

# Me, You and Baby Too

**A resource pack for practitioners in Hartlepool supporting strong parental couple relationships**



ADAPTED FROM MATERIALS BY

# Foreword

A child or young person can experience difficulties at any time during their childhood and adolescence. There is now a substantial body of evidence to confirm that addressing those difficulties early can improve their wellbeing and avoid the need for more costly specialist services.

In Hartlepool we believe that family stability is crucial to delivering the best outcomes for children and young people, and that effective parental relationships are at the heart of that stability. Inter-parental conflict can occur for a number of reasons. How parents deal with that conflict will affect the health and wellbeing of the whole family dynamic, including the children's ability to form and maintain healthy relationships in the future. Effective early help services should focus on the needs of parents when they are experiencing difficulties, helping them to understand how healthy relationships can benefit the family and support the emotional and behavioural development of their children.

Developing professional practice is key to our ambition of empowering families to take more control over their own lives. Many practitioners in roles that support Hartlepool families have already attended training on *why* a couple and co-parenting focus is so important.

This booklet is designed to be used alongside the **How to argue better: Working with inter-parental conflict training** delivered by the Healthy Relationships Partnership. How to Argue Better aims to set out how in more detail, giving frontline staff a practical toolkit to support parents in managing conflict confidently, safely and effectively.

We define 'inter-parental relationships' as relating to both intact and separated couples and 'conflict' as frequent, intense and poorly resolved discord between parents and carers.

Assessments should seek to identify relationship distress where and when it occurs and this training and other practice development opportunities across Hartlepool will provide practitioners with the confidence, skills and tools to intervene.

Thanks to OnePlusOne for permission to reproduce their materials.

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**Healthy Relationships Partnership Hartlepool**

# Introduction

This resource has been adapted from materials created by OnePlusOne in collaboration with Hartlepool Health Visitors and Early Help Locality Team staff.

To develop their materials for Me, You and Baby Too, OnePlusOne completed a comprehensive research review to find out what works in helping parents navigate the transition to parenthood. The research review focused on good-quality studies both from this country and abroad. It is really important to communicate the key messages of research to parents in an accessible and sensitive way. Remember that research findings provide guidance, not cast iron rules, as all individuals, couples and families differ to a certain extent.

## The tips and tools in this booklet will support you to:

1. raise parents' awareness of the impact having a baby can have on their relationship.
2. raise parents' awareness of the impact of their relationship on their baby.
3. prepare parents for the changes and challenges to their relationship: physical, emotional, sexual, financial, practical.
4. help parents develop skills in communication and managing conflict.

This booklet makes reference to '**How to Argue Better**' a training course for practitioners created by OnePlusOne. The content brought together here assumes that:

- Practitioners will have attended How To Argue Better
- Practitioners will have access to How To Argue Better tools and support resources to help their understanding of how best to use the tools

This is part of a suite of resources brought together by the Healthy Relationships Partnership for the Relationships Matter 2019 campaign. More of these resources including the 'Supporting Couple Relationships Guidance for Practitioners' are available on our website [www.hrphartlepool.co.uk](http://www.hrphartlepool.co.uk)

With thanks to OnePlusOne and to Hartlepool practitioners Tracey Richardson, Tracey Tillott-Gray, Kay Piper and Ann Yale.

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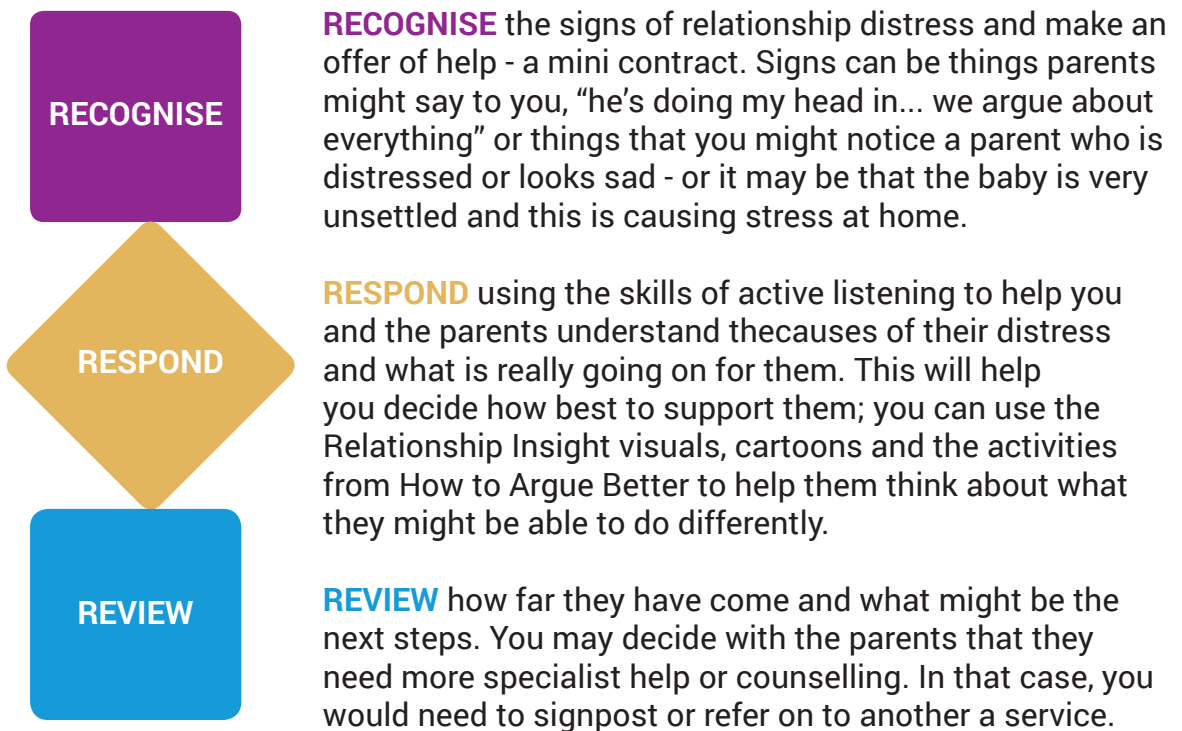
# Section 1

**Working with individuals or couples**

# How do I get started?

As part of your meeting or session with Mum, Dad or couple, asking an open question questions like “**How are things between the two of you?**” can give parents space or permission to speak about anything that is concerning them about the changes that might be happening in their relationship. It also sends a clear message that you are open to having a conversation about their relationship.

Some parents may speak about their relationship voluntarily and give you signs that they are experiencing issues in their relationship. The **Brief Encounters Model®** is shown here. It can be used to help you work with parents and respond to relationship issues where they may arise. The model focuses on RECOGNISE, RESPOND and REVIEW:



It is vital to listen carefully and to be sensitive to each parent’s experience. Understanding and acknowledging both perspectives is key. Caring practitioners approach mothers and fathers with sensitivity. Many parents do feel anxious and guilty about the effect of arguments on their baby.

Where possible, offer each parent a separate time to talk to you, to allow you to build a strong relationship with each of them so you can understand their different perspectives. Listen and be empathic. Both mothers and fathers need to know that someone else acknowledges how they feel before they can think about what is going on for their partner or their baby.

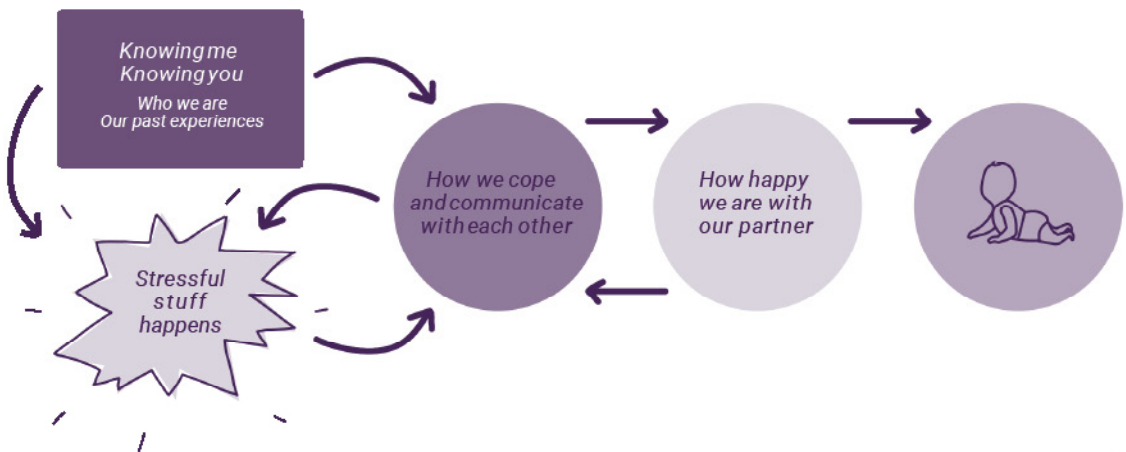
## Working with and engaging dads

It's important to think about how we can strengthen the relationship between dads, their baby and his or her mother during the transition to parenthood.

The 'What Happens to Us' Relationship Insight in your Relationships Matter pack can help you think through how conflict happens and the impact it has on the baby.

### Relationship Insight

*What happens to us?*



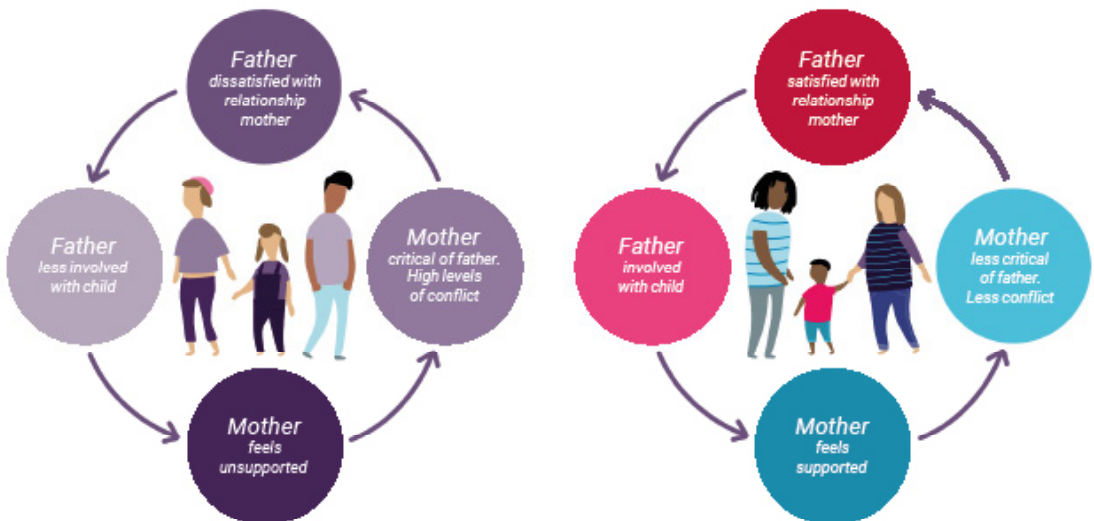
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Despite best intentions the needs of dads often get overlooked and many dads still don't get the support they need. Gender inequality exists in early parenthood and health and children's services often forget to 'think family'. With this in mind, we have drawn on NSPCC research (All Babies Count: The Dads Project Hogg 2014) and can share the following best practice for working with Dads.

# Top ten tips for working with parents before and after a baby is born

1. Think of dads as service users in their own right, not only as mums' supporters. Know, record and use dads' names.
2. Learn about the research around the psychological and social elements of both mums' and dads' experiences of pregnancy and new parenthood. Educate yourself about the challenges they can face.
3. Ensure your communications, workspaces and materials communicate that dads are equally valuable and welcome.
4. Reflect on and challenge your own assumptions and stereotypes about fathers. Seek feedback from dads about their experience of your service.
5. Help mums and dads to understand each other's experiences of pregnancy and new parenthood. Show them concrete ways in which they can help each other. The 'Vicious Virtuous Cycle' Relationship Insight can help you to support parents to think about this.

*Vicious virtuous cycle*





6. Talk to mums and dads about the challenges of new parenthood so they know what to expect. In every contact, ask both parents how they are doing and listen and respond respectfully to their answers. You can also use the Me, You and Baby Too cards with parents to help you have this conversation.
7. Teach mums and dads how to care for a baby (for example bathing and nappy changing). Specifically encourage and acknowledge dads' involvement in caring for their baby when speaking to the family.
8. Utilise appointments (such as home visits and scans) as an opportunity to help both parents to engage in the pregnancy and get to know their baby. Ensure dads are explicitly invited to appointments and meetings and acknowledged when they are there.
9. Teach mums and dads about babies' early cues and encourage them to watch and interact with their baby.
10. Consider how you can facilitate conversations between mums and dads, dads and dads, and wider families and communities to help create supportive networks around new parents.

## Working with same-sex couples

There were 10,000 same-sex couples with dependent children in the UK in 2017 (ONS, 2017). The research evidence suggests that in the transition to parenthood same-sex couples experience very similar issues to those of heterosexual couples. For many same-sex couples their relationship is accepted by those around them, but not by everyone and they may well be facing additional stress and stigma. They may also have concerns about how negative attitudes towards their sexual orientation might affect their baby.

## Using Resources with Parents

How to Argue Better provides a number of tools and visual resources which can be used when encouraging parents to think about their relationship. All resources from How to Argue Better are effective with new parents. All of the Relationship Insights images can provide the stimulus to engage parents in a helpful conversation about their relationship. Developing relationship insight!

A number of Relationship Insights are referenced in this booklet and there are also others available. Helpful descriptions of how they may be best used and in what circumstances can be found in materials for **How To Argue Better**. Those you may want to look at include:

- How not to argue
- Sliding Scale of Happiness
- Changes and Stages of Relationships
- Hidden Issues
- Sliding Scale of Communication

**Me, You and Baby Too** cards are a resource for parents. They can be used by you to start a conversation and or given to parents to work on as an exercise independently from you.

## Dealing with challenging situations

Encouraging reflection and discussion about relationships may trigger emotional reactions and prompt couples to look critically at the way they themselves were brought up. It is important therefore that you are well prepared for what may arise.

Below we have described a few common challenges and offer some potential ways of handling the situation.

### When a parent reacts in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable

It often leaves us feeling unsure what to do next if a parent has an outburst of emotion. If a parent becomes distressed or angry, or demonstrates any behaviour which leaves you feeling uncomfortable, you need to respond promptly and demonstrate empathy and confidence in your response.

Acknowledge what is happening and offer the opportunity to pause.

'I can see this is upsetting for you shall we stop for a few minutes?'

## If a couple disagree with one another in front of you

Try not to take sides – this can inflame the situation. To ensure that both parents feel heard, summarise both their points of view and assertively move them on. It can be helpful to use your hands to ‘pause’ couples who are arguing to encourage them to take it in turns to speak.

‘What I am hearing from you, James, is that you are feeling very frustrated at the moment and what I understand from you, Jill, is that you are feeling very alone and worried about things.’

‘I can see this is getting difficult for you two.  
Would it be helpful for us to chat about this some more?’

If it is hard to move disagreeing couples on, it may be helpful to possibly take a break.

‘Is this a good time for us to take a break?’

## When a parent expresses concern about their unborn baby/new baby.

When somebody shares a concern like this with you, they are asking for help. It’s important to acknowledge that it must have been difficult for them to share this with you.

‘I can imagine that that’s been difficult for you to tell me and you are not sure how to make things better. Is that right?’

There are two parts to this statement:

- Parent’s concern about the effect of the conflict on the unborn baby/baby.
- What information can you share with this parent which will help them to think about how they could deal with their disagreements in a different way?

It would be important for a parent not to feel judged by anything you say, or any non-verbal cue that you might be demonstrating. Ask what it is that they are noticing that is causing them some concern or what they might be noticing that makes them think their baby is being affected.

'What have you noticed that is worrying you?' Explore if both parents are worried: 'Is this something that you are both aware of or worried about?'

You might want to take this opportunity to use the **Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours** Relationship Insight to explore this.

You could explain that disagreements and arguing are normal, but when it is destructive this can have an effect on their baby and their health.

'Disagreements are normal but unborn babies/ babies feel upset when they are listening to their parents argue, especially if there is lots of shouting, name calling.....!'

You would want to share with the parent that destructive conflict does have an effect on their health and well-being too.

'There are things that you can do that can make this look a bit different as it's not good for your health either.'

Being more aware of the triggers that start an argument can be really helpful. We cannot change somebody else's reaction, but we can change our own.

It is important to stress at the outset that whenever there are concerns that a child may be suffering, or be at risk of suffering, significant harm or if you have any concerns that domestic abuse might be an issue, the Tees Local Safeguarding Children Boards' (LSCB) procedures must be followed.

These procedures can be found on the internet at [www.teescpp.org.uk](http://www.teescpp.org.uk)

# Section 2

## Working with groups of parents

*Groupwork is hugely valuable in peri-natal education, such as antenatal/postnatal clinics or home visits. If you're working with a number of parents there may be benefits to working with them as a group. This way parents get the opportunity to meet other parents and see that experiencing stress in your relationship at this time is completely normal and common. Putting together a group can also help you deliver your intervention to more parents over a smaller amount of delivery time.*

# Roles in the group

## Your role in leading a group

Talking about relationships is not always the easiest subject to handle when working with groups of parents. Try to draw on the experiences of the group (even if the parents are first-timers, they will have plenty of stories to share about their friends and family) and ensure that there is the chance to find solutions to problems and opportunities to strengthen parental relationships.

In a group setting your role is:

- to show active interest in what each parent wants to share and respect each parents' opinions and views;
- to keep a manageable balance in a group between content (information) and process (discussion);
- to ensure each parent feels comfortable to share their concerns and ask questions;
- to give information, time and space;
- to facilitate discussion in a sensitive manner and challenge gently;
- to be part of prevention and early intervention to signpost to other agencies and services as appropriate;
- to recognise signals from parents that they may wish to talk on a one-to-one basis;
- to provide time at the end of the session if any parent wants to talk privately.

## Co-facilitating

It is often more effective for facilitators to work in pairs, particularly if a parent becomes upset and needs to talk about his/her concerns privately. Taking the time to prepare together beforehand and de-brief afterwards helps the flow of the sessions and makes the quality better, thus enhancing the experience for parents. It is also an opportunity to model a positive partnership to new and expectant parents.

# Delivering the group

## Introduction and ground rules

This material is designed based on the assumptions that:

- facilitators and group members already know one another.
- a group agreement is already in place, with particular emphasis on respecting confidentiality and diversity. This helps to establish trust and safety in the group.
- it is clearly understood, with regard to safeguarding, what exceptions there may be to confidentiality. If this is not the case then you will need to spend time in the first session establishing comfort and safety within the group.

## Knowing your group

You will know your group and what tends to work for them, so use your discretion. For example, some groups respond well to working in pairs or small groups, others feel safer staying in the whole group with the facilitator, especially at the beginning. You may be working in a specific cultural context in which the material and how you deliver it requires you to adapt it to meet the needs of that particular group. You need to be able to gauge the learning ability and capacity of different group members in deciding what is most valuable and manageable to focus on in each session.

## Learning by having fun

Laughter helps us learn, when we laugh we breathe harder and our heart beats faster which transports more oxygen to the brain. This stimulates the release of serotonin leading to feelings of contentment which improves concentration, learning and motivation

## Dealing with difficult situations in a group

As when working with parents as individuals or as a couple there may be times when parents react strongly in a group setting.

### When a parent reacts in a session in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable

In addition to acknowledging what is happening (as outlined in Section 1) you may also want to highlight and how it is affecting other people in the room.

'I can see this is upsetting for you shall we stop for a few minutes?'

### If a couple disagree with one another in a session

In the same way as when working with individuals and couples you should try not to take sides. Again, summarise both their points of view and assertively move them on.

'This sounds like a disagreement that comes up for lots of couples, and I'm sorry that we don't have any more time in the group to talk it through today!'



Or offer the couple time out and then an opportunity to talk with you or your co-facilitator at a later date if appropriate.

'I can see this is getting difficult for you two.  
Would it be helpful for us to chat about this after the session?'

If it is hard to move disagreeing couples on, it may be helpful to remind them how their argument could be affecting other people in the room, and possibly take a break.

'Is this a good time for us to take a break?'

## Feedback and Evaluation

Getting feedback about the session helps learning and all group facilitators have their own methods and style. It is valuable to recap the main messages covered in the session when working with material that raises personal issues. Ask the group for feedback on each topic raised, or establish what they have learnt. This allows you to adjust further sessions if you need to. Informal feedback of each session need only take a few minutes.

# Other services

There are a range of support services available to help parents experiencing relationship difficulties. Some are listed here:

## Online Tools and Services

**The Healthy Relationships Partnership Hartlepool** provide free resources for parents and practitioners to help support relationships. Resources for parents include tips on strengthening your relationship, advice on what you can do or where you can go if you are experiencing relationship struggles and information specifically for new parents and parents of children with additional needs.

Practitioners can find toolkits and guides to help with supporting parental relationships as well as practice development videos and posts on our blog.

[www.hrphartlepool.co.uk](http://www.hrphartlepool.co.uk)

**Click** is a unique service providing early intervention relationship support from a mobile-friendly platform. Individuals, couples, families and professionals can use Click to access helpful, evidence-based support from a secure, mobile-friendly space. Its many features include moderated forums, interactive learning, goal-setting, animations, quizzes, personalised recommendations and evaluation. This service is built and maintained by the people at OnePlusOne, an organisation with decades of relationship expertise and technical knowhow.

[www.clickrelationships.org](http://www.clickrelationships.org)

**Relate** provide relationship resources which can be accessed by individuals, couples and professionals

[www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

## Services available in Hartlepool

Changing Futures North East  
[www.changingfuturesne.co.uk](http://www.changingfuturesne.co.uk)  
01429 891444

Tees Valley Mediation  
[www.teesvalleymediation.co.uk](http://www.teesvalleymediation.co.uk)  
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