A theory of marital dissolution and stability', *Journal of Family Psychology*, vol. 7, pp. 57–75; Sharlin, S. A., Kaslow, F. W. and Hammerschmidt, H. (2000) *Together Through Thick and Thin: A multicultural picture of long-term marriages*, Heworth Clinical Practice Press.

⁴⁷ Chang, Y.-S. and Barrett, H. (2009) *Couple Relationships: A review of the nature and effectiveness of support services*, Family and Parenting Institute.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

- recognise early signs of relationship strain which may lead to longer-term problems
- identify appropriate help – the right help at the right time
- feel safe in, and confident about, seeking and asking for help

At the end of their review, Chang and Barrett recommended that further research should be undertaken to answer a number of key questions, several of which provided a framework for our current study and informed the research questions we wished to address. We posed a number of questions which we expected the study to be able to answer, refining and developing these as the research progressed. In addition, members of the cross-departmental Steering Group (see Annexe 3) established by the DCSF suggested questions and areas of interest specific to the policy agendas in other government departments responsible for health, work and pensions, child support and family justice. We were able to ask some questions directly, while the answers to some others emerged during interviews and focus groups.

Phases of Research

The DCSF specifically requested that the study be conducted in two phases. The first (May–July 2009) focused on investigating the experiences and needs of adults, primarily parents, whose relationship had broken down and ended in separation or divorce; and the second (August–November 2009) focused on adults who were currently in what they considered to be a committed relationship. There was inevitably some degree of overlap between these two phases, so we adopted a themed approach to the analyses and to the writing of this report, referring to the distinctions between phase 1 and phase 2 participants as appropriate and when they might have direct implications for policy responses. Chapter 5 does, however, focus specifically on relationships that were breaking down and those that had ended.

Call for Research Participants

We wanted to secure the participation of as many people as possible, within the constraints of a qualitative study, and not to limit our samples to couples and adults who had used particular kinds of relationship support services, such as counselling. Our approach, therefore, was to be as open and inclusive as possible, and at the same time to target people of specific interest to policymakers. We worked with a small group of gatekeepers who formed a Reference Group (see Annexe 3), with whom we could share ideas and test out our approach. In each phase of the study we invited people to participate via the *Sun* newspaper, the Fatherhood Institute, Marriage Care, family mediation services affiliated to National Family Mediation (NFM), Bounty, Gateshead Children’s Services, and the Family and Parenting Institute’s parents’ panel. In addition, information about the study was posted on a range of websites and on a dedicated website located in Newcastle University. We designed a range of information leaflets and prepared letters of invitation and consent forms for use with different groups of invitees. We coined the phrase ‘Relationships Matter’ as the name of the study. It expresses the sentiment behind the study and is consistent with the range of policy papers launched by the DCSF in recent years.

Data Collection

Our recruitment methods enabled us to hear the voices of a wide range of people, far more than would normally be the case in a relatively small, time-limited qualitative study of this kind. We were successful in reaching over 1,000 people who participated in a variety of ways by: completing an online e-survey (anonymously if they wished), talking to a member of the research team (either on the telephone or face to face), taking part in a focus group, posting their thoughts on the FPI web page, or writing to the research team. There was no shortage

of willing participants, although more people came forward in phase 1 to talk about a relationship that had ended than came forward in phase 2 to talk about an ongoing relationship. Telephone interviews were more popular than face-to-face interviews. Table 1.1 indicates how many people participated in each phase of the study.

Table 1.1 Number of participants in each phase of the study

Mode	Phase 1	Phase 2	Total
E-survey	710	297	1,007
Individual telephone interviews	51	37	88
Couple telephone interviews	–	16	16
Face-to-face individual interviews	22	2	24
Face-to-face couple interviews	–	4	4
Focus groups (phase 1 and 2 combined)	–	78	78

The total number of people participating in the study was 1,133. Forty-seven people in phase 1 and 37 people in phase 2 completed e-surveys and subsequently gave interviews. People responded from across the UK and some contacted us from abroad. However, as this study focused on informing policy that relates only to England, we have not included people living outside England in any of the analyses undertaken for this report. E-surveys completed by people living in England totalled 669. All the interviewees and focus group participants were living in England.

Characteristics of the Research Participants

As the study progressed it became clear that, wherever possible, it was helpful to consider three groups of people: those who had separated, those who were planning to separate, and those who were in committed intact relationships, referred to as the ‘together’ group. We provide a more detailed description of the characteristics of the research participants in these groups in Annexe 2. Here we summarise them briefly.

E-survey Participants

The e-survey participants showed the following characteristics:

- in all three groups, over 80 per cent of participants were female, the vast majority of participants (over 90%) were parents and more than 95 per cent of participants described themselves as heterosexual
- participants, ages across the groups ranged from 17 to 71 – the mean age in each group was between 36 and 38
- there was a mix of ethnicities in each group, but the majority of people identified themselves as white English
- some 60 per cent of people in each of the three groups were in full- or part-time employment, although the separated group contained more people who were unemployed (separated women were more likely to be unemployed or working part-time than women in the together group)
- participants in the separated group were also more likely to be receiving housing or council tax benefit (38% in separated groups; 12% of those planning to separate and 11% of the together group)

- a range of religious faiths were represented, but the majority of participants either had no religion or described themselves as Christian
- relationships in all three groups had lasted between a few months and 30 years, but more couples in the together group had been in relationships for over 30 years
- in phase 2, some 60 per cent of people were married, 25 per cent cohabiting, and the remainder not living with their partner

Interview Sample

In-depth interviews were undertaken with 132 people (73 at phase 1 and 39 individuals and 10 couples at phase 2). Eighty-six of the interviewees were women and 46 were men. Their ages ranged from 22 to 88; 118 were parents and 19 had stepchildren. The interviewees came from a variety of backgrounds and faith groups and had been in relationships that had lasted between one and fifty-two years. Sixty-three interviewees were separated, ten were planning to separate, and 59 were in intact 'together' relationships.

Focus Groups

We conducted ten focus groups (78 participants in total) in different parts of England. These groups were held with separated and divorced men and women, young mothers, grandmothers, fathers who had attended a parenting course at a Children's Centre, members of a faith group, people in long-term relationships, and people with a background in delivering support services in the community.

The Limitations of a Qualitative Study

As this was designed to be a qualitative study and we did not set out to collect quantitative data, we did not attempt to quantify any information, beyond noting the seeming frequency of specific responses and the frequency with which certain themes arose across the study. Nor did we set out to obtain representative samples of adults in different kinds of couple relationship. We sought to achieve a balance in terms of gender, age and socio-economic circumstances wherever possible, but our research participants reflect the avenues we chose in order to invite people to take part in the study. As in most studies of this kind, more women than men agreed to take part. Nevertheless, men's voices were heard loud and clear.

The rich and extensive data sets enable us to report the views and experiences of a wide range of people at different stages in their relationship journey. Our approach to the study enabled large numbers of people to contribute. Nevertheless, it is important not to make any generalised statements from the findings we present in subsequent chapters.

Presentation of Findings

We present findings from the e-surveys in order to: demonstrate similarities and differences in the accounts given by people who had separated or were planning to separate and those in intact relationships; consider the mechanisms which help people to cope with challenges and problems that routinely present themselves; and examine the different kinds of support people had sought and received, and the support which might have been helpful. The percentages reported enable us to illustrate the trends and indicate the frequencies of various responses, but they do not allow generalisations to be made.

It has been our intention throughout the study to ensure that the voices of those who agreed to participate in the research are heard. We have selected comments provided in the e-

surveys and specific verbatim comments made during interviews and focus group discussions to illustrate key themes and do justice to the rich detailed accounts we received. We have endeavoured to respect the integrity of the accounts and to ensure anonymity for all those who talked about their relationship experiences so openly.

In the next chapter, we explore the formation of couple relationships and the decisions which couples take about moving in together and whether to marry. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the tensions and problems that arise in relationships. Chapter 3 focuses specifically on the transition to parenthood and the impact of children on couple relationships, and Chapter 4 examines other issues and life events and the coping strategies people adopted to manage pressures in relationships. Chapter 5 discusses the ending of relationships, and Chapter 6 considers the use of support services and people's attitudes towards relationship support. The final chapter draws together the themes that have emerged from the study and discusses the implications for policies and practices aimed at supporting adult couple relationships.

Chapter 2 Forming Couple Relationships

It is the pivotal point ... when you make the big decision of moving in with someone or making some sort of major commitment like that. It does change – changes things quite a lot ... (male)

As we noted in Chapter 1, family structures and adult couple relationships vary greatly. Nevertheless, most people, it seems, expect to form a committed, intimate relationship with another adult at some stage in their lives and many plan to marry. Although some young people in our study appeared to drift into relationships, for the majority deciding to live with a partner and/or get married had been significant decisions which marked a number of important transitions in the formation and consolidation of couple relationships. These decisions and transitions could also have far-reaching implications for children when parents formed new couple relationships and established new, blended families as a result. In this chapter we have drawn on the data from both phases of the study in order to:

- gain a better understanding of the various ways in which couple relationships are formed and how decisions are taken
- understand the specific issues relating to the formation of stepfamilies
- discern the issues that had arisen at the time people had formed their couple relationship
- examine the expectations people had of the couple relationship and the extent to which these were shared between the partners
- consider the support people may need or would find useful at the point when they form a new couple partnership

Throughout the study, we have sought to explore whether more could be done in a preventative capacity to support adult couple relationships at their inception and to discover the extent to which couples whose relationships stand the test of time take a different approach to the formation and maintenance of their relationship. This chapter, therefore, focuses on the beginnings of relationships, the processes people experience and the pathways they take. We refer to people's support needs in more detail in Chapter 6.

Moving In Together

Our sample included people who had been through the process of forming a couple relationship, moving in together and creating their own family unit just once with different partners (first-and-only-time relationships) and people who had been through the process more than once with different partners (repeat players). The former group consisted of those people who were still with the same partner and expected to be so long into the future, and those whose first relationship had subsequently broken down and who had not formed a new relationship by the time they participated in the study. The latter group contained many people who had been through the experience of forming a new couple relationship and moving in with a partner on several occasions. It is clear from the narratives that, irrespective of the varying experiences they had had, partners had taken a number of important decisions when they had decided to move in with each other and live together. These decisions inevitably varied according to whether there were children to consider, but most people had had to think about where they would live, and whether this would entail other changes such as in their employment or in their moving to a new area. For those with children, these transitions could be particularly significant: they often entailed considerations about whether children would have to change schools, move away from their friends or make different

arrangements to see a non-resident parent. Parents may have to commit to taking on, adapting or giving up a house, or move to another area and make new friends, or make decisions in consultation with or in respect of their own or a prospective partner's children. Almost everyone, both men and women, indicated that moving in together with their partner was the first significant milestone in the development of their relationship: the point or stage at which it became a more serious commitment and one which they expected to last into the long term.

Motivations

There were distinct generational differences between the accounts of couples who had been together a long time and those of younger couples in the sample who had formed a couple relationship more recently. The process of couple formation had been a somewhat different experience for those people in the study who had been in their current relationship for many decades. Their motivations for moving in together were inextricably linked to societal expectations regarding the processes that should be observed through the periods of courtship and engagement leading up to marriage. For them, moving in together had marked the end of the engagement period and the beginning of marriage. Often, this transition had coincided with one or both partners leaving their parental home to start a new phase in their life. There was an accepted order to the process of making a long-term commitment which was understood by most young people at the time, and processes which deviated from the norm were unusual and often frowned upon. The narratives of these older couples contrasted strikingly with those of younger couples in the sample.

Couples whose relationships had been formed more recently described a less formal process, in which each partner had usually left the parental home and had been living on their own before moving in with their partner. For some of these couples, moving in together took the form of a gradual transition rather than consisting of discrete stages, as they spent more and more time together in one or the other partner's accommodation until they eventually decided to move all their property to one address. People who had established independent lives before forming a committed relationship took the decision to move in with a partner on practical as well as emotional grounds:

As time went on, the custom and practice was, I was there [at the partner's home] more and more and more. And I had perhaps a phase of nine or ten months when it became increasingly complicated. Just things like me bank was registered here, and this was registered there ... (male, cohabiting)

Partners who had each lived in their own accommodation found that maintaining separate residences gradually became impractical or undesirable:

There would still be some nights or mornings when obviously – you know – we'd be in our own houses. So it took away the pain of that – just that we were within the same place and we were coming back to be in the same place at the end of the day, and leaving from the same place in the morning. So it gave the feeling of greater stability, I think, and ... security ... (female, cohabiting, engaged)

Some talked about having drifted into the relationship rather than having made formal decisions to live together, pool resources and live under one roof. Others, however, saw the move to one address as primarily signifying an increased level of security in the relationship. The narratives indicate that being together could reduce the stress associated with living apart, but that it could be both exciting and scary. For the majority of people, moving in with their partner had marked a decisive transition, occurring anywhere from the day after the first date to three years into a relationship, although, usually, people had been in the relationship for a period of three to six months before they had moved in together. In many accounts,

moving in together was described as an expected 'next stage' in a relationship that looked set to continue:

I virtually moved in with her after about five months, I think ... six months – I know it was quite soon. But I thought it was the right thing to do. (male, cohabiting for one year)

Other people recalled their prime motivations for moving in together as having been that they were having fun or enjoying the relationship and therefore wanted to be able to share more and spend more time with the other person:

Moving in is usually great. You get to spend more time together and it's like you're not having to think, I've got to get up for work, I've got to get dressed, have a shower, and then go and meet my boyfriend, cos he's already there when you get home. So it does, like, get rid of a bit stress that way. (female)

For younger people in the sample, the decision to move in with their partner had been prompted by practical considerations – running two homes seemed to be unnecessary – and by a desire to be together and to cement the relationship in some way. Both push and pull factors were in evidence. Some people mentioned other push factors, such as the opportunity to move out of (or being asked to leave) the parental home, needing to ease the financial pressure of running two homes, or becoming pregnant.

A Significant Step

For the majority of people in the study, moving in together had marked an important step in the formation of a couple relationship. Although there was usually a mix of 'push' and 'pull' factors influencing the decision, people described the move as a very positive step despite some of the challenges it involved. However, it became clear that moving in together was not always a carefree, exciting step, and could be the cause of some trepidation. This was also so for those couples who had moved in together having come from different parts of the country or from different countries. Some people recalled that moving away to live with a partner had left them feeling bereft of family or friends. Others reflected that they had felt pressured into moving in with their partner. One woman described how her boyfriend had rushed into buying a large house for them to move into as soon as she had accepted his proposal, while another had felt obliged to accommodate her boyfriend when his ex-partner had thrown him out, even though, as a single mother, she had not wanted him to move in at that time. Another man told us that his partner had moved into his house because she had become pregnant, but he had ensured that the house stayed in his name because of his concerns about her finances and the possibility that the relationship might end in the future.

Some people told us that they felt their partner had changed as soon as they had moved in. For example, one woman had discovered that her partner had a gambling problem which she had not been aware of, and found that he changed once she began living with him. Other people found that they themselves had changed. One woman, for example, said she had become more irritable and a man told us that he no longer wanted to go out as he had done previously. Such unexpected shifts in behaviour could impact negatively on the relationship. Other people realised that their partner's domestic habits could be a fertile ground for arguments and disagreements if they did not attempt to accept and accommodate themselves to them.

The evidence from the study suggests that moving in together as a couple marks a key and public point in the formation and establishment of the couple relationship. It is a point at which the couple is formally recognised as a unit and when many decisions are made which are likely to have future consequences. It was not always a simple 'next step', but one that

carried a number of implications for the future. Yet people reflected that they had rarely thought these implications through, nor had they discussed them together, or sought advice when they had moved in with their partner. Reflecting on this, one man whose relationship had subsequently broken down commented:

I think sometimes people don't come into relationships thinking about what really needs to be put on the table ... A lot of people just say, 'Yeah whatever', and they go along with things, and then later when an argument does erupt it's 'Well, you didn't say that, and you didn't say that'.

Moving in together had been seen as the moment when a relationship had been 'getting serious'. A nexus of important decisions were seen to be involved, and participants varied in terms of how aware of and prepared for all the implications they were. The study participants acknowledged the potential benefits of support at this time, although some expressed doubts as to whether couples in this situation would be receptive to outside interventions. We consider this further in Chapter 6.

Repeat Players – Reconstituted Families

As we noted above, considerations around moving in together could be complex for parents who were forming a new relationship. E-survey responses indicated that approximately 15 per cent of people had stepchildren. Interviews, however, indicate that the proportion of people living in reconstituted family settings is likely to have been considerably greater than this, for two reasons. First, a number of women who were either married to or cohabiting with men who were not biologically related to their children may not have identified themselves as living in a stepfamily although they were. Secondly, when a new partner had non-resident children from another relationship, women did not always think of these children as stepchildren.

Quite a few interviewees in both phases of the project spoke about issues that had confronted them when they had formed new partnerships as parents: what made for difficulties, what helped them to cope with these difficulties, and what other help might have been useful. They expressed the view that reconstituted family relationships were very demanding and that, in the words of one, 'everything has to be a lot more considered'. Often, each adult was living in their own accommodation, either rented or owned, and decisions had to be taken, sometimes in consultation with children, about who should live where. Contact arrangements could significantly influence these decisions. In this situation, the views of children often had to be taken into account and the adult couple had to negotiate a solution that would work for two families. One mother, for instance, told us that she and her partner had had to put off moving in together for several months while he went through a court battle with his ex-wife over contact with his children. A father explained how deciding to move in with his new partner had involved a series of transitions, including selling his former matrimonial home and agreeing to modify the childcare and contact arrangements he had with his ex-wife. Some people had experienced particular difficulties around decisions about where children from previous relationships should live. One man, for instance, told us:

I had a situation where a relationship completely failed because it was just expected of me that the person just said 'Here I am, and three months later me and my daughter are going to move in'. And I went, 'Oh really?'

Since the majority of children continue to live with their mothers after separation and divorce, it is not surprising that, when new relationships were formed, the men in our study usually moved into their partner's home. This was seen as the best option in many cases because the woman already had a child or children from a previous relationship living with her.

Mothers and fathers in the study talked about how important it was to weigh up new partners carefully before introducing them to their children. They described how, although they looked for qualities in partners that made them feel accepted, they also took their children's actual and potential reactions into account. They remarked on how stressful it was to form a new partnership after things had gone wrong in a previous relationship:

He'd always said he wouldn't have another girlfriend and he'd never put his kids through it and he'd never put himself through it ... so even when we tentatively started dating it was more of a big deal – we both kind of had to be a lot more sure.

The people who were forming a reconstituted family appeared, for the most part, to have taken this early stage of relationship formation fairly slowly, and it had not always been an easy period for them to negotiate. From the accounts we were given, it was clear that many different solutions to the question of how to involve new partners in family life had been arrived at, from agreements that the non-parent partner would not be involved at all in decisions about care of the children, through more peripheral involvement, with the biological parent continuing to assume most responsibility, to equal or almost equal parenting agreements. Some of these solutions were working better than others and it was not uncommon for people to talk about the solutions they had arrived at with a certain degree of ambivalence:

It helped that he did not try to be Dad. The downside of that is that there are things that he might have wanted to sort out if the children had been his. (female)

Couples spoke about the difficulty of getting the balance right between meeting the needs of children and their own needs. They drew attention to the need to make sure that both couple time and parent-child time were available when they formed a new family unit, but stressed that this could be difficult to arrange. When both partners had children from previous relationships (typically a woman with resident children and a man whose children lived with his ex-partner) multiple arrangements for the children to have contact with their biological parents could mean that there was very little time when one or other set of children were not needing attention. Non-resident fathers could find that they were spending significant amounts of time travelling to see their children, perhaps every other weekend. Sometimes this involved taking their new family with them, at other times they went alone, leaving their new family behind. Finding couple-time in these circumstances was extremely difficult.

Worries About Children

Several parents in reconstituted families had had serious concerns about children, both their own and step-children. Three couples recounted how the disturbed behaviour of non-resident step-children had put serious strains on their newly forming relationship and, when this had not been resolved, it became the chief source of tension in the relationship. These parents were not able to identify a service that might help, but said that they would have appreciated some kind of guidance for themselves as well as for the children concerned.

Problems with Ex-partners

For some couples, ongoing problems relating to the breakdown of previous relationships put stress on the new couple relationship. Often there were unresolved financial issues, either because fathers were finding it difficult to support non-resident children or because mothers were not managing to obtain adequate maintenance payments from ex-partners. Practical and emotional challenges were also apparent in respect of maintaining contact with children from previous relationships. Some people we spoke to were having problems initiating or arranging contact and some were still involved in legal procedures to try to sort matters out. Practical, emotional and financial difficulties clearly had the potential to put serious strain on

a new relationship and were, for some couples, a focus of disagreement early on in their relationship. However, it was also apparent that quite a number of couples felt that having to work together to meet these challenges had brought them closer.

Getting Married

Among the e-survey respondents, nearly two-thirds of the 'together' group were married and just over a quarter were cohabiting. Of those who had already separated or divorced, just over half had been married and just under a third had been in a cohabiting relationship. These figures indicate that more people in the study were or had been married than were or had been cohabiting.

Shifting Attitudes

In the past, moving in together and getting married went hand in hand as the most significant event in the process of becoming a couple. Cohabitation was not a common precursor to getting married, nor, for most people, was it the relationship of choice. Today, attitudes have changed and moving in together is normally the first significant step in the couple relationship. Nevertheless, deciding to get married emerged as another significant milestone in most narratives. Participants in both phases of the study reflected on their reasons for choosing to get married or choosing not to. We noted a distinct generational difference between people who had been in a committed relationship for a long time and who were, therefore, usually older and those of people who had not been in long-term relationships and were, therefore, somewhat younger. People who had been in long-standing relationships recalled that getting married was a step they had had to take if they had wanted to move in with their partner: it was the done thing, and the relationship would not have been possible without marriage at the time they met their partner. These couples described marriage as the starting point for a relationship that had become serious – they got married in order to be with each other and to have children. People of all ages in the sample recognised, however, that there had been a shift in couples' thinking in particular and in social attitudes generally about marriage, often referring either to their own generation or to previous generations when marriage was not easily dissolved and the dominant expectation was that once someone had married they should stick with the marriage through thick and thin. Most participants regarded the attitudinal changes as having emerged around twenty to thirty years ago. The disappearance of older, more traditional values, and the practices of courting and getting engaged, were seen as having given way to a 'trial' philosophy regarding marriage, which one woman summed up as follows:

Twenty to thirty years ago when you were getting married a lot of couples had never lived together, and it was get married and then move in. Whereas now, my little phrase is 'You've got to try before you buy'.

Some of those in longer-term relationships routinely expressed the view that marriage is less likely to be successful today than in the past, and some bemoaned the fact that married life now appears to be no different from what comes before it. Because the majority of people live together and have a sexual relationship before getting married, thereby changing the order of relationship formation quite significantly, some people who had been married for many years were of the view that for people forming such relationships now there would be no excitement about taking on new commitments; being married would not seem very different, and, therefore, couples would no longer see the need to work at their relationship. The belief that marriage is not very different after people have lived together was also put forward by some people who had married recently. One young woman, for example, commented:

I got married recently, I got married in May, and people say, 'Oh how is married life?' Well, it's no different than it was the other seven years that I've lived with him.

Influencing Factors

Most younger parents in our sample who were in committed, married relationships said that they had chosen to get married after living together for some years. They described marriage as to be entered into when the time is right, once life together as a couple has been established and when both partners are confident of their commitment to one another. By contrast, some other young people, who viewed marriage as an essential precursor to a serious relationship that should last for life, commented that their view had been influenced by their religious beliefs.

Younger couples tended to see marriage as an undertaking which demonstrated a new level of commitment in what was previously a cohabiting relationship, or which cemented more strongly a relationship that was already well established. They described marriage as symbolising a relationship within which partners could feel strongly committed. One woman described this feeling of commitment as a resource that she could draw on when times were difficult, mirroring the attitude expressed by people who had got married several decades ago:

Part of it is related to being married. For me, saying I'm taking this relationship seriously, I fall back on that if I feel a bit fed up. You wouldn't have got married if you didn't care for him. You made a promise so now get on with it!

One man pointed out that getting married had conferred dignity on his partner by changing her status from cohabitee to wife. Other people suggested that they had got married to give their children a stable family background, and a name common with that of both their parents. Participants argued that marriage is something that could or should be done for the children. For quite a few, indeed, expecting a baby had been a trigger for proposing or for getting married, and some people saw starting a family as a natural time to make a specific commitment:

And when the baby came it obviously changed things, made me think ... that this is gonna be a long-lasting relationship ... And it got to the point where we got engaged and we were gonna get married. [male, cohabiting]

Some people had decided to get married because of family or social pressures after they had been in relationships for some time, which seemed set to last. The husband of a couple who had got engaged after six and a half years together stressed that he and his partner's decision to marry had not been 'rational' since they were already in a committed relationship and living together, but had been driven by a 'social imperative' to get married. He nevertheless had found that getting engaged and then getting married had signified step-changes in the relationship:

... although we had already been committed to each other, that [getting engaged and getting married] certainty just made us think and act differently. So we started talking about children for the first time ... We talked about pensions, the future. We'd probably talked about things like baby names before, but only in a joky way.

This interviewee was one of very few who mentioned a romantic aspect to getting married. Others simply cited practical reasons as their motivations for getting married. These included couples in the Armed Forces who were able to live in married quarters and couples in which one partner would otherwise be unable to remain resident in England. Several phase 2 participants who had married relatively late in a cohabiting relationship told us that they had

decided to get married so that if anything happened to either of them the other one would be accepted as next of kin. Marriage for these participants represented a means of ensuring financial security for either partner in the event of one of them dying.

A Mutual Decision?

Married couples who had cohabited, including those who were still together and those who had parted, often portrayed the decision to marry as having been driven by one partner, usually the woman, with the other partner being less committed or concerned about marriage but going along with it for their partner's sake. One couple indicated that getting married had been something they had done for the wife's rather than the husband's sake:

Marriage is not that important to him but he knew it meant something to me. My mother would have wanted that too. (wife)

I impulsively asked her to marry me. I knew it meant a lot to her. It didn't change the relationship at all. We had a big party. That was cool. (husband)

Some of those who had separated described their marriage as something they had agreed to because their partner had wanted it. One father, who had separated after four years of marriage, described the marriage as a measure that had been taken to alleviate his wife's insecurities. Some wives also portrayed themselves as having been the more reluctant partner; two women, each of whom had been married before, recalled feeling ambivalent at the start of a new relationship about wanting to take on yet another marriage. One of them told us:

He really pushed us into getting married, which we did and I couldn't understand why ... because I've been married a couple of times before as well and I just went along with it really ...

Not everyone who had got married regarded marriage as signifying a mutual decision. This could create difficulties in the relationship if one partner was seen to be less committed as a result. Some married women emphasised the depth of lifelong commitment that their marriage vows represented for them. Interviewees who considered their spouse to be less serious about their commitment to the marriage tended to see this lack of commitment as a problem in the relationship. Some interviewees from phase 1 who were separated or divorced still regarded themselves as being bound by their marriage vows even though they felt their ex-partner had long rejected any such commitment:

I signed a marriage contract for life and I signed two contracts to bring two children into this world as a family unit and then I've been left to bring them up on my own, and to me, I just feel as though he, he's broke all three contracts. (female, divorced)

Relationships Under Strain

Some people in the sample explained that their cohabiting relationship was already exhibiting signs of strain by the time they were considering marriage. One woman who was still cohabiting at the time she talked to us explained:

I still want to get married, but there are times when he annoys me and I am like 'Why are you even bothered?' ... Because obviously everything on top, it's like the bills, obviously the stress and arguing and it just gets to the stage [where] I am like 'Oh God, I want to be out of this relationship'.

Some phase 1 interviewees identified getting engaged before getting married as the point at which things had started to go wrong, rather than it having been the start of a new and special phase in a couple's life. For others talking about the engagement emphasised subsequent feelings of regret at having agreed to get married:

The first strange thing started happening after we got engaged. He kept promising me all these big wedding venues, and he never did pay the deposit and I'd ask and ask and ask but there was always an excuse. (female, divorced)

Those who described themselves as having had to instigate, or take the lead in planning, the marriage, with rather less support from their partner than they had anticipated, told us they had felt some resentment about this, even some years afterwards. One woman said that her having had to organise a wedding specifically to achieve UK residency for her foreign partner, instead of being able to plan the more traditional event she had envisaged, largely by herself, had represented an unresolved issue between the couple which had surfaced during counselling much later on in the marriage.

Choosing Not To Marry

Increasing numbers of couples choose not to marry, or at least to delay marrying for a considerable time after they move in together. A quarter of people in phase 2 of the study were in committed cohabiting relationships. The reasons they gave for choosing not to marry varied. Some said that they would like to get married but felt they could not afford to do so, while others downplayed the significance of marriage. These couples saw having a baby as the big event in their lives. Marriage, for them, was not necessarily an obvious next step in a cohabiting relationship:

He asked me that [to marry him] a few times and I didn't feel comfortable ... I didn't really understand why he wanted to marry me and in my family nobody gets married of my generation. (female, cohabiting)

Some parents who had chosen not to marry expressed satisfaction with being in a cohabiting relationship and saw no reason to change the status quo. Indeed, a few expressed concerns that if they got married the change in the relationship might not necessarily be for the better:

I think we are under the impression ... why change something that's sort of working well for us now? At the moment we just want to be settled and we will look at where we're going to be in the future. (female, cohabiting)

Some of the separated fathers who had been in a cohabiting relationship were pleased that they had decided not to marry because it had made things easier in terms of sorting out the finances at the time they had separated. By contrast, a few participants in phase 1 expressed regret that they had not got married. The relationship of one father, for example, had ended in under two years and he felt he had not had sufficient time to propose to his partner. A mother who had cohabited with her partner for twenty years said that on two occasions their planned engagement had been cancelled or put off (because of an affair and illness respectively), and she felt very upset that they had never married, although they were now separated.

Expectations of Relationships

People's accounts of how they had decided to live with their partner and whether or not to get married reveal very clearly the factors which influenced them in their choices. Couple relationships, and marriages in particular, bridge public and private worlds but decisions about them are normally private and personal. Clulow and Mattinson argue that intimate

relationships have 'to be understood in the context of the social environment in which couples live out their lives together'.⁴⁹ They go on to suggest that an important reason for marriages and cohabitations being problematic and ending in separation is the expectations associated with them. They suggest that there are four particularly common 'mirages' or 'fantasies' that may help to explain the high incidence of marital stress and breakdown: false notions about romantic love, expecting to be happy ever after, assuming equality between the partners, and expectations that individual free choice can continue. These combine to create a set of illusions and expectations which are likely to be disappointed.⁵⁰ The scope for conflict, therefore, is considerable. We wanted therefore to examine the expectations of people in both phases of our study, and to consider the possible contribution to couple conflict if the partners' expectations were not compatible.

A Lifetime Commitment

The expectation that people in phase 2, and many in phase 1, voiced most frequently was that their relationship would be permanent. A large proportion of e-survey respondents in all three groups (separated, planning to separate, together) described the relationship as the most serious commitment they had ever made (75%, 55% and 75% respectively). The vast majority of people in the study, irrespective of their current relationship status, regarded the relationship they told us about as important. Indeed, just 2 per cent of those who had separated and 1 per cent of those who were still together described the relationship as not important, although 13 per cent of those planning to separate described it as not important. There were very few differences between the men and women in the study, although slightly more men described the relationship as the most serious commitment they had ever made, and none of the men who were planning to separate and none in intact relationships described it as not important. For most people, the relationship had seemed special from an early stage: at the point at which the couple had decided that the relationship would be ongoing they felt they had met someone unique with whom they wished to spend the rest of their life. This point of view was often qualified, however: some people in phase 2 told us that they expected their relationship to last, or saw no reason why it should not, but expressed some degree of conditionality. In some cases this was voiced as an acknowledgement of the prime importance of protecting children's interests; others suggested that, if there was infidelity or some other breach of trust, this would signal the end of the relationship, though they did not expect this to happen to them; and others simply would not rule out the possibility that something might split them up in the future, but that nothing of that nature was on the horizon.

When people were looking back to the start of their relationship, some reflected that these kinds of expectations had been unrealistic, and that they might not have felt so sure that the relationship would last for life had they been aware of how their partner might change, for instance, or of how they would be spending time when they were older. Others felt that their initial expectations had led them to overlook or ignore potential problems had been evident from the start:

I knew that he was very, very wrong for me ... but I fancied him like mad and I was thirty-six and he was the first man ever in my whole life who said, 'Yes, I'll have a baby with you.' Well, biggest aphrodisiac you can imagine. And so he moved in fairly quickly (female, married and separated)

As well as expecting that the relationship would be lifelong, some people realised that they would need to be flexible and adapt to changes as the years went by. People who spoke about the importance of being flexible were of the view that their commitment should not

⁴⁹ Clulow, C. and Mattinson, J. (1989) *Marriage Inside Out: Understanding problems of intimacy*, Penguin, p. 6.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 8.

prevent couples from embracing developments in themselves and their lives. While not everyone could make the adaptations necessary to sustain the relationship, some told us that they had started out expecting the world, and had to rein in or amend what they wanted from the relationship, or accept changes either in themselves or in their partner, or in their circumstances. One woman, now divorced, expressed this view in the following way:

... you just believe that's going to be for ever, don't you, when you fall in love? Until – you know – you start finding each other's faults ... just a matter of 'Can you live with these faults?' at the end of the day. (female, divorced)

Clearly, some people in the study could adapt and accept their partner, faults and all, while others made the decision to end the relationship. People whose relationship had ended explained how failure to compromise on their expectations had contributed to the ending of their relationship. By contrast, people in intact relationships described the need and willingness to compromise on their expectations as something that had kept them and their partner together. Recognising that as time passes it may not be possible to spend as much time having fun together, or that staying up all night to talk may not be appropriate, were the kinds of changes and accommodations people had made. Being realistic about how the relationship would have to change was seen as very important. People reflected, with hindsight, that it is important for people entering a relationship to establish whether, or to what extent, interests, ambitions, beliefs, tastes and a sense of humour are shared. People in intact relationships also told us that their having got to know and evaluate their partner before becoming serious in a relationship had been important to its success:

I knew what [my partner] was like long before me and him got together and the fact that he is so fantastic with his kids is part of the reason I respect him so much and like him so much and admire him so much because he's absolutely fabulous and fun to be around. (female, cohabiting with new partner)

People in the study, of all ages, had expected to form a committed relationship with someone who they could talk to and laugh with, who made them feel safe, and who would remain faithful and be a lifelong partner. A number of couples and individuals who participated in our study indicated that they had met through internet dating services, which had asked them to indicate their expectations about a relationship to any prospective partners. This process had been helpful and had had the effect of helping them to consider what it was they would be looking for in a committed relationship before they embarked on it. One couple who had met in this way recalled the process as follows:

It [the agency] does say 'What sort of relationship are you looking for?' Whether you're just looking for friendship or something longer-term or something serious, something along those lines. So I'd identified that I was looking for more than friendship. 'Possibly', I think I said possibly', or 'preferably long-term' ... (female)

... the sort of the same for me. I'd definitely sort of ticked the 'looking for a relationship' box. (male)

Not Having Expectations

Not everyone had high expectations of their relationship or saw it as destined to last for life. These people recalled that they had had few, if any, expectations of the relationship when it had begun:

... well, the way that I am I just tend to throw myself into things. So I just thought this was just amazing, and didn't really question anything and, you know, kind of just thought he was amazing. (female, married in a relationship of nine years)

This attitude was evident among some parents in our study, who described their relationship as a teenage fling that had gone on to last for years or decades. They did not see the relationship as any less serious or substantial; some felt that it was better that they had started the relationship without expectations. One participant, for instance, argued that it was important in a relationship not to look to the long term too much because circumstances are too susceptible to change. Those without expectations whose relationship had subsequently ended did not, in general, link this to any lack of expectations, nor did they think that if they had had clearer long-term expectations things would have turned out differently.

Influences and Values

In addition to asking people about their expectations when they had embarked on their relationship, we also wanted to understand what values they had taken into their relationship and the influences and beliefs that had shaped their decisions and choices. Two main sources of influence emerged: family norms, and faith and religious affiliation. Having been in a relationship that had failed had also influenced how some people had approached a new relationship.

Family Norms

The influence participants mentioned most frequently as having shaped their expectations of relationships was that of their own parents. Interviewees said that their parents' relationship had informed their own in a number of ways. Some referred to the stability of their parents' relationship and to how this had manifested itself, for example through tolerance, negotiation skills and commitment, thereby providing a model for how they wanted or expected their own relationship to operate. Others felt that there were certain patterns of behaviour that family members followed. For example, one married man told us:

In my family, people get together young and stay together.

Parental influence had also extended to the selection of partners: many people remarked on the extent to which their parents had approved of a relationship when it had started or when it had finished. Some described difficulties that had arisen at the start of a relationship because of the expressed disapproval of their own or their partner's family. Some people were also influenced by parental relationships in which parents had shown commitment and determination to form a relationship against the wishes and advice of their own parents and had subsequently confounded family expectations by achieving a long-lasting and successful marriage.

Parental relationships could be seen as positive or negative, however. Although some people in the study referred to the values they had learned from their parents that had helped them with their own relationships, we received far more comments in which people mentioned their determination to avoid following in their parents' footsteps, citing their parents' relationship as a negative experience while they had been growing up. This was particularly so for people in the study who had witnessed domestic violence, for example, or had had to cope with the difficulties of living with alcoholic or drug-abusing parents. Some people talked about the domestic violence they had since experienced in their own relationships since leaving home:

I'd just come out of another long-term relationship, which was controlling and abusive in its own rights, but then I came from a family where my Dad was very abusive and my Mum left him. (female, married and separated)

People often remembered their parents as having been indifferent or emotionally abusive, and they were concerned that this had had a detrimental effect on how they themselves reacted or responded to their own partner. Several people in phase 1 identified problematic issues between themselves and their partner that they could trace back to the different parenting styles they had experienced as children. One woman, for example, told us that while she embraced her family's combative style of interaction, her partner came from a far more reserved family, and this had created difficulties. She had adopted some of her mother's strategies and, eventually, her own relationship had broken down:

I didn't know any other ways of expressing myself. Cos I saw my mum doing it and thought, 'Right, I can throw plates at him' ... (female, divorced)

A number of people cited either their own parents' separation, or their own parents' decision to stay together for the sake of their children, as behaviours to guard against. They talked of their efforts to be vigilant against this happening to them or their children, or of fears that their parents' relationship might render them more likely to replicate this pattern of behaviour in their own family. Others stressed that the parental neglect or parental separation they had experienced had given them a greater sense of commitment to their own family and a strong determination not to repeat the mistakes their parents had made. One woman described how her experience of being in a stepfamily when her mother had divorced her father and formed a new relationship with another man had made her determined not to let this happen to her own children:

Having that as all I've ever known, I was just thinking there ain't no other way and, after the baby came along, I was so desperate to cling to that perfect two point four family and nobody was going to tell me otherwise. (female, cohabiting)

Faith and Religious Background

In interviews, participants expressed their beliefs, or talked about values which were derived from socialising influences, to account for their views relating to relationships in general and theirs in particular. They discussed these beliefs in relation to various points in the relationship, and as something that they had brought into the relationship, or that had informed it from the outset. Although between 40 and 50 per cent of e-survey participants (separated, planning to separate, together) said they had no religious affiliation, 50 per cent of those who had separated described themselves as Christian, while another 10 per cent included people who described themselves as Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Jewish. Indeed, the differences in religious affiliation between people in together relationships and those who had separated were minimal. Similarly, the people we interviewed came from diverse ethnic, cultural and faith backgrounds and sometimes described their views on relationships and marriage as being to some extent products of their background. For example, several people saw their commitment to their children and to keeping the family unit together through times of crisis as flowing from their Catholic upbringing.

Previous Relationships

Some people who were separated reflected on the extent to which the experience had influenced their expectations of and approach to subsequent relationships. Some described the experience as positive, in the sense that they felt clearer about what they wanted and what they wanted to avoid in future relationships, and others described it as negative, in that they worried that the separation had made them paranoid or over-cautious or distrustful, and overly concerned about all their relationships. The following remark illustrates one person's awareness of these different perspectives:

The minute we have a bit of a disagreement, I've been known to say to him 'I love you but I don't need you' ... although I think the world of my new partner, I won't have anybody walk all over me again, ever. So it's left me stronger from that point of view, but I just question whether it's left me so guarded that I'm never going to let him in.
(female, cohabiting)

Media Images and Other Influences

While families of origin and experiences of parental relationships and religious upbringing influenced couple relationships, the media were not, it seems, particularly influential. Indeed, when people spoke to us about long-lasting, serious relationships, they said they had not, by and large, been influenced by cultural norms, the media, advice, sex education in schools, or their peers. It may be that some of these influences are so ingrained that they are barely noticeable and not thought about or thought worthy of mention, or that people are reluctant to suggest that they might have been swayed by the media in respect of something as serious as their relationship. Instead, parents appear to be the main influence on people's beliefs and ideas about relationships. Some people in phase 1 had received counselling at some stage in their lives and had been encouraged to reflect on possible connections between their own childhood and their adult lives, which might explain why they regarded parental influences as dominant.

Summary

There are a number of important themes running through our exploration of the ways in which people had formed couple relationships and their expectations of them:

1. The decision to move in and live together is normally a significant step in the process whereby partners form a committed relationship, marking a change in the nature of the relationship and increased levels of commitment and stability.
2. There are distinct differences in the ways in which relationships are formed today as against how they were formed in previous generations. People who had experienced long-lasting relationships had usually followed a clearly defined and accepted pathway, beginning with courtship and ending in marriage. Those who had embarked on a committed relationship more recently had usually lived with their partner in a sexual relationship prior to getting married, and some chose cohabitation rather than marriage for the long term.
3. While the lack of a clear pathway had resulted in some couples drifting into a relationship rather than consciously deciding to make a long-term commitment, the majority had thought about the significance of moving in together and had experienced a step-change in their couple relationship.
4. A number of 'push' and 'pull' factors influenced both the decision of partners to move in together and their decision to marry (or not). These often focused on practical considerations rather than on romantic notions of marriage. Individuals' decisions to move in with their partner had been influenced by them wanting to: meet societal expectations, ease financial pressure, gain more security, start a family, and spend more time together.
5. People in the study had normally expected their relationship to last for life, and had usually had high expectations which often proved to be unrealistic. Adapting expectations to match the reality of cohabitation and marriage was frequently challenging and, clearly, not all relationships had survived.

6. A specific set of challenges is associated with the formation of blended/reconstituted families, in which children from previous relationships are integral to the decisions which have to be taken.
7. Generally, people had not received any preparation for their couple relationship, and few had thought through the implications of the steps they were taking or talked to their partner about their expectations and the extent to which the partners' hopes and dreams were mutually consistent and shared.
8. Family norms and, to a lesser extent, faith and religious upbringing had influenced the expectations and values each partner had brought to the relationship. These were regarded as having been more influential than the views expressed in the media and by peers.

In the next two chapters we consider the stressors and life events which had been experienced by people in both phases of the study after they had made a commitment to live together, and which had subsequently contributed to the demise of some relationships. In Chapter 3 we examine the transition to parenthood, commonly regarded as the most significant transition in couple relationships, and in Chapter 4 we examine a range of other worries and challenges and their impact on couples in the study.

Chapter 3 Couple Relationships and Children

Having a baby is the hardest thing you can do. I look back and think ... people are right, having kids is the hardest thing you'll ever do. (father, phase 2)

In the previous chapter we examined the ways in which people in our study formed and re-formed couple relationships. We noted that the pathways in the forming of committed couple relationships are now less clearly defined, although for most couples moving in to live together marked a decisive change in the status of the relationship, and that a number of accommodations needed to be made by each partner. In this and the next chapter, we examine the life events, challenges, problems and pressures experienced by people in the study which had impacted on the couple relationship after people had moved in together or got married. One of the key and most frequently reported stressors was the arrival of children and the transition to parenthood. Most young people still cherish the vision of forming a lifelong relationship and raising a family. This vision was clearly expressed by one young woman in a committed relationship as follows:

As a teenager, I had an idea of my future. I thought I would be in a long-term relationship and have children. I want children. It's a factor in staying in the relationship – not the main factor, but having children would be a concern if we were to split up. As time goes on, it becomes more of a factor.

For some people, moving in with a partner had coincided with the transition to parenthood, and this dual transition had created specific tensions. This was particularly so for couples who were 'repeat players' in terms of forming a couple relationship and who may therefore have found themselves accommodating children from one or more previous relationships. Indeed, as we noted in Chapter 2, some couples were experiencing pressures on the relationship from the start. For others, having a baby had been the next significant life event to impact on the couple relationship after moving in together. It is widely recognised that the transition to parenthood is one of the biggest challenges couples may face. Indeed, alongside moving house and bereavement, it ranks as one of the most stressful of life events. A number of studies have documented the impact on couple relationships when partners become parents⁵¹ and highlighted the striking alterations in self-definition and roles.⁵² Becoming a parent requires no particular family form or relationship, and increasingly large numbers of babies are being born outside wedlock, although the parents of the vast majority of newborn babies are living together at the time of the birth.⁵³

Because the transition to parenthood was the most frequently cited stressor on the relationships of couples in our study, in this chapter we focus attention on the impact of parenthood, looking specifically at the following issues:

- the decision to have children
- problems associated with pregnancy and the postnatal period
- changes in roles and responsibilities

⁵¹ See e.g. Mansfield, P. and Collard, J. (1988) *The Beginning of the Rest of Your Life: A portrait of newly-wed marriage*, Macmillan.

⁵² See e.g. Deutsch, F. M., Ruble, D. N., Fleming, A., Brooks-Gunn, J. and Stangor, G. S. (1988) 'Information-seeking and maternal self-definition during the transition to parenthood', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 55, pp. 420–31; Belsky, J. and Pensky, E. (1988) 'Marital change across the transition to parenthood', *Marriage and Family Review*, vol. 12, pp. 133–56.

⁵³ ONS (2007) *Social Trends 37. Household and Families*, Palgrave Macmillan.

- the pressures associated with being a parent and their impact on the couple relationship

In the next chapter we examine the other life events and challenges which had impacted on couple relationships, recognising that some of them were closely associated with the transition to parenthood, although not always.

Deciding To Have Children

Mothers and fathers in our study, however much they had been looking forward to starting a family, were in no doubt about the extent of the responsibility and the challenges associated with the move to parenthood. Indeed, parents in both phases of the research considered parenting to have been one of the most difficult things they had had to do. The following comments, by a young mother and a father respectively, were typical:

We had her [a daughter] after we had been together for a year. It adds a complication. It brings so many challenges – there's more need for discussion. Parenting is the hardest thing.

Forget going out to work, forget ... writing up a thesis or anything like that. Having kids is the hardest thing you'll ever do in life. And if you can, like, come through it sane you go 'I've ... I've done something right there'.

Both of the above parents articulated how, in order to negotiate the transition to parenthood successfully, couples need to make conscious efforts to adapt. While most of the parents who participated in both phases of the study, whether they were separated or in intact relationships, tended to have been in reasonable agreement about having and wanting children, they were not always in agreement about the best time to have either the first or subsequent children. This could mean that one partner felt under pressure from the other to go along with a life change for which they were not well prepared. A theme that emerged in many accounts was that of not being in control of the transition to parenthood. The feeling of not being in control had clearly provoked a range of reactions from partners who had not anticipated becoming, nor had wanted to become, parents. Some parents whose relationships had ended and some who were still in committed relationships described their sense of not being in control. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strongest expressions of doubt about having a baby came from parents in phase 1 who had separated, usually though by no means always from fathers. Some of these parents talked about having had minimal involvement in the decision-making; others had been ambivalent or detached; and others again had expressed positive acceptance. On the other hand, although some parents in the intact couples group in phase 2 also said they had not been entirely in control of the decision to have children, they tended to have been less anxious about the transition to parenthood and to have had a greater ability to make it work:

She had been broody for several years, but we had never discussed it. We weren't in a financial position to start a family. It was planned but not meticulously planned. We stopped using contraception and it happened quite quickly. But we didn't do the spreadsheet until after. But it was fine. (male, phase 2)

For some couples, an unexpected pregnancy had marked the beginning of difficulties in the relationship; in other cases, it had been an opportunity for the partners to work together as a couple to manage the transition. A small number of women, in both separated and intact relationships, said that they had had children at inappropriate points in their relationship or at a time, as they later realised, when they had not known their partner very well.

The same sense of not being in control was felt by adoptive parents. The process of adopting children is often stressful for couples unable to have children of their own. Even when both

partners had been committed to the process, not knowing when a child would be placed with them could be stressful, particularly when a second child was being adopted. A mother with two adopted boys told us:

My oldest one was eight months old when he came, and the younger one was five months ... it was separate adoptions. And we had a six year wait in between, which was again extremely stressful. Because we'd anticipated there would be, like, a two- or three-year gap in age ... Becoming new parents overnight was very challenging for us both. And ... it obviously brought up some new feelings and new thoughts for both of us. Because whilst it was very exciting, it was also very daunting as we had no preparation time for it ... Going from ... married professionals to ... become a stay-at-home mum ... suddenly overnight ... the loss of income, loss of my independence, to this is what I really always wanted, to be a mum, and ... it took me by surprise – it was not what I expected it to be, because of the enormity of the scale of what we'd undertaken, and the responsibility.

While for this couple the extremely rigorous adoption vetting process had been manageable, they nevertheless identified a time when they would have appreciated some support:

The time that I feel that I really wanted the support, actually, was the minute that we had our first child placed with us ... It was fine until the adoption order was made, but once the adoption order was made all the services disappeared ... and that was a time where actually we could have done with some more support, even if it had been somebody that we could have phoned from time to time.

This mother also talked about the impact of becoming the parent of a child who was not a newborn baby, and the loneliness she had felt when she had become a mother in a somewhat different way:

You are a new parent but you haven't got a teeny-weeny baby ... you've approached it at a completely different angle, and you've become an instant parent. And actually that was quite – that was quite isolating at that time.

Having Second and Subsequent Children

The evidence from our study demonstrates that decisions about whether/when to have more than one child can also involve tensions and a similar sense of not being in control. A number of parents said that they had not been prepared for the arrival of another baby. One mother, for example, described her sense of not being in control as follows:

We talked about having our first child and that's what we both wanted, but when it came to having the second child I wasn't quite ready. [My first child] was only two and a half and I just wasn't – emotionally I wasn't ready to have another child. I needed time, you know, but [my husband] said 'Oh no, we don't want too much of an age gap' ... so I felt a little bit pressured, a little bit pressured into having the second one.

One separated father explained how both he and his wife had been very keen to have their first child, but that he had been far less ready than his wife to have more children:

The first one we were [in agreement] definitely. The second one – I was coerced – I mean not in a sort of negative way, you know. But I wanted to wait, because I was quite shocked at how hard it was having a small child, and thought, oh, I want a bit more time to get used to this, and see what this person is ...

He went on to explain how, since he had always liked the idea of having a big family, he had been swayed by his wife's enthusiasm. However, when the third pregnancy occurred, he definitely had not been ready for it:

Then the third child came along – and that wasn't planned – in very quick succession after the first, and that felt like a real hammer blow actually. We were both very distraught by that, and spent a long time talking about what to do ... neither of us happy with the idea of a termination, but also utterly terrified.

This man identified the third pregnancy as the point in the couple's relationship when the problems had started. Others described the pressure of having more children as the transition that had ultimately destroyed their relationship. We learned from parents, particularly fathers, who had had several children just how difficult it had been for them to cope with the news of repeated pregnancies. Both mothers and fathers felt that having had several children very close together had been very hard work. One father of six commented that, had he realised what was involved, he probably would have preferred to have had longer gaps between the pregnancies.

We found that unresolved disagreements about when to have children, and misperceptions of a partner's wish to become a parent, could lead to serious problems later in the relationship. These difficulties could play out in a variety of ways. Some people talked about being forced to stay in a relationship that otherwise would have ended much earlier. Others talked about the problems associated with the rejection of a baby by one of the parents. One father described how his relationship with his wife had deteriorated after the birth of their third child. He explained that his wife had arranged for their second son, who was born with Down's Syndrome, to be adopted out of the family because she did not think she would be able to cope with him:

After our third son was born, our relationship was in difficulty, probably directly due to our having given up for adoption our second child. Having another child ... could not act as a BandAid.

Some women recalled that an unplanned pregnancy had resulted in violent reactions from their partner:

In hindsight, this is the start of his abusive behaviour. That night when he told me 'I want you to have an abortion'. The way he talked about that with no empathy, no consideration for my feelings, no support, it shocked me actually. It did cross my mind to get out then, there and then. Maybe I should have. I think till this day, maybe I should have ended my relationship with him then. (female, separated)

Having a baby in order to cement a troubled relationship was not uncommon. Sometimes it was an effective strategy and other times it was not. For example, one man described how he and his wife had thought that having another baby might put their rocky relationship back on track, but it had brought added pressures:

It was not a mistake – I wouldn't change anything – but I suppose it was just added pressure of more money going out, added pressure of three kids running about.

Problems Associated with Pregnancy and the Postnatal Period

Women in both phases of the study had experienced difficulties conceiving a baby. There were differences in the accounts of parents in phase 1 and phase 2, however. Separated women tended to describe the difficulties as having had a negative impact on their relationship, and some of them spoke movingly about how the difficulties had put a strain on

their relationship. Women who were in committed longer-term relationships tended to point out that the difficulties had brought them and their partner closer. Nevertheless, even when a partner's reaction had been sympathetic, difficulties with conception could put a lot of pressure on the couple relationship. One woman summed this up as follows:

I mean, we tried for a year to get pregnant with my eldest ... every month I would be disappointed that I wasn't pregnant ... It wasn't a fun time, you know – it would be a case of 'Right, it's the right time to conceive – come on, let's get on with it' ... I think the romance goes out of it as well.

The women who had experienced difficulties attempting to get pregnant described this period as having been very stressful, and it had resulted in arguments with partners and a kind of mechanical, ritual approach to sex which had left it devoid of romance. Some couples had tried for a very long time to have a baby and some had faced repeated disappointment, exacerbating strains in the relationship. Some people told us that their relationship had deteriorated or ended as a result of the difficulties they had experienced. Sometimes this had been caused by perceived changes in the woman's behaviour during pregnancy. For example, one of the separated fathers we spoke to told us that his worries about his wife had begun during her pregnancy:

... when my son's mother was pregnant and she wasn't eating properly ... I just know it was a really difficult time for me. I think establishing roles and responsibilities is a big issue at that stage. And an inability to establish those effectively later leads to separation and divorce.

Another separated father described how his wife's personality had seemed to change shortly before the birth of their baby. He attributed the deterioration of their relationship to this change:

We was together for about seven months, and then we got pregnant, kind of thing. So I think it just went downhill from there on in. I mean, I know the hormones change. Women's hormones change and it just got unbearable to live with her.

Miscarriages

Becoming pregnant but then losing the baby was especially difficult for the women who suffered miscarriages. Indeed, having a miscarriage emerged as a particularly stressful experience for women in particular and an event which could have serious repercussions for the couple relationship, especially when partners found it difficult to cope with or found it difficult to understand fully what had gone wrong. One woman described the time she had miscarried twins as 'one of the most stressful things a couple can go through'. We heard repeatedly during the study that very little support had been on offer to people who had miscarried a baby. In the e-surveys we detected a good deal of concern about the lack of support during and after a miscarriage, and we identified this as a critical moment in the couple relationship when couples need and want better support from professionals who understand their loss. We return to this in Chapter 6.

Losing a baby is also an experience which men and women tend to respond to differently. Women described the loss of a baby as having left them feeling mentally and physically drained, and some spoke about having had their dreams shattered. Several women told us that their partner had simply not been able to handle these emotional reactions or the pain and hurt they had felt. Men, on the other hand, spoke of their partner's grief as something that had resulted in their partner becoming emotionally detached, and of their own feeling of helplessness, which had left them unable to do anything to support their partner because they had found the situation too difficult to handle. While some men spoke positively about

having participated in antenatal classes, they felt that no one had prepared them for the impact of a miscarriage or provided appropriate information and support afterwards.

Postnatal Stress and Depression

It is now over thirty years since the potential for mothers to become depressed when trying to cope with young children was recognised in a seminal work.⁵⁴ A number of women in each phase of the study had experienced varying degrees of discomfort, stress and depression after the birth of their children. It was not uncommon for these difficulties to have had a very direct effect on their capacity to sustain intimate relationships with their partners. The connection between pregnancy, the birth of a baby and postnatal depression has long been recognised, and, initially, was generally explained by the bodily changes associated with pregnancy.⁵⁵ The work by Brown and Harris, however, changed this understanding: they attributed the depression to the meaning of the event and to the impact that having a baby has on the mother's life.⁵⁶ They also alluded to complexities in couple relationships which might enhance the depression, including unhappy marriages and problems in other aspects of day-to-day life. Mothers and fathers in our study also referred to postnatal depression as having impacted on their relationships. One woman, for example, described the difficulty she had experienced while attempting to cope with being at home all day with a new baby:

Your husband is out there working and you then take all the stress and depression – you know. You are going through it alone during the day and you take it out at him when he comes home at night.

We received many accounts in e-surveys of mothers being unable to cope after their baby was born. The accounts suggest that the husbands' reactions to mothers' postnatal depression had varied. Some had been very supportive and understanding and others had withdrawn and/or become even more demanding. Many mothers who had separated cited postnatal depression as a key factor in the demise of their relationship. In contrast, several of the mothers who were in committed relationships and who had experienced postnatal depression expressed their gratitude to their husbands for having been very tolerant and supportive:

He did help when I needed support and I respect him for that. I had PND for three or four months and couldn't bear him being out. (female, married)

Not all husbands had been supportive, however. For example, one man whose wife had suffered with postnatal depression after the birth of all three of their children had left his wife and gone to live with his mother temporarily. Although this had given the couple a break and he later returned, the relationship remained troubled. The comments of another man reflect the responses of several men in the study:

During that first year, my wife suffered from postnatal depression and we found it really difficult to communicate. I didn't know that my wife was suffering from postnatal depression. I just thought that was sort of normal, having never been in that situation before.

Some people stressed the need for better monitoring systems as well as better education on the subject of postnatal depression. It was clear from the e-survey responses and from our interviews that postnatal depression could have a negative impact on relationships for

⁵⁴ Brown, G. and Harris, T. O. (1978) *The Social Origins of Depression*, Tavistock.

⁵⁵ Kendell, R. E., Wainwright, S., Hailey, A. and Shannon, B. (1976) 'The influence of childbirth on psychiatric morbidity', *Psychological Medicine*, vol. 6, pp. 297–302.

⁵⁶ Brown and Harris, *op. cit.*

several years. Several referred to there being a general lack of understanding about what it is like for a mother to feel so depressed following the birth of a baby and about what it is like for the partner who is trying to cope both with a new baby and with a very depressed partner. The stress of postnatal depression had led to relationships breaking down irretrievably, primarily because there had been a general lack of support for men and women to help them understand and cope with it. For example, one man whose wife was suffering from postnatal depression, although it had not been diagnosed at the time, had contacted his GP for help because of the difficulties he and his wife were experiencing:

I went to the doctor twice and ... I explained to the doctor that we had an intolerable situation at home and I just told him that it was an absolute nightmare. And he said 'Oh, there's nothing I can do unless she comes to me'. I went to see her health visitor, she told me the same thing. She said there was nothing I could do unless she presents herself for help. And I just couldn't believe it, this brick wall. And I think there was a third visit to a doctor, a different doctor in the same practice. I got the same answer again, so that was three times that I had been for help and there was nothing, nothing, nothing at all.

Changes in Roles and Responsibilities

We have focused thus far on the problems and challenges that many people had experienced before, during and after pregnancy. The problems were not universal, and some couples regarded the transition to parenthood as a positive next step once they had made a commitment to be together. Nevertheless, even though many people had not had difficulties during their pregnancy and had not suffered from postnatal depression, men and women in both phases of the study mentioned how difficult they had found it to adapt to parenthood. In the e-surveys, 37 per cent of separated parents, 27 per cent of those planning to separate, and 61 per cent of those in intact relationships talked about difficulties that they linked to becoming parents. The enormous changes that life after having a baby entailed were associated by many with a period of very high stress. One man likened this to being in a war zone:

I remember when my child was born, first one, I felt as if my life had been bombed and all the bits blown up into the air and it was absolute chaos, and they all settled down again to different patterns, but it was a huge change.

Another man used a similar metaphor, comparing his new baby to a grenade that had been lobbed between him and his wife. The arrival of baby usually meant that roles and responsibilities in the home had to change, and the transitions were not problem-free. One mother described the change as follows:

... you need to put your relationship on hold or, like, to the back seat at least, and you just have to focus on getting the baby sorted, and – you know – dressed and fed and cared for. I think that was something that was a big shock for us.

Sharing Childcare

Couples in both phases of the study had responded in many different ways to the challenge of caring for a very small baby. A common theme to emerge from the data was the stress of childcare:

The toughest time was in the early days after having a child. It is difficult. He's a noisy baby, didn't sleep from the age of one until two. We shared the burden. I got up in the night quite a bit except for feeding. She was breast-feeding. I'd get up in the morning

so that she could sleep. I used to take him out in a sling or the car so that she could sleep and to get him to sleep. We tried to share it. (father, separated)

In the first six months after the birth, parents seem to have accepted that the mother would have to spend more time with the baby during the day. Fathers often spoke of trying to do as much as they could when they were at home, and some of the mothers acknowledged this contribution. However, fathers' attempts to be involved sometimes proved quite difficult for mothers to accommodate:

... they sort of come home and it's like 'Don't mess with the baby, it's asleep'. And it's 'Well, I've been at work all day but I want to come and look after me son or me daughter'. (mother)

Parents, particularly fathers, commented on how the physical demands of caring for a small baby had affected the couple's relationship. One father, whose relationship subsequently ended, expressed the problem as follows:

The parenting element puts more strain on the relationship as well, up late at night, doing the feeds. I mean, I used to spend for ever feeding my daughter to goodness knows what hours, and I was a full and active part of bringing her up.

Although a number of fathers had tried to combine work commitments with caring for a baby, several mothers spoke about having felt very isolated, left on their own with a small baby all day, especially when they also had other small children to care for:

So I was left at home with a little boy of two and a half and newborn baby and it was hard, and he [her husband] was leaving home from, say, half seven, quarter to eight in the morning and wasn't getting home till after six at night.

This sense of isolation was often exacerbated when there were no relatives living nearby or when the husband's job required him to be away a lot.

Although the majority of couples appeared to have arrived at mutually acceptable childcare arrangements during these early days, this was clearly a point in the couple relationship when some couples first began to grow apart. Men who were separated often referred to the confusion they had felt about roles and responsibilities, particularly as they felt under pressure to provide for the family financially. They touched on the assumption that men have less responsibility towards children than women and often expressed strong views about what the role of mothers should be. The recent evidence paper from the Cabinet Office and the DCSF⁵⁷ reported that while fathers express great interest in being involved in caring for their children, they continue to believe that mothers are better carers. There was evidence of this belief in the comments made by some of the men in our study. For example, one man was very disappointed that neither of his two ex-partners had been prepared to stay at home with their babies:

The first two years is the most important part of a baby's life, and that baby's got to be with you. You can't have the baby for three months and go back to work.

Competing Demands

Our study has confirmed the findings of many others about the tensions which emerge as parents attempt to juggle work and home commitments. Difficulties that emerged in the early years of a child's life sometimes lessened as couples adapted to their new roles, but this was

⁵⁷ The Cabinet Office/DCSF (2008), *op. cit.*

by no means always the case, and for some, pressures and resentment had built up. Almost all the parents who were interviewed mentioned that their lives had changed enormously since the arrival of their first child. They spoke of how hard they had found it to meet the demands of their children, of the workplace and of each other, and also to meet their own need for support and recognition. Lack of time, lack of sleep, lack of energy and lack of money figured in many of the accounts given by men and women in both phases of the research.

It is well documented that men sometime feel jealous of a new baby and resentful of the amount of time that the mother devotes to caring for the baby,⁵⁸ and it was not uncommon for women in our study to remark that they thought their partners may have felt excluded. One mother described how, because she felt her husband was not bonding well with the baby, she had suggested he spend more time helping rather than being out with friends. In response, her husband had said he wanted to leave. Another separated man described how difficult he had found trying to be involved with childcare because his wife was so anxious:

Possibly as a result of her father dying, she became – if there is such [a thing] – too close to the boy, so she was too close to him, sort of wouldn't really let him out of her sight ... I mean, I bonded with him, it wasn't difficult for me to be close to him, but it felt, like, difficult to be close because she wasn't letting him away from her at all ... possibly she never thought of him as ours. I think she thought of him as hers and I think still does.

As roles and responsibilities changed, other stresses frequently surfaced and lives began to diverge. Even fathers who willingly took on household tasks and were determined to take a share in parenting responsibilities found that traditional gender roles began to reassert themselves, despite earlier plans for tasks in the home to be distributed equally. During the course of this study, we recorded a number of comments about the changes in family life which left men and women feeling confused about what is expected of them. We detected that men and women talked differently about their respective expectations of family life and their own roles in it, particularly when they became parents. Parents were aware of the pressure on men to play a more active part in their children's upbringing yet at the same time to work hard to support the family. The transition to parenthood was a particularly critical moment in couple relationships, especially for men who struggled to accommodate new demands and expectations. In one of our focus group discussions, a marriage counsellor acknowledged that many fathers have difficulty when they reach the postnatal stage:

Where everybody on the football pitch is chasing the ball, and the ball is the baby ... So the male often gets, you know, a right rude awakening, and it's a real shock period ... Even his parents bypass him, and his friends bypass him, and mind the baby.

Another man in the same group said that he often thought of the father's role at this early stage as like 'loitering with intent around the mum and the baby', which is not a comfortable position to be in. While it is known that fathers often feel excluded after a baby is born, the fact that mothers, too, can feel excluded is less well known. Several mothers made remarks such as the following:

He [her husband] just sort of cut me out of his life or didn't want to be part of my life. I mean, he was happy with having the family but it wasn't a couple relationship any more ... He was happier and more at ease playing with the baby than talking to me ...

A new baby can change the family and/or couple dynamic for better or worse. For some people, it made a poor relationship better, but more commonly it created strain. Several

⁵⁸ Mansfield, P. and Collard, J. (1988), *op. cit.*

people talked about the impact on the couple's sex life, which had often deteriorated badly. One man described how having a crying baby, an often tired and preoccupied partner, and a baby who at first slept in a cot at the bottom of the couple's bed and who as a toddler would climb into bed with him and his partner, had seriously dented the couple's sex life and changed his own behaviour:

When things start going against you, and I was probably a bit weak-willed at the time ... just thought the easy way out was to go and have a shed load [of beer].

His drinking had subsequently played a large part in the final breakdown of the couple's relationship.

There was a view among many participants in the study that the roles of men and women, and particularly of mothers and fathers, are less clearly defined than they were in the past. Interviewees felt they were having to carve out or renegotiate roles for themselves as each new baby, or, in the case of adoptive parents and reconstituted families, a new child, arrived. As circumstances changed, each couple needed to engage in fresh negotiations and renegotiations about their roles and about their own relationship. Several of the married women in our study described themselves as having become very much like single parents:

You've got to be the mum and the dad and you've still got to look after the children, go to work, look after the house. Yes, sort of like a super person and do everything. And then they sort of come back and expect you to drop everything and, you know, attend their every whim when you sort of got settled into a routine, children were in a routine. (mother, married and separated after ten years in relationship)

Within each of our three groups, sizeable percentages of people who responded to the e-survey had argued about parenting responsibilities (50% of those who were separated, 43% of those planning to separate and 29% of those in 'together' relationships). It is noteworthy that those in intact relationships argued less about parenting tasks than people in the other two groups.

Pressures on Parenting and Their Impact on Couple Relationships

As well as concerns about roles and responsibilities and the resentment that can build up relating to childcare, parents described other changes in family life which had impacted on them, particularly money worries and children's behaviour.

Financial Pressures

Having a baby created more financial responsibilities and simultaneously limited parents' capacity to meet those responsibilities. It was not unusual for women to have given up work to look after their babies and young children. This had meant a loss in income and a loss of financial independence. Increased financial dependence of women on their partners had also created a dynamic with which a number of couples had had difficulty coping. These difficulties had not passed quickly, and some women had found it very difficult, when they wanted to get back to work, to persuade their husband that for this to happen the husband would have to be prepared to take a greater share in the childcare:

In our case my husband was always in full employment and I was looking for jobs and sometimes he couldn't quite register I was actually going back to work and I had to have him to look after the baby ...

Other women complained that, when they had returned to work, their partners had not taken a fair share of the housework and child-rearing. We were told that men had been supportive

of their partner going back to work as long as this did not interfere with the mother taking care of the children as well. One man, however, whose relationship had ended, described how chaotic family life had become when his wife had returned to work and had, in his eyes, 'dragged' their son to the nursery. While some mothers were keen to get back to work, others spoke of the pressure on them to return to work and of their sense that being a mother is no longer regarded as an important job. Quite a number felt that they had no choice as to whether they would stay at home or try to find work. Being unwillingly separated from their babies at an early age, combined with the worry of finding alternative care, clearly had the potential to reduce mothers' self-esteem as well as their sense of self-worth.

The need to boost the family's income was the main reason mothers and fathers gave for both partners having to work. Unemployment or redundancy could propel a relationship to go downhill rapidly because of the stresses involved in making ends meet and paying bills. The loss of a job introduced a huge strain on households and relationships in terms of finances, expectations, and depression. It sometimes precipitated other changes such as moving to a new area. As relationships were put under strain, couples tended to argue more, about 'every little thing'. Others talked of not being able to afford to go out together any more, which then increased the stresses and pressures at home.

Children's Behaviour and Other Transitions

The problematic behaviour of children featured equally prominently in the responses of people planning to separate and in those of people in intact relationships. Thirty-two per cent of e-survey respondents in each group associated relationship difficulties with their children's behaviour. Separated couples and those planning to separate argued more about their children (40% and 30% respectively) than couples who were together. Caring for children with special needs, whether they were related to health problems or education, was described as having been particularly stressful. The demands of caring for a child who has chronic illness or has been diagnosed with a disorder such as autism can put severe strains on the parents' own relationship.

The transitions in children's lives also caused added stress for some parents. For example, parents (37%) in intact relationships described problems they had experienced when their children had started school and 12 per cent described problems in their couple relationship when children had left home.

Summary

For many of the parents in the study the transition to parenthood had been both difficult and stressful. Having a baby marked a critical moment in most couples' relationships, as each partner had to adapt to and accommodate radical changes in their circumstances and daily routines. This had been particularly challenging for couples who had had to accommodate and integrate children from previous relationships within new stepfamily households, as we discussed in the previous chapter. It is clear that bringing up children can put pressure on parents for many years and that couple relationships can be put under serious strain. The study has demonstrated the following:

1. Tensions in couple relationships were associated with:
 - (a) whether and when to start a family or have more children;
 - (b) unexpected and difficult pregnancies;
 - (c) miscarriages and postnatal depression;
 - (d) changing roles and responsibilities;
 - (e) coping with childcare;
 - (f) financial pressures resulting from having children;

- (g) caring for children with special needs;
- (h) resentment about the changes in routine that disrupted the couple relationship and about the time spent caring for a new baby;
- (i) juggling work and childcare.

2. Difficulties conceiving, problems during pregnancy, miscarriages and postnatal depression were particularly devastating, and frequently had a serious and detrimental impact on couple relationships.
3. Parenting roles and responsibilities were not always clear-cut and the expectations of mothers and fathers frequently varied, causing tensions in the couple relationship, particularly as traditional gender roles re-emerged.
4. The transition to parenthood was often associated with the deterioration and subsequent demise of the couple relationship by people who had separated or were planning to do so.
5. Raising children continued to place a number of strains and pressures, including money worries, on family life and couple relationships, particularly at key transitions in the child's development.
6. Parents tended to feel that they had not been given sufficient advice and support to deal with the pressures and that support services had not taken account of the impacts of childcare and the bringing up of children on the parents' own relationship.

In the next chapter, we examine a number of other problems that people described as having had an impact on their relationship, and consider some of the coping strategies they had adopted.

Chapter 4 Problems, Challenges and Coping Strategies

Weaknesses in the relationship? Financial issues, trust issues, violence, control, alcohol. My husband and I never spent any time alone together. (female, phase 1)

In the last chapter, we explored how participants in the study had made the transition to parenthood and examined the challenges and problems they had faced. This transition was the most widely discussed source of difficulties in couple relationships. In this chapter we examine other events or emergent problems which people across all three groups (separated, planning to separate and together) referred to as having put pressure on their couple relationship. The problems mentioned most frequently related to: work pressures; finances; bereavement or illness; and alcohol and substance use. We have already mentioned some of these in Chapter 3 in relation to the transition to parenthood. Often, these problems had emerged or re-emerged later in the relationship. We examine each of these in turn. In addition, we refer to other problems that were raised, such as lack of intimacy, affairs and arguments, and the symptomatic problems associated with mental illness, alcohol abuse and domestic violence. In the final section of the chapter, we examine the aspects of couple relationships which people in phase 2 of the study highlighted as being very important if couples are to cope with pressures and problems as they arise, and consider the extent to which these aspects had been absent or problematic in the relationships which had ended which people told us about in phase 1 of the study.

Work Pressures

In the e-surveys, 21 per cent of people who had separated and 28 per cent of those planning to separate said they had experienced difficulties at work. The percentage of people (59%) in intact relationships who had experienced difficulties at work was even higher, however. The demands of employment were frequently mentioned by phase 1 participants as having put a considerable strain on relationships: people described having had to work long hours or cope with stressful employment situations. Others reported that, at some stage, their partner had been compelled or had chosen to work long hours: one father, for example, told us that as his wife's drinking became problematic he had come to regard his workplace as a refuge. Long working hours that kept one partner away from home for much of the time could leave the other partner feeling anxious, depressed, or feeling that they had been abandoned to cope with the rigours of housekeeping and child-rearing alone. The difficulty of dealing with these pressures was widely recognised. One man's comments reflect many of those made:

... my boss was putting massive pressure on me, the children were putting massive pressure on mum, there was no release for either of us. When I got home from work after a fourteen-hour day, mum didn't want to provide for me in any way, and I didn't particularly want to provide for the kids in any way.

When one or both partners came home at the end of a long day feeling tired, resentful and irritable, they often regarded workplace stress as marring the limited interaction they were able to find time for. The problem was compounded when both partners had demanding jobs: when partners rarely saw each other because of their respective work commitments, their increasingly separate lives often put escalating pressure on the relationship. Problems were also widely reported as a result of jobs that took one partner away from the home for extended periods, such as being a member of the Armed Forces or a HGV driver:

He rang me like one in the morning, two in the morning, saying I am going to stay at this customer's house, there's no point me coming home and that really hurt. You know 'there's no point me coming home.' (female, divorced)

As well as creating rifts in relationships, lengthy stays away from home by one partner were often linked to having affairs, or gave rise to suspicions of infidelity. One mother, for instance, attributed her partner's flings to him spending his evenings in bars while working away from home.

The jobs that required a high level of commitment were usually described as being essential to securing an adequate income for the family. Several people cited the current economic climate as leaving them no choice but to accept demanding jobs, and voiced concerns at what might happen to their jobs if, for instance, they sought to limit their hours or exhibited signs of stress to their employer. People talked about the distress they felt on a daily basis when they were juggling work demands and home life, and found that circumstances often meant that they were reliant on earning money in order to cope.

Although more people in the together group had experienced difficulty as a result of changing jobs than people in the separated or planning to separate groups (65%, 16% and 7% respectively), changing jobs was identified by e-survey respondents in phase 1 as having been a particular source of strain on relationships that had failed. For example, one man told us:

I was in the process of changing jobs. I spent a year in a job I hated so she [his partner] could change jobs and find her dream career. When she moved to her new job, I became very concerned that my change of career might not go as well. This put a strain on our relationship. I was having trouble sleeping at nights and becoming very depressed.

A few of those who had experienced difficulties in their relationship which were associated with work nevertheless described the positive impact of their having an understanding employer. People who felt their work and/or their employer had helped them during or at the end of a relationship were extremely grateful.

We noted that, when people were discussing the pressures associated with work, there appeared to be a general acceptance of traditional gender roles, thereby echoing the findings reported in the previous chapter in respect of the transition to parenthood. In this regard, we did not hear any fathers complaining about being left to cope with the demands of child-rearing while their partners worked long hours. On the other hand, women who were struggling with the demands of their job tended to complain that their partner did not take a fair share of household tasks and that this compounded the pressure they were under. Moreover, a reversal or sharing of roles was rarely suggested as a remedy. In focus groups, discussions about possible solutions to the conflicting demands of work and home tended to centre on how mothers could be better supported in managing childcare and housework, and fathers be better supported as breadwinners.

Job insecurity and unemployment can also be particularly stressful. Again, people in all three groups talked about the pressures on relationships (26% separated, 32% planning to separate, 43% together) when they experienced work insecurity or unemployment. These difficulties could be exacerbated when they led to financial problems.

Financial Difficulties

Over half the participants in all three groups had experienced problems with money (52%, 58% and 60% respectively). People in both phases of the study described difficult times in their relationships which had been brought on by financial constraints. The following comment was typical:

I think there were quite a few rows in the early days, particularly to do with money ... I go back to the loss of income, not being able to just fill up the car with petrol when I wanted, having to ask my husband. And I think there were quite a few frustrations. And he always wanted to provide. (female, married)

This comment also highlights the differing gender expectations of roles when some young couples moved in together. Mothers in particular spoke of the difficulties they had experienced in adjusting to the loss of an income after taking a decision to give up their job to raise children, and in being forced to budget. Whatever the reason for money having become tight, partners regarded the impact this had had on them as having left them with little or no scope for expenditure on each other or for enjoying time together. Economising or budgeting could also bring differing expectations to the fore. When resources had dwindled, for instance after one partner left a job, those who saw the need to rein in their expenditure said that they had suddenly become aware that their ideas about what was necessary, what to plan for, what to prioritise, and how or whether to splurge on occasion, were at odds with those of their partner. When financial constraints arose as a result of redundancy or giving up a job, the difficulties were often associated by the partner who had lost their job with an accompanying loss of self-confidence and by an increase in stress and uncertainty within the couple relationship. In describing this situation, people often said that they had felt resentment, because they had to be the breadwinner, or because they had to rely on their partner for financial support, or because their partner had been difficult:

I was left with a hundred pounds to buy food, to pay bills, to buy clothes, everything. I was getting in debt with my bank account and, because he had already told me I was a ponce, there was no way I was going to ask him for money. (female, married and separated)

Another implication of losing a job is that the unemployed partner has more time to spend at home. While this meant that some people were relieved of the stress of a demanding job, the anxieties associated with unemployment and how to pay the bills quickly replaced it and, as a result, any increase in time available to spend together as a couple or as a family was often marred by the worry of finding work and managing the finances.

Differences Between People in Intact Relationships and Those Who Had Separated

When we compared the narratives of people in intact/together relationships with those of people who had separated, we found that there were important differences in emphasis in relation to financial problems and responses to them. People who were in intact relationships discussed financial constraints as something that had made life difficult for them and their partner, primarily because of a lack of earning power. Those whose relationships had ended discussed similar problems as incidents or episodes which had not merely made life difficult but which had caused serious rifts in relationships. To some extent this difference appeared to be a difference of scale. For instance, phase 2 interviewees talked about having different expectations and priorities regarding what it was important to spend money on, while phase 1 interviewees talked about running up debilitating credit card debts which, often, only one partner was aware of, and about having to deal with substantial sources of debt, such as negative equity, that the other partner had brought to the relationship. People in intact relationships talked about the need to agree how to budget, while those who had separated described situations in which their partner had had unilateral control of household finances or which had resulted in mutual mistrust of each other's spending:

I had worked for about four years and my money was his money to spend and his money was his money to spend. And then if anything went wrong, it was my fault, sort of financially. (female, divorced)

People in intact relationships talked about mutual reliance and sharing the load, whereas those who had separated described mistrust or vituperative personal criticism being hurled between the partners, and accusations of 'sponging', or lack of ambition or commitment, being levelled. Those in intact relationships described periods of limited finances as difficult, but did not describe them as having a clear negative impact on the relationship, whereas those whose relationships had broken down referred to serious arguments, resentment and overreactions that had arisen as a direct result of finances having been limited.

The ways in which participants in the two phases talked about their financial difficulties suggest that couples were better able to cope with these problems when they were able to see them as shared troubles. Accounts in phase 1 were characterised by references to 'his' or 'her' debt, individual contributions to household funds, or the need to take individual control of household finances, rather than by references to how the couple worked out common arrangements and responses. The 'his' and 'her' explanation of debt is illustrated in the following comment:

She wasn't working for a year and also was wanting towards the end of that time for me or for us to buy a new, bigger house, but that would be me doing that. Because the relationship wasn't great, I didn't feel it quite appropriate at that time because it would be my debt, if you like. (male, separated)

Bereavement and Illness

Life events such as bereavement or serious illness are traumatic for everyone, whether they are in a relationship or not. Thirteen per cent of people who had separated, 7 per cent of those planning to separate and 39 per cent of people in the together category had experienced death in the family, and many had experienced physical illness (9%, 21% and 25% respectively) or mental health problems or depression (38%, 43% and 32% respectively). Our data point to ways in which these difficulties can impact on relationships. Some people spoke about the death of a parent, usually their own rather than their partner's, as being a difficult time for the couple or for the family:

I put that [the emergence of problems in the marriage] and my depression down to my dad getting terminal cancer, and not being able to do anything to help that and feeling the panic that they must be going through. That put a lot of pressure on me. (female, divorced)

People described a period of terminal illness or the aftermath of a bereavement as a time when they were much more involved with or were caring for their relatives and had less time to spend with their partner or children: they felt they had become less focused on their partner or less attentive as a result. The loss of a parent had led some people to become withdrawn or depressed, or to change their behaviour. For example, two women told us that they had felt the loss of their respective mothers very keenly: their mothers had been significant confidants, advisers and sources of support in the women's own relationships as well as in other areas. Other people had realised that their partner had felt rejected or pushed aside during a period of illness in the family.

A serious health condition had placed extraordinary demands on some people's relationship. The impacts were similar to those of bereavement: the illness had caused them to feel unable to focus on their partner or family, and the stress had been enhanced because their partner had not been supportive, or had not responded appropriately. In contrast, some people clearly felt that ill health had been used as an excuse to avoid facing up to problems. For example, one woman whose partner suffered from ME told us that he had used the diagnosis to his advantage:

If there's a problem he goes under the duvet and he just says 'I am exhausted, I am not feeling well'. And for me then to work out is it me? Is it avoidance? Is it just a little cold or whatever? (female, cohabiting)

Ill health and the needs arising from it emerged as issues about which partners could develop differential and problematic expectations. Mental health problems, and depression in particular, were more widely referred to than physical ill health. Sometimes depression was linked to events such as bereavement and sometimes to the fact that the relationship was going wrong. We noted in the previous chapter that postnatal depression had made relationships difficult. In parallel with people who had been bereaved, those suffering from mental health problems often described their partner as not having been as supportive as they could have been. When mental health problems had been experienced, some people had accessed primary care health services for support or help. Dealing with a partner's mental illness had been a source of strain for many people. A few people told us that their partner had attempted suicide, prompting them to stay in the relationship:

It really, really upset me a lot. It really drew the carpet under my feet away. Because I thought, whatever I do I can't [leave him]. I mean, I don't want to be responsible in any way. I really don't want my son's father to kill himself ... (female, cohabiting)

People also talked about their belief that their partner's behaviour in the relationship was attributable to an undiagnosed mental health condition, such as bipolar disorder. We cannot know from their accounts whether mental health conditions were actually a factor. However, the recurrence of such claims is an indication that when relationships are under pressure or start to go wrong, mental health conditions are likely to be part of the discourse when partners account for relationship problems, and may be used to explain difficulties:

My husband just can't make more money. I would put some of that down to mental health reasons. He wouldn't, but I would. (female, married)

Differences Between People in Intact Relationships and Those Who Had Separated

Again, when we compare the data from phase 1 and phase 2 participants, we note a difference in the responses to illness and bereavement. In general, people in intact relationships described their partner as having been there to support them at this time, allowing them the time and space to grieve, and as sharing their grief to some extent. People who had separated, on the other hand, tended to describe their partner as having failed to think of their needs or make allowances for them at this time. They also remembered vividly occasions on which their partner had shown a lack of care and respect. Funerals emerged in a few accounts as occasions during which resentment had been significantly heightened. One woman regarded her husband's expressed opinion that she should be 'getting over' a bereavement while she still felt devastated as constituting a tipping point in their relationship. While some people had accessed support from GPs, Macmillan nurses, CARIS and other counsellors, the support was focused on helping them to come to terms with the bereavement rather than on any knock-on effects on their relationship or family life. One mother, for example, reported that her CARIS counsellor was instructed to keep to the subject of bereavement in her sessions rather than allow her to talk about the impacts on her relationship with her partner.

Alcohol and Substance Use

A number of interviewees whose relationships had ended saw their own or their partner's drinking as a significant source of relationship problems. More e-survey respondents who had separated or were planning to separate than those in intact relationships identified drug and alcohol problems as particularly problematic (26%, 19% and 10% respectively).

Concerns about alcohol were wide-ranging. Drinking had sometimes led to concerns over children's safety; it was seen as a significant drain on household resources; it was thought to be responsible for changing a partner's behaviour; and it had led, in some cases, to a drunken affair or fling. The development of serious arguments or violence was strongly associated with a partner arriving home drunk. One man, separated from his partner, explained the consequences as follows:

But any normal, civil conversation was difficult. Everything was heightened. And as you know, with alcohol it's a stimulant that, if you're in a good mood, it can heighten your good mood, but if you're in a depressive mood, and her moods would go like that, it would actually worsen it.

It was clear that behaviours such as drinking to excess had been evident prior to the start of some relationships but, as some people indicated, excessive drinking or drug taking could be hidden, surfacing only after the couple had made a commitment to live together or get married. Other people talked about having been in denial about addictive behaviour, either their own or that of their partner, which had led to increasing resentment. People who told us about their partner's drinking either associated it with their behaviour before the relationship or saw it as a reaction to external stressors, such as their business being in trouble and concomitant depression. Those who told us about their own drinking behaviour acknowledged the same influences, and, in addition, some told us that they had been unprepared for the relatively quiet or temperate life that their partner lived. For some people, alcohol and substance abuse had been a long-standing problem, pre-dating the formation of their relationship. Others had turned to alcohol when difficulties emerged in their lives, using it to escape from other problems, at least temporarily. Often alcohol and substance abuse were symptomatic of other deeper problems which were unresolved. People also mentioned using alcohol to cope with the strain of relationship problems, and so had not regarded drinking as a particular problem:

I was pissed quite a lot of the time ... At that point, I probably don't think I would have taken help [for drinking]. I don't think I would have seen it as a major problem ... I was probably thinking, 'This is justifiable self-medication, it's what I need ...' (male, separated from a cohabiting relationship)

People who had separated who described their partner's drinking as a problem had usually encouraged their partner to see their GP or to attend Alcoholics Anonymous. Some described repeated failed attempts at boundary-setting prior to separation. Those who testified to their own problematic drinking usually said they had stopped or tried to stop. Two women who were separated from their partners had found AA, and Al-Anon, the support service for relatives of those with an alcohol problem, unsatisfactory because the drinkers were encouraged to focus on themselves and partners were encouraged to distance themselves at a time when they still felt very much in love and part of a couple.

In contrast to the people who were separated, only a few people who were still together spoke of there having been problems associated with excessive drinking. One woman we interviewed described her husband's drinking as an unresolved problem in the relationship; and one man indicated that the realisation that his drinking was causing strain in his marriage had led him to reduce his drinking to manageable levels. One woman who was still living with her husband told us that it was hard for her to consider leaving him because he was 'so nice' in all other respects and only his excessive drinking had caused problems.

Violence and Abuse

In the e-surveys, 29 per cent of those who had separated from their partner and 7 per cent of those planning to separate referred to problems caused by domestic abuse. Just 4 per cent

of people in together relationships spoke about domestic violence and none of our phase 2 interviewees referred to violence or abusive behaviour as an issue in their relationship. By contrast, both men and women in the phase 1 interview sample told us that they had experienced physical abuse by their partner. In some cases this had involved what were described as one-off or occasional incidents. Other people described frequent or regular instances of violence. Abuse was obviously a major problem in some relationships. The following comment by a woman who was separated from her partner was typical of many:

He was emotionally bullying ... put me down all the time, was cold, rejecting and refused to have sex with me for long periods.

Other women described how their partner had continually belittled them, making them feel worthless. They described this behaviour as something which had taken them a long time to acknowledge, but when its implications had sunk in, they had realised that the relationship was fundamentally compromised:

I kept warning him, saying, eventually, 'You are about to destroy everything I feel for you because you just keep chipping away at me emotionally, and criticising me, my friends', and things like that. I slightly began to not be upset by his comments. I didn't cry any more and I didn't beg him to stop. I'd just go 'Yes, whatever'. (female, separated)

Some women had left their partner at the first sign of violence, taking their children with them. Other women had returned after an initial escape, and had clearly continued to live for years with the threat of abuse. Moving out of and then moving back into relationships was a common pattern in relationships that were described as abusive:

Three years ago, one night I woke up to him strangling me. I did leave him for a week and then it was a very emotional time. I really didn't know what to think. He said he would never do it again. (female, married and separated)

Some women said they had been cowed by shock or fear, and some had denied the violence while in the relationship:

Violence isn't a word I like to use, and oh he won't ever tolerate the word violence, but obviously it had happened at those times, and we stayed at the house... (female, married and separated)

The men who had experienced violence mostly said they had been punched or slapped in the face. One man told us how his wife had attacked him with a baseball bat. A few fathers in the sample told us that their partners had made false allegations of domestic violence against them. Violence against partners was clearly a key factor in many relationships that had ended.

Sex, Intimacy and Infidelity

Intimacy is an important aspect of strong couple relationships. People in both phases pointed to the importance of sexual intimacy, the nature of which may change through the life course. Discussions about intimacy by couples in intact relationships differed from those by people who had been in relationships that had fallen apart. In the e-surveys, 27 per cent of people who had separated, 40 per cent of those planning to separate and 21 per cent of those in the together group referred to problematic sexual difficulties. However, the gradual decline of sexual intimacy, sometimes over years, characterised many of the relationships we heard about in phase 1. Some attributed this to the demands of child-rearing or to long working hours, others to a growing antipathy towards the other partner. Others again described how

the times when they had had sex had been used by their partner as an occasion for belittling or demeaning them. The absence of an active sex life was sometimes explained as resulting from the woman's previous experience of sexual abuse and her need to come to terms with this. Both women and men talked about how sexual activity in their relationship had dwindled: men described sex as something they and their partner had stopped doing, whereas women tended to claim responsibility for the cessation. Both men and women said that they felt that a central connection in the relationship had gone when sexual intimacy had been lost. This state of affairs was seen by some as an indication that the relationship had reached the stage of being unsustainable:

Sex has gone right out of the window. It was very much a brother and sister relationship I think and therefore what's the point of keeping it going? I mean on her side as well as mine really. (male, married and separated)

People in intact relationships mentioned similar problems regarding sexual intimacy, though most had not been going on for a long time and were not seen as heralding the end of the relationship. Instead, people realised that it might take time for normal sexual relations to be resumed, particularly after the birth of a baby, for example.

Dwindling sexual intimacy and infidelity were clearly associated, and people who talked about the impact of affairs on their relationship often described a period when sexual relationships with their partner had been difficult. People who had separated often mentioned their partner's infidelity as having been a problem, and some told us about their own infidelity. Usually, infidelity and affairs had signalled the end of the relationship. These accounts are therefore discussed more fully in the next chapter when we look in detail at what had happened in relationships that had ended. However, it is worth noting here that several people described infidelity (their own or their partner's) as stemming from a period when the partners had been 'drifting apart'. Two men and two women, for example, who had had affairs emphasised the loss of intimacy or closeness in their relationship when describing the impact on them of someone else offering them the intimacy, respect or fun that they no longer found in their marriage or cohabiting relationship:

I stupidly made the mistake of actually accepting the affections of someone else. And it was all so difficult because, when you realise that people can actually be nice to you and want to be with you, and yet when you come home to your wife she pushes you away ... and won't sit next to you and watch a DVD. (male, separated)

Thirty-eight per cent of people who had separated and 14 per cent of those planning to separate referred to the impact of infidelity on the relationship, as against just 9 per cent of those in together relationships. While infidelity was mentioned by interviewees in intact relationships, most had found ways of dealing with it. One interviewee, for example, told us how he and his wife had put her affair behind them with the support of marriage counselling.

Communication Difficulties

People whose relationship had been in trouble frequently referred to having experienced 'communication problems'. More e-survey respondents who were separated or planning to separate reported that they had had difficulty communicating with their partner than those in intact relationships (58% and 69 % as against 33%). Sometimes the problems were undefined, but most people recognised that there had been several issues that should have been discussed. People in the study were acutely aware that having a rational conversation could be difficult if the partners were approaching difficulties differently and if emotions were running high when arguments erupted. Phase 1 interviewees recalled many instances of destructive and inappropriate communication which had made it impossible for partners to talk together positively as a couple:

I said 'Just exactly what have I got to say to you for you to put that bloody padlock on that gate?' Now can you imagine that effect that had on her? That was the relationship breaking down. You don't recover really from incidents like that. Once you become against your partner and you start shouting, giving orders, it doesn't work. (male, divorced)

Not having been able to talk about the things that really matter was frequently cited as a problem by those whose relationships were in trouble. The following e-survey comments during phase 1 were typical:

We were able to talk about most things, but maybe we didn't talk about issues that we both found important – sex, money, general happiness. (male, separated)

My partner would not communicate with me about his feelings. (female, separated)

Some people told us that they had avoided talking about important things, including their feelings, because they had been uncertain what to say, nervous, or afraid of their partner's reaction. When trust had broken down, some people had suspected that their partner would simply tell lies if they tried to talk about their problems.

Understanding Gender Differences

People were able to identify various barriers to being able to instigate serious conversations with their partner, and distinct gender differences emerged in the accounts they gave. The most frequently recounted situation was of one partner wishing to talk about a problem but finding that the other refused to do so, or avoided doing so. Women in particular recalled that they had tried to engage their partner in discussions in the hope of saving the relationship or dealing with problems, but had found that their attempts were resisted:

Whenever there is a problem, he just shies away or hides away or leaves the room or blames me. It never resolves in any productive way. I just found that really exhausting. (female, cohabiting)

Two women complained specifically about their partner's insistence on conducting conversations about the relationship via text messaging. Women attributed their partners' avoidance of talking face to face to wilful indifference, immaturity, laziness or other flaws of character. Some men in the study described similar situations from the opposite viewpoint. They said that they did not wish to enter into a discussion with their partner because underlying issues were likely to cause upset or provoke a row:

I wanted out and I don't know how you tell her I wanted out. I felt trapped and felt I had to stay. But I would just hurt her if I had been telling her that and it wouldn't have achieved anything ... (male, separated)

Some women made statements to the effect that men in general were unable or disinclined to communicate about relationship issues. Other women who had engaged their partners in conversations about problems they had been having expressed the belief that their partner was incapable of understanding what they were talking about or why. Many men, and some women, in the sample observed that they are not good with words, lacking the vocabulary to talk about personal matters, or being easily talked round in conversations. As a result, they chose not to engage, or not to try to express their own viewpoint:

I don't find talking easy. She found talking very easy so she talked a lot and I didn't really probably say what I should have said, which I should have... I just look for an

easy life. So from my point of view, my communication probably was wrong because I just looked for an easy life, like most men ... (male)

Arguments

Stresses and strains in relationships and communication difficulties can frequently result in arguments. Although the e-surveys show that people in phase 2 argued significantly less than those in phase 1, who were describing relationships that had ended, very few people claimed that they never argued. Whereas 43 per cent of people in intact relationships said they rarely argued, the percentages were much lower for the other two groups (19% and 13% respectively). By contrast, just 16 per cent of people who were together said they argued often or all the time, as against 55 per cent of those who had separated. Arguing was an even greater problem for those planning to separate: 46 per cent said they argued often and 22 per cent argued all the time. This pattern highlights the propensity for people who are in the throes of separation to be arguing regularly.

People in our study said that they argued about a range of issues: about half the people in all three groups argued about household tasks, but there were observable differences between the groups in respect of other issues, as Figure 4.1 illustrates.

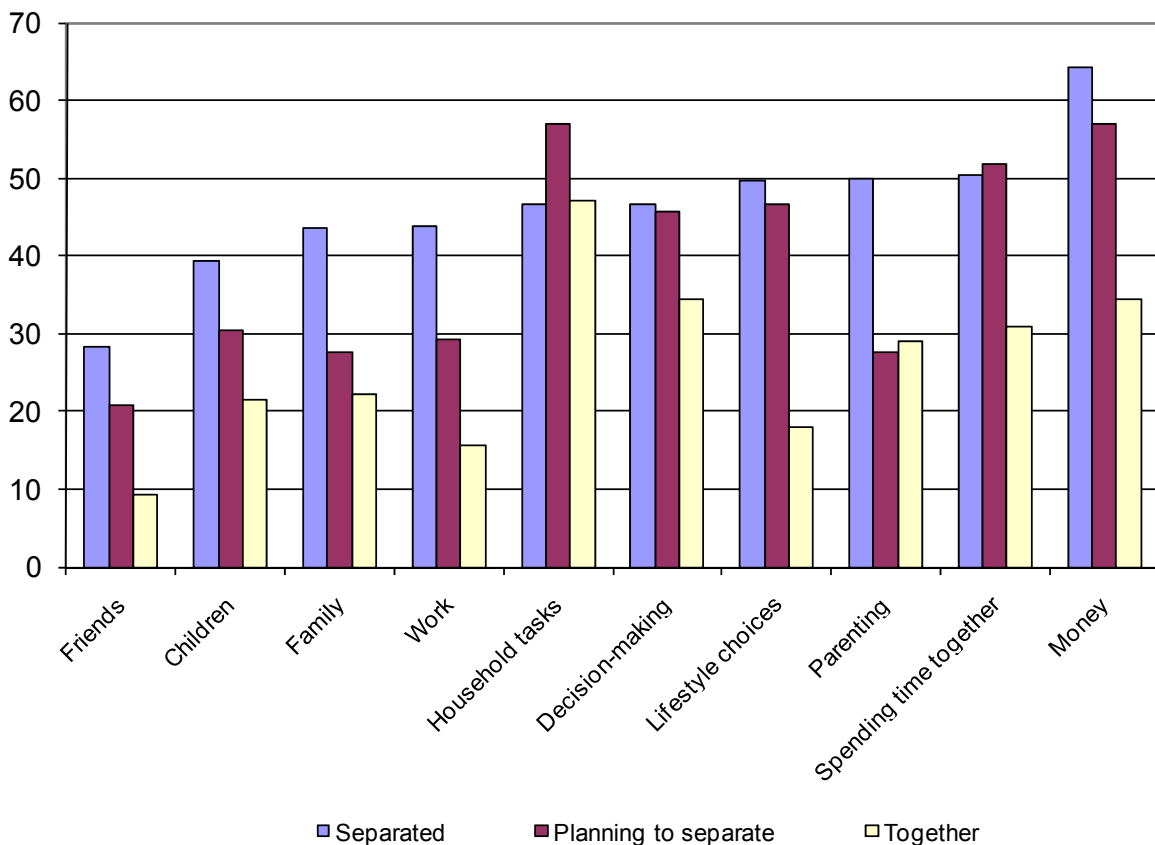


Figure 4.1 Issues people argued about (e-survey respondents)

Not only was arguing about a range of issues more prevalent among people who had separated or were planning to do so, but having arguments was talked of as having been or being a problem in its own right in these relationships: it was, in fact, the key symptom which enabled people to recognise that there were problems in their relationship. Some people who had separated emphasised that constant, repetitive arguments had constituted a malaise, or

a way of life. They tended to describe disputes which had recurred on a daily basis without any resolution:

And the arguments we had were just the same argument over and over again, and it never ever got resolved. The same things would come up. I could tell you, I could almost say them all to you now. (female, divorced)

People emphasised the silly nature of the arguments: little things could result in rows on a daily basis and, with hindsight, people had realised just how trivial many of them were. Domestic arrangements and household tasks, such as tidying and doing the washing, were fertile ground for disputes. Indeed, arguments could arise from anything, but arguments about the children were recalled as having been particularly vituperative. It is important to note, however, that among stepfamilies the vast majority of parents in all three groups indicated that they did not argue about stepchildren (over 87% in each group). Arguments were seen by some people as particularly disruptive if they involved accusations and counter-accusations or the throwing down of ultimatums. A common perception was that one partner actively sought to wind the other up: several people referred to their partner as knowing the buttons to push that would make them particularly angry. Arguments were also stimulated by a number of other factors, including lack of sleep, particularly after the arrival of children, loss of love in the relationship, and the acquisition, by one or both of the partners, of a somewhat negative style of communication from their parents.

Resolving Differences and Settling Arguments

In the narratives of people in intact relationships, much less was said about arguments and lack of communication. People said arguments were rare, or else that they did not argue; just 5 per cent said that they argued all the time. When people in intact relationships did refer to arguments, they described these as relatively insignificant events. Several interviewees used the term 'bickering' rather than 'arguing' to describe what went on between them and their partner. Moreover, when arguments did occur they were resolved, usually at the time. Phase 2 interviewees stressed that in their experience arguments were settled and not allowed to linger or fester; some suggested that the motivation for this is a strong desire not to put relationships at risk of splitting up, while one interviewee expressed the view that he and his partner were simply too lazy to argue.

There was a striking difference, therefore, between phase 1 and phase 2 participants in terms of their responses to questions about arguments and communication. People who had separated or were planning to separate were more likely to say that they never or rarely resolved arguments (53% and 55% respectively) than those in intact relationships (13%). Forty-nine per cent of people in the latter group said they always resolved arguments, as against just 7 per cent of those who had separated and 9 per cent of those planning to separate.

Finding Ways To Deal with Problems and Pressures

We turn now to look more closely at the aspects of relationships and coping strategies which people regarded as important in maintaining healthy couple relationships.

The Importance of Couple Time

Many people identified spending time together as a couple as the aspect of the relationship that suffered as a result of one or all of the problems discussed in this and the previous chapter. The majority of people who had separated said that they and their partner had been

unable to spend much time together as a couple, and that this had contributed to the break-up. One man said:

If you focus on the children, you miss each other – that's when it goes wrong. If it goes wrong there, kids suffer anyway. Make sure you get the time to go out.

Some people who had separated remembered that, in the wake of pervasive arguing, any leisure time they had had at home had been spent pursuing separate activities, typically with one partner watching television and the other using the internet in a separate room. Their attempts to persuade their partner to spend more time with them had, they said, repeatedly been rebuffed. Once the emotional bond had been severed, spending time together had begun to seem a façade, or a chore.

People in intact relationships, by contrast, treated any restriction of their time together as negative. Several phase 2 interviewees, though they did not describe any particular strategies for ensuring that they and their partner were able to be together, emphasised the importance of each partner making an effort to allow the other their own time and space to pursue individual interests, as well as the importance of doing things as a couple. When the partners did get time together they wanted to enjoy each other's company. One of the key messages remembered by people who had attended counselling at Relate or Marriage Care was that they should make an effort to spend more time together with their partner rather than spend time with them in the context of parenting their children. People referred to this message as having been a 'wake-up call' and some described it as having been a revelation. Spending time together as a couple was not necessarily an activity that phase 1 participants had thought about as a mechanism for maintaining a strong relationship.

Talking To Each Other

E-survey responses in phase 2 indicate that the most popular strategy couples in intact relationships used to deal with problems in their relationship was talking to their partner about them. Hundreds of people told us that talking had helped them to make their relationship strong. The following responses are typical of many of those received:

Being there for each other and talking through problems and understanding/helping to problem-solve. I believe that every relationship will have its strengths and weaknesses and ours is no different. Our relationship is like a roller coaster ride, sometimes with great highs and other time lows. The strain of having young children whilst trying to afford mortgage payments and other financial commitments impacted on our relationship in the early years. It has definitely been worth working through all these experiences together as we now have a great shared history and two beautiful children. (female)

My wife and I talk everything through. We both discuss our feelings and support each other throughout difficult times. (male)

Finding time to talk, making time to get away together, sometimes giving each other space and not pressuring each other to talk when [the partners] may not be happy. Listening and learning how partner reacts, helping them to grow ... Supporting each other openly during difficult times and sharing and making joyous moments. (male)

People in intact relationships overwhelmingly said that they were happy with how they were able to talk together and saw this as a strength in their relationship. Seventy per cent of those in the phase 2 survey described communication between themselves and their partner as either good or excellent; just 11 per cent described it as poor or non-existent. Moreover, 87 per cent said they could talk openly with their partner about the things that really matter,

and over 90 per cent talked about their relationship. By contrast, 58 per cent of those that had separated and 69 per cent of those planning to separate had experienced difficulty in communicating with their partner. Two-thirds of people in intact relationships said that they and their partner talked about how to bring up their children; 72 per cent talked about their working lives; 64 per cent talked about shared interests; 57 per cent talked about their behaviour; about half talked about how to resolve problems and how to maintain the relationship; and over 80 per cent talked together about their plans for the future. In addition to talking about a range of issues and day-to-day aspects of their life together, people identified ways of talking through differences of opinion that were very different from those described by phase 1 participants. For example, one married woman said:

When he [her husband] first says something critical, I can't bother with it then because I'm so mad. After a day or two, I will try to think of a way to get round it myself. You have to look at your faults. It's about taking criticism.

Others in phase 2 described how they communicated slowly and calmly and with a clear focus about things that concerned them, or said that they always attempted to explain why they were taking a particular position in order to prevent any escalation of the argument or fraying of tempers. Being able to recognise when exchanges between the partners were beginning to get out of control was seen as important; some people used 'time-out' strategies to allow feelings to subside before attempting to resolve issues. Some people stressed the importance of using humour and said that they were able to laugh about arguments afterwards, or that they were usually able to let arguments go without bringing them up again later:

If we've had a row, you know, we can just look at each other and then one of us will laugh, and it's just the reality that actually it's very petty and minor or silly that actually defuses it quite quickly. (female, married)

Some people made a conscious effort not to wind their partner up if there were any disagreements. Being able to communicate well together resulted from shared trust and from each partner relying on the other to acknowledge what they were trying to do. It was only in phase 2 that anyone admitted that they themselves might be responsible for starting arguments, whereas people whose relationships had ended frequently placed the responsibility for starting arguments on their partner. A few women in phase 2 also expressed the belief that men did not talk about relationship problems but said that, instead of casting this as a barrier to communication, they had sought ways of working round it. Not all phase 2 interviewees saw successful communication as resulting from such strategies; some attributed it to personal qualities ('Neither of us has a bad temper ...').

Developing Respect and Trust

The data suggest that mutual respect and trust are also important aspects of healthy couple relationships. In phase 2, people pointed to high levels of mutual respect as an important aspect of their relationship. Some stressed that it was important not just to have respect but to demonstrate it actively and to give as well as to take:

I would consider kicking him out if he didn't help in the home and if he was going out a lot and if he didn't make me feel special sometimes. You've got to make them happy, make sure they're happy. It's not just one-sided all the time. You have to show him that you care about helping him. (female)

People who were in intact relationships offered various suggestions regarding how mutual respect could be maintained to the benefit of the relationship. They frequently asserted that it was important to learn to accept a partner's different values or different ways of dealing with

situations, rather than expecting them to be brought round to other ways of thinking or acting. Demonstrating affection for one another and offering each other praise were also seen as essential ingredients. Other recommendations from phase 2 interviewees included: being sure to listen when the other person is speaking; consciously trying not to undermine one another in front of others; and being able to say sorry to each other.

Some people in phase 1 had come to recognise that their relationship was in trouble when they had begun to realise that there was a lack of respect in the relationship and a consequent lack of trust. People told us about repeated failures on their partner's behalf to mark or acknowledge birthdays and anniversaries, and a lack of enthusiasm for shared holidays (and, in one case, for the couple's wedding). These were taken as indications that the other partner did not feel strongly enough about the relationship, causing people to re-evaluate their own feelings. Some women complained that their partner offered little or nothing in the way of support to them in times of stress. People in phase 2 emphasised the importance of mutual trust and honesty, but emphasised that these were not necessarily easy to come by and had to be earned and demonstrated.

Shared Responsibilities and Shared Outlooks

People in intact relationships identified sharing as a vital feature of their lives together. By consulting each other on decisions that had to be taken, and working to agree a division of household responsibilities and work commitments amenable to both, the couples and individuals we spoke to felt they had arrived at a secure *modus operandi* for the relationship. This did not necessarily mean that all tasks were split evenly, but that each partner was happy with the roles each had taken on and was confident that the other was doing their bit. In this regard, many people described how they and their partner worked as a team:

In many situations, two people share the earning and parenting, and I did a bit but in many ways I was professional on the earning side and she was professional on the mothering side. (male, married)

This kind of accommodation required an ability to make decisions together, and the study shows that people who had separated talked about decision-making rather differently. They described situations in which unilateral decisions had been taken by their partner, or complained of being expected to make all the decisions themselves, for instance in relation to their children's schooling. Whereas people in intact relationships gave examples of how they had reached important decisions, such as how to share childcare roles and responsibilities, in consultation with their partner, very few of the phase 1 interviewees regarded the division of household and external work responsibilities as having been equitable. People told us that they had had to do the lion's share of the housework and/or of the childcare, or that their partner had cherry-picked the tasks that were more fun:

I ran the house, I did the shopping, the cooking, the cleaning. I looked after the children, I organised the childcare, I held down a full-time job and I booked all the holidays ... I just organised everything. I bought everyone's Christmas and birthday cards. The only thing I didn't do was do any mechanical work on our cars ... I even bought the cars. I organised the finances, I did everything ... (female, divorced)

Others complained specifically that their partner had not done what they had expected them to do. Typically, we were told that men would not go out and earn, or that women had been unwilling to take on part-time work or had been shiftless around the house. During focus group discussions with parents in intact relationships, mothers were keen to point out that their partners took a share of the housework (which they nevertheless tacitly accepted as their sphere) or at least did some little things towards it. Some made connections between

these indicators of shared roles and the advice they had received from GPs or from attending a parenting course, such as the Webster-Stratton course.

In addition to sharing responsibilities, people in intact relationships frequently asserted that what had got them through problems or bad times was sheer perseverance and adopting a positive outlook. In this sense, they had kept going when things had been bad rather than giving up on the relationship, and had been able to find and maintain this determination and fortitude because they had a shared understanding about the need to face difficulties together as a couple, and/or a shared a commitment to making the relationship work:

We have common goals for the future, and we have separate interests and do things separately, but we have a common theme and if couples don't have that, then where is the compatibility? (female, cohabiting)

Some people whose relationship had ended could remember having experienced a shared outlook during the early stages of their relationship but, looking back, realised that they had reached a point where they and their partner had held divergent views or goals.

Summary

Narratives about the things which cause stress in relationships were remarkably consistent across both phases of the study. Couples whose relationships were intact had faced most, if not all, of the same kinds of problems as those whose relationships had ended, indicating that most couples experience and have to deal with similar difficulties, although not necessarily in the same combination or clusters, at different times in their relationship. From the accounts of people across both phases of the study, we can see clearly the life events and situations which commonly cause stresses in couple relationships. In addition to the arrival of a baby and the presence of children, discussed in the previous chapter, people across all three groups referred to problems they had had which were associated with work, childcare, money, ill health and bereavement, alcohol abuse, domestic abuse, sexual relations and intimacy, and infidelity. They all had experience of arguments, often about trivial things. Eighty per cent of people in intact relationships reported in the e-survey that there had been times in the relationship when it had not been working so well, but the majority of these people had talked with their partner about the problem(s) and described their communication as good or excellent. Very few (7%) experienced very poor communication.

What distinguished people in intact relationships from those who had separated or were about to separate was the ways in which problems and pressures were handled and how arguments were dealt with. People in intact relationships seemed to argue less and, when they did argue, resolved the difficulty fairly quickly. Resentment did not build up and communication between the partners did not break down. Those whose relationships were intact had found a number of ways to address issues, and couples were usually rooted in a common purpose and were confident about the strength of the relationship. A number of strategies and behaviours had been successfully adopted:

1. Making time to be together as a couple, talking together and not putting the relationship on the back burner.
2. Developing and demonstrating respect for and trust in each other.
3. Sharing responsibilities and having a shared outlook.

4. Resolving arguments and not allowing them to fester. Several people said that they never went to bed on an argument.
5. Ensuring that each partner has space in the relationship to pursue separate interests and balancing this with their mutual interests.
6. Accepting differences in individual views and behaviour and being able to see alternative points of view.
7. Learning to give and take.
8. Talking about issues that really matter and not ignoring problems.
9. Using humour to relieve tension and thereby resolve arguments.

When partners were unable to talk about important issues and did not find time to foster their couple relationship, communication often deteriorated, arguments became repetitive and cyclical and people no longer found ways to share problems or resolve difficulties. Gradually, relationships deteriorated to the point when separation became inevitable even though this was not what most people wanted. In the next chapter, we look specifically at the experiences of people in phase 1 of the study, whose relationships had broken down, and consider the ways in which their relationship had fallen apart and the kinds of support which they might have found helpful.

Chapter 5 Ending Relationships

I forgave the first affair as I believed him when he said it was a one-off, but when he had a second affair, I realised he could not be faithful. (female, phase 1 e-survey participant)

The findings set out in the previous two chapters demonstrate clearly that all couples experience problems and critical moments which can put a strain on their relationship. There is, however, evidence to suggest that different people addressed the pressures in different ways, that the majority of couples whose relationships had stood the test of time had developed effective ways of managing and coping with these pressures, and that the absence of some or all of these coping strategies had often led to the eventual demise of the relationships that had broken down. As we saw in the previous chapter, the problems in relationships can be serious and relationships may for a while teeter on the brink. Even people in phase 2 in strong, committed and long-lasting relationships made statements such as 'It's not all a bowl of cherries' and 'It's been tough at times'. They had, however, managed to work through the difficult times, and the relationship had often become stronger as a result. Others were in relationships that continued to exhibit problems, although they had not taken the step to end them. Some of those we spoke to during phase 2 described relationships that were struggling, although they were trying to ensure that they could survive. By contrast, all the participants in phase 1 of the study told us about relationships in which the problems had been impossible to resolve and which had subsequently disintegrated. Drawing clear distinctions between these groups is not straightforward, however, and understanding just what enables some relationships to survive and flourish and what causes others to flounder is complex and challenging.

It is important, therefore, to attempt to tease out the situations, circumstances and problems which result in relationships ending so as to ascertain the ways in which couples might find support helpful and feel able to use it. In this chapter, we reflect primarily on the findings from the phase 1 e-survey, the interviews with phase 1 participants, and the views people who were separated expressed in focus groups. We discuss:

- the different pathways to separation/divorce
- the reasons people gave for deciding to end relationships
- the impacts ending the relationship had
- the process of moving on and people's ability to reach closure

We examine the help and support people had accessed and/or would have liked in the next chapter.

The Endgame: Heading for Relationship Breakdown

People in phase 1 described their relationship as having ended in one of three ways, and we examine each in turn:

1. Relatively gently after a protracted period of dwindling intimacy, growing dissatisfaction and cyclical arguments, during which partners simply grew apart and lived separate lives.
2. After relationships had sustained incremental damage as a result of: couples lurching from one crisis to another; escalating incidents of, for example, drinking and domestic

violence; and recurring problems. Eventually, the final straw had been arrived at, it being clear that the relationship was not going to recover.

3. Suddenly, and as an unforeseen event initiated out of the blue by one partner.

A Slow and Steady Decline

The relationships of people in the first group had ended after they had reached an unsatisfactory state in which things had not been right for some time, and appeared set to continue that way. People described how there had been a period during which intimacy had dwindled, perhaps as a result of starting a family or after an illness or a particularly stressful event. Intimacy, which is such an important ingredient in healthy couple relationships, had all but disappeared for many couples. Lives had grown apart, often evidenced by sleeping arrangements. Some men had slept on the couch for some months. Women described strategies for sleeping apart, either continuously or at different times, and some people said that they had not slept with their partner for years prior to the separation:

I mean, we hadn't been sharing a bed for about a year, and it had been pretty grim. You know, it just gets to like you can't speak to each other in passing. There was no warmth there, no kind word. I mean – all that sort of broken down and gone really. (male, previously cohabiting)

People described themselves and their partners as having grown increasingly dissatisfied with the relationship and with their daily living arrangements, which had led to them living increasingly separate lives with little communication occurring between them:

I felt rejected and uncared for and didn't have any emotional connection to him any more. I didn't want a sexual relationship any longer. He felt rejected sexually and we couldn't compromise. We stopped talking. (female, separated)

People in relationships that were disintegrating often busied themselves at work or in the home and pursued leisure activities separately, if at all. This group described arguments as a constant or regular feature of family life, and these arguments tended to be cyclical, in that partners vented anger and frustration but this did not achieve resolution, and the arguments were typically always about the same, often trivial, issues:

... we just led pretty much separate lives, apart from to have rows, really, and unsatisfactory holidays where we just never agreed what we wanted to do, and we rowed before, during and after. (female, separated after 25 years of marriage)

Arriving at the Final Straw

The second group were different, in that although their relationships had usually broken down over a prolonged period, rather than gently dwindling to an end point they had sustained incremental damage. Couples had lurched from one crisis or incident to another until one of these had brought things to a head:

He took out a huge loan against the mortgage for the second time during our marriage and didn't tell me about the amount ... (female, divorced)

My wife over-spent on credit cards which we agreed I would pay ... and then two years later did the same thing. (male, divorced)

One mother spoke of the gradual erosion of trust through a series of crises – the discovery of her husband's use of adult chatlines, his concealment of their bankruptcy, and her finding

that he had been accessing salacious material on the internet. For others, the crises were more threatening to safety or family security and involved escalating incidents of domestic violence, episodes of excessive drinking, or gambling of increasing severity. Some people had used the crises as markers, which had led to attempts to repair the damage and recover the relationship. Others had found themselves issuing ultimatums in order to indicate the perceived seriousness of the situation. Most attempts to save the relationship eventually failed and people talked about the final straw having been arrived at:

... he just like sat down in a chair and ignored me after saying 'Yes, I gambled all that money' ... and I went to see a solicitor two days later and I went back that evening and I said to him 'I'm being serious because I'm going to divorce you. I'd like you to leave this home', and he refused, so I did a runner basically ... (female, married and separated)

The final straw came with a domestic incident which had me so scared I went to the police and then court and was granted a non-molestation order. (female, separated)

The final straw, for some, had arrived when trust and respect had diminished over time and then something had happened which confirmed that the relationship had broken down. Indeed, lack of respect and lack of trust appeared to go hand in hand for couples whose relationship was breaking down. While trust diminished over time in many relationships, some women had experienced a sudden loss of trust in their partner, which had lasting repercussions:

I'd found some texts on his phone to a customer of his that were inappropriate ... that was the start of the lack of trust, really, and I don't think we ever really got that back on track, to be honest. (female, married and separated)

A Sudden and Unexpected Ending

Finally, the third group of people told us that their relationship had been ended by their partner 'out of the blue'. Some people maintained that they had been unaware of any underlying problems prompting their partner's departure. Others were aware that there had been some problems, but had seen these as resolvable and had expected that they could have been overcome:

It [the relationship] was just sort of like bumbling along really ... I thought we were basically like sticking it out, but [my wife] obviously in the background had sort of been thinking it wasn't really going to work, and she just basically announced that she wanted the relationship to end. And ... she no longer like loved me and had fallen out of love. And I was just like 'Uh?'. It was literally like just been ran over by ... a truck. (male, previously cohabiting)

Some of those whose partners had left them felt that they had had a 'close relationship' or a 'happy family life' that had come to an abrupt end. More women than men described an abrupt ending to their relationship, describing how their husband had simply announced that he no longer wanted to be with them and had moved out very quickly afterwards:

My husband suddenly decided one day that he wanted to be on his own. He still says he loves and cares for me and tells me we had a great life together ... He decided this on a Monday afternoon and left the next day. (female, separated)

Some said they still had no idea why their husband had walked out. Others had subsequently discovered that their partner had had an affair, although they had not been aware that anything had been wrong in the relationship.

Triggers and Reasons

For the majority of people, in all three groups, a decisive moment had come when they had realised that their relationship was at an end. Those who had experienced an incident that signified the final straw had been reached (the second group) realised, or accepted, either that they no longer loved their partner or that their partner no longer loved them (or, in some cases, that love and the partners' feelings for each other could no longer justify the unhappy conditions in which they lived). These people had usually experienced an incident that had tipped the relationship over the edge:

She [the daughter] said, 'What Daddy's just done to you is a form of abuse.' And for my daughter, for my thirteen-year-old child to say that to me – I was absolutely devastated. For her to know that this was going on (and of course she knows what's going on, she's not an idiot) – that was the end for me, to be honest. From that moment on, I said to him, we're done. (female, divorced)

This usually meant that whatever trust the partners had had in each other had gone. Separation was suddenly a possibility, or simply the only option. For about half of the people we interviewed in phase 1, the breaking point or final straw involved the discovery or disclosure of an affair or a partner's use of prostitutes, and had usually led to one or other of the partners swiftly leaving the house. Some had subsequently attempted to work at the relationship, to try to resolve issues or get back together with their partner, but the realisation that one partner had admitted that they loved someone else had rendered the separation irreversible. While interviewees cited specific incidents – the discovery of an affair, mounting debt, or another violent episode, for example – as triggers for the separation, their justification for having initiated the break-up ranged back over the period over which they or their partner considered the relationship to have been in decline. Those in the first group above who described an unsatisfactory ongoing relationship said that they had felt things would never change; they felt trapped in an unhappy situation and could foresee no change in that, so that separation was inevitable. Some of those in the second group talked of an affair or a particular argument or fight as an incident that had had a galvanising effect, giving them the impetus to leave the relationship, something many thought they should have done long before:

... it was quite a big knife, and he just said to me 'You know, if I really wanted to hurt you', he said, 'I'd just stick it in your back when you weren't looking'. And I carried on chopping my vegetables. And that was my thought – 'I have to get out of here'. (female, divorced)

The taking of a unilateral decision to end the relationship was typical for couples in group two for whom a critical incident had led to decisive action. By contrast, those in the first group whose relationship had gradually declined, and some of those in the third group whose relationship had come to an abrupt end, tended to describe the decision to separate as having involved a series of actions and counter-actions which had meant that there was no going back. A few interviewees suggested that they had reached a more or less consensual decision with their partner, or a mutual acknowledgement that the relationship was at an end once one of them had raised the possibility of parting. Whichever route to separation couples follow, however, the majority of separations/divorces in the UK are initiated by women.⁵⁹

People, in both of the first two groups, identified a range of pressures and problems that had been present in their relationship. Three that were widely noted were the burden of childcare and household duties, financial pressures, and the demands of work. We discussed the ways

⁵⁹ Sakraida, T. J. (2008) 'Stress and coping of midlife women in divorce transition', *Journal of Nursing Research*, Online First, pp. 1–19.

in which these impinged on relationships in Chapter 4. These pressures had ultimately led to exhaustion, worry, a lack of money to go anywhere or do anything with each other or their children, drifting apart, resentment, and arguments:

We didn't have money to ... go and do anything, have any fun together and stuff. Life just became quite serious really ... We weren't at our best around each other. We were irritating each other, we were snapping at each other, we were getting on each other's nerves and then never actually making any time to sit and sort anything out, I suppose. (female, separated after twelve years of marriage)

Lack of time to sit down and talk or simply resolve difficulties emerged as a common theme in the accounts of people in group one, whose relationships had gradually deteriorated. Lack of communication in the relationship was a key problem which interviewees identified; they spoke, in particular, of the feeling that the other partner was not prepared or able to discuss significant problems as they emerged, that they would rather 'tough it out' or could not 'open up'. A number spoke of the problem of they and their partner not spending time together as a couple, which became a habit that gradually became ingrained. Watching the television, using the computer, tinkering in the garage, seeing friends – these were all described as activities that took over. Most people referred to regular arguments which had become a feature of their shared lives, arguments which became familiar and predictable:

It ended up being like a general malaise. You'd come home – everyone's knackered, there's not enough money in the pot, you know the kids are going bloody crazy. It ended up being the default position to have an argument about something ... a lot of shouting, kids shouting, us shouting. (male, separated from partner after cohabiting relationship of ten years)

The phase 1 e-survey revealed that 39 per cent of those who had separated and 48 per cent of those who were planning to separate had never talked to their partner about their relationship. Moreover, 53 per cent of the separated group and 27 per cent of the second group said that they had not found/did not find it helpful to talk to their partner about the relationship. These responses contrast with the e-survey responses in phase 2, when 87 per cent of respondents said that they sometimes or always talked openly with their partner about the things that mattered in their relationships.

The Presence of Children

Children were a major factor in discussions about the decision to separate. Long delays in ending a relationship that had failed were often attributed to a concern that to split up would be damaging, or that the upheaval would cause difficulty for the children. Some people stressed that they had stayed in an unsatisfactory relationship because of the commitment they had made to being a parent, or being a family unit: they felt that they owed it to their children not to disrupt the family. Some of the participants in our focus groups talked about 'staying together for the kids' as something that their parents' generation did, but not necessarily something that should be adhered to. People who had stayed for the sake of the children said on reflection that they should have left long before:

What I wanted was what was best for my son, and I would have tried, I definitely did try harder to maintain the relationship because I thought it would be good for him. But in retrospect, that was wrong and it wasn't good for him. But if I thought it would be good for him, I would still be trying to sort it out, but I don't think it would. (male, previously cohabiting)

Quite a few parents who were planning to separate said that they had come to believe that the bitter atmosphere or constant arguments to which the children were being exposed were

as bad for them as separation might be, and that the only way to put an end to this stressful situation was to separate:

I kept saying to her [his partner], 'Come outside, let's talk outside. [Our daughter]'s really upset.' And she would never do anything other than in front of the children. (male, married and separated)

By comparing the accounts of those people whose partners had left them with those of people who had decided to leave their partners, we can determine the oppositional reasoning around children's interests that accompanies or drives separation. Both parties are likely to draw on ideas about what is best for children to support their actions or situation: they are unlikely to act or maintain a position without being able to make a case that they are not acting selfishly or against their children's best interests. While people spoke of concerns about their children, they did not say on what basis they had made judgements regarding their children's interests: they appeared to have made decisions based on heuristic or normative beliefs about children and separation. A number of people made statements about how they thought children would be affected by having separated or cohabiting parents in order to justify their decision either to stay in a relationship or to separate:

I firmly believe that children need two parents. Not one, one isn't good enough ... in a normal course of events, children are better placed and better served by having a mother and a father ... (male, divorced)

It is notable that none of those who gave an account of having left their partner talked about having discussed their decision to leave with their children. Several of those whose partners had left them related with some bitterness how they had been left with the task of explaining the separation to the children by themselves.

Problem Clusters

People in the first two groups mentioned a range of crunch points, clusters of problems and significant events which had finally led to the ending of their relationships. Several of the narratives were peppered with references to bullying behaviour or abuse, health difficulties, arguments about children, and the breakdown of constructive communication. Some used phrases such as 'walking on eggshells' to describe the atmosphere in the home. Several interviewees mentioned mental health issues, either in relation to themselves or because their partners had suffered from depression or anxiety at various points in the relationship. We referred in Chapter 4 to the potentially devastating impacts of miscarriages and of postnatal depression. For some people these had signalled the beginning of the end of their relationship. Both men and women raised postnatal depression as having been a serious condition from which they had never fully recovered and which had led to difficulties in communication and a lack of understanding.

Drink was also a problem which led to the demise of some relationships. Two women described how their partners had begun to drink too much when they had lost their jobs, and another woman deeply resented this since everyone else in the household was economising at the time:

Drink was just the other person in the relationship ... I tried to tell him what the kids were saying, like 'How can I justify saying "No, I can't take you to wherever because we have no money – I'm not working, Dad's not working" and yet you can still go for a beer at teatime to see the lads?' (female, separated from partner after cohabiting relationship of twenty years)

One father linked the pattern of arguments in his and his partner's household to their increasing reliance on drink as a coping strategy, and another speculated that his partner had had a history of drinking and drug-taking in her previous relationship.

Financial worries also emerged as a key problem in relationships that had broken down, and worries about money were also a key factor in premeditated decisions to split:

He gambled five thousand pounds in a month then came home each night late and stoned. I could see no way forward and had no trust left. (female, separated)

Unemployment or redundancy had constituted the final straw and triggered the end of some relationships that had gone downhill rapidly because of the acute stress of making ends meet and paying bills. These stresses often continued long after separation. Many parents had worried about what would happen to the house, and how they would cope with their children's needs if earnings were to be split across different earners and households.

Shirking Responsibilities?

The motivations of a partner who had left out of the blue were usually seen as negative by people in group three. These partners were portrayed as having sought a convenient way out of relationship or other difficulties at the expense of the other partner and their children, or as having been driven by money or self-gratification. Some interviewees, however, reflected with hindsight that they might themselves have had some role in the breakdown of the relationship that had led to the separation: they acknowledged that there had been problems latterly, or that both partners had been jointly responsible for a breakdown in communication. Nevertheless, all of them described themselves as having been strongly committed to the relationship and to their children:

My biggest mistake that I made was putting my children before my husband, and I readily admit that. But I don't think, even knowing that's where I went wrong – I don't think I would have ever done it any differently to be honest. (female, divorced)

The partner who left was typically viewed by the partner who had been left as having had less concern for the children or as having lacked awareness of the children's needs or feelings, and the act of leaving was held up as demonstrating this lack of care. Some people argued that their partner had shirked their responsibilities rather than addressing problems, and were aggrieved that it had been easy for their partner to abandon them:

It seems to me that people seem to break up easily over things, and they don't want to fix the problems. The catalyst is there and it somersaults and off you go. (male, divorced)

In focus groups, fathers in particular expressed a belief that divorce or separation had become a soft or easy option for parents seeking self-fulfilment at the expense of their children and the other parent:

So why should somebody be prepared to work through [their problems]? – why should they have to go to that effort, when you can simply get rid of that and start it, start again? And people are told that they can.

There was, however, little evidence in our study that leaving had been easy or that the decision to separate had been taken lightly or to shirk responsibilities. Indeed, people frequently described a maelstrom of conflicting impulses and ideas about what they should do:

I didn't disappear exactly ... I thought, well, also it is his child and I don't know how far I might take her from him. I was very frightened. I didn't want to do the wrong thing. It was a very difficult time ... (female, married and separated)

I'd already, in my own mind, made the decision a good ten years before then that we were never going to grow old together, but in order to keep the family together and because I thought that that's what mothers did and they stayed with their children, and I really wasn't quite sure what he'd do if I wasn't there ... (female, divorced after 25 years of marriage)

Making the transition from covering things up, keeping the family together and protecting the children to the realisation that the children's interests would be better served by the severing of a problematic and unhappy relationship was difficult for many people: participants expressed strong concerns about what the consequences might be for the children. None of our interviewees described separation as a transition that had made things easy for them. People were fearful of the stigma attached to being a single parent, but felt that their situation was becoming intolerable and found that they were unable to enlist their partner in working together to solve problems. Some interviewees who had not yet separated told us that they had not ended the relationship because of concerns that they or the family would not be able to cope with the financial difficulties that would ensue; others worried about what would happen to the matrimonial home.

Several of the letters we received were from people who were struggling with the decision to separate. One woman who had been married for 25 years described a relationship without any overt affection or physical contact, which was tearing her apart. Yet she felt unable to leave:

I love him so much and do not want to live without him ... I have to carry on, but I have to make a decision. I don't want to be without him but feel very lonely in this marriage. We have done Relate. It worked for so long and went worse after that.

Another woman, with a son at university, initially wrote to say that she had been in an abusive relationship and had left her husband several times. He had had affairs, and she was on antidepressants and was, in her words, 'swinging between hating and loving him with equal passion'. This woman wrote again later in the study to say that she had plucked up the courage to leave her husband, had found a job, made new friends and moved on. On reflection, she wrote, she realised that she had been 'living under a dark and heavy cloud', and that her life had 'stopped' while she had remained in the relationship. Making the break had enabled her and her partner to move on fairly amicably.

The Impacts of Relationship Breakdown on Adults

The impacts of relationship breakdown are very well documented, and our study adds further support to the findings that have been reported elsewhere.⁶⁰ The e-survey respondents described a range of negative impacts that they had experienced as a result of the breakdown of their relationships. Those who discovered that their partner had had an affair tended to describe the experience as devastating and wrote about a sudden loss of trust leading to lasting trauma. One of the fathers we interviewed told us:

I went every day for months and months and months of just crying and crying a lot in front of my children, not being able to control my tears and just inwardly destroyed by it. (male, divorced)

⁶⁰ Coleman and Glenn (2009), *op. cit.*

Interviewees who had left abusive relationships similarly experienced a traumatic period following the separation, several describing subsequent harassment by their partner and practical and legal difficulties in dealing with property and financial matters. Those who said that their own affair had ended the relationship described this as an outcome they had been forced into by their partner's inability or refusal to address problems or talk about them. On the whole, however, they described things as having turned out for the better, to a greater extent than had been the case for people who had been left. Nevertheless, they still recalled the period after their departure as having been painful or confusing, and had experienced considerable practical difficulties.

III Health

Some interviewees reported lengthy periods of sick leave in the wake of separation; others found they had had no choice but to go to work while struggling to cope. Both men and women frequently felt that the separation experience had undermined their self-esteem and self-confidence. Quite a few interviewees described themselves as having become depressed or as having been diagnosed with depression in the wake of the separation:

I ended up getting depression and I was off work for three weeks with depression because I just didn't want to see people. I didn't want to talk to people. I just wanted to be on my own. I mean, I just took the children to school, and then I just came home and I just stayed in until it's time to pick them up again. (female, divorced)

My health has suffered as I've had a couple of breakdowns, requiring medication. The whole experience nearly broke me and I feel quite badly psychologically damaged. I lost quite a bit of weight during this time too. I started to smoke and drink more too. (male, divorced)

A number of men and women told us that they had felt suicidal at the time of the separation, and some had sought psychiatric help:

Long-term depression, months off work, psychiatric hospital, constantly tearful, thoughts of suicide, lack of energy, struggle to get up in the morning, long-term medication with worries about side effects, etc. It is four years down the line and no sign of improving. (male, divorced)

We received a number of letters from people describing their suicidal thoughts and wanting help. Periods of ill health inevitably took their toll on people's work patterns: some had lost their jobs, while others had moved to part-time work or had taken a job which appeared to be less demanding and stressful. Some of the e-survey respondents told us that they had never gone back to work, and had become long-term-unemployed. Some had had periods in which they had felt better and then had suffered a relapse, reinforcing a negative spiral in which self-esteem plummeted, self-confidence was severely knocked, and insecurity took over. As a result, people had found it difficult to make or sustain new relationships and described themselves as being very lonely.

Contact Arrangements and Maintenance

The majority of interviewees who had left the family home, leaving their children behind, had experienced difficulties in seeing them in the immediate aftermath. Although the majority of non-resident parents had some contact arrangements in place, few were satisfied with them and several fathers were locked in court battles to see their children at the time we spoke to them. Non-resident fathers spoke passionately about the problems associated with making contact work. Not only had contact arrangements been difficult to manage and stressful to

execute but, often, they had involved significant financial investment and continued determination and perseverance to play a part in their children's lives.

Resident parents, by contrast, tended to talk about their ex-partner's lack of input or apparent care for the children, with some describing a significant increase in the burden of looking after their children. This is consistent with the findings from many other studies.⁶¹ Resident parents described considerable stresses at a time when some felt barely able to function themselves. They tended to feel it had been left to them to provide their children with emotional support while they struggled to keep a household functioning. A few resident parents told us that their child's other parent was not paying maintenance, or that the maintenance payments did not cover what was required. Some women knew that their partner was not giving them any money because he could not afford to, and others were of the view that both partners were struggling to make ends meet after they had separated. Some non-resident fathers, on the other hand, remarked on how much they were expected to pay and yet they did not have access to their children. In one focus group, the suggestion was made that child benefit⁶² should be paid to both parents and withheld from those who are not prepared to share the care of the children after the parents had split up. Some fathers also expressed the view that, after parents had separated, lone mothers could claim benefits and receive child support and thereby be financially better off than when their partners had lived with them.

A few mothers remarked how helpful the Child Support Agency (CSA)⁶³ had been, although some said that arranging maintenance had been a very slow process, and one interviewee explained how the involvement of the CSA had led to further arguments and, subsequently, the cessation of contact. This interviewee told us that her ex-husband had threatened that if she did not 'cancel' the CSA he would not have the children on contact visits and that, if that happened, he would not pay any maintenance for them. From that point, he had stopped seeing the children and contact had not been resumed at the time of our interview. While breakdown in communication was cited as having been a common problem in most relationships leading up to the separation, interviewees for the most part, had some level of functional communication with their partner after the separation, around contact with children, dealing with practical issues or, in some cases, talking about their problems. But for some, the separation had marked a decisive and permanent break in communication. One mother, for instance, told us that neither her children nor her partner had spoken to her or responded to her attempts to make contact since she had left the matrimonial home some years previously. She believed that this lack of response had been due, in part, to the influence of her in-laws, and she continued to feel rejected. Other interviewees whose partners had left them said that they had found it impossible to make contact with them after they had gone.

A few of our interviewees who had been together for between one and four years before splitting up viewed the relative brevity of their relationship as having made the separation somewhat easier to deal with. Two fathers we spoke to, for instance, still had the houses that they had left when they had moved in with their partners, and were therefore able to return to their previous homes and re-create something akin to the life they had had before. Nevertheless, one father was still finding it hard to cope with the loss of a relationship he had expected would be permanent, and was experiencing difficulties in seeing his newborn daughter.

⁶¹ Walker, J., McCarthy, P. and Timms, N. (1994) *Mediation: The making and remaking of co-operative relationships*, Relate Centre for Family Studies, University of Newcastle upon Tyne; Walker *et al.* (2004), *op. cit.*

⁶² Child benefit is paid to all parents with dependent children – it is a universal benefit. Child maintenance is paid by a non-resident parent to the parent-with-care after parental separation.

⁶³ Now part of the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission.

Financial Issues

As well as the emotional difficulties and feelings of loss and hurt which most people talked about, quite a lot of the people we interviewed had been left with considerable financial problems. In some cases the separation had come about in the wake of redundancy, bankruptcy, or the build-up of sizeable debts. Some of those we interviewed had not been aware of the extent of the debts. For example, one woman, who had found herself with £10,000 of her ex-husband's debt to clear after the sale of her house, told us:

I was so financially trapped. And that's the other danger in this country, that once you're financially trapped, I think regardless of what your situation is, I think it makes it harder to break up from a relationship. (female, divorced)

Men also talked about having to cope with debts incurred by their partners, either because they had run up huge credit card bills or because of loans, drinking behaviour and spending sprees. It seems that many partners had lied about or failed to disclose financial problems, which only came to light when couples separated. Resident parents described how they had struggled to manage their finances after the separation, particularly when their partner had previously handled finances for them both or when the separation had come about at a time when a family business had got into trouble or one or both partners had incurred large debts. Some people expressed regret that they had not given more thought to their financial arrangements and checked their spending patterns during the relationship, given the circumstances they found themselves in after the separation.

Relationship Breakdown and Children

It was clear that parents worried considerably about how their children were likely to be affected by their parents' separation. We did not specifically ask people about the impacts of separation on their children since this has been well researched before and was not central to our remit. Nevertheless parents frequently referred to their children, and children of all ages were typically said to have been 'devastated' or 'blown out of the water' by the separation. Some parents reported that either they or their partner had expected the children to leave with them. When the children had refused, they had been taken aback:

I said, 'You can come and stay with me now if you want, or you can stay with your father and spend some time with me differently.' And they just went completely ballistic and just blamed me for everything, told me to get out. (female, divorced)

As we noted earlier in the chapter, however, relatively few of the interviewees said that they had explained what was happening to, or had consulted with, their children in advance of the separation. Quite a few parents believed that their children had been unaware of the arguments or of the difficulties between them and their partner until they had told them about the separation, either because they were too young or because they had been careful to conceal any disagreements or disaffection. Others thought that their children had been aware of problems but had not wanted to talk about the situation. These parents were keen to emphasise that their children had been supportive of them. One mother told us that her children were fine just ten to fifteen minutes after they had learned that their father had gone, and another mother told us:

They don't talk about it. So, they are not bothered ... Because their father did so little with them anyway, their life hasn't changed. (female, married and separated)

For parents in the third group, where the separation had come out of the blue things had seemed to happen too fast for them to take into account how to tell the children. One mother, for instance, had found out that her husband was leaving her shortly before his taxi had

arrived to take him to his sister's house; she told us that he had refused to explain any of this to his daughter at the time or since, and that she had been left to do so. Another mother and her husband were living in separate houses by the night after his affair had been discovered, and the husband had not wanted to tell their children:

We didn't tell them straightaway. We just said things weren't working, but eventually the boys did ask questions and I did say there was somebody else involved and that's why their dad left, and they put two and two together. (female, divorced)

This mother had not explained the situation fully to the children at the time since she had been worried that they might then blame her for the separation. Other parents expressed some trepidation about how their children might apportion blame, depending on how the relationship breakdown might be portrayed to them:

He involved my youngest daughter, which I won't forgive him for. So she got very upset and said, 'Mum what's the problem? You know, you're being difficult.' He made it look like I was being difficult because I was asking him to leave. (female, divorced)

Explaining the situation to children was more difficult for parents who had suffered abuse. One mother had been faced with the problem when her husband had been arrested:

They saw him being arrested, which is not very nice. I sort of have to explain that Daddy hurt Mummy, we can't live together any more. (female, married and separated)

Interviewees' accounts suggest that many parents were less inclined to talk to their children to establish their wishes and feelings, and for various reasons – exigency, emotional fragility, or simply not knowing how – were reluctant to enter into discussions or explanations with them about what was happening.

While some of the parents we spoke to were able to look back and state that the separation had ultimately been a change for the better, nobody described the process as an immediate easing – all emphasised the disruption that had occurred at the time in the lives of everyone involved. The majority interviewees had separated some years previously, yet some still felt that they and/or their children were experiencing the effects from that period in their lives:

I know I am still tearful now. And it is four years. It is five years. I am still tearful now. I am just not ready to go into another relationship. (male, divorced)

Some resident parents felt that they had been forced to become single parents against their will, and did not know how to deal with this or how to construct a new family. One mother told us that she still felt traumatised and lacked control over her life some six years after her divorce.

Reaching Closure

Separation was described by everyone in the study as having been difficult, and a number of people spoke of the strong antipathy they felt towards their partner. Some people had clearly made subsequent attempts at reconciliation, but no one we interviewed had got back together with their partner. Those who had tried to save the relationship tended to describe this as a messy process which had ultimately simply confirmed that the relationship was at an end and that they needed to move on:

Within two or three weeks she asked me to come back, and I wouldn't go back because I thought, no, I couldn't put my kids through [this], because I thought, if I got back, [in] another month's time it could come out the same, then I thought I can't put

the kids through or myself through the separation period of sitting down and telling them [again]. And I thought, no, that's it. (male, divorced)

Some of those we interviewed had managed to agree, or had worked out with their partner, the terms of their separation in respect of sharing assets and making arrangements for the children. Some had been resistant to the idea of involving agencies in this process, preferring, for instance, not to resort to the CSA or seek mediation. Being able to agree arrangements had worked well for some but not all parents. For example, one mother had preferred to arrange with her husband for him to leave the matrimonial home at a time they had agreed between them, even though both their lawyers had advised them that he must leave immediately. She felt that it was more important to avoid the children thinking that one parent was forcing the other one out. Another woman was grateful that there had been no problems relating to maintenance and contact, primarily because those issues had been resolved first. Nevertheless, not everyone was happy about the way things had panned out. Some had found themselves disenfranchised by the agreements they had made at the time of separation. For instance, one father had agreed with his wife that he would not go to a solicitor with demands over contact if his wife agreed not to approach the CSA for maintenance, but he was finding it increasingly difficult to see his daughter at all:

She said, 'I don't ever want you to see her again.' So that's that. And I gave me word that I won't go to a solicitor and go through the courts and everything but ... I've got to decide whether I want to stay here and see me daughter or do I leave the country? (male, divorced)

We were told that the establishment of separate lives at separate addresses had been the transition which had brought about a sense of closure, an end to the relationship. For those who had been married the divorce itself had emerged as a further transition which provided a postponed confirmation of the end of the relationship, a tying up of loose ends:

For me the big decision was to separate, because once I'd made that decision ... I knew there was no going back. The divorce was then just a paperwork exercise. (male, divorced)

Nevertheless, the divorce itself could involve and rekindle some of the dissatisfactions associated with the separation. For some interviewees, the arrival of the Decree Absolute marked the revival of a sense of failure:

I must admit, once the divorce was final that was another big low point because suddenly that was it, it was all over. (female, divorced)

Some fathers, however, regarded their divorce as an episode in an ongoing legal battle to see more of their children. They along with some mothers did not feel that the divorce represented any kind of closure. One mother had wanted her husband to attend mediation so that she and their child could receive an explanation from him of his reasons for leaving, which the divorce process had failed to give her.

Some of those we interviewed seemed to have coped with separation and reached closure more easily than others. They had not wanted the relationship to end and splitting up had still been painful, but they had realised that if there was no longer love in the relationship there was no point in continuing it.

Looking Back

In the phase 1 e-survey we asked people to reflect on whether they had wanted to save their relationship and how they saw it with the benefit of hindsight. Sixty per cent of those who had separated indicated that they had wanted to save their relationship. A quarter of those planning to separate said that they still wanted to save their relationship. Just 23 per cent of the separated group said that they had not wanted to save their relationship and 17 per cent said they did not know, as did 46 per cent of those planning to separate.

Looking back, 58 per cent of those who had separated thought that they might have been able to spot problems in the relationship earlier and 57 per cent of respondents thought that they could have dealt with relationship problems better than they had done. Reflecting on their current position, almost half of those who were planning to separate thought that they might have been able to spot problems earlier and 61 per cent that they could deal with them better than they were currently doing. Sixty-six per cent of those who had separated and 62 per cent of those planning to separate said that they had not found any helpful ways of dealing with their relationship difficulties. These findings suggest that many people realised that they might have been able to recognise their relationship was in trouble earlier than they had done and to have handled problems and difficulties better, particularly as many had wanted or still wanted to save the relationship. These findings have implications for the provision of support when relationships hit difficulties, and we explore these in the next chapter.

Summary

In this chapter, the focus has been on phase 1 participants whose relationships had ended in separation or divorce or were in the process of ending. The evidence suggests that the ending of the relationship had been reached in a number of different ways, all of which had involved periods of distress and unhappiness for the partners and for their children. The majority of people described a process whereby their relationship had been under strain for some time prior to the separation, and either it simply fell apart or it was dealt a final blow from which it could not recover. The findings suggest:

1. The triggers for the ending of the relationship had been various, but affairs, domestic violence and excessive drinking were commonplace, and most people cited clusters of problems, which included money worries, ill health and arguments, which had led to the demise of the relationship.
2. There had usually been warning signs that a relationship was in trouble prior to the final separation.
3. Having children had weighed heavily in parents' decisions about whether and when to separate, and most parents were concerned about the potentially detrimental impacts of splitting up.
4. The impacts on the adults concerned involved ill health, depression, financial difficulties and unemployment, and many adults went through a period which had been very stressful.
5. Contact arrangements for children were a major source of anxiety and discontent, particularly for non-resident fathers.
6. Reaching closure and moving on could take years.

7. With hindsight, people believed that they might have been able to spot problems in the relationship sooner and deal with them better.

People had turned to a number of professionals and agencies for support and help, before, during or after the separation. Some they regarded as having been helpful, others less so. In the next chapter we examine the help and support people across both phases of the study had accessed and the suggestions they made for the provision of support in the future.

Chapter 6 Supporting Couple Relationships

In the previous four chapters we have explored various aspects of adult couple relationships and noted the key stressors which had impacted on the everyday lives of people who participated in the study. As we noted earlier, people whose relationships had broken down and people in intact relationships had faced similar challenges. Indeed, the vast majority of the 'together' group had experienced times when their relationship had not been working well. For the most part, however, they had managed to work their way through the difficulties, in contrast to those whose relationships had disintegrated. Moreover, people in both phases of the study had sought help with their problems at some time or other: 42 per cent of those who had separated, all those planning to separate, and 27 per cent of those in intact relationships had sought some help with their relationship difficulties, and most held firm views about the kinds of support that would be helpful.

In this chapter, we examine the relationship support needs of couples in a variety of circumstances. We consider:

- the help and support, both informal and formal, that people had accessed
- the perceived helpfulness of that help and support and the ways in which it might be improved
- the barriers that had deterred people from seeking help with relationship problems
- the kinds of support people would have liked

Starting Out

We noted in Chapter 2 that relatively few people had thought through the implications of moving in and making a commitment to spend their life with their partner, and that not many had received any specific advice at the time they had done so. In the e-surveys, about a third of respondents across both phases of the study indicated that it would be useful for people to receive information and advice at different times: before getting into a committed relationship; when thinking about whether to move in with a partner; and soon after the partners had moved in together. Not surprisingly, perhaps, rather more phase 1 than phase 2 respondents highlighted the potential usefulness of getting help during these early stages of couple formation.

Marriage/Relationship Preparation Courses

Only a minority of people had participated in marriage/relationship preparation courses, but all of them were positive about the experience, even though the course itself had not necessarily altered how they had thought about their relationship, and spontaneously indicated that they would recommend attendance at a course to others about to enter a committed relationship. Typically, people mentioned that marriage preparation classes had encouraged them to talk and think about issues they might not otherwise have considered, including each partner's individual expectations, hopes and dreams for the future, the partners' expectations of each other, and how they would cope with worries and problems that might emerge day to day. The issues had been presented in ways which, as one man put it, 'did not give answers', thereby encouraging individuals/couples to think them through for themselves. There was a high level of consensus among study participants about the need for such courses. The comments of two men in intact relationships were typical:

I think this should be rolled out nationally and everyone should go, because 'forewarned is forearmed', as they say.

The more I go on, the more I think the key is for people to think before they commit. I think there should be relationship courses before marriage. There's many stresses with being married, and introducing children makes it get even more complicated.

Some people remarked that when couples decide to marry their attention is usually focused on the wedding and on making the arrangements rather than on the nature of commitment and the transition marriage implies:

... normally people just talk about the wedding arrangements. And if people could actually be persuaded this is a really important step, and sod the bloody wedding and what the bridesmaids are wearing – you know, let's think about the real commitment ... (male)

People in the study who had attended marriage preparation classes were acutely aware that they are offered mostly in religious contexts, notably for Roman Catholics, as a prerequisite to a church wedding. Many believed that courses should be made available in more secular settings. One man whose relationship had ended referred to the need for 'reality classes', and a woman who was separated felt that people should be obliged to go to counselling before getting married, to 'have some understanding of what to expect':

The purpose of the reality class would be for couples to know what the reality of a marriage is and what they can expect – optional, not compulsory, so people can choose if they want to go or not. (male)

Counselling at the start of a relationship, it was suggested, would enable partners to talk about how they would deal with problems and challenges that might arise in the future. People in intact relationships underlined the message that all relationships have to be worked at and that most are stressful at some stage. They suggested that the point at which two people are planning to live together as a couple and to make a commitment to each other would be a good time to encourage them to understand the importance of maintaining good communication and of seeking help in times of trouble. People believed that key messages about relationships should be given routinely to couples embarking on marriage or a civil partnership, or starting to cohabit.

Some people admitted to having felt some trepidation about embarking on a committed relationship, and others talked of their fears about being alone, unlovable or abandoned, especially if previous relationships had broken down. Fears about intimacy and about commitment itself could also make it difficult for couples to develop close, loving relationships. People said that admitting to and sharing these kinds of fears had been difficult, and many people had ignored them until the relationship had got into trouble. E-survey respondents referred to the importance of being honest and acknowledging that relationships require an investment from each partner if they are to be maintained: 'working together as a team' was a phrase some people used to describe constructive relationships, particularly between parents. Providing information about these aspects of relationships and emphasising the value of seeking help were regarded as useful starting points for partners setting out on their life together. While people could see how preparation courses and information about relationships could be targeted at couples planning to marry, they acknowledged the challenge in making them available to people planning to cohabit, for whom no ceremony is held to mark the transition.

People suggested that couples should be encouraged to think more about their individual and joint expectations, and to anticipate changes in those expectations, early in a relationship:

I think people need to be encouraged to have that conversation about what having a relationship means, what having children means, what making a commitment means, and what expectations there are around managing money. (female, married)

This woman went on to note that it is relatively easy for couples planning to marry to get help with this kind of preparatory work, and a number of people in the study discussed the idea of receiving advice at the start of a relationship. Generally, they did not think that people starting out on a relationship would be particularly open to, or looking for, help or advice, even if they knew there was the potential for future problems. While some thought that young people need to know that there will be tough times in the relationship and that they can get through them, most were of the view that at the start of relationships most people do not see the need for help and advice and that it is only with the benefit of hindsight that they might recognise advice at an early stage as being helpful. The following comment sums up the general view:

People very often feel they don't need [advice] at this stage, and I think it's a much more difficult stage [at which] to provide support, because it's just resisted. (male)

By contrast, people believed that relationship education provided from an early stage in life would be helpful and would make people more aware of the essential ingredients of strong relationships and the need to have realistic expectations. We return to this suggestion in the final chapter.

People who were forming a new partnership after previous relationships had failed expressed the view that help might be particularly useful in the early stages. From the e-surveys, there was some indication that parents and their new partners might appreciate more support and advice, both for themselves and for their children. From interviews, however, it was also clear that, while biological parents thought it might be good to have more support, most tended to consider this a rather sensitive and private area. In general, they seemed to think that it was better to rely primarily on their own judgements. Even so, there were some areas where both parents and step-parents identified difficulties and a need for more support. These related, essentially, to children's needs for more support and the need to protect and nurture the new family while, at the same time, attempting to ensure that children from previous relationships could maintain contact with both their parents.

Relationship Enhancement

Nearly half of those in intact relationships indicated in the e-survey that they talked to their partner about how to maintain their relationship, but only a few had accessed marriage/relationship enhancement courses, about which they were very positive. One couple, married for thirty years, explained how their marriage had gone through some very difficult patches, mainly due to the husband working away from home for much of the time while the couple's three children were growing up. The wife had felt like a single parent during that time, and when the couple were together they tended to focus on resolving practical problems that had arisen while they were apart, placing their relationship under severe strain. The couple had attended a Marriage Encounter weekend and this had got them talking together about the serious topics they had tended to avoid, enabling them to strengthen their relationship before it deteriorated further:

... I think that opened up a new way forward for us to communicate better, and I think a lot of the problems that people experience are probably because they are not as open

with each other as they should be and they maybe don't know how to communicate what they are feeling ... That [attending the weekend] was a big step in our relationship. (wife)

Relationship enhancement programmes can help couples to develop the coping strategies identified by couples in phase 2 as necessary for maintaining a healthy relationship, such as talking and spending time together, demonstrating respect and affection, sharing tasks, and thinking positively.

Having and Raising Children

In Chapter 3, we reported that the transition to parenthood was cited as the most common stressor in couple relationships. We wanted to know, therefore, about the support people had received and how helpful it had been. People referred to a number of sources of advice and support, including health services, Children's Centres and family and friends.

Antenatal Services

A small number of people mentioned that they had received support from the National Childbirth Trust. They all spoke positively about the classes and said they would recommend them. The content had varied, however: some people had been given quite a lot of information about the impact of having a baby on couple relationships, while others had received purely practical information about childbirth itself. The information about relationships had been much appreciated.

We received mixed comments about the helpfulness of antenatal classes during pregnancy. A central message was that these had been primarily practical in focus, and had not included information about the changes that might occur in, and the impact of having a baby on, relationships. The impact that pregnancy and becoming a parent (or coping with several children) could have on the couple relationship and day-to-day family life was rarely, if ever, mentioned. Nevertheless, the practical advice given was clearly valued. One man, for example, who had got time off work to go to antenatal classes when his first child had been expected, had been delighted about the information he had received and described his initial experience in glowing terms:

Both of us went together, and for one day a week and ... it was great, and I felt really involved, and she felt really involved, and there's midwives there telling us what was going to happen when the baby was born, and this'll happen and that, and giving us loads of information, loads of advice, and it was great.

When this man's second child had been due, however, he had not been offered any classes, and he attributed the problems that had led to the breakdown of his marriage to the period after his second child was born. Several people felt that more advice is needed in respect of how roles and responsibilities have to change after a baby is born, and how relationships may change: people told us that knowing what to expect would have been helpful. Mothers and fathers suggested that antenatal classes offer an important opportunity to provide information for couples about relationships and about accessing support services:

... talks on how to nurture their relationship, and how things are going to change, and how the roles are going to change. (male)

One father who had attended antenatal classes when his wife had been expecting their first baby had particularly valued the opportunity they provided for the couple to benefit from peer group support:

It gave us a real strong foundation at that point to move forwards ... We kept in touch with the other people, we kept in touch with other mums and dads that went to ... those classes and we felt really, really involved. And that wasn't there, I remember, when my wife got pregnant with the second child ...

Health Visitors

Health visitors are uniquely placed to work with parents in the period following the birth of a baby since their service is primarily home-based. Parents had mixed views about the help provided by health visitors, however. Some spoke highly of the help they had received, particularly when their health visitor had been trained to deliver intensive support, and others were less positive:

My health visitor was very helpful. Fantastic. My family had a talking therapist who came to our home. It's helpful in terms of making us talk together, and understanding ... what we are going through. I was referred by my GP because of postnatal depression. The visitor was a health visitor with a kind of extended skill. I think it's very beneficial to have someone coming to the house because you don't need to worry about [arranging] childcare and that kind of thing. (mother)

My health visitor is absolutely rubbish! (mother)

Fathers were generally far less positive than mothers about health visitors, primarily because the health visitors had not attempted to involve and include them. During one focus group discussion, several fathers offered examples of how they had felt marginalised by health visitors. The following comments were typical of those of a number of fathers in both phases of the study:

One of the difficult problems I've found was, health visitors come round, visit our child, and ask me to leave. That happened in the hospital once to me when [my child] was being born, and also in antenatal classes – I turned up ... and she [a staff member] just said to me, 'Oh you might as well go, you're not needed ...'

Both parents should be able to relate to and interface with the services around them in a gender-neutral way ... at the moment, my experience is, or was, that the health visitor was interested in mum. The GP ... would be interested in mum mainly.

Some fathers felt strongly that their health visitor could have done more to help both parents deal with difficulties, such as postnatal depression:

I didn't think ... the health visitor was very interested. I think she could have provided more care at that time. She should have identified my wife's depression ... I think the health visitor could have done more. (male, in intact relationship)

Mothers and fathers told us that they would have liked their health visitors to involve fathers more. It is not surprising, perhaps, that the e-surveys showed that the majority of people (82% of those who were separated, 96% of those planning to separate, and 65% of people in intact relationships) had never talked to their health visitor about their relationship. Just a small percentage of people in these three groups (10%, 4% and 9% respectively) had found it helpful to talk to a health visitor about relationship issues.

Some parents suggested that having someone akin to a health visitor who could focus on relationship advice might be especially helpful:

So we have health visitors who help families with young children, look after their development – then we should have a relationship visitor that will help people look after the development of their relationships. The relationships visitor can be implemented by ... the registrar of births, deaths or marriages. Maybe a department can be attached that will help people with marriages and relationships. (female in intact relationship)

Rather than have a health visitor being responsible for relationship support, I think there should be a separate Relationship Advisor. Health visitors have so much on their plate, they're lucky if they see the baby as much as they need to. (female in intact relationship)

Sure Start Children's Centres

People in both phases of the study told us that the introduction of Sure Start Children's Centres had greatly improved parents' potential to meet other parents and to develop their parenting skills. Fathers and mothers were enthusiastic about the help they had received, particularly via parenting courses they had attended. It was evident from focus groups with young mothers and with fathers that attending a parenting course had enabled them to talk about difficulties and problems, including problems in their couple relationship, with others in a similar situation. This form of peer group support was widely welcomed and valued by parents:

You can go to organised things and meet new people at the Sure Start centres ... that sort of thing does help your relationship because you have the opportunity to talk about all sorts of things to do with your child with other people so that, when your husband comes home from work, or if you're working, if you've got the chance to talk to other people, you don't then have to unload on each other all the time. (female in intact relationship)

People valued the advice and training available and the provision for babies and young children to be looked after in a crèche, leaving parents free to network. Parents were disappointed, however, that the limited opening hours of Children's Centres meant that any parent who was working during the day could not use them. One new father commented:

There needs to be some sort of building or wherever that you could go to, and I think the Children's Centres would be great in as much as you could use the time to take time out with your children on Saturday morning or Saturday afternoon or whatever and then, if you really wanted a chat, there would be a crèche facility there for your children whilst you have a chat ... And I think it would be quite a success ... (male in intact relationship)

This father had made a good connection with a male worker at his local Children's Centre and said that he would turn to this worker for help with relationship problems:

I would probably start with the fathers' worker at the Children's Centre ... he would be my first port of call ... If we hadn't got our children, I've got to be honest, I wouldn't know even where to begin to turn ... And I think, as a result of that, it would be very easy for a relationship to break up altogether.

Some parents, however, were doubtful about whether those with the most serious relationship problems would use Children's Centres for fear of losing their children:

I think, with the Children's Centres, because of the county council involvement, a lot of the time people are almost scared because they feel as though they could be monitored there and because they are run by the county council who quite often will

have social workers and various other support people ... I think the more needy parents are, probably the less chance that they would use a Children's Centre.

Others disagreed with this view, and one group of fathers showed us a video they had made to publicise the work their local Children's Centre was doing with fathers in the area. They firmly believed that, with the right kind of advertising, local Children's Centres could provide much-needed support to fathers as well as to mothers and that talking about couple relationships can be acceptable and helpful within the context of a parenting course and a supportive peer group. For these men, all of whom had experienced considerable difficulty and hardship in their everyday life, the sharing of a meal was an important aspect of getting together in a group. With the benefit of peer support, these fathers had enhanced both their parenting skills and their confidence in dealing with a range of debilitating challenges in their home environment.

There was considerable consensus about the need for parents to be told about the benefits of using their local Children's Centre and the support on offer. Fathers and mothers spoke about the 'breathing space' going to a centre provided, which in itself benefited relationships and relieved feelings of isolation. The following comments by two mothers were typical of many:

It's important that mums meet other mums so that they don't feel as isolated because, if you start to feel isolated, naturally you take it out on the person that is closest to you.

You know, if I didn't come here and speak then I think I'd crack up, I'd end up killing myself.

Relying on Family

Support from family members had been a lifeline for many people in the study. It included help with parenting and childcare and often extended to more general support with relationship issues and problems as the years went by. Family members were particularly valued, however, for the support they gave couples when they became parents. Being able to fall back on family members for practical support had been important to people in both phases of the study. Some young parents had felt particularly isolated when there were no family members living close by and had found talking on the phone helpful. One mother whose parents lived in another country told us:

I find my family's advice helpful because sometimes you just need to put your worries or your concerns in words. Often that's enough. My parents are still together and sometimes my mum is quite good to put things into perspective. She always says, 'Look, it's not that big, it's not that big a deal.'

Family support had been particularly valuable for adoptive parents:

I think what probably got us through is that we had really good family support ... from our own family, from my parents in particular who live very locally, grandparents, brother who lives locally, but also my husband's family [who] don't live very far away ... And I think the fact that we did have a lot of family support at that time really did help us ... (female in intact relationship)

Family support, particularly that given by grandparents, was important for many parents throughout the child-rearing years. Some talked about having been able to take time out as a couple while children were cared for by grandparents. One couple explained how this kind of support from grandparents had enabled them to save their relationship when it had been in danger of breaking down:

... it would come to a head and we would recognise that we would have to set aside some time together, so we would arrange for my parents or his parents to come and look after the children. And we would go on holiday, just the two of us, to just have time to get in touch with each other again without all the stresses of just everyday living going on. I think that was very valuable on many occasions.

Another couple had taken their children to stay with one or other set of grandparents at weekends so that they could have time alone while the children were having fun with their grandparents. Clearly, grandparents had helped parents to take time out, helped some women and their partners to deal with postnatal depression, provided a sounding board when there were problems, and given helpful advice. Some people also described the help they had received from siblings: older sisters had been particularly supportive to women having their first baby, by providing practical advice and information and personal support to new mothers.

While talking to parents was regarded as particularly helpful in respect to childcare issues, talking to them about relationship problems was not always straightforward. The e-surveys suggest that talking to family members about relationship difficulties was regarded as more helpful by people whose relationships had ended and those in intact relationships than it was by people planning to separate: while nearly half of those in each of the first two groups described it as having been helpful to talk to relatives, fewer (36%) of those planning to separate had found it helpful. Fifty-seven per cent of those planning to separate had never talked about their relationship to relatives, as against just 24 per cent of those in intact relationships. The evidence suggests that talking to family members when relationships are in the process of separating can be particularly difficult – family members may take sides and complicate matters. One woman, for example, told us that her mother, father and sister had stopped speaking to her when she had got divorced and then remarried. She suggested that counselling might be helpful for grandparents who find it difficult to accept their children's divorce and their new partners. For a number of people, talking to family members about relationship problems had become easier once a relationship had ended. Not wanting to admit to having problems or be disloyal to a partner had prevented some people from sharing their concerns more widely with relatives while the relationship remained intact.

Some people mentioned a number of other issues, such as ill health, which were easier to talk about with relatives than with their partner. For example, one woman in phase 2 described how she had turned to her parents rather than to her husband when she had first been diagnosed with cancer:

I turned to my parents more than my husband at that time. I think he was incredibly worried, and [he] himself was quite young, so he was very, very caring, but I think he didn't know what to say and didn't know what the right thing was, and when he did say something it wasn't the right thing. So he – he was treading on eggshells really ... I sort of turned to some of my family. And family were very practical ... and [gave] emotional support.

This woman went on to explain that had there been a problem in her relationship with her husband. She would not, however, have talked to her parents about it, but to her friends.

Turning to Friends

Friends were described as important sources of help, advice and support by people across the study. Some of the couples who had been in longer intact relationships stressed how important their circle of friends had been at all stages of their relationship. They were keenly aware that people without this source of support may find life much more difficult. It was

important to many people that their friends shared their values and their attitudes towards parenting. Their closest friends were frequently parents too, with similar approaches to bringing up children. This meant that they were able to offer mutual support around the birth of a baby and when children were very young. Although many people talked about having good friends who could give them support, and some felt they could talk to close friends about anything and everything at any time of day or night, some were cautious about telling their friends too much about their couple relationship:

I talk to friends and family, although I feel very loyal to him [her partner] so don't want to criticise him. So I limit what I say ... I don't talk to friends about my relationship. (female)

Sixty-four per cent of those whose relationship had ended, 48 per cent of those who were planning to separate and 62 per cent of people in intact relationships had found talking to close friends about their relationship helpful – more than had found talking to family members helpful. As relationship problems had become more serious, however, it had become increasingly difficult for some people to find anyone to talk to who would be unbiased, particularly if the couple had mutual friends:

Perhaps when the need for emotional support is greatest, when couples are in conflict or when their relationships are under strain in some other way, it is difficult to talk to friends ... because they feel they have to take sides. (male)

Talking to mutual friends could add another layer of difficulty for people whose relationship was ending, which people were anxious to avoid:

So, basically, my wife's mate's fallen out with her ... stopped speaking to her because she had a fight with her about what had gone on. And her mate won't speak to me, cos she took sides with her ... just a mess. (male)

For some people who had experienced abusive relationships, talking to friends and colleagues had provided some relief but had also drawn disapproval. Nevertheless, not having any friends to turn to in the bad times had clearly made life more of a struggle for some people than it might otherwise have been.

Throughout the discussions about the importance of friends, we noted some recurring gender differences. A number of men observed that women seem to be able to talk to each other in ways that men rarely do. Women were also aware that they turned to friends more frequently than their partners did:

I compare notes with my girl friends. I've got a lot of close friends ... He wouldn't talk to his friends, he wouldn't seek help. There are people that he could turn to ... lads who are my friends' partners ... but I don't think he would discuss our relationship with family, close friends, or anyone.

Seeking Professional Support for Relationship Problems

Findings from the e-surveys indicate that, however supportive friends and family might be, most people who took part in our study preferred to talk to professionals about serious relationship difficulties, primarily, they said, because while friends may provide a shoulder to cry on they are rarely able to resolve the difficulties. Mostly, people who had looked for professional help had turned to doctors and relationship counsellors, and they offered mixed views about how helpful they had been.

The Medical Profession

The people who had sought help via their GP had done so primarily because they had been feeling worried or depressed and this had been affecting their health. Twenty-six per cent of those who had separated, 30 per cent of those planning to separate and 43 per cent of those in intact relationships had talked to their doctor about their relationship. While some of these people had found their GP to be both sympathetic and helpful, others recounted less helpful experiences. The responses of GPs tended to fall into two groups. The GPs described as having been helpful had usually signposted their patients to counselling or support services, while and those described as having been less helpful had usually prescribed medication and had not offered counselling or specialised support:

I look back now and I feel very, very angry. I went to the GP and it should have been apparent that I was really, really struggling and that I needed help. He offered me tablets – that's part of the medicalisation of issues – but what I needed was practical help ... and support. (female, divorced)

Even doctors who had been considered helpful, however, had not always been able to secure appropriate help when their patients had needed it most. One woman, whose relationship had ended after twenty years of marriage, had become suicidal by the time she had consulted her GP. She described how, while she had been in the consulting room, her doctor had searched the internet for an appropriate counselling service, but that she had then had to wait a long time to see a counsellor:

I asked for help. I tried to do it on my own, I tried to do it with close-knit family and I couldn't. I was so lonely, my head was just in bits ... I didn't want to be here any more ... and I went to the doctor's and, I thought, I need help [because] something devastating has happened in my life ... it hurt so much, so I asked for counselling and I waited for ever for this counselling.

People in both phases of the study talked, also, about the lack of support available to address relationship problems when fairly common medical issues had caused stresses in the relationship. For example, women who had experienced a miscarriage or had suffered from postnatal depression, and men and women who had had mental or physical illnesses, explained that the support they had been given had focused on the medical condition and how to manage it and had rarely taken account of the impact of the condition on personal relationships. This had been particularly stressful for partners who were struggling to manage a medical condition and had realised that their relationship was suffering. There was a plea from people who had been in that situation for health services to recognise that people may need advice about and help with their couple relationship, alongside medical support.

This plea was echoed by people who had had, or whose partner had received, treatment for alcohol or substance misuse problems. Again, people felt that not enough thought had been given by the professionals involved to how the problem and the treatment might impact on couple relationships. Moreover, these kinds of difficulties had frequently been associated with the existence of other problems, such as unemployment or money worries, with the result that the pressures on the couple relationship had continued to escalate while little or no attention had been given to this aspect. There was a clear message from those people who had experienced difficulties that had led them to seeking professional help via health services that targeted support should include consideration of the health of their personal relationship.

Counselling Services

The e-surveys indicate that most people had never talked to a counsellor about relationship problems (50% of those who had separated, 68% of those planning to separate and 67% of those in intact relationships). The majority of those who had talked to a counsellor in the separated or planning-to-separate groups had found it helpful, but slightly fewer of those in the together groups had found it so. Those people who had accessed counselling referred to a range of counselling services, including those offered by Marriage Care and Relate. Of these, Relate was the service that appeared to be best-known and the one that had been most used by study participants. It was clear that people had heard of Relate and said it would probably be their first port of call if they were seeking professional help. Not all were clear about what it could offer, however, and some were of the view that its image might discourage people from using the service:

Relate has still got some sort of old-school thoughts around it, you know – it's only when your marriage is failing that you go there. (female in intact relationship)

Unfortunately Relate's image is very antiquated, and Relate has this brand that says 'Yes, you come to us as the last resort if you are really stuck'. (female cohabitee in intact relationship)

People in phase 1 who had gone to Relate when their relationship had got into difficulty said that their counsellor had enabled them and their partner to talk together and that this had been helpful, but counselling had not necessarily enabled them to resolve their problems:

... it was inconclusive and it was 'Maybe you could have a try with this, and, you [must] try to understand better what he's feeling ... he must try and understand better what you're feeling.' Of course, he didn't. Nothing changed ... (female, separated after 25 years of marriage)

A number of people who expressed positive views about Relate counselling said it had not necessarily resulted in lasting improvements in their relationship, and, consequently, they were reluctant to go back to Relate. Some people had done, however, and had felt more positive the second time around. One woman, for example, who had been dubious about the value of the counselling she and her husband had received when they had first gone to Relate, describing the counsellor as unprofessional and unhelpful, felt positive about their second experience three years later. Counselling, at that stage, had helped them to improve their relationship.

There were a number of people who were less positive about Relate counselling, particularly those whose relationship had subsequently ended. They gave a number of reasons for this: their partner had been unwilling to go and merely 'went through the motions' rather than taking it seriously; one or both partners had felt that counselling was not making any difference to their relationship, so they stopped going; or the progress made had been short-term and the gains disappeared very quickly. A number of those who had not been able to salvage their relationship had nevertheless found counselling helpful since it had enabled them to move on and end the relationship more constructively:

Relate was really useful ... it became clear in my mind that the relationship was over. (male, separated)

Although Relate counselling didn't result in us being a happy family ever after, it did bring us to a point where we could have that discussion and finish it without being angry with each other. Things went wrong after that, but at the time when we decided to end our relationship I don't think either of us felt anger towards the other. We

acknowledged we had tried different things at different times and that separation was the best way forward really. (female, separated)

People, it seems, had not gone to Relate at the start of relationship problems but had left it late to seek help, rendering it an uphill task to try to resolve the difficulties that had built up. Several recognised that they should probably have gone sooner.

Although people pointed out that they did not want to 'knock' Relate counselling, they did raise consistent concerns, throughout the study, about three specific issues. These were that waiting times were too long, that costs were too high, and that the quality of the counsellors was variable, all of which had acted as barriers to people in the study who had been seeking help when they felt that they had most needed it. We examine each of these in turn.

The problem of long waiting lists was a recurring theme. Having to wait for an appointment was a source of serious frustration for those who had believed that their relationship was in a state of crisis when they had approached Relate:

Basically the waiting list was too long. I found that incredible at the time ... Our marriage was in crisis and yet we didn't have any immediate source of support. I found that tragic really. (male, separated)

Unfortunately they've got a huge waiting list of like six months. So a six-month wait to see a counsellor about a relationship that's on the rocks – by the time you actually get your appointment it's over and done with. (male focus group participant)

Others said that it had been impossible to find appointment times that fitted in with work commitments and the availability of childcare. A number of people said that just making the phone call to Relate had been difficult in itself – it takes courage to ask for help – so being told there was a long waiting list, particularly for evening appointments, had been devastating. One woman, who had subsequently separated after twelve years of marriage, put it as follows:

... when things come to a head it's then that you want help, not in two months' time.

The second consistent concern related to the perceived cost of Relate counselling. Indeed, one woman had been told by her father that it would be cheaper to get divorced. Although one young married couple had thought that it would be helpful to go to Relate to talk about recurring problems in their relationship, they had been reluctant to do so because they had understood that it would cost them £500 for six sessions. The husband in this couple told us that it might be better for them to spend the money on a holiday so that they could try to be nicer to each other. The following comment of another man was typical of many:

It cost thirty pounds per session, which I couldn't afford. I was working so hard in order to pay back our debt ... often couples get into difficulties, mainly due to finance. Often things start to break down when the finance isn't there, when there's arguments about the finance.

Despite commenting very positively about the comprehensive nature of Relate's website, a number of people raised concerns about the quality of the counsellors they had experienced. The following remarks, the first by a man and the second by a woman, both of whom had subsequently separated from their partner, illustrate the concerns people expressed:

The only counselling I could find was Relate. The quality of the person that came through was appalling – they couldn't guarantee what qualifications they had or who they would be. The Relate counsellor practically picked up her chair and sat next to my

wife, and started interrogating me. And as far as I know ... you 're meant to air views on both sides and not actually take sides.

The counsellor was awful, truly awful. She made me feel it was all my fault She didn't seem to have the necessary qualifications or training ... It makes me feel very, very angry. In fact, when I look back, I regard this experience of counselling as the tipping point in our relationship.

Inevitably, perhaps, people in the study who were disappointed with Relate or who had subsequently split up were more negative about these aspects of counselling than those who had found its services helpful, but the problems of waiting times, cost, and the quality of counselling surfaced, irrespective of the experiences people had had and the outcomes they had achieved.

A few people in the study had accessed other counselling support via other services and had appreciated approaches to counselling that did not require people to delve back into their past life. The counselling they had received had generally been individual and personal, rather than couple counselling. One woman who had been married for ten years prior to getting divorced and had been to couple counselling had appreciated a more forward-looking approach to counselling at a later stage:

I am not fond of counsellors ... because you are constantly talking about what went wrong I don't like talking about the past all the time. The counsellors tend to do that ... raking things up you don't want to ...

One young mother, who had accessed counselling via her GP, which she described as having been 'absolutely useless' because it had opened up a 'massive can of worms' from her past, had found another counsellor who was prepared to help her deal with her separation and move on, and this she described as having been far more useful. Being helped to separate or move forward via individual counselling had been helpful for many people.

Some people, particularly those who worked in large organisations, public services such as the police and the Armed Forces, had accessed counselling and other kinds of support in their workplace. People expressed the view that employers could and should do more to support employees through crises in their home life, either by providing time for them at work to drop in and talk to a counsellor or by allowing them to take time off work to attend counselling appointments locally.

Ending Relationships

As we have noted above, some people had been to counselling to help them come to terms with the ending of a relationship, and those that had described it as having been helpful. People in phase 1 of the study had turned to various sources of support during or in the wake of separation, and by far the most frequently mentioned services were those provided by GPs and counselling agencies, both of which we have referred to already. Relatively few people had gone to a mediation service, however, to resolve any issues in dispute and make arrangements for the future. When we talked to parents in phase 1 about their understanding of and interest in using mediation, some said that they had considered mediation but had been unable to persuade their partner to do so. Others indicated that mediation services were not available in a location that would have been convenient for them. Among the phase 1 e-survey respondents just 14 per cent of those who had separated and 7 per cent of those who were planning to separate had talked to a mediator. Their views about its helpfulness were mixed. Those who were more sceptical about mediation said that they had felt pressured to make agreements and that it had been expensive:

I bought her [his ex-wife] out of the house that we jointly owned ... But effectively I was bullied into that by mediation. The last mediation I went to, it cost me ... just under a hundred and fifty pounds a session. Cost her nothing. What she wanted to talk about was me having my boy ready fifteen minutes earlier than I do, ready for her pick-up. And so mediation are charging me a hundred and fifty pounds for that. (male)

While a number of people who had considered mediation accused their partner of having been unwilling to try it, some admitted their own reluctance. They had felt too unstable emotionally to negotiate effectively; they had seen the potential for their partner to browbeat them; they had not been on a level footing with their partner, so they saw their partner as having potential advantages in the negotiations; or they had been concerned that participating in mediation might have signified a tacit acceptance that they were willing to share responsibility for what had gone wrong in the relationship. The following comments, which were made by separated men in one of the focus groups, illustrate the factors that had prohibited them or their partners from attending mediation:

She [his ex-wife] cancelled [the mediation appointment]. And she sent me an email: 'I'm not going because you've got a long history of railroading me, railroading me into making decisions.'

'If I admit to going to mediation' – this is what I normally get back [from my ex-partner] – 'it's I'm admitting blame ... [I] have to then share my feelings as to my part of the responsibility as to why the relationship fell to pieces ... No I'm not doing mediation.'

All it [mediation] does is reinforce what the parent with the cards in her favour wants ... they can get away with anything, in my view.

Nevertheless, people in our interview sample who had been to mediation tended to be positive about the difference it had made. One father, for example, considered that mediation had been very helpful. He and his wife had been recommended to go by their respective lawyers. He told us:

We wouldn't have been able to talk face to face, cos it just wouldn't have worked. There's too much emotions on both sides ... family mediation was great cos there was a family mediator there, and you could discuss things, money, housing, what's going to happen in the future, care plans like for [our child], with an independent person. And it's very hard to kick off in front of an independent person without looking stupid. (male)

Several people who had been to mediation felt that their partner had not fully engaged with the process, although they acknowledged that having someone independent to assist with negotiations could be very helpful. In this respect, a number of people, separated fathers in particular, expressed the view that a meeting with a mediator to explore the options should be made mandatory:

The mediation thing, call it what you will – there should be some sort of a compulsion. Cos I would have given my back teeth to have gone to speak to someone, an in-between with my wife, at any stage. But she said no. (male, separated from his wife)

The vast majority of participants in phase 1 described the separation as having been highly stressful and characterised by huge anxiety. Often, they had been unable to talk with their partner without promoting angry exchanges, shouting matches and further distress, and those that had tried mediation described going to see a mediator as preferable to going to see lawyers.

Going It Alone: Accessing Helplines, Books and Websites

People in both phases of the study had sought advice for relationship problems from helplines, books, leaflets and websites.

Helplines

People had valued the advice that is available via helplines to help them deal with specific problems, such as debt and parenting problems. The majority of people who completed an e-survey in phase 1 said that they would be prepared to use telephone helplines to talk about their relationships. Nine per cent said that they had already used this kind of helpline; 60 per cent said they definitely would, or might, try using one, and 6 per cent remained unsure. In the phase 2 e-survey, just 3 per cent of respondents had accessed a telephone helpline; a third said that they definitely would, or might, try using one; and 14 per cent were sure that they would not use one. We noted, however, that most people in focus groups had very little knowledge about the availability of helplines or knowledge of how they find out about them.

Print Media

Most people indicated in the e-surveys that they had looked for information about relationships in magazines and books at some stage in their relationship, or when it had ended. Books which described gender differences in relationships were viewed as having been particularly helpful and some people wished they had had this information earlier:

I read a book recently ... talking about the way men and women are different ... it's not criticism or blame, but explains. Well, if I'd read that before I got married, I think perhaps it would have been successful, because it certainly explains flashpoints, when you both get in from work and perhaps the female would want to sound off while the male would just want to disappear, and that is a flashpoint.

While some people had been sceptical as to whether books and magazines could have helped with their own specific relationship problems, others had been embarrassed about borrowing or buying books, such as books about sexual problems. People suggested that self-help books should be available in health clinics and GP surgeries. While many new mothers had valued the Bounty bag that they had been given, they felt that much of the information in it, about cot death for example, was too upsetting and they had ended up throwing it away. What new mothers had valued most were the 'vouchers and freebies'.

Websites and Online Services

Many people who had completed the e-surveys online were in favour of using websites and online services to access information and advice. Nearly 40 per cent of e-survey respondents had browsed websites and another 40 per cent said they would definitely try this method of seeking help. Moreover, over 60 per cent of people who had separated or were planning to separate and over 50 per cent of those in intact relationships indicated that they would definitely or might try online counselling in future. One of the perceived advantages of online counselling was that waiting lists for face-to-face counselling might be avoided. Very few people had already tried it, however.

Both men and women were generally attracted to online services, but expressed some reservations, mostly about the quality of the information and support that might be on offer and whether they would be as helpful as face-to-face exchanges. The reservations expressed by this man were typical:

I think the problem with a lot website services is ... [they] take away that one-to-one, that personal touch with your problem ... [And] there's so many sites, it's knowing which ones are actually giving you good advice ... you could go through a whole list of situations, you could pick one that's closest to what your problem is and you could wring the advice from that, but if it's not spot-on, I think you could finish up, actually, giving yourself more problems than you had in the first place.

Some websites were mentioned frequently as having been helpful, including those of Gingerbread, the Fatherhood Institute, Bounty, ParentlinePlus, Relate, Tammy's, dads.co.uk, Mumsnet, Netmums and Directgov. Nevertheless, knowing where to look and what to trust remained a problem for many people. Overall, web-based information and support was popular, for a number of reasons: it is a convenient way to access information and support quickly, it is anonymous and non-stigmatising, and it offers choice and privacy.

Barriers to Seeking Help

The e-survey evidence shows that people in both phases had sought help for relationship problems from a variety of sources. Most had talked to family and/or friends, some had sought professional support, and some had preferred to find information via books and websites. Seeking help was felt to be difficult, however, and many people talked about the barriers that stand in the way of asking for help for what they regard as private, personal issues. The barriers fall into a number of categories: being prevented by cultural inhibitions, taboos, attitudes and social stigma; not wanting to admit to having troubles; needing to cover up and put on a brave face; and not knowing what services exist or what they do.

Inhibitions, Taboos, Personal Attitudes, Social Stigma

One of the most salient themes to emerge from the narratives of people in all kinds of relationships was the belief that talking about relationship problems or seeking help for them is not the 'done thing'. Women remarked that men find it difficult to talk about feelings, emotions and worries, partly because society does not encourage them to feel comfortable doing so. Several women in intact relationships who initially agreed to be interviewed subsequently withdrew because their male partners were reluctant for them to talk and reluctant to talk themselves about their relationship, even though the relationship was apparently strong. This response supports the widely-held belief that relationships are private and not to be discussed with strangers. Men and women acknowledged that, irrespective of whether relationships are going well or are in trouble, it is more socially acceptable to keep relationships 'under wraps' and 'behind closed doors'. People who admit they have relationship problems are therefore regarded as brave:

I think it's quite brave to admit that things are going wrong, cos it is quite humiliating ringing a complete stranger and saying 'Look, I need help'. (female, focus group participant)

Others said that they would feel like a failure or that they would be being disloyal to their partner if they had to ask for help, and some had no faith that anyone could or would help them anyway. Putting up with an unhappy relationship, and self-reliance, had meant that some people had lived in abusive relationships for a long time before doing anything about them:

I thought of myself as being more fortunate than some people who were having to cope with these things [domestic violence] ... So I'd got to be able to cope and sort it, or try and sort it. (female, separated)

Self-reliance was also linked to a conviction that no one would understand the problems well enough to be able to do anything about them, so when the situation became intolerable it was time to move out:

... if you can't make each other happy then there is no point in being together, cos if a relationship isn't working then it's time to move on and find another. (female in intact relationship)

A few people regarded this kind of attitude as symptomatic of a throwaway society in which it is too easy to jettison a relationship that is not working perfectly. Although this was not a dominant attitude during the study, many people nevertheless acknowledged the stigma around seeking help for relationship problems:

Services are still stigmatised and make people feel like they have failed because they are accessing the service in the first place! It should be OK to ask for help because life doesn't come with a handbook and it can be hard. (female, separated)

One woman, whose cohabiting relationship had broken down after twenty years, gave an account of the stigma attached to talking about a relationship that is in difficulty, which had prevented her from seeking help:

He [her partner] said, 'You absolutely can't talk to your parents ... I don't want anyone knowing that we've got problems. I don't want my dirty linen washing in public ... I don't want anyone to know. You mustn't tell your father.'

Denial and Fear

It was not only the stigma attached to admitting there were problems that prevented people from seeking help. Often, the reluctance was provoked by fears about what might happen if problems were acknowledged and how this might affect the children. Some parents preferred to put on a brave face and cover up any problems so as to prevent their children from discovering that their parents had difficulties. People had feared that seeking help or going to Relate would raise the possibility that people would find out the relationship was on the rocks and might break down:

You just think about the kids and you try and sort of cover it up to make it better ... Because I didn't want them to worry and I didn't want them to have anything bad in their life. (female, separated after twenty years in cohabiting relationship)

The children haven't been aware of any of our difficulties as far as they know. Discussions have happened after they've been in bed. So far as they were concerned, it was happy families, until two months ago ... They haven't seen us shouting or arguing. (female, separated after twelve years of marriage)

Some people in phase 1 had come to realise that they had been unable to see, or had avoided seeing, just how serious their problems had become:

Looking back now I'm able to pinpoint when he [her husband] began to withdraw from the family, but I suppose, when I was living with it I denied it, because you don't want to see these things happen. (female, separated)

Admitting that things were seriously wrong had been particularly difficult for people who had felt under pressure to put up with things. One woman, who had married a man contrary to all the advice of friends and family who had then posed a threat to her life, admitted that it had taken her a long time to accept the seriousness of her problems.

Lack of Knowledge

Many people said that, apart from Relate, they had little knowledge about relationship support services, or where to find them. Lack of knowledge meant that some people had fears about what going for help might entail, particularly if it involved talking about past hurts and opening up old wounds. Concerns were expressed, also, about the quality of services such as counselling support, whether counsellors would be properly trained, whether they might do more harm than good, and whether this kind of help would be sufficient:

Talking about things is of limited use unless it is accompanied by a change of practical circumstances, i.e. better housing, more income, less taxation, more help from extended family ... (female in intact relationship)

Lack of knowledge, and scepticism about whether services could help anyway, had led many people to attempt to cope with their problems on their own:

Strangers need to work hard to be given credibility by me. (male)

Looking to the Future: Support That Would Be Helpful

Despite the fact that many people identified barriers to help-seeking, they nevertheless made a number of suggestions about the kinds of help and support which they thought were lacking and about how existing services could be improved in order to remove some of the barriers.

Peer Support

When people were asked about the help they would have liked, the desire for peer support was the most common response of women and men in both phases. The following comment was typical of very many we received from men and women in the study:

... there's nothing better than having people who have gone through the same thing, to meet and talk about the problems.

People said they would like peer support at the following times: during the transition to parenthood, in order to talk about what they could expect and how to deal with the changes having a baby implies; following a miscarriage or postnatal depression; during periods of ill health or after a death in the family; while struggling with the demands of bringing up children and when children have specific needs; when forming stepfamilies; and when they are trying to make sense of what has gone wrong in a relationship and are trying to move forward after separation and divorce. Although some people had made contact with others in similar circumstances via organisations such as Gingerbread and Families Need Fathers most had not, and described the deep sense of isolation, self-doubt and, often, depression that had accompanied their experiencing of problems. This deep need to talk with other people who could understand what they were going through was expressed by one woman as follows:

... when you go through your own rubbish, you need to be around people that you sort of relate to ... so why can't you ... engage with like-minded people who have been through hell in a relationship and not be made to feel like you're a freak? (female, separated)

Fathers were equally vociferous about their need for peer group support and critical that most services seem to cater for women but not for men. One man whose wife had cancer, for example, had found it very difficult to deal with his anxieties because all the support had been directed towards his wife:

There should be something set up for the partner to come down and have a cup of tea. Imagine twenty fellas in the same room, all with wives who have got cancer, and I'll bet they've all got the same stories. (male focus group participant)

We talked to one group of fathers who met regularly at their local Children's Centre. This opportunity to get together and take a break from stresses at home had provided a much-needed lifeline for them, enabling them to hold families and relationships together. One mother whose marriage had ended after sixteen years suggested that a support group or peer group for couples just starting married life would have been helpful for her.

Personalised Services

There was general agreement that professional support needs to be personalised and that a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. People talked of needing someone who could befriend or mentor them:

... a parent advocate, who had experienced some kind of difficulty, who can signpost people into the relevant services ... I think families who are in real chaos are much more likely to respond to somebody who has been in that situation and come out the other end ... (female)

Maybe a type of mentor ... some advice from someone who's there to support you or just listen, but not counselling as such, ... There's nothing for relationships. (female)

People were clear that this kind of support should be community-based and that there should be more community workers in local centres to offer a range of support opportunities: somewhere for peer groups to meet; drop-in sessions for one-to-one mentoring; and advice sessions, for example, relating to debt, alcohol abuse, problems with children and problems with relationships. Parenting support workers in Children's Centres were described as being well-placed to help parents with relationship issues since they get to know parents well and work hard to establish trust.

Strengthening Relationships

In the phase 1 e-survey, over 50 per cent of people who had separated said either that they would definitely or that they might attend a relationship preparation course if it were available, and a substantial percentage (60%) showed interest in relationship-building courses. Twenty-seven per cent also said that they would definitely look for help in choosing a partner. There was considerable interest on the part of e-survey respondents in both phases in attending courses on problem-solving (78% of those who had separated, 64% of those planning to separate, and 55% of those in intact relationships), conflict management courses (74%, 60% and 44% respectively), and parenting classes (61%, 57% and 50% respectively). Moreover, e-survey respondents said that they would like help to improve couple communication (82%, 88% and 79% respectively), advice on anger management (48%, 56% and 36% respectively), financial advice (40%, 36% and 36% respectively), guidance on sexual problems (28%, 40% and 46% respectively), and help with domestic abuse (33%, 24% and 7% respectively). These responses indicate that many people in the study were keen to find ways in which they could strengthen their relationship, either their current relationship or ones they might form in the future.

Improving Existing Services

A number of people suggested ways in which existing services could be changed or improved in order to strengthen couple relationships. People reflected on their experiences of

health visitors, GPs and other health professionals and on the lack of attention that had been paid to the impact of the presenting problem or situation on their couple relationship. We heard pleas for specialist services to understand the stresses and strains that are placed on couples when they have to cope with a specific problem or condition and to offer appropriate information and support. Moreover, men had felt left out when midwives and health workers had been primarily concerned to support mothers and babies during the pre- and postnatal periods, with scant regard to the roles that partners might play. Overall, interviewees felt that the medical professions generally should be more helpful and more understanding of relationship issues and of the support that might be needed. Other changes and improvements to services that people suggested included the provision of good-quality, affordable (preferably free) counselling that is readily available when it's needed, the development of a single website where all the information is brought together for couples experiencing relationship problems, and the extension of support services to include men as well as women.

People in the study who had been in violent or abusive relationships had commented that support services were not always sympathetic to them. They also made a plea for more information to be made available about abusive relationships. At least three women in the interview sample in phase 1 had been in violent relationships before repartnering. Although they said that it would be helpful for them and people like them to have more information about being in controlling relationships and how to recognise these, they illustrated quite distinct approaches to help-seeking. One, who came from a middle-class, stable family background, had considered getting help through counselling but had not pursued this since she had gained consolation from an older work colleague whom, to the surprise, and in some cases dismay, of some friends and colleagues, she had subsequently married. Another woman had spent her teenage years in care because of her mother's neglect (stemming from substance abuse and violent partners) and attributed her two failed marriages to a desperate need to form her own family unit. Although she said that she would have appreciated more mentoring support from someone with experience of being in care at the point at which she had left care, she also said that she would probably not have taken anyone else's advice because she had been so sure that having her own child was the only meaningful way forward. The third woman had been to several different kinds of counselling service, some of which had been more useful than others.

People who had separated suggested changes to the services designed to help couples manage the separation process. There were calls, particularly from fathers, to make attendance at a mediation appointment mandatory for all parents. Mothers and fathers made requests for parenting-after-separation courses which would include support for children as well as for the parents, and for different ways to approach separation and divorce that did not involve lawyers from the start. These new approaches might involve new panels and other professionals:

*I think there should be ... a voluntary family assistance panel – before it goes terribly wrong and you're compelled to go and see these people [mediators and lawyers].
(male)*

I think there's a space for something where a couple who are about to embark on separating could sit in front of a child psychologist ... perhaps a barrister and court welfare officer ... and just explain what they want, how they see the future ... And then those three tell them ... the problems they're going to face. And it gives them ... a touch of realism [about] what is going to happen ... and at the same time, [it] offers support. (male)

Essentially, people wanted there to be an opportunity to stop and reflect with someone who could tell them about the things they must think about and the issues they would have to face. Some of those who had separated speculated that had such an opportunity existed for them, they perhaps would have thought again about whether separation was the best way forward, and would have been slower to engage a lawyer and rush into a legal process which is difficult to stop once it has been set in motion.

Summary

The findings reported in this chapter indicate that people in all kinds of relationship, and in both phases of the study, valued support when things had gone wrong in their relationship, but not all the services they had accessed had met their needs. The study has shown:

1. There are considerable barriers to seeking help with problems that impinge on relationships and to admitting that relationships might be in trouble.
2. While family and friends are important sources of help, people in this study preferred to get relationship support from skilled professionals.
3. Health professionals do not always recognise the impact of health issues on couple relationships and are not always able to provide the support people need to be able to cope with the impacts of health problems.
4. There is a tendency for men to feel marginalised when support services focus on women or mothers and do not routinely include men or fathers.
5. While most people who had accessed relationship counselling had found it helpful, concerns were expressed specifically about the image associated with Relate: its long waiting lists and restricted appointment times, its high costs, and the quality of some of its counsellors.
6. Relatively few couples in phase 1 had been to mediation, and there are a number of barriers which limit its use, which might be removed if an appointment with a mediator became mandatory.
7. People appreciate the information available via print media and websites but are often uncertain about the quality of the information and whether it can be trusted.
8. Substantial numbers of people across the study would welcome support to strengthen relationships, improve their communication skills and learn strategies for problem-solving.
9. People would like more opportunities to access peer group support in order to help them deal with life events that can put stress on relationships, and would welcome services that are personalised and inclusive.

People made a number of suggestions for ways in which relationships might be enhanced and supported in future, and we develop these ideas further in the next chapter. We also consider the responses people gave to a number of policy proposals relating to the future provision of support for adult couple relations. Finally, we consider the implications of our findings for policy and practice and make a number of recommendations.

Chapter 7 Relationships Matter – Looking to the Future

There should be much more comprehensive education in schools about relationships ... so that all children learn how to form and sustain healthy, meaningful relationships from an early age. (male, e-survey respondent, phase 1)

The fairy-tale vision of falling in love, becoming a couple and living happily ever after does not reflect the reality for the vast majority of people who form committed couple relationships. There was a general consensus among people in our study that relationships are demanding and have to be worked at, and that there are plenty of challenges which can so easily destabilise the strongest of partnerships. Being fully committed to another adult does not stop most people questioning the relationship from time to time. One man who, over twenty years ago, took part in a study of 351 couples who had been married for at least fifteen years captured the essence of commitment when he said:

*Commitment means a willingness to be unhappy for a while ... You're not going to be happy with each other all the time. That's when commitment is really important.*⁶⁴

People in our study of couple relationships spoke about the nature and importance of commitment as they described how they had negotiated the stresses and challenges they had faced in their everyday lives, while others spoke of their regret when commitment had not been sufficient to avoid recurring crises or the gradual disintegration of their relationship. Their narratives constitute a rich tapestry of experiences which further our understanding of the problems and crunch points that can serve either to strengthen or to undermine relationships; the coping strategies people adopt when times are hard; and the advice, help, information and support which can help people work through their difficulties at different times in their relationship. In this final chapter we:

- put these findings into a wider context
- consider the kinds of support that might bolster couple relationships in the future
- indicate the key policy and practice implications
- put forward some recommendations which flow from the evidence we have gathered

Twenty First Century Realities

People of all ages recognised that couple relationships are more varied than in times past, that the pathways to forming a committed relationship are less well-defined, and that marriage is not always the relationship of choice even though it remains the most common form of partnership. They recognised, also, that roles and responsibilities within families have changed, particularly as women have had increased opportunities to combine childcare with work outside the home and become more economically independent.

Being Clear About Expectations

As roles and responsibilities have shifted, expectations of couple relationships, including marriage, have also changed. Men were acutely aware that the changes within family life had impacted significantly on traditional gender roles, and some spoke with passion about their struggle to make sense of modern-day expectations:

⁶⁴ Lauer, J. C. and Lauer, R. H. (1986) *Til Death Do Us Part*, Haworth Press, p. 181.

What has happened, particularly over the last twenty or thirty years, is that the old format of relationships, where you would expect the man to be the money earner and the head of the household, has disappeared ... now, it's often the woman who is the occupier of the home, and the man who moves into her home. (separated father)

Despite this change in the order of things, men told us that they had still felt under pressure to provide for the family once the couple had had children and had experienced additional pressures to share in parenting tasks and to take more responsibility for child-rearing. One young woman in an intact relationship explained how difficult it was for her husband to cope with the imbalance in their respective earning power:

There are pressures for him as a man to provide for his family and this has an impact on his mental health. I am earning more than him so there is inequity between us. There are also pressures from both mine and my husband's side of the family for my husband to find work so that he can get more money for the family.

Several women agreed that men are often put down by the media, and that very often, people's expectations of relationships are now unrealistic. Men and women expressed their expectations quite differently, and the lack of a clear blueprint for modern couple relationships meant that these expectations had often collided and conflicted. A recent report by the Coalition on Men and Boys notes that while the breadwinner role is still important for men, so too is their involvement in caring for their children. Reconciling these roles can be difficult for fathers, and the transition to parenting can leave them feeling undervalued and isolated because they are usually ill-prepared for their new role.⁶⁵ Reconciling different roles can be difficult for mothers, also. Many researchers have identified the transition to parenthood as constituting a very vulnerable period in an adult's life, often leading to increased negative feelings between partners⁶⁶ which can in themselves result in dissatisfaction and depression.⁶⁷

In their summary of twenty years of research in this field, Cowan *et al.* conclude that first-time parents are at risk of experiencing personal and marital distress and that this may continue until well after the baby has reached the age of two.⁶⁸ Moreover, the effects on family structure and family reorganisation may last into the pre-school years and beyond.⁶⁹ Many parents in phase 1 of our study referred to difficulties that had developed in their couple relationship when they had had a baby, which had often contributed to the eventual demise of the partnership. Society's expectations of parents are high, probably higher than at any time previously in respect of the behaviours, tasks, obligations, responsibilities and commitments associated with parenting.⁷⁰ It is important, therefore, for practitioners to

⁶⁵ Coalition on Men and Boys (2009) *Man Made: Men, masculinities and equality in public policy*, Coalition on Men and Boys; Crompton, R. and Lyonette, C. (2008) *Who Does the Housework? The division of labour within the home*, British Social Attitudes, 24th Report, National Centre for Social Research, Sage.

⁶⁶ See e.g. Ruble, D. N., Fleming, A. S., Hackel, L. S. and Stangor, C. (1988) 'Changes to the marital relationship during the transition to first time motherhood: effects of violated expectations concerning division of household labour', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 55, pp. 78–87; Fiese, B., Hooker, K. A., Kotary, L. and Schwagler, J. (1993) 'Family rituals in the early stages of parenthood', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 55, no. 3, pp. 633–42.

⁶⁷ Fedele, N. M., Golding, E. R., Grossman, F. K. and Pollack, W. S. (1988) 'Psychological issues in the adjustment to first parenthood', in G. Y. Michaels and W. A. Goldberg (eds) *The Transition to Parenthood*, Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁸ Cowan, C. P., Cowan, P. A., Heming, G. and Miller, N. (1991) 'Becoming a family: marriage, parenting and child development', in P. A. Cowan and M. Hetherington (eds) *Family Transitions*, LEA.

⁶⁹ Fiese, *et al.* (1993), *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ Walker, J. (1995) 'Parenting in the 1990s: great expectations and hard times', *RSA Journal*, vol. 143, no. 5, 456, pp. 29–41.

understand that parenting is now expected to be a joint venture, make every effort to include both mothers and fathers in parenting interventions and support programmes, and give consideration to the way mothers and fathers function as partners and the different stressors that may be present.⁷¹ When offering preventative interventions, it may be worthwhile for practitioners to assist new parents in deliberately thinking about their individual expectations of parenting so as to help them develop supportive coparenting behaviours, work together as a team, learn to problem-solve and make use of support networks in the community.⁷² This approach would appear to fit well with our findings which demonstrate the potential for couple relationships to flounder when attention is not paid to the impact of parenthood and steps are not taken to promote teamwork. A number of people in intact relationships remarked on how important teamwork had been for them and a number of those who had separated referred to the absence of teamwork in their relationship. Some focus group participants suggested that as soon as a couple are expecting a baby they should be offered some kind of incentive to attend parenting preparation classes. These could be attached to antenatal classes, people suggested, thereby getting prospective parents to talk about relationship issues at the time when they are likely to be the most receptive to being given information and advice.

All the evidence suggests that it is vitally important for partners to be clear with each other about their expectations of the couple relationship and, when they become parents, to be equally clear about their expectations of each other as parents. Despite the vast increase in personal choice open to people today, choosing a partner had been a serious undertaking for almost everyone who had formed their relationship in the last twenty years, just as it had been for those couples who had been together for well over thirty years. On the whole, people had not been explicit about their expectations when they had moved in with their partner, nor when they had started a family, only realising later that each partner may well have been wanting different things and had then been bitterly disappointed when life had not turned out as expected. Understanding, managing and being flexible about expectations, then, is a key factor in couples being able to make the kinds of adaptations which are necessary at different stages of couple formation and re-formation. This requires partners to be able to talk openly and honestly to each other and to find the time to do so. The experiences of many people in the study indicate that there are significant practical and psychological barriers which prevent couples from protecting couple time. Several people talked about the dangers of partners becoming estranged while living under the same roof, simply because they are unable to find time to be together. The phrase used most frequently was that the relationship had been put 'on the back burner'. It is not surprising, therefore, that when challenges and difficulties emerged and people had little opportunity to address them, relationship tensions went unresolved.

Ending Relationships

Hawthorne *et al.* have suggested that marriage is increasingly confined to those most committed to forming enduring relationships.⁷³ There is little evidence in our study to support this assertion and some people freely admitted that their motivation for getting married after a lengthy period of cohabitation had been to attempt to salvage a relationship that was showing signs of strain. In other words, they viewed marriage as a way of repairing the relationship, to glue it back together and give it new meaning. These marriages had usually broken down fairly quickly, however, primarily because they had had less chance of surviving than most others. Nevertheless, the majority of people who had separated, or were planning

⁷¹ Lindsey, E. W., Caldera, Y. and Colwell, M. (2005) 'Correlates of coparenting during infancy', *Family Relations*, vol. 54, pp. 346–59.

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ Hawthorne, J., Jessop, J., Pryor, J. and Richards, M. (2003) *Supporting Children through Family Change: A review of interventions and services for children and divorcing and separating parents*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

to separate, had, whether they were married or cohabiting, expected their relationship to last for life. Even those who had moved in with their partner fairly rapidly after they had met, or said that they had drifted into living together without having made a purposeful choice, had not regarded the relationship as transitory.

The consequences of parental separation and divorce are such that practitioners and policymakers believe strongly that steps should be taken to minimise the detrimental impacts on children and adults and to foster post-separation relationships that will enhance the quality of children's lives rather than diminish it. We were told about many unhappy, painful separations and about ongoing conflicts which had caused untold difficulties in respect of parents' mental and physical health and their ability to hold down a job, and had reduced their self-esteem to the extent that forming new relationships had been very difficult. The majority of people did not rush to end their relationship. Instead, there was often a protracted endgame during which both partners were likely to feel dissatisfied and become increasingly unhappy. Sometimes, the presence of children had kept them together for longer than might otherwise have been the case.

It would appear that there are several potential opportunities for people whose relationships are breaking down to receive help and support. First, people need information about the stressors and crunch points that regularly occur in relationships and how they might deal with them. Second, they need an opportunity to stop and reflect before taking irreversible steps to split up – earlier evidence suggests that the decision to move out is as significant as that to move in, and usually marks the beginning of the end.⁷⁴ Third, support is needed during the separation and any associated legal proceedings so as to minimise the conflict, help parents settle disputes as consensually as possible, help partners reformulate a constructive parental alliance after separation, and help people make sense of the ending of their relationship and move forward into the future. Ultimately, however, a key policy goal is to help couples manage the stressors in their relationship and find ways to cope with them that will lessen the chance that the relationship will end and enhance the possibility of people meeting the more realistic expectations they cherished at the start.

The Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from our study suggest that there are a number of ways in which policymakers and practitioners can enhance couple relationships at various times. Key to these is the ability to identify relationship stressors and provide support in a wide variety of ways.

Identifying Relationship Problems

Some research has suggested that it is possible to identify relationship problems long before couples themselves perceive there to be difficulties, and to predict which couple relationships will be put under the most severe strain in the face of normally occurring challenges in day-to-day family life.⁷⁵ The evidence suggests that a number of factors are associated with a higher risk of marital separation, some of which relate to personal characteristics and the backgrounds of each partner and are therefore immutable, and some of which relate to lifestyle and each partner's expectations regarding the other partner's behaviour and are

⁷⁴ Walker, J. (ed.) (2001) *Information Meetings and Associated Provisions within the Family Law Act 1996: Final evaluation report*, Lord Chancellor's Department; Walker, J., McCarthy, P., Stark, C. and Laing, K. (2004) *Picking Up the Pieces: Marriage and divorce two years after information provision*, Department for Constitutional Affairs.

⁷⁵ See e.g. Stanley, S. M. (2001) 'Making a case for pre-marital education', *Family Relations*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 272–80; Clements, M. L., Stanley, S. M. and Markman, H. J. (2004) 'Before they said "I do": discriminating among marital outcomes over 13 years', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 66, no. 3, pp. 613–26; Butterworth, P. and Rodgers, B. (2008) 'Mental health problems and mental disruption: is it the combination of husbands and wives' mental health problems that predicts later divorce?', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, vol. 43, no. 9, pp. 758–63.

therefore open to change and modification.⁷⁶ Such studies have potentially significant implications for the development of relationship support services, including those designed to be preventative as well as those that are remedial. If certain predisposing characteristics are known, relationship support services and relationship education might be able to target or provide tailored interventions for those couples whose relationships may be especially vulnerable. The implication here, also, is that different kinds of support are needed by couples in different social and relational circumstances and at different stages in relationship formation, disintegration and re-formation. Our study has shown that there is, perhaps, a need to draw a rather finer line between relationships that survive and endure and those that end in separation. The stresses and strains mentioned by participants in both phases of the study were remarkably similar and their narratives contain many similar accounts of relationships which were far from being perfect and which had often been challenging.

A range of predominantly qualitative studies have suggested that the qualities/attributes of the couple relationship (e.g. commitment, sharing, reciprocity, trust) and the processes by which conflict is contained, decision-making is shared, and expectations are communicated are critical indicators of whether relationships will weather the storms all couples experience.⁷⁷ Furthermore, as we have noted, one of the key aspects of healthy relationships is the amount of time couples spend together in building and maintaining their relationship. Helping couples to balance their work and family commitments is one way in which strong, stable relationships can be fostered. In a broad sense, one of the distinguishing features of relationships that were long-lasting was a conception of 'coupleness' in which the partners viewed their relationship as having primacy, and in which they both were committed to nurturing and sustaining the relationship and had the goodwill necessary to learn and engage in the behaviours that kept alive the emotional connection that brought them together in the first place.⁷⁸ Our study supports the previous research in this area: people in both phases referred to the attributes which are important in healthy couple relationships and the adaptive processes that need to be harnessed if relationships are not going to wither and die. The study also supports previous findings which indicate that the beginning of the couple relationship is a critical moment during which expectations need to be realistic and shared and the couple need to be prepared for what lies ahead.⁷⁹ A number of people thought that couples should receive more information at the beginning of the relationship and that relationship preparation courses and coaching should be available at the point partners are planning to live together. They expressed the view that drawing attention to the key ingredients of positive, healthy relationships, such as trust, understanding, acceptance, tolerance, forgiveness, respect, having fun and sharing interests and time, might help couples think about the adaptations they may have to make and render their expectations of couple relationships more realistic. 'Not to take each other for granted' was a key phrase used by many people who viewed preparation for relationships as a good idea. The challenge is how to provide this information in such a way that people will accept and appreciate its value.

Professional and public interest in marriage education and marriage enrichment courses has existed since the 1970s, most markedly in the USA. Hundreds of community initiatives have developed across the USA, with the intention of strengthening marriage and lowering the

⁷⁶ Kippen, R., Chapman, B. and Yu, P. (2009) *What's Love Got To Do With It?: Homogamy and dyadic approaches to understanding marital instability*, paper presented at the Biennial HLDA Survey Research Conference, pp. 16–17, Melbourne, Australia.

⁷⁷ See e.g. Parker, R. (2002) *Why Marriages Last: A discussion of the literature*, AIFS Research Paper, no. 28.

⁷⁸ See c.f. Sharlin, S. A., Kaslow, F. W. and Hammerschmidt, H. (2000) *Together Through Thick and Thin: A multinational picture of long-term marriages*, Haworth Clinical Practice Press.

⁷⁹ Parker, R. (2000) 'How partners in long-term relationships view marriage', *Family Matters*, vol. 55, AIFS.

divorce rate.⁸⁰ While proponents of these programmes point to their value, relatively little research is available that demonstrates effectiveness beyond accounts of participant satisfaction.⁸¹ Nevertheless, there is evidence that a range of programmes are offering significant support to couples in a variety of circumstances, and couples in our study who had experienced relationship preparation and/or marital/relationship enrichment courses spoke very positively of their value.

What Government Might Do

Seeking help for problems in couple relationships still carries social stigma. When we asked people whether they thought that more should be done to help couples build stronger, more lasting relationships, most people thought it should. Moreover, over half of those in the study thought that government should do more to support relationships. Very few people took the view that couple relationships are purely private, personal matters and that no one but the partners themselves could or should attempt to improve them. Many of the e-survey respondents, in both phases, made suggestions about what government might do to support couple relationships. These tended to fall into two categories: the first includes proposals for how better support can be provided at times of stress and during key transitions when couples need to find ways of adapting to a change of circumstances; the second includes practical proposals to promote changes in society more generally. Our analysis of both these categories has enabled us to develop a framework within which government might facilitate new developments in relationship support. There was a remarkable degree of agreement about the changes that need to be made if couple relationships are to receive the attention they need and if people are to be able to develop and sustain strong, healthy partnerships which can stand the test of time. We examine each of these in turn:

Enhancing Understanding of Relationship Problems

People were keen to ensure that the stressors on and crunch points in relationships are better understood in society generally, and by practitioners in particular. Many people felt that a lack of understanding had made it difficult for them to get the help they needed. The examples people gave related to a lack of understanding about the impact of miscarriages, postnatal depression and mental and physical ill health on couple relationships. During focus group discussions many participants felt that there needs to be a public education campaign to draw attention to the fact that all relationships run into difficulty and that there are strategies and approaches couples can learn to manage these and to negotiate their way through them so that the relationship itself is not threatened. Some relationships will end, however, and some people suggested that a similar campaign could illustrate the ways in which parents can work together co-operatively to ensure that children are protected from the most damaging aspects of separation and divorce. The emphasis people thought, should be on enhancing the strengths and coping strategies that facilitate the management of stressful life events and adaptive processes.

Providing Better Training for Practitioners in a Range of Professions

A strong message emerged about the need for professionals who work with individuals, couples and families to be better informed about and trained to support couple relationships. This would include:

- teaching them about relationship issues

⁸⁰ Larson, J. H. (2004) 'Innovations in marriage education: Introduction and challenges', *Family Relations*, vol. 53, no. 5, pp. 421–4.

⁸¹ Adler-Baeder, F. and Higginbotham, B. (2004) 'Implications of remarriage and stepfamily formation for marriage education', *Family Relations*, vol. 53, no. 5, pp. 448–58.

- training them to develop programmes and support services that can meet the needs of men and women in a wide variety of relational and socio-economic circumstances
- informing them about the various support services which are available and how they can be accessed so that they can signpost people to them as appropriate

Providing Better Information and Publicising Services More Widely

It was evident during some focus groups that people were ill-informed about the support services available and had little idea of where they could get information about them and find out what they do. Providing better information would include:

- encouraging practitioners to signpost people to appropriate services
- developing a range of information leaflets that would be available in a wide range of community settings
- providing guidance about the support available and how to access it via the internet and web-based services
- establishing telephone helplines for a range of problems

Some people suggested that attention should be given to how support services are marketed. The labels 'counselling' and 'mediation' were thought to have little appeal because they are so closely associated with relationships that are failing or have failed. People suggested that the marketing of support services should indicate more clearly what they are designed to do, such as to improve communication between partners, or help them learn problem-solving skills, and that terms which appear to stigmatise people who use the services should be abandoned.

Making Services Available and Accessible for Everyone

Many participants felt that existing services are not universally accessible and that, in future, services should be:

- available locally (and not subject to a postcode lottery) in a range of settings, such as Sure Start Children's Centres, schools, GP surgeries and clinics, libraries and workplaces
- available in the evenings and at weekends
- available (free) to people on low incomes and those unable to pay for services
- responsive to people from different cultures and backgrounds
- flexible and able to meet individual needs
- where necessary, targeted towards adults and children with special needs who have to cope with specific problems

A number of people thought that religious institutions could be used as venues within which a range of services could be provided. Local churches and other places of worship may well occupy a central position in neighbourhoods and offer a non-stigmatising place to which people can go and where they can talk to others, seek advice and access information.

Extending the Range of Services

People were keen to see information about and support with relationships made available through a wide range of channels, thereby giving people choice and enabling them to find the medium which best suits their specific needs and circumstances. People had the impression that existing services designed to help couples with their relationships are limited in scope and that other services, several of which we referred to in Chapter 6, could be developed. There were words of caution, however. Some people were anxious that Web-based services might not be quality-assured and deal in what several people referred to as 'pop psychology'. If there is too much choice and too much information it is hard for people to know where to start. The establishment of a dedicated website that brings information together was a proposal several people made. This could also offer advice about online support, via helplines and counselling, for example.

People who had separated said they would like more support to be made available when relationships are breaking down, including access to specialist relationship advisors and counsellors who might encourage couples to stop and think about the steps they were planning to take. Parenting-after-separation courses were also mentioned as providing an opportunity to think about the needs of children and about how parents might meet these even though they no longer lived together. Encouraging both partners to attend these kinds of services is far from easy, however.

During the focus groups and via the e-surveys we asked people to give their views on some specific policy proposals which the Government was considering. Each of these proposals received strong support. The proposals were:

1. *To provide more support for new parents.* E-survey responses indicate that providing more support for new parents was welcomed by 88 per cent of those who had separated, 91 per cent of those planning to separate, and 95 per cent of those in intact relationships. This high level of support is hardly surprising in the light of the findings we presented in Chapter 3 which indicated that the transition to parenthood is a critical moment in couple relationships and that people would welcome more support during it.
2. *To provide more support for children whose parents are separating.* This provision of support for children when their parents are separating was welcomed by people in all three groups (93%, 89% and 94% respectively). They suggested that support could be offered in school settings and via specifically designed programmes. Others proposed that courses should be made available for children that are age-sensitive and designed to give children an opportunity to access peer group support and talk openly about their fears and expectations. Research which has evaluated the impact of these programmes has reported positively about the ways in which parents and their children have been helped to make sense of what is happening in their lives and build strong co-parental relationships which protect children from some of the negative impacts of family breakdown. Involving children in this way is increasingly viewed as beneficial to them.⁸²
3. *To train more professionals to support couples and families.* The vast majority of e-survey respondents (88%, 89% and 87% respectively) were enthusiastic about the proposal to

⁸² Walker (2009) *International Benchmarking: Research review of family mediation*, Report for the Child Support Agency, Dublin, Ireland.

train more practitioners to support couples and families. This endorsement is closely linked to the suggestions people made about the need to provide better training to existing professionals so that they become more aware of and better able to respond to relationship difficulties.

Cultural Change

As well as being enthusiastic about the Government proposals and making suggestions about how existing services might be enhanced and new services developed, people felt that other changes need to take place if couple relationships, of all kinds, are to be strengthened. Proposals to promote change more generally were numerous and largely underpin all the suggestions listed above. Strong messages were given by people in both phases of the research about the need for fundamental changes within society generally, and within the provision of support for couple relationships in particular. People were agreed that while admitting to having relationship problems, and seeking help for them, carry social stigma, little use will be made of support services, however helpful and effective they might be. They want to see campaigns launched to promote cultural change so as to normalise relationship problems and help-seeking behaviour and endeavour to remove the stigma associated with them. They also pointed to the need to confront:

- overly romantic conceptions of couple relationships and marriage
- confusions and contradictions relating to roles and responsibilities in modern family life
- the taboos which prevent people talking about relationships and relationship problems

Policy Change

People also pointed to a number of other areas in which policy change would be welcomed. Referring to the everyday stressors which result from unemployment, low pay, financial worries and having to juggle work and home commitments, they suggested that:

- parents should not be forced back into work when children are young
- welfare benefits and tax credits should support parents to stay together
- parents should be given greater opportunities for flexible working, longer, more flexible periods of parental leave (for both fathers and mothers), and more family-friendly employment environments

Learning About Relationships

Finally, the strongest message to emerge from this study is that relationship education – learning about and preparing for relationships – should begin as early as possible. People believed that it is never too early to teach children how to form and maintain healthy relationships and that primary schools should routinely teach children about relationships. They firmly believed that more could be done to prepare the next generation to understand and learn about how to form good relationships via the education system, which reaches nearly all children in England.

Relationship education would provide a vehicle through which values can be transmitted and embedded via drama, special projects, teamwork, groupwork and play. Such activities could also serve to lift existing taboos which prevent people from talking about intimate relationships. Friendships are important to children of all ages, so learning how to foster

these can help children to think more widely about the relationships they might form as adults. Simply encouraging children and young people to talk about and share their feelings would be an important way of engaging boys and girls in activities which will encourage the skills and behaviours that will be useful in adulthood. As children get older they can learn more about the nature of commitment and what partnership entails.

Throughout the study, we received very many comments supporting the provision of early relationship education, of which the following are typical:

I think children should be educated about relationships in schools. They should start when they are four or five. They're not too young to know and they can understand a lot if the information is tailored to their level. The earlier the education starts, the more slowly they can take it in, over the years. (male)

We need better education about relationships in schools ... Children should be taught to talk about relationships and about respecting yourself, girls and boys, not just about sex. (female)

Emotional intelligence should be linked into the curriculum so that all children learn how to form and sustain healthy relationships ... and also learn how to resolve human conflict with others. (male)

We need an attitude adjustment ... [we] should teach children in school to be more open ... [to] accept that there is no such thing as a perfect relationship and ... [to understand that] we all need to talk about things. (male)

... the government should promote families and relationship education. (female)

People felt that sex education is given inappropriate priority and that relationship education should precede sex education. They indicated, also, that relationship education should be continuous. Young children should be taught about forming friendships, about the importance of making good friends, and about the essential ingredients of lasting relationships; teenagers need specific advice about forming loving, stable relationships as adults and fostering healthy relationships; and relationship education and preparation classes should be available for couples when they are forming relationships and starting a family. People saw relationship education as essential if preventative approaches are to promote couple relationships in which the quality of these relationships is a key factor.

People also suggested that children and young people should learn about self-esteem, and know about how to set boundaries and express feelings. Being encouraged to talk about these things will encourage them to regard it as normal to talk about relationships. Men, in particular, could see huge potential for helping boys and young men feel comfortable talking about their feelings and expressing emotions. Some people made strong statements to the effect that early relationship education is the key to changing public attitudes about admitting to relationship problems and seeking help for them without feeling a sense of shame or feeling a failure. A few people said they had tried to introduce relationship education in schools but finding time for it in an already crowded curriculum had been problematic, hence the importance of government taking the lead. Helping parents to be able to talk to their children about how to develop healthy relationships would also be important.

We were left in no doubt that people who took part in the study believed strongly that relationship education should be provided for everyone, and should form the foundation for supporting couple relationships and for helping couples to develop the skills they need to foster healthy relationships. They also felt that relationship education should encourage couples not to be afraid to ask for help when things go wrong.

Recommendations

The study set out to enhance understanding of how adults form relationships and of the emotional, social and economic stressors that confront relationships on a daily basis, and to identify their support needs. Large numbers of men and women spoke candidly and openly about couples' relationships, pointing to the situations which had been challenging for them and their ability or lack of ability to manage them. People had experienced a range of problems which had made life difficult and some had failed to protect and maintain their relationship with their partner during those difficulties. In many ways, couples' support needs were simple. They needed people around them to recognise the stressors and put support in place that addressed their needs – thereby providing the right help, at the right time.

The recommendations that flow from the evidence are equally straightforward:

1. Relationship education should begin early in life and continue as children grow into adulthood.
2. Relationship preparation should be available to couples when they form a committed relationship.
3. Support and advice should be readily available at key transitions and when couples are facing stresses and strains which impact on their relationship.
4. More should be done to break down the barriers to seeking support for relationships in trouble and to encourage couples to seek help as early as possible.
5. Practitioners in a range of agencies should be trained to spot relationship problems, ensure services such as counselling and parenting support are available, and involve men as well as women.
6. Targeted support for specific problems, such as depression and unemployment, and for clusters of problems, should include consideration of the impact of the problem(s) on the couple relationship.
7. More support and advice should be given when relationships are in danger of breaking down, to help couples make informed choices about options for their relationship and the well-being of their children.
8. More support should be provided for new parents and for children whose parents split up.
9. Information, advice and support should be made available in a range of formats and in a wide variety of settings, and more use should be made of community resources, such as parenting advisers in Children's Centres.
10. Messages need to be given which reflect the reality of couple relationships in the twenty-first century. These should:
 - (a) stress the need for couples to work at their relationship;
 - (b) acknowledge that all relationships come under stress at some time or other;
 - (c) encourage partners to have realistic expectations of their relationships, learn to be flexible, adapt to new situations, and develop coping strategies which will see them through;
 - (d) reassure couples that it is all right to admit to problems and ask for help.

There are no quick and easy solutions in meeting the policy commitment to support adult couple relations, particularly those of parents, but the large response to our invitation to participate in this study indicates that relationships matter to people and that they want them to work. People are clear about the support they find helpful and the things that need to change if more relationships are to flourish. People who contributed to the research clearly valued being able to talk about relationships and talking appears to be a key factor in relationships that last:

There were times when it did not look as if it was going to work out. But, sitting back down with each other and talking things through has got us through. (female in long-term marriage)

Adult couple relationships are personal and private. It has long been the case that relatively few people take steps to prepare themselves for the commitment they make, or to seek advice and support when relationships are under strain. Nevertheless, the responses we received to our invitation to participate in the study in phase 1 indicate that the breakdown of an intimate relationship is usually intensely stressful and upsetting, and that the consequences of separation and divorce can have an impact on people's lives for some considerable time. Looking back, people could see how things had gone wrong and, with the benefit of hindsight, how they might have handled them better. People in intact relationships had also experienced a number of similar stresses and strains but had found ways to cope with them.

The narratives we have been privileged to hear provided us with a rich and varied data set. Although the people who contributed to the study came from many different walks of life and had had a variety of relationship experiences, the themes and the messages were remarkably consistent. We do not know how representative they are of the experiences of couples in England and, clearly, not everyone will feel comfortable volunteering to talk to a researcher. Moreover, although there was a great deal of support for proposals to strengthen and extend services that can assist couples to deal with situations which cause stress in relationships, there is no way of knowing whether people would, in fact, take advantage of them. Implementing proposals to shift cultural attitudes and embed relationship education in all aspects of our daily lives might mean that people will in the future be better prepared when they make a long-term commitment to a partner, more aware of the potential pitfalls, and more likely to receive support when it is needed.

Annexe 1 The Policy Context in England

The research discussed in this report has sought to understand the needs of adult couples for relationship support at various life stages. Family structures have changed considerably in the past fifty years as couple relationships have shifted and changed. In addition to the increases in cohabitation and divorce and the decrease in the numbers marrying reported in Chapter 1, a growing number of couples are now choosing to 'live together apart', which is a new and developing family form. Another important change reflects a significant shift in public attitudes towards same-sex relationships: since December 2005 civil partnerships between same-sex couples have been legally recognised. Moreover, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 dropped the previous requirement that only married couples could apply to adopt a child, thus allowing same-sex couples to apply. Since April 2009, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 has given same-sex couples undergoing fertility treatment the right to name both partners on their child's birth certificate.

There is continuing debate about the extent to which marriage provides the more secure and stable family form and about whether other kinds of relationships, such as those involving cohabiting couples and stepfamilies, are somehow less conducive to positive outcomes for children and, indeed, for adults. While we have not sought to investigate the validity of the various arguments and beliefs, our study demonstrates clearly that it is not useful to conceptualise family life as occurring in a social vacuum. The social context of family life impinges on relationships within the family and influences different couples in many ways. Shifts in male–female roles in the wider economic sphere have repercussions in private lives, often in ways that individuals cannot either predict or easily control.

The Policy Response

The significant changes in family life over the past 50 years have led successive governments to consider how best to support families and to protect children from the potentially detrimental impacts of parental separation and divorce. Since 1998, the Government has placed increased emphasis on addressing some of the key factors. In 1998, the then Home Secretary pledged to: ensure parents have access to advice and support services and to improve these services; reduce child poverty; balance work and home commitments; strengthen marriage and reduce the risks associated with family breakdown; and tackle serious issues such as domestic violence.⁸³

The Green Paper contained a chapter entitled 'Strengthening marriage' in which the Government expressed the view that marriage provides a strong foundation for stable relationships and the most reliable framework for raising children. However, it went on to say that government should not interfere by trying to make people marry or criticising those who choose not to. Since the publication of that Green Paper, a raft of initiatives has been launched to meet the Government's objectives, including, for example, Sure Start, the Parenting Fund, the Strengthening Families Grant, Family Pathfinders, and Family Intervention Projects. They contribute to a strategy which promotes cross-cutting interventions, holistic support, and services which are designed to be family-oriented, inclusive, empowering, coherent and evidence-based. In all these, there has been a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention.

In 2003, the Government set out, in the *Every Child Matters* agenda, the terms by which integrated services were to be achieved and five key priority outcomes for children promoted.⁸⁴ The priority outcomes identified as being essential for all children were that they

⁸³ Home Office (1998), *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters: Change for children*, DfES; HM Treasury.

should be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic well-being. These outcomes provide the framework within which all the agencies working with children, young people and families are expected to deliver their services. The principles underpinning the framework are that early intervention is cost-effective and that prevention of poor child outcomes is possible because a great deal is now known about the risk and protective factors in a child's life.⁸⁵

Every Parent Matters

The Government has placed increasing emphasis not only on reshaping children's services but also on providing better support for parents – ensuring that parents are able to take responsibility for their children's health, well-being and development. In 2007, the Government launched a paper – *Every Parent Matters* – to mark the beginning of a national debate with parents, children, young people, service planners, commissioners and providers about how parents can best be supported and engaged.⁸⁶ The role of government is described as being to ensure that all parents are able to make confident, informed choices for their family, shape services to respond to their needs, work in partnership with services to optimise their children's outcomes, and access additional support when they need it. The paper also announced the introduction of a number of new projects, designed to support parents at different stages in their child's life (from pre-birth to school age, during school-age years, and when teenagers make the transition into adulthood).

Think Family

In 2007, the Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force launched a review⁸⁷ of families at risk and promoted a 'Think Family' approach. To support the 'Think Family' focus the DCSF and the Cabinet Office published an analytical discussion paper in 2008⁸⁸ about family life in Britain. The paper provides a framework for taking stock of family life in Britain today, understanding the trends and changes and their implications for family outcomes, and defining the role of government in supporting and intervening in families and shaping a modern family policy. The discussion paper states that concerns about family change are of relevance to governments only if the changes affect outcomes, particularly those of children, and that any response to the concerns must be informed by evidence. The paper reaches the conclusion that it is the quality of relationships in families that matters most, regardless of the form relationships take, and that healthy family stability and good relationships between partners result in positive outcomes for families. At the end of the discussion paper, the Government indicated that the debate would be taken forward in a number of ways, including via the Children's Plan⁸⁹ and the Relationship Summit, which took place just prior to the commissioning of our research.

⁸⁵ James, C. (2009) *Ten Years of Family Policy 1999–2009*, Family and Parenting Institute.

⁸⁶ DfES (2007) *Every Parent Matters*, Crown Copyright.

⁸⁷ Social Exclusion Task Force (2007) *Reaching Out: Think family*, Cabinet Office.

⁸⁸ DCSF/Cabinet Office, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ DCSF (2007), *op. cit.*

Annexe 2 The Study Design

Call for Participants

We set out to:

- secure the participation of a varied and general population of adults in different social groups and geographical locations and in a variety of relationship types (to include cohabitees, young parents, parents who had never lived together, step-parents), and avoid an overemphasis on any particular data source
- include those who had accessed relationship support services in the past or who were doing so at the time
- include people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds
- select a large enough number of participants to allow comparisons to be made between different groups

In each phase of the study we followed a similar process in order to invite people to participate in the research:

1. The *Sun* newspaper brought the study to the attention of its readers via Deidre Sanders' agony aunt column and letters of invitation sent to everyone who wrote to *Dear Deidre* during the data-collection periods.
2. The Fatherhood Institute put out a number of invitations via its extensive e-network of some six thousand adults, with the specific purpose of recruiting men and fathers.
3. Marriage Care issued invitations to couples currently using its relationship counselling service or participating in its marriage preparation courses.
4. Family Mediation Services, affiliated with National Family Mediation, issued invitations to participate to people at initial individual intake meetings.
5. Bounty provided information and invitations to new mothers receiving a Bounty Bag.
6. We worked with Gateshead Children's Services to invite parents to attend focus groups in local Sure Start centres.
7. We invited members of the Family and Parenting Institute Parents' Panel to contribute to the study via a discussion page on the FPI website.
8. Invitations were posted on a wide range of websites.

Data Collection

In each of the two phases of the research we set out with the following data-collection targets in mind. We expected to conduct:

- an e-survey with up to 500 participants
- 40 telephone interviews with individuals

- 20 face-to-face interviews (with individuals in phase 1 and couples in phase 2)
- 8 focus groups

In common with most research studies, some aspects of data collection in our study worked extremely well and others presented challenges which required us to refine our approach. The e-survey in phase 1 proved to be a very popular mode via which people could relate their experiences. It was qualitative in design, with many open-ended questions. We decided to leave it open throughout the study and we greatly exceeded our target. We found that, while we had no shortage of willing interview participants in phase 1, fewer people came forward in phase 2 and many of those who did subsequently withdrew. It became clear that people in current, committed relationships are generally more reticent in coming forward to talk about them. People who withdrew from the study indicated that, when they had mentioned it to their partner, their partner had not been happy about them talking to a researcher about something as personal and private as their relationship. During several interviews in phase 2, interviewees remarked on some of the stresses and strains in the relationship in ways which suggested that they had not talked about these before and that doing so may have made them think about things a little more. In other words, there was the potential to take the lid off the relationship tin, and some participants expressed concerns that this might not be a good idea. The general reluctance to come forward in phase 2 also underlined people's tendency to keep relationship-talk private and not to share problems with other people – hence the tendency of most people not to seek help with relationship problems.

We learned early on in phase 1 that telephone interviews were far more popular than face-to-face interviews, and from our perspective they were far easier to arrange at a time which suited the interviewee and more cost-effective – if the interviewee subsequently decided to change the day/time at the last minute because of unforeseen circumstances we were not faced with wasted journeys to far-flung corners of England. It also became clear that the depth and quality of the data we were collecting via telephone interviews were no less rich than those of the data we were obtaining via face-to-face interviews. In many cases, it appeared that telephone interviewees were less inhibited and felt freer to open up and talk in some detail about their relationship, almost certainly because they were not having to maintain a brave face in front of a researcher and could ask to end the call and resume it later, sometimes on a different day, if they became upset. Some interviews taking place in these circumstances were spread over several days.⁹⁰

Arranging focus groups proved to be the most challenging aspect of the study. We found that this took far longer than we had anticipated, particularly since several agencies, including parenting co-ordinators in GO North West, offered to arrange them for us. We agreed with the DCSF to reduce the number of focus groups and combine the phase 1 and phase 2 groups, since the primary goal was to test out potential policy proposals with a range of adults. The focus groups produced a good deal of rich data and we doubt that conducting more groups would have extended or enhanced the information already obtained.

Overall, therefore, we exceeded our target numbers in some elements, particularly the phase 1 e-survey and the telephone interviews. We had fewer couple interviews than we had hoped, primarily because of one partner's reluctance to talk about their current relationship.

⁹⁰ The value of telephone interviews has been emphasised in other research. See Holt, A. (2010) 'Using the telephone for narrative interviewing: A research note', *Qualitative Research*, vol. 10, pp. 113–21.

The E-survey

We designed the survey using Survey Monkey in order to collect information relating to: demographics; relationship experiences, problems and crunch points; ways of resolving conflict in relationships; the use and perception of support services; and opinions on current policy initiatives. The phase 1 e-survey went live on 1 May 2009. The phase 2 e-survey went live on 8 August 2009 and both were online until December 2009. Tables A2.1 indicates the routes into the survey. Table A2.2 indicates where people were living.

Table A2.1 Routes into the e-surveys

Source	Phase 1	Phase 2
<i>Dear Deidre, the Sun</i>	120	12
Bounty	106	95
Gingerbread	153	11
Family and Parenting Institute	87	58
Fatherhood Institute	30	29
Family mediators	32	7
Families Need Fathers	23	–
MATCH (Mothers Apart from Their Children)	10	–
Marriage counsellors	10	7
Other	124	66
Missing/unknown	15	12
Total	710	297

The 'Other' category includes people who had heard about the study via Netmums, Facebook's Contact A Family, Resolution, One Space, friends, colleagues, our *RM* website, or 'while browsing the internet'.

Table A2.2 Geographical location of e-survey respondents

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
England	Count	374	66	229	669
	% within group	91.4	89.2	85.8	89.2
	% of Total	49.9	8.8	30.5	89.2
Wales	Count	6	4	4	14
	% within group	1.5	5.4	1.5	1.9
	% of Total	0.8	0.5	.5	1.9
Scotland	Count	19	1	21	41
	% within group	4.6	1.4	7.9	5.5
	% of Total	2.5	0.1	2.8	5.5
UK Other	Count	–	1	4	5
	% within group	–	1.4	1.5	0.7
	% of Total	–	0.1	0.5	0.7
Overseas	Count	10	2	7	19
	% within group	2.4	2.7	2.6	2.5
	% of Total	1.3	0.3	0.9	2.5
Other	Count	–	–	2	2
	% within group	–	–	0.7	0.3
	% of Total	–	–	0.3	0.3
Total	Count	409	74	267	750
	% within group	100	100	100	100
	% of Total	54.5	9.9	35.6	100

Because the study related to policy in England, we needed to eliminate from the analyses the e-survey respondents who did not live in England. For the most part we have divided the respondents into three groups: those who were separated; those planning to separate; and those in committed intact relationships – the ‘together’ group.

The first two groups participated in phase 1 of the study and the third group in phase 2. E-survey participants did not always complete all the questions or provide all the data requested, but the missing data were to be expected in a qualitative e-survey which provided for open text responses about a range of topics.

Characteristics of the England-based Respondents

The following tables (A2.3–A2.10) indicate the gender, religion/faith affiliation, relationship status, sexual orientation, parental status, benefit status, length of relationship and employment status of the e-survey respondents.

Table A2.3 Gender

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
Female	Count	301	56	195	552
	% within group	81.1	86.2	85.5	83.1
Male	Count	70	9	33	112
	% within group	18.9	13.8	14.5	16.9
Total	Count	371	65	228	664
	% within group	100	100	100	100

Table A2.4 Religion/faith group

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
No religion	Count	148	32	115	295
	% within group	40.0	50.8	51.1	44.8
Christian	Count	193	23	89	305
	% within group	52.2	38.5	39.6	46.4
Buddhist	Count	9	1	–	10
	% within group	2.4	1.5	–	1.5
Hindu	Count	3	–	3	6
	% within group	0.8	–	1.3	0.9
Jewish	Count	1	–	2	3
	% within group	0.3	–	0.9	0.5
Muslim	Count	4	3	6	13
	% within group	1.1	4.8	2.7	2.0
Sikh	Count	2	1	–	3
	% within group	0.5	1.6	–	0.5
Other	Count	10	3	10	23
	% within group	2.7	4.8	4.4	3.5
Total	Count	370	63	225	658
	% within group	100	100	100	100

Table A2.5 Relationship status

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
Married	Count	–	–	149	149
	% within group	–	–	63.9	21.8
Living with a partner	Count	–	–	63	63
	% within group	–	–	27	9.2
In a civil partnership	Count	–	–	1	1
	% within group	–	–	0.4	0.1
In a committed relationship but not married or living together	Count	–	–	20	20
	% within group	–	–	8.6	2.9
Married but planning to separate	Count	–	43	–	43
	% within group	–	61.4	–	6.3
In a civil partnership but planning to separate	Count	–	3	–	3
	% within group	–	4.3	–	0.4
Cohabiting but planning to separate	Count	–	24	–	24
	% within group	–	34.3	–	3.5
In a relationship, but separated in the past	Count	40	–	–	40
	% within group	10.5	–	–	5.9
Married and already separated	Count	98	–	–	98
	% within group	25.8	–	–	14.3
Divorced	Count	107	–	–	107
	% within group	28.2	–	–	15.7
In a civil partnership and already separated	Count	5	–	–	5
	% within group	1.3	–	–	0.7
Already separated from a cohabiting relationship	Count	109	–	–	109
	% within group	28.7	–	–	16.0
separated, never lived together	Count	21	–	–	21
	% within group	5.5	–	–	3.1
Total	Count	380	70	233	683
	% within group	100	100	100	100

Table A2.6 Sexual orientation

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
Heterosexual	Count	355	65	218	638
	% within group	96.2	100	95.2	96.2
Gay/lesbian	Count	5	–	5	10
	% within group	1.4	–	2.2	1.5
Bisexual	Count	9	–	5	14
	% within group	2.4	–	2.2	2.1
Transgendered	Count	–	–	1	1
	% within group	–	–	0.4	0.2
Total	Count	369	65	229	663
	% within group	100	100	100	100

Table 2.7 Parental status

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
No dependent children/stepchildren	Count	23	5	31	59
	% within group	6.2	7.6	14.8	9.0
Dependent children/stepchildren	Count	347	61	179	587
	% within group	93.9	92.4	85.2	90.9
Total	Count	370	66	210	646
	% within group	100	100	100	100

Table A2.8 Benefit status: whether people were receiving Housing and/or Council Tax benefits

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
No	Count	227	58	205	490
	% within group	61.4	87.9	89.5	73.7
Yes	Count	143	8	24	175
	% within group	38.6	12.1	10.5	26.3
Total	Count	370	66	229	665
	% within group	100	100	100	100

Table A2.9 Length of relationship

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
Under a year	Count	6	2	5	13
	% within group	2.1	3.5	2.7	2.6
1.5 years	Count	1	–	–	1
	% within group	0.4	–	–	0.2
1–2 years	Count	22	1	14	37
	% within group	7.7	1.8	7.6	7.0
3–5 years	Count	58	4	41	103
	% within group	20.4	7.0	22.3	19.6
6–10 years	Count	84	20	49	153
	% within group	29.5	35.1	26.6	29.1
11-20 years	Count	91	20	47	156
	% within group	31.9	35.1	25.5	29.7
21–30 years	Count	22	12	17	51
	% within group	7.7	21.1	9.2	9.7
Over 30 years	Count	1	–	11	12
	% within group	0.4	–	6.0	2.3
Total	Count	285	57	184	526
	% within group	100	100	100	100

Table A2.10 Employment status

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
Employed full-time	Count	124	28	98	250
	% within group	33.3	42.4	42.8	37.5
Employed part-time	Count	105	14	52	171
	% within group	28.2	21.2	22.7	25.6
Self-employed	Count	23	5	13	41
	% within group	6.2	7.6	5.7	6.1
Unemployed	Count	45	3	5	53
	% within group	12.1	4.3	2.2	7.9
Full-time homemaker	Count	49	13	47	109
	% within group	13.2	19.7	20.5	16.3
Retired	Count	4	–	3	7
	% within group	1.1	–	1.3	1
Student	Count	19	–	6	25
	% within group	5.1	–	2.6	3.7
Other	Count	3	3	5	11
	% within group	0.8	4.5	2.2	1.6
Total	Count	372	66	229	667
	% within group	100	100	100	100

Looking separately at male and female employment patterns by group, we can see that the association between group and employment pertains only to women (Tables A2.11, A2.12).

Table A2.11 Employment status of women

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
Employed full-time	Count	86	21	75	182
	% within group	28.8	37.5	38.5	33.1
Employed part-time	Count	97	13	50	160
	% within group	32.4	23.2	25.6	29.1
Self-employed	Count	15	4	10	29
	% within group	5.0	7.1	5.1	5.3
Unemployed	Count	37	3	1	41
	% within group	12.4	5.4	0.5	7.5
Full-time homemaker	Count	44	13	47	104
	% within group	14.7	23.2	24.1	18.9
Retired	Count	1	–	1	2
	% within group	0.3	–	0.5	0.4
Other	Count	3	2	5	10
	% within group	1	3.6	2.6	1.8
Student	Count	16	–	6	22
	% within group	5.4	–	3.1	4.0
Total	Count	299	56	195	550
	% within group	100	100	100	100

Table A2.12 Employment status of men

		Separated	Planning to separate	Together	Total
Employed full-time	Count	38	6	23	67
	% within group	54.3	66.7	69.7	59.8
Employed part-time	Count	7	1	2	10
	% within group	10	11.1	6.1	8.9
Self-employed	Count	8	1	2	11
	% within group	11.4	11.1	6.1	9.8
Unemployed	Count	8	–	4	12
	% within group	11.4	–	12.1	10.7
Full-time homemaker	Count	3	–	–	3
	% within group	4.3	–	–	2.7
Retired	Count	3	–	2	5
	% within group	4.3	–	6.1	4.5
Other	Count	–	1	–	1
	% within group	–	11.1	–	0.9
Student	Count	3	–	–	3
	% within group	4.3	–	–	2.7
Total	Count	70	9	33	112
	% within group	100	100	100	100

We asked e-survey respondents whether they had any disabilities. The vast majority (well over 90% in each group) did not.

Interview Sample

The interviews in phase 1 involved individuals who had experienced the breakdown of their relationship. In phase 2 we invited couples in committed relationships to participate in individual or couple interviews: we were keen to hear how each member of a couple talked about the relationship and the extent to which the partners' accounts converged and how they negotiated specific topics. We developed open-ended interview schedules and adopted a narrative interviewing style throughout, which encouraged interviewees to tell their own relationship story in their own way. We used prompts to focus on key transitions or flashpoints in relationships. This approach enabled us to situate relationship tensions and concerns within a relationship process over time rather than as a scattering of standalone events or instances.⁹¹ Interviews were recorded, with the permission of each interviewee, and lasted between 30 minutes and 5 hours.

The interview sample comprised 132 individuals over the two waves: 73 at phase 1 and 59 at phase two (comprising 39 individuals and 10 couples). Table A2.13 indicates the characteristics of the interview sample. Interviewees' ages ranged from 22 to 88, with a median age of 41. The majority were parents and 19 individuals told us that they had step-children. The modal number of children reported was 2 (43 individuals); the largest family reported included 6 children. Fourteen people in the sample considered

⁹¹ Murray, M. (2004) 'Narrative psychology and narrative analysis', in P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes and L. Yardley (eds) *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design*, American Psychological Association, pp. 95–112.

themselves to have disabilities, which included deafness, dyslexia and epilepsy. The faith affiliations identified included Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish. Six of those who had separated, and one person in an intact relationship did not live together with their partner. The relationships they told us about had lasted between one and 52 years (Table A2.14).

Table A2.13 Characteristics of the interview sample (count)

Characteristics	Number of interviewees	
Gender	male	46
	female	86
Relationship status	separated/divorced	63
	intact relationship	59
	planning to separate	10
Parental status	parents	118
	non-parents	14
Employment status	employed/self-employed	85
	full-time homemakers	19
	student/unemployed	19
	retired	9
Religious affiliation	Christian	69
	other	13
	none	50
Ethnicity	White British	106
	White non-British	7
	Asian or Black British	6
	African	2
	Mixed ethnicity	4
Sexual orientation	heterosexual	125
	homosexual or bisexual	6

Table A2.14 Length of interviewees' relationship (count)

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Total
1–2 years	5	4	9
3–5 years	17	17	34
6–10 years	16	13	29
11–20 years	24	14	38
21–30 years	10	4	14
31+ years	1	7	8
Total	73	59	132

Focus Groups

We proposed the use of focus groups as a useful way of accessing normative views on relationships and on relationship support. Each focus group comprised between five and eleven participants and the purpose was to encourage the group members to talk together about specific aspects of couple relationships, the need for and availability of support, and the proposals for support currently being considered by the Government. Focus group participants were not asked to divulge personal information or to talk about their own experiences, although sometimes they referred to their own experiences to explain their reasons for holding particular views. All the focus groups were conducted using Chatham House rules and participants were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement at the outset. We prepared a number of prompt questions and a series of vignettes. We found that very few prompts were needed in some focus groups, and our use of the vignettes varied. The focus groups were recorded and one of the two facilitators kept notes. Each participant was

given a £15 voucher for attending the group and out-of-pocket expenses were reimbursed. Each focus group lasted for about two hours.

We held ten focus groups in different parts of England. Two groups with separated fathers were organised through Families Need Fathers and two mixed-gender groups were organised through Marriage Care. Three groups with parents (one with fathers, one with mothers and one mixed) were organised via workers at Sure Start Children's Centres; two of these groups included parents who had recently completed a parenting programme. A further group was organised with child and parenting practitioners at another Sure Start centre. One group was organised with parents who attended a local church and one was held with social workers and therapists. Just a few more men than women participated in the focus group. Participants in one group were black; the vast majority of participants in other groups were white. The ages of focus group participants ranged from the late teens to over 65.

Analysis of the Data

Our analysis of the data followed the principles of grounded theory.⁹² Coding of interviews was undertaken by listening to interview recordings and reading transcriptions, identifying passages which were rich in thematic content,⁹³ and using Nudist and Nvivo software. The qualitative data from the e-surveys were also analysed thematically and coded in the same way as the interview data. Data from each element in the study were analysed sequentially and then merged to develop the themes presented in the report.

⁹² Henwood, K. and Pidgeon, N. (1992) 'Qualitative research and psychological theorising', *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 83, pp. 97–111; Willig, C. (2008) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*, OUP.

⁹³ Henwood, K. and Pidgeon, N. (2004) 'Grounded theory in psychological research', in P. M. Camic *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 131–56.

Annexe 3

In this annexe we list the members of the Cross-Departmental Steering Group and members of the Reference Group.

Members of the Steering Group

Annabel Burns (DCSF)
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Members of the Reference Group

Adrienne Burgess (Fatherhood Institute)
Duncan Fisher OBE
Viki Kately (Bounty)
Mary Macleod OBE (Family and Parenting Institute up to September 2009)
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Jane Robey (National Family Mediation)
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