



Together and apart: supporting families through change

Topic report

June 2011

About Families is a partnership between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, Parenting across Scotland and Capability Scotland.



Contact details

Karen Mountney
Project Manager
0131 650 4055
karen.mountney@ed.ac.uk

Katrina Reid
Development Officer
0131 651 1941
katrina.reid@ed.ac.uk

About Families
Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR)
The University of Edinburgh
23 Buccleuch Place
Edinburgh EH8 9LN
www.aboutfamilies.org.uk

Contents

1. Summary of key findings	1
2. Background	2
Why relationships between parents?	2
Research on family change	2
Families affected by disability	3
Trends and statistics	4
3. Findings	6
a. Sustaining relationships and managing change.....	6
i. Communication and conflict	6
ii. What puts pressure on relationships?	7
iii. What helps parents to manage better?.....	8
iv. Attitudes towards relationships	9
v. How relationships end	9
b. The impact of breakdown on well-being.....	11
c. Contact with children after separation.....	12
d. Financial issues.....	14
e. Supporting parents.....	16
4. Discussion	19
Recommendations from the literature	19
Existing research and gaps in the research.....	19
What Next?	20
5. Appendices.....	21
Appendix i) Research.....	21
Appendix ii) Policy context.....	23
Appendix iii) Bibliography	23
Appendix iv) Acknowledgements.....	26

Summary of key findings

Since good relationships between parents are important for the well-being of both adults and children, About Families asked what research could tell us about sustaining healthy relationships and coping with relationship breakdown.

This report presents a review of research evidence to help inform voluntary and public sector agencies in the development of services. It has been produced by About Families, a partnership which seeks to ensure that the changing needs of parents, including families affected by disability, are met by providing accessible and relevant evidence to inform service development.

1. Summary of key findings

- **Conflict:** Conflict does not necessarily lead to unhappier relationships. How conflict happens and how it is dealt with is what matters.
- **Pressures:** Many things put pressure on relationships and it is normal for relationship satisfaction to decline after the birth of a baby. Parents of disabled children face additional pressures which can continue into the child's adulthood.
- **Coping:** Parents manage better when they can spend time together as a couple, communicate well, have trust and respect, have a supportive relationship and are happy with their roles and responsibilities. Access to short term breaks is key for families affected by disability.
- **Attitudes:** Seeing relationships as flexible and able to change can help adults to deal with relationship issues.
- **Impact:** Improving relationship satisfaction and preventing relationships from breaking down (where appropriate) are important for the well-being of both adults and children. Stability is more important than family structure for children's well-being.
- **Contact:** Arranging contact with children following separation is complex for both practical and emotional reasons but arrangements do not have to be conflict-free to be successful. Developing good couple communication skills may be more effective in facilitating contact than legal interventions.
- **Finance:** Men and women face different financial pressures following separation. Single mothers are the worst off financially, while families affected by disability face additional financial disadvantage which can continue throughout their lives.
- **Seeking support:** Parents face practical and emotional barriers to seeking support from relationship services. While the most common source of support is family and friends, this is not problem-free. People prefer support from skilled professionals when experiencing serious concerns.
- **Families affected by disability:** Research tends to focus on the difficulties associated with living with disabilities or long term conditions. This emphasises the strains and pressure having a disabled child puts on relationships and family life. Help for parents often aims to support them by providing help for the child. Recognising pressures and challenges for these families needs to be balanced with addressing social barriers and the capacity of families to manage well given the appropriate support.
- **What do we know about supporting parents?:** Research does not always distinguish between different family forms, type of relationship, parents and other carers, or gender, and tends to be based on heterosexual families. However, many of the issues arising around relationship support are applicable to many types of families.

Background

2. Background

Why relationships between parents?

This report looks at relationships between parents for a number of reasons. Strengthening a couple's relationship has profound benefits for adult and child well-being, and the parenting ability of the couple. On the other hand poor quality couple relationships are associated with poor parenting and poor parent-child relationships (Coleman et al, 2010).

Stable, supportive relationships offer benefits in psychological and physical health as well as social advantages, such as access to more supportive social networks (Walker et al, 2010). When relationships break down, these benefits are lost.

Children thrive best in families with predictable and consistent care, and good quality relationships, whatever the family type (Walker et al, 2010; CRFR, 2010).

Given this understanding, About Families partners were interested to know more about parental relationships and their impact on individuals and family life.

This report explores relationships between, and outcomes for, adults. However, research clearly indicates that adult relationships affect parenting and outcomes for children. Although exploring outcomes for both adults and children in any depth would have produced an unwieldy report, the link between adult relationships and their impact on children is crucial (Hunt et al, 2009; Mooney et al, 2009; DCSF, 2010).

Although relationship breakdown is more common nowadays, its negative impact on the well-being of separating couples has not disappeared. This contradicts the argument that there is more acceptance and less stigma around relationship breakdown due to increasing rates of divorce (it currently is estimated that 45% of marriages will end in divorce) and separation (Ramm et al, 2010).

Understanding how to support and strengthen relationships between parents therefore remains an important area for research, policy and practice. Importantly, evidence strongly suggests that damaged relationships can be repaired, improved and prevented from breaking down. However, it is also important to understand when it is appropriate for a

relationship to end (Coleman et al, 2010). Helping couples to recognise signs of difficulty early, and providing appropriate support at the right time, are important in both helping to sustain relationships and supporting families through breakdown and change (Walker et al, 2010).

This report provides:

- a brief overview of some recent relevant statistics
- an outline of the types of research we used, including definitions (e.g. of types of relationships) and what was included or excluded by the literature
- a review of the research findings under themed headings
- discussion points to start conversations about how families can be better supported

How we searched for research can be found in appendix i.

Research on family change

A range of research and reviews are published on parenting and relationships in the UK and beyond. Some are commissioned by either the Scottish or UK governments, reflecting a growing policy interest in sustaining healthy relationships and supporting parental capacity.

Disability

Research tends to focus on children, rather than parents, with disabilities and the difficulties associated with living with disabilities or long term conditions. This emphasises the strains and pressure having a disabled child puts on relationships and family life. Help for parents often aims to support them by providing help for the child. Recognising pressures and challenges for these families needs to be balanced with addressing social barriers and the capacity of families to manage well given the appropriate support.

Different kinds of families

Generally, research does not attempt to explore issues in relation to different family forms, such as adoptive or step-families. For this reason, we have not attempted to do so here. However, the issues arising will be relevant to all family types. Where a family form is in transition (i.e. during separation or divorce) or if a specific family type is being referred to, this is made clear.

Background

Marriage and living together

Research does not consistently refer to marriage or cohabitation, separation or divorce, and sometimes uses such terms interchangeably. It is sometimes not clear whether 'couples' are partners, cohabiting or married. In this review, we take 'couple' to mean a 'marital-type relationship', a stance taken by some of the reviews included. 'Relationship breakdown' is used to refer to all types of relationship dissolution and separation. Divorce is referred to if this was specified in the literature. We have not attempted to compare outcomes or impacts for married or cohabiting couples.

Forming new families

Research around re-partnering tends to explore likelihoods of forming new relationships given certain circumstances (e.g. gender, children, mental health, length of marriage, cohabitation etc). This is outwith the scope of this review, since our focus is on issues relating to maintaining healthy relationships and the challenges that face people experiencing relationship change. Likewise, we did not explore the life history factors which affect likelihood of relationship outcomes (e.g. education level, age at marriage, parents relationship etc).

Parents and carers

Most of the research included focuses specifically on parents. In other literature it is not clear whether the adults are parents or not. We have selected literature which is relevant to parents and/or couples in the types of relationships, or process of breakdown, outlined above.

The focus of this review is on parents, rather than outcomes for children, as mentioned earlier. We have included some literature on outcomes for children or children's experiences where this relates directly to relationships between parents.

We refer generically to 'adult' or 'parent' unless the literature refers specifically to women or men, mothers or fathers.

Other issues

Relationship issues or breakdown in cases of domestic violence or abuse are referred to where they appear in the literature included, and using the same

terminology. However, we have not been able to cover this important but extensive area in any depth as it is outwith the scope of this review. Circumstances such as bereavement or imprisonment are also beyond the scope.

Geography

Around half of the literature drawn on was published in the UK, most of which focuses on England and Wales. Around a quarter was published in Scotland. Many of these studies and literature reviews refer to a range of international reviews and research when discussing the issues arising. Of the eight USA publications, five are literature reviews and three are research reports.

Families affected by disability

1 in 5 of the Scottish population (1 million people) is disabled, and 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem. Half (49%) of Scottish households including someone with a disability have net annual incomes below £15,000. More than half (52%) of disabled people are unemployed and those materially affected by the economic climate are up to 8 times more likely to have sought help for depression and anxiety. Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) disabled people who require an adapted home live in one that is 'not at all' or 'not very' suitable (DAS, 2011).

Social barriers such as people's attitudes to disability, and physical and organisational barriers, mean that disabled people generally have fewer opportunities and a lower quality of life than non-disabled people (Disability Wales, 2011).

Throughout the project, About Families is looking at how the issues we explore relate to families affected by disability as well as those not affected. We hope to enable parenting professionals to provide services appropriate for all families, and likewise to help those working in the disability field to appreciate the impact of the family context. Some family issues may have a different impact if the family is affected by disability, for other issues it may make no difference at all. Any impact may depend on the type of disability. Also, there may be elements of good practice that can be shared between those working with families affected by disability, and those who work with parents generally.

Background

Increasing the evidence on disability

Not much research on relationships includes disabled families and research that does tends to be research specifically about the disability. For this reason, we conducted a survey and interviews with disabled parents and parents of disabled children using Capability Scotland's 1 in 4 Poll* and services. We presented some key issues around relationships or breakdown and asked whether they thought they would be different or the same for families affected by disability. This research was small scale and is not representative of the views of families affected by disability across Scotland, since that is outwith the scope of this work. The intention was to include some reflections from disabled families to inform discussions of what action is needed to meet the relationship needs of parents, and to ensure that the voices of disabled families are included.

Responses from the 1 in 4 Poll* respondents are included in '1 in 4 Poll says' boxes at the relevant points throughout this report.

**Capability Scotland's 1 in 4 Poll was established in 2000 and so-called because one in four households in Scotland lives with disability. 1 in 4 Poll panel members have personal experience of disability and respond to 3-4 surveys each year on issues that relate to disability equality.*

Trends and statistics*

Current statistics on UK families show that:

- There has been a decrease in the number of family households consisting of married couples by 100,000 between 2001 and 2010 to 12.2 million. This links with both the increase in opposite sex cohabiting couples from 2.1 million to 2.8 million, and the general decrease in the number of marriages since the early 1970s.
- In 2010 a similar percentage of married and cohabiting couples had dependent children, 38% and 39% respectively.
- 4% of civil partner couples and 5% of same sex cohabiting couples have dependent children.

- While the total number of dependent children has not significantly changed, there are some changes in the types of families in which they live. 63% of dependent children lived in a married couple household in 2010, a decrease from 68% in 2001. Over the same period, the percentage of dependent children living in opposite sex cohabiting couple households increased by three percentage points to 13%, and those living in lone parent families increased by two percentage points to 24%.

(Office for National Statistics, 2011.)

Lone parents:

- 67% of lone parent families have dependent children, an increase between 2001 and 2010 of 12% from 1.75 million to 2.0 million.
- Mothers head 9 out of 10 lone parent families with dependent children and fathers head 1 in 10. These proportions have remained stable since 2001.

(Office for National Statistics, 2011.)

Stepfamilies**:

- Around 10% of all families with dependent children in Great Britain were stepfamilies in 2005 (Office for National Statistics, 2007).
- Stepfamilies are generally larger than non-stepfamilies. For both married and cohabiting couple stepfamilies, 27% had three or more dependent children compared with 18% of non-stepfamilies in 2001 (Office for National Statistics, 2007).
- The majority (84%) of stepfamilies in Great Britain in 2006 consisted of a stepfather and a natural mother compared with 10% of families with a stepmother and a natural father (Office for National Statistics, 2008).
- In 2006, 6% of stepfamilies comprised children from both partners' previous relationships (Office for National Statistics, 2008).

Current statistics on Scottish families show that:

- In 2008 the proportion of births outside marriage in Scotland rose to 50% for the first time and increased slightly in 2009 (Office for National Statistics, 2011_a).
- Of the children adopted in 2009, 24% were adopted by a step-parent (General Register Office for Scotland, 2010).

Background

- The average age at which people first marry has increased by around two and a half years in the last 10 years, to 32.5 years for men and 30.7 years for women (General Register Office for Scotland 2010).
- 10,173 divorces were granted in Scotland in 2009-10, 10% fewer than in 2008-09 and the lowest number in the last 10 years. There were 27 civil partnership dissolutions in 2009-10, up from 17 in 2008-09 (Scottish Government, 2010).
- Divorced people accounted for a quarter of people marrying in 2007, an increase from just under 6% in 1971 (General Register Office for Scotland, 2008).

**all statistics are based on the latest available figures. Exact corresponding statistics are not always available for Scotland against UK figures.*

***statistics referring to stepfamilies may use varying definitions of 'family'.*

Findings a. Sustaining relationships and managing change

3. Findings

a. Sustaining relationships and managing change

Key findings: Sustaining relationships and managing change

- Good communication between couples can prevent arguments and serious problems from developing, and provide mutual support.
- Issues reflecting unequal balance of control and poor communication often underlie relationship difficulties.
- Conflict does not necessarily lead to unhappier relationships. How conflict happens and is dealt with is what matters, and can influence the impact it has on children.
- Many things put pressure on relationships. It is normal for relationship quality and satisfaction to decline after the birth of a baby.
- Parents of disabled children face additional pressures which can continue into the child's adulthood.
- Parents manage better when they can spend time together as a couple, communicate well, have trust and respect, have a supportive relationship and are happy with their roles and responsibilities.
- Encouraging people to see relationships as fluid, in their control and able to change can help them to understand and deal with relationship issues.
- It can take a long time to decide to end a relationship, to reach closure and move on. Partners can have very different understandings of the state of their relationship.

i) Communication and conflict

People tend to have unrealistically high expectations of marriage and living together. Few couples discuss their expectations and adapting

them to match reality is often challenging (Ramm et al, 2010). Disagreement over household division of labour can be a key cause of dissatisfaction and is influenced by role expectations, perceptions of fairness, attitudes and preferences (One Plus One, 2007).

Talking through issues can prevent arguments and serious problems from developing, even though it can feel uncomfortable (Ramm et al, 2010). People in on-going relationships seem to argue less and resolve arguments fairly quickly when they occur, preventing resentment from building up and communication from breaking down. Couples with good communication are better able to cope with money worries and life events such as bereavement and illness because they view them as shared troubles and provide mutual support (Walker et al, 2010).

Some parents avoid confrontation by suppressing their own opinions. This is a defensive response and different from positive steps taken to develop good communication as a way of avoiding conflict (Ramm et al, 2010).

Issues reflecting unequal balance of control and poor communication often underlie relationship difficulties (Ramm et al, 2010). This is also indicated in responses to the 1 in 4 Poll. Behaviours which are associated with unhappier relationships include criticising, contemptuousness, defensiveness, complaining and sarcasm (One Plus One, 2007).

1 in 4 Poll says:

Two thirds of parents in our poll felt that communication is a key factor in relationship difficulties. Problems stem from a range of issues: partners disagreeing over what the child's impairment is and how best to manage it; partners receiving a lack of support leading to a lack of time/energy to communicate effectively; disagreements about the disabled child's treatment and/or ways of tackling behavioural problems; all of which may result in parents feeling withdrawn or depressed.

Conflict does not necessarily lead to unhappier relationships. How conflict happens and is dealt with is what matters (Walker et al, 2010; Coleman et al, 2010). Taking responsibility for behaviour, and problem-solving ability, are important (Walker et al,

Findings a. Sustaining relationships and managing change

2010). Enduring conflict is one of the most difficult aspects of family breakdown for both children and parents (Walker et al, 2010) and reflects a process that often begins before and continues after the breakdown (Coleman et al, 2010). While increasing emotional distance and doubts about remaining in the relationship can be part of the breakdown process, some couples become closer by working through their problems (Ramm et al, 2010).

Managing conflict well can influence the impact it has on children (Coleman et al, 2010; Rodgers et al, 2001 cited in Parentline Plus, 2008). 'Destructive' conflict (such as physical violence) can be particularly harmful, whereas 'constructive' conflict (such as mild conflict which is resolved) can help children to learn how to resolve disputes effectively. Unresolved conflict that involves children as messengers or recipients of negative information is particularly harmful. However, very low levels of conflict can mean children have little time to anticipate the relationship breakdown, and may even blame themselves for the separation (Coleman et al, 2010).

Family relationship issues feature in 35% of calls to ParentLine Scotland. 74% of these callers discuss difficulties in communicating with other family members.

ii) What puts pressure on relationships?

Aside from becoming parents, a range of factors put pressure on relationships:

- Work pressures, such as working long hours and managing a demanding job.
- Financial worries. Research found that separated couples tended to blame debts on their partner and suggested that overreactions to financial pressures damaged the relationship, while couples who were still together talked of mutual reliance and the need to budget.
- Affairs, which are often a response to escalating arguments and declining effective communication.
- Arguments, often about household tasks, money, work, doing things together, friends, family, lifestyle choices, parenting and children. However, arguments can help people to recognise that there are problems in the relationship.
- Life events such as bereavement, mental or physical ill-health.

- Alcohol and substance use.
- Domestic abuse or violence (Walker et al, 2010).

It is normal for relationship quality and satisfaction to decline after the birth of a baby (Rodgers, 1999 cited in One Plus One, 2007). Key tensions relating to becoming parents include:

- whether and when to start a family or have more children
- unexpected or difficult pregnancies
- miscarriages
- postnatal depression
- changing roles and responsibilities (including gender roles becoming more traditional)
- coping with childcare
- financial pressures
- caring for children with special needs
- resentment about changes in routine and time spent caring for a new baby
- lack of sleep
- fathers feeling rejected by their partner after the birth
- juggling work and childcare (reported by women in particular) (Walker, 2010)

1 in 4 Poll says:

Two thirds of parents told us that they felt the additional challenges associated with having a disabled child had had a negative impact on their relationship with their partner, with a quarter saying they had caused major problems or led to separation. Those who had separated said that, from the list above, coping with childcare, changing roles, juggling work and childcare, and resentment about changes to routine contributed to tensions the most.

In all families, parenting challenges can contribute to a vicious cycle. A father's dissatisfaction can reduce his involvement in parenting, leaving the mother feeling less supported and, in turn, being more critical of the father, and so on. Differences in parenting styles emerging as the child grows older can cause conflict (Ramm et al, 2010). These processes may be

Findings a. Sustaining relationships and managing change

even more acute for couples parenting a child with a disability (Glenn, 2007).

New parents have better relationships if they have high relationship satisfaction before the pregnancy, planned rather than unplanned pregnancy, and a low-demanding baby (Coleman et al, 2010).

Parents of disabled children can experience grief as they mourn for the 'imagined' baby (Green, 2007 cited in Glenn, 2007). Mothers' grief may be less severe if she feels supported by her partner (Statham, 2002 cited in Glenn, 2007). The impact of grief on the marital relationship is largely neglected by the literature (Glenn, 2007).

Tensions between expectations and reality also feature in calls to ParentLine Scotland from mothers with post natal depression. Some mothers say they find it difficult to share their feelings with their partner.

The multiple pressures associated with parenting children with chronic illnesses or disabilities can have a detrimental impact on parents' health, relationship and ability to parent. In a UK survey of parents, around three quarters experienced stress/depression and/or tiredness/lack of sleep which most linked with the challenges and lack of support associated with having their disabled child. Almost one quarter felt that the additional challenges caused major problems in their relationship or led to their separation (Shapiro, 2003). These challenges include managing more traditionally gendered parenting roles; a lack of time for each other; managing different coping styles; coming to terms with loss and grief; adjusting to changes over time; the care demands specific to their child's disability; and acute financial pressures (Glenn, 2007).

New pressures and concerns can arise as a child with a disability grows up (Todd et al, 2005 cited in Glenn, 2007). These can include: realising that communication and mobility problems will not improve; their child may not be able to live independently in adulthood or have a family; how the community and society will integrate with their child; education (Heiman, 2002, cited in Glenn, 2007); employment; and planning long-term care. Coping with increasingly challenging behaviour and growing physical care demands can all coincide with the usual challenges of puberty and adolescence. Transition to adulthood often coincides with a massive reduction in state support, and a move

from specialised paediatric care to adult teams, whose case-load is largely made up of the elderly (Glenn, 2007). When older siblings leave home, the important emotional and practical support that they frequently provide is lost (Todd et al, 2005 cited in Glenn, 2007; Hartley, 2010).

Where children with disabilities continue to live in the family home into early adulthood, pressures for families can be on-going. This means that parents of children with a long term condition can experience continued marital strain (Hartley et al, 2010).

1 in 4 Poll says:

Other factors that put pressure on relationships include dealing with health professionals/ other organisations (including time taken to attend appointments); dealing with family and friends who find it difficult to come to terms with disability; lack of time with their partner; and concerns about their child's future.

iii) What helps parents to manage better?

Parents say they manage better when they:

- talk about problems and don't let them escalate
- make time to be together as a couple (not put the relationship on the back burner)
- develop trust and respect and reflect these in their behaviour
- share a positive outlook
- share responsibilities (this does not mean evenly dividing tasks, but that each partner is happy with their roles and is confident that the other one is doing their bit)
- learn to give and take
- use humour to relieve tension (Walker et al, 2010)

1 in 4 Poll says:

Most respondents agreed that the list of factors above helps parents in disabled families to manage better. Parents also identified support from family and friends, support from external organisations and access to short term breaks.

Findings a. Sustaining relationships and managing change

Closeness, independence, having children, and support are the most valued aspects of relationships. Feeling close involves mutual understanding, sharing a sense of humour and having a friendship with a partner. Balancing independent activities with time spent as a couple and as a family is important. Independence also includes having personal friendships and respecting a partner's individuality (Ramm et al, 2010).

Parents' perception of their situation and their child's ability is important to both their own and their child's well-being. The attitude of parents of disabled children and how they look at life may impact on the strength of their relationships and their ability to deal with pressures (Shapiro, 2003).

A supportive relationship can help with parenting stress (Kersh, 2006). Partners with good relationships can provide each other with useful emotional and practical support, and are also more likely to get support from other sources (Quinton, 2004 cited in Glenn, 2007). However, the multiple pressures of caring for a child with a disability leave parents with little time for themselves, other siblings or their relationship. 90% of parents of a child with a learning disability say they do not have enough time together (Bauman, 2004 cited in Glenn, 2007).

iv) Attitudes towards relationships

Attitudes towards relationships can underpin many relationship issues. A 'developmental' perspective sees relationships as fluid and able to change through time. People with this view are more likely to engage in relationship improving behaviour and seek support if they experience difficulties. Those with a 'non-developmental' perspective feel that a couple cannot learn to improve their relationship, and consider relationship support to be ineffective (Ramm et al, 2010).

Couples can be helped to have a more developmental understanding about relationships including these factors:

- Relationships change over time – it's normal to experience varying levels of relationship satisfaction. Being aware of this can help prevent people from misinterpreting this as deterioration.
- Certain circumstances are frequently associated with relationship difficulties – such as transition to parenthood, financial problems, illness, and the influence of friends and in-laws.

- It is possible to control the outcome of relationships - relationships are flexible and can respond to change (or 'work'). Such awareness may help people to engage in behaviour which helps to improve relationships, such as understanding a partner's behaviour and feelings, investing in relationship 'work', or using support.
- The way a couple communicate has a bearing on many aspects of their relationship – this can help to develop a trusting and supportive relationship.
- It is useful to understand a partner's behaviour - understanding the reasons behind a behaviour may help reduce relationship tension.
- Conflict and confrontation is normal in a relationship - lack of conflict does not necessarily indicate a healthy relationship. How conflict is dealt with (constructively rather than destructively) is more important than the conflict itself.

(Ramm et al, 2010)

v) How relationships end

A range of pressures and problems usually contribute to relationship breakdown. These include childcare, household duties, financial difficulties and work demands, alongside a lack of time to talk and poor communication (Walker et al, 2010). Parents of a child with a disability experience the 'normal' stresses and strains that all parents face, and the additional pressures can exacerbate any relationship problems that already existed (Glenn, 2007; Shapiro, 2003).

Although many couples parenting a child with a disability stay together, they are more likely to divorce or separate than parents caring for a non-disabled child (Glenn, 2007). In the UK, 53% of parents caring for a child with a disability believe the challenges they faced had caused either 'some' or 'major' difficulties or the breakdown of the relationship (Shapiro, 2003).

1 in 4 Poll says:

The respondents who had separated or divorced identified two main causes for the breakdown in the relationship: partners disagreeing over what the child's impairment is and how best to manage it; and the impact of the general pressures and challenges faced in caring for a child with a disability.

Findings a. Sustaining relationships and managing change

Separated parents with disabled children are less likely to form new relationships (Corman et al, 1992 cited in Glenn, 2007). In the UK, around three in ten lone parents have a sick or disabled child, equating to over 40,000 lone parents with a disabled or sick child in Scotland (One Parent Families Scotland, 2008). Where they do re-partner, they are likely to experience added pressures as partners negotiate care roles and responsibilities (Turnbull et al, 2006 cited in Glenn, 2007).

Couples may stay together because they feel uncertain about parenting a child with a disability alone. Parents may feel that finding another home which is suitably equipped for their child's needs would be difficult. Moving may mean reorganising healthcare and education packages. In cases of domestic violence, separation is especially problematic if this means moving to a new area and non-adapted accommodation (Glenn, 2007).

1 in 4 Poll says:

Some parents said they had stayed in a relationship despite it having broken down because they felt responsible for caring for their child.

Nearly half of respondents felt they would not be able to find suitable accommodation following relationship breakdown because they thought it would not be available, did not know how to find out about it or felt they would not be able to afford it. Separated parents were more likely to think they would find accommodation, suggesting they had experience of doing so.

Relationships tend to end in one of three ways: relatively gently after a period of dwindling intimacy, growing dissatisfaction and cyclical arguments; after lurching from one crisis to another until things come to a head; or suddenly, initiated out of the blue by one partner. More women than men describe an abrupt ending to their relationship (Walker et al, 2010), though most separations and divorces in the UK are initiated by women (Sakraida, 2008 cited in Walker et al, 2010; Parentline Plus, 2008).

Reaching the decision to end a relationship usually takes a long time. Where one partner initiates the separation, the other is usually shocked and distressed (Myers, 1989 cited in Parentline Plus, 2008) and are often two years behind in their understanding of the state of the relationship (Clarke-Stewart et al, 2006 cited in Parentline Plus, 2008). Reaching closure and moving on could take years (Walker et al, 2010), meaning that people need support over a significant period of time.

Discussion points:

- *How can parents be supported to understand the range of tensions associated with relationships and parenthood, and accept these as normal rather than signs of the end of the relationship? How can relationship deterioration be prevented?*
- *How can services support parents of disabled children to manage their relationships better, particularly when other support such as short term breaks is limited?*

Findings b. The impact of relationship breakdown on well-being

b. The impact of relationship breakdown on well-being

Key findings: The impact of relationship breakdown on well-being

- Improving relationship satisfaction and preventing relationships from breaking down (where appropriate) are important for the well-being of both adults and children.
- The multiple pressures associated with parenting children with chronic illnesses or disabilities can have a detrimental impact on parents' health, relationship and ability to parent.
- During separation and divorce, men and women seek help for different reasons. While both want to do the best for their children, their own emotional state can interfere with their ability to do so.
- Stability is more important than family structure for children's well-being.

The impact of relationship breakdown is worse for some people than others. A number of factors can influence impact, including social and economic support, the ability to forgive, and who initiated the separation (Amato, 2000).

Improving relationship satisfaction and preventing relationships from breaking down (where appropriate) are important for the well-being of both adults and children (Coleman et al, 2010). High quality relationships can benefit physical health (Coleman et al, 2010). Impacts of relationship breakdown on adults' mental health can be seen two years prior to breakdown, peak during separation, and decline over the following two years (Gardner et al, 2006). Although living in conflict is detrimental to their own and their children's well-being, parents sometimes stay in unsatisfactory relationships as they worry about the impact relationship breakdown might have on children (Walker et al, 2010; CRFR, 2010).

While parents want to do the best for their children, their own emotional state can interfere with their ability to do so. In recent research, parents said they could not think clearly at the time of separation, felt

their lives had been turned upside down and that their confidence was severely knocked. Many felt a sense of failure and that they had let their children down. More positively, many parents also felt that after time, the split had made them stronger (Parentline Plus, 2008).

During separation and divorce, men and women seek help for different reasons. Men are more likely to call helplines about divorce and separation than any other issue. Women are much more likely than men to call with concerns about inability to reach agreement, access, finance, residence, parental responsibility and stepfamily tensions (Parentline Plus, 2008; ParentLine Scotland, 2008).

Most children adjust to change after a period of instability. Most impact on children as a result of family change is evident during the two years following divorce (Dowling et al, 2000 cited in Parentline Plus, 2008), which could relate to the difficulties their parents experience during this time (Parentline Plus, 2008).

Repeated changes in living arrangements are more likely to have a detrimental effect on children than the structure of their family (Coleman et al, 2010, CRFR, 2010). The more often changes occur (e.g. from marriage to divorce, to remarriage, involving new half-siblings, etc.), the more negative consequences for children. A stable family is more important than the structure of that family, even if that is in a single family (Coleman et al, 2010). The evidence is not settled when it comes to the claim that marriage is a more stable arrangement than cohabitation (CRFR, 2010).

Discussion points:

- *How can different types of services support parents in sustaining healthy relationships, including families affected by disability?*
- *How can services provide appropriate and timely support for both men and women experiencing relationship difficulties or separation?*
- *How can parents be encouraged to seek relationship help before difficulties escalate?*
- *How can services support parents to do their best for their child in spite of their own emotional distress?*

Findings c. Contact with children after separation

c. Contact with children after separation

Key findings: Contact with children after separation

- Successful contact arrangements do not have to be conflict-free, but any issues need to be well-managed. Good communication skills between couples are more effective in facilitating contact than legal interventions.
- Arranging contact requires a sustained effort by both parents, and acceptance of changing roles. Fathers often have to learn a new role and way of relating to their children after separation.
- Disagreements over parenting and difficulties of making decisions when living away from the child can make co-parenting after separation difficult for parents, including families affected by disability.
- Where fathers pay maintenance, there is usually frequent contact with children and less conflict between parents. However, contact and money can be a source of ongoing disagreement.
- Mothers can control how much time fathers spend with their children by 'gatekeeping'. After separation, a cycle of distrust can be triggered if fathers feel undervalued or excluded.
- Long working hours and lack of suitable accommodation can make it difficult for fathers to organise contact.

In the UK, 24% of dependent children live with one parent (Office for National Statistics, 2011). There are both emotional and practical issues around contact for both parents (MacLean, 2004).

Most parents make informal verbal agreements over contact and maintenance payments (Wasoff et al, 2006; Scottish Government, 2008). While a small number may use child support agencies, very few

resort to legal action unless they see no other option (Scottish Government, 2008).

In Scotland, most disputes happen because the non-resident father is not satisfied with contact arrangements. In most cases, they had not approached other services, suggesting that parents need more knowledge and understanding about available services (Laing et al, 2010). Parents affected by disability sometimes feel discriminated against in court decisions regarding child residence and contact (Wates, 2003).

Parents living in rural areas have less access to contact centres. Rural centres have fewer staff and financial resources than urban centres and some are run by volunteers, which reduces flexibility and accessibility (Sproston et al, 2004). Families affected by disability are particularly disadvantaged (Scottish Executive, 2004).

Developing good couple communication skills is more effective in facilitating contact than legal interventions. Successful contact arrangements do not have to be conflict-free, but parents need to resolve or manage any issues. It helps if the resident parent encourages the contact, parents accept each other's new partners, and all parties' wishes (including children's) are considered. A realistic view of each other's strengths and weaknesses, and the ability to compromise, is beneficial. Quality of contact suffers if parents aren't committed to sorting out contact issues or overcoming disputes (Trinder et al 2002; Wilson et al, 2004).

Arranging contact requires a sustained effort by both parents. Non-resident parents must accept that their role has changed, while resident parents must accept that they need to actively facilitate contact arrangements, even if their relationship is not amicable (Trinder et al, 2002).

1 in 4 Poll says:

Three quarters of parents who were divorced/separated said they felt that disagreements about approaches to parenting and difficulties in making decisions for the parent not living with the child can make it difficult to co-parent after relationship breakdown.

Findings c. Contact with children after separation

Non-resident fathers

Most Scottish non-resident fathers have contact with their children. Contact is more likely if the mother thought the father was happy about becoming a parent, or if they all lived in the same household at some point. If the mother has a new partner, contact with the non-resident father can decline (Marryat et al, 2009). Even where fathers have been closely involved with the child before separation, their role in childcare drops considerably afterwards (Lewis et al, 2002; MacLean, 2004).

Frequency of child contact and maintenance payments are linked (Scottish Government, 2008). If the father is paying maintenance, children are more likely to have weekly contact, including overnight stays, and there is less conflict between parents (Marryat et al, 2009). Non-payment can be a reason for resident parents to limit child contact (Scottish Government, 2008).

Contact and money are seen as intertwined and can be a source of ongoing disagreement and tension. Some parents use their children as a 'weapon' against their ex, even though they say they don't. Access and contact can be limited as a form of 'punishment'; children are used to demand extra money, fathers spoil children in a way that mothers can't, and both parents can try to score points off one another through their children (Parentline Plus, 2008).

Mothers can control how much time fathers spend with their children by 'gatekeeping'. In couple relationships, the time that fathers spend with their children is often mediated through the mother (Smart et al, 1999). After separation, the mother's relationship with the father and her opinion of the father's parental ability can influence negotiations over contact. However, multiple responsibilities at home, work commitments or tiredness can mean mothers can feel they need to rely on fathers, even if they would prefer not to (Fagan et al, 2003). If fathers feel undervalued or excluded, a cycle of distrust and undermining each

other can be triggered (Trinder, 2008). Many fathers feel powerless in their attempts to maintain their contact with and responsibilities towards their children (Lewis et al, 2002). However, mothers sometimes work hard to ensure that fathers remain involved with their children after separation (Smart et al, 1999).

Co-parenting after separation is not the same as co-parenting within a non-separated family. Fathers often have to learn a new role and way of relating to their children after separation, building a more direct relationship with their children (Smart et al, 1999). Services and policies aimed at non-resident fathers would benefit from appreciating the difference their non-resident parent status makes, such as fathers' feelings that they need to 'perform' in a role imposed upon them rather than engaging in 'natural' parental behaviour (Wilson et al, 2004).

Fathers face practical difficulties in organising contact. Long or irregular working hours can cause problems, and considerable resources are needed for both parents to provide accommodation suitable for overnight stays for children (MacLean, 2004). Contact and residence issues feature most frequently in calls from fathers to ParentLine Scotland.

Discussion points:

- *How can services support parents in managing conflict and developing good communication in order to facilitate effective contact arrangements?*
- *How can services support parents in understanding and adapting to their new roles as primary care-giver or non-resident parent?*
- *How can more parents be made aware of services available, as alternatives to legal action?*

Findings d. Financial issues

d. Financial issues

Key findings: Financial issues

- Many families affected by disability face additional costs and constraints on income which can continue into the parents' old age.
- Appropriate and affordable childcare for disabled children can be hard to find, affecting parents' ability to work.
- Men and women face different financial pressures following separation. Single mothers are the worst off financially, and some mothers accept lower, or refuse, financial contributions from fathers due to difficulties in the relationship.
- Many families reduce spending on social activities, increase working hours, spend savings or borrow money to deal with immediate financial pressures.
- Relationship breakdown places pressure on housing, including social housing, to provide suitable accommodation for blended families and visiting children.

Relationship breakdown has a range of financial impacts, including legal fees; moving; maintaining two households; additional childcare costs; impact on employment, earning prospects and disposable income; as well as the impact on services supporting the detrimental health and social impacts associated with relationship breakdown (Coleman et al, 2010).

In families affected by disability, reduced earnings and increased expenditure can put strain on relationships. 55% of families caring for a child with a disability are living in or at the margins of poverty (Harrison and Woolley, 2004). If the father is affected by disability, household finances are more likely to be affected which can contribute to family breakdown (Clarke et al, 2008). Although there is disagreement over the size of extra costs incurred by disability and how best to measure them, estimates range from £7.24 to £1,513 per week (Tibble, 2005).

It costs three times more to bring up a child with a disability than a non-disabled child (Glenn, 2007). Families often meet costs of equipment or care that

are not provided by the NHS or Social Services due to tight budgets and waiting lists (Shapiro, 2003). Alongside the usual financial pressures of separation, some parents must rely on benefits as their main source of income (Glenn, 2007).

Appropriate and affordable childcare for disabled children can be hard to find. Caring responsibilities can therefore affect parents' ability to work (Glenn, 2007). Of mothers with disabled children, 3% of are employed full-time and 13% part-time, compared to 22% and 39% of mothers with non-disabled children respectively (One Parent Families Scotland, 2008).

For families affected by disability, financial pressures may continue into old age. Parents who could not work, or whose work was constrained by caring responsibilities, may not have met minimum contributions for state pension entitlement and generally make lower contributions into pension schemes than families of non-disabled children (Wooley, 2004; Glenn, 2007).

Financial issues following separation

Single-mother families are the most economically disadvantaged (Coleman et al, 2010). In the UK, 90% of single parents are female (Office for National Statistics, 2011_b). Three in ten Scottish single parents say they do not manage financially, compared to one in ten across all households. Almost half (47%) of all single parents live in social housing. Only 35% of single-parent households in Scotland have savings or investments, compared with 50% to 74% nationally (Office for National Statistics Scotland, 2010). Up to three quarters of children from lone parent households are persistently poor (Barnes et al, 2010).

Men and women experience different financial impacts following separation. After separation, women are generally 18% worse off financially, while men experience no substantial change (Perry et al, 2000) or are slightly better off (Callan et al, 2006).

On the other hand, mothers are more likely to stay in the family home while fathers finance a new home and continue to cover some family home costs. Men can move several times before finding an adequate home (Perry et al, 2000; Parentline Plus, 2008).

Mothers can be willing to settle for less than they are entitled to in order to 'keep the peace'. Some don't want the 'rights' that they feel go with the money or feel 'beholden', or want to be rid of a violent partner (Parentline Plus, 2008).

Findings d. Financial issues

When a relationship ends, immediate financial issues arise which cannot wait to be dealt with (Perry et al, 2000). Many parents, especially women, have difficulties in making ends meet after separation, particularly with expenses such as birthday and Christmas presents. Families often deal with this by reducing spending on social activities (e.g. school trips), increasing working hours, or using savings or borrowing money (Perry et al, 2000; Parentline Plus, 2008).

Relationship breakdown increases demands on housing. Non-resident parents can feel pressured to include bedrooms, garden space and other 'family home' facilities for visiting children. Social housing faces increasing challenges to provide enough accommodation, including large houses for blended families which tend to be bigger (Callan et al, 2006).

1 in 4 Poll says:

Practical issues (mostly about housing and finance) would be the main concern immediately following separation, as well as concerns about managing alone.

Discussion points:

- *What can services do to support families experiencing the financial impact of separation at the same time as emotional impacts?*
- *How can services support families affected by disability?*

Findings e. Supporting parents

e. Supporting parents

Key findings: Supporting parents

- Parents face practical and emotional barriers to seeking support from relationship services. Forming good, intimate couple relationships is still commonly believed to be a private and personal matter.
- Both men and women prefer support to come from someone familiar who has been through similar experiences.
- Seeking help with relationship and emotional difficulties from family and friends is not problem-free, even though this is the most common source of support.
- When a relationship is in serious trouble, people prefer support from skilled professionals. Services are most effective when they are flexible and respond to the needs of individuals.
- Unresolved issues can interfere with the health of a new relationship.
- Families with disabled or chronically ill children do not receive an appropriate level of support which puts pressure on relationships. Professionals can see disability in a negative light and not recognise that families can manage very well where sufficient support is in place.
- Access to short term breaks is key in easing time pressures and helping relationships between parents of disabled children. However, this is not problem-free.
- Lack of suitable childcare can make it difficult for parents of disabled children to access relationship services.
- Helping couples to recognise the early signs of relationship difficulty and motivating them to seek help are important. Many parents would be prepared to learn about developing relationship and parenting skills.

Counselling and mediation

Family mediation and relationship counselling can help parents experiencing relationship difficulties in different ways. *Relationship Counselling* enables the parties in a relationship to recognise repeating patterns of distress and to understand and manage troublesome differences that they are experiencing (British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy, 2011). It does not aim to 'save' relationships and in some cases might offer a safe space for ending a relationship (Chang et al, 2009).

Family mediation is a voluntary process where two or more members of a family meet with a trained mediator who helps them to communicate effectively and find their own arrangements. It supports parents with family change or breakdown, resolving conflicts and making plans for the future. Like relationship counselling, family mediation does not aim to help parents to get back together (Relationships Scotland, 2008).

Relationship counselling can help with marital distress and adult mental health problems such as depression, addiction and anxiety (Baucom et al, 1998; Breinlinger, 2009) and can reduce mild to moderate levels of aggression in couple relationships even when this is not specifically targeted (Simpson et al, 2008). Marital therapies have been found to be more effective than no treatment in bringing change in spouses' behaviour and in the general assessment of their relationship (Dunn et al, 1995). The use of family mediation in settling disputes in family changes has been strongly supported by research (Kelly, 2004).

Some factors can influence the outcome of family mediation, but others make no difference. Parents' age, the length of their relationship and the number of children they have does not have any significant impact. Full agreements are less likely to be reached where factors indicating a high level of conflict among the parents are present, such as a high number of mediation sessions, concerns about the effectiveness of mediation or the involvement of legal representation (Ballard et al, 2011).

Unresolved issues can interfere with the health of a new relationship. In families going through change, parents can face numerous challenges such as loss of an intimate partner, the move from a family home, the

Findings e. Supporting parents

lost opportunity for a close child-adult relationship for non-resident parents or the potential competition with a new step-parent. Aside from any unresolved issues, remarried couples can go through a 'honeymoon' period in which their marital satisfaction is higher than in their first marriage, followed by a sharp decline. This can be due to unrealistic expectations or the presence of children (Michaels, 2007).

Lesbian and gay family changes face similar challenges. Most lesbian-headed stepfamilies are formed following the breakdown of a heterosexual relationship. The formation of a new sexual identity while creating a new stepfamily can present further complications (Michaels, 2007).

Families with disabled or chronically ill children do not receive an appropriate level of support. Many families report poor levels of social support and in some cases, reduced social contact for both the parents and siblings. For example, 30% of parents in one study reported they had lost all contact with friends, relatives or extended family (Heiman, 2002 cited in Glenn, 2007). Support groups may help these parents to keep a positive outlook and a chance to share experiences with others (Beresford, 1994 cited in Glenn, 2007).

Where support works well, it co-ordinates services and provides an emotional and practical help. Professionals can sometimes pathologise families with disabled children and have a negative view of the child, and not recognise that families can manage very well where sufficient support is in place. This can impact upon the family and the relationship between the parents. Some fathers of disabled children have argued that the focus of services on mothers rather than parents leaves them feeling excluded (Glenn, 2007).

Access to short term breaks is key in easing time pressures and helping relationships between parents of disabled children (Shapiro, 2003). However, parents can feel guilty or concerned about safety when using breaks, which can add to their stress (Hartrey et al, 2003). Current provision has been criticised for being both inadequate and inappropriate both when children are young (Shapiro, 2003) and into adulthood (O Connell et al, 2006 cited in Glenn, 2007).

1 in 4 Poll says:

Short term breaks can support families by providing parents with time on their own, with their partners or with their other children. However, some parents feel that availability is limited.

Barriers to seeking support**Barriers to seeking support before, during and after break-up include:**

- one or both partners not wanting to admit to having troubles
- putting on a brave face for the sake of the children
- not wanting to talk to strangers about personal problems
- believing that nothing and no one could help
- preferring to stick it out and cope alone
- not knowing what services exist or what they do
- the stigma attached to seeking help

(Walker et al, 2010)

Forming good, intimate couple relationships is still commonly believed to be a private and personal matter despite a growing demand for couple support services in the UK (Chang et al, 2009).

Practical and emotional issues stop people seeking relationship counselling or family mediation. Long waiting times, finding convenient appointment times, cost, and perceptions of variable quality of service can deter people from speaking with relationship counsellors. For mediation services barriers include partner's reluctance, feeling too emotionally unstable to negotiate effectively, seeing potential for the partner to pressurise, not feeling on an equal footing, and thinking that participation might signify a tacit willingness to share responsibility for what had gone wrong (Walker et al, 2010).

Both men and women prefer support to come from someone familiar who has been through similar experiences (Ramm et al, 2010; Parentline Plus, 2008; Wilson et al, 2004). Being able to 'off-load' problems, be listened to and accept neutral and realistic advice are important (Ramm et al, 2010). Peer support is a preferred source for both men and women (Walker et al, 2010). Scottish non-resident fathers prefer to speak

Findings e. Supporting parents

with family and friends about contact issues. If they do use services, they prefer those with a largely male profile (Wilson et al, 2004).

Seeking help with relationship and emotional difficulties from family and friends is not problem-free (Walker et al, 2010; Parentline Plus, 2008; Edwards et al, 2004). People are prevented from sharing concerns with family and friends by not wanting to admit to having problems or be disloyal to a partner, concerns of overburdening them, wanting to keep relationship difficulties private, and feeling that more difficulties could be added if friends and family 'take sides'. Talking to family can be easier once a relationship had ended (Walker et al, 2010).

When a relationship is in serious trouble, people prefer support from skilled professionals. While friends might provide a shoulder to cry on, they can rarely resolve the difficulties (Walker et al, 2010). However, feelings of stigma, isolation and emotional turmoil combine to make it difficult for parents to seek appropriate services. Services are most effective when they are flexible, respond to the needs of individuals and differentiate between mothers and fathers (Parentline Plus, 2008). Parenting programmes need to address issues specific to parenting a child with a disability or behavioural problems (Glenn, 2007).

Helping couples to recognise the early signs of relationship difficulty and motivating them to seek help are important (Chang et al, 2009). Front line practitioners (such as GPs, health visitors and court officials) could benefit from training to increase their awareness of relationship issues and what can help (Chang et al, 2009). Many parents would be prepared to learn about problem-solving, conflict management, parenting, ways of improving communication and anger management through relationship preparation or relationship-building classes (Walker et al, 2010).

Printed information and websites are widely accessed by both men and women. Information on the internet is seen as convenient, anonymous, easily available, and non-stigmatising, although the reliability of information is not always obvious. Internet-based support can be immediate, confidential, not face-to-face and informative, and can offer the opportunity to gather advice from people in similar situations as well as experienced professionals (Walker et al, 2010).

1 in 4 Poll says:

As with all types of families, parents told us that key barriers to seeking help are: lack of awareness of services available; covering up issues to protect the children; and not wanting to admit to having problems. Some parents felt that health professionals are not aware of what help is available. Others were concerned that parents would be perceived as having 'failed' if they asked for help.

Parents felt that relationship services were unlikely to help them deal with a breakdown in a relationship because they felt such services would not have the necessary knowledge over disability, the support offered would not help, or their partner would refuse to take part.

A quarter of parents felt that lack of suitable childcare for their disabled child would make it difficult to access relationship services.

Existing contact with professionals about their disabled child meant that parents were less likely to seek outside help, either because they had poor experience of professionals or because they did not want anyone else involved professionally in their lives.

Discussion points:

- *How can services be flexible and respond to the needs of individuals – men, women and families affected by disability?*
- *How can parents' emotional and practical barriers to seeking professional support be addressed?*
- *How can services support families living in rural communities?*
- *How does cultural background impact on how people seek support, and how can services reach them in an appropriate way?*

4. Discussion

Recommendations from the literature

Some of the literature drawn on in this report included recommendations over what might help support relationships.

Relationship education should:

- start early in life to promote awareness and knowledge around strong and positive relationships

Parents would benefit from:

- better signposting to targeted advice, help, and support services
- peer support where people with similar situations and experiences can meet
- more support and advice at the point when relationships are in difficulty to help them make informed choices
- a menu of support provision, with different options to meet needs of people at different stages of their relationship
- support which is appropriate to how couples experience difficulties and the type of support they find acceptable when they do
- active support which understands parents' emotions rather than simply provides information

Support services should:

- engage with men as well as with women
- consider how all issues, such as health or unemployment, impact on well-being and relationships
- make use of community-based resources, including the provision of support in the workplace
- help professionals working with families around the time of childbirth to understand relationships, and to offer support and signposting
- offer training and support for practitioners to enable them to deal with the high levels of emotion and conflict present around separation and contact arrangements, and to work sensitively with both mothers and fathers

In summary, helping adults to become more informed about couple relationships (such as expected transitions and changes), the increased ability of practitioners

(and couples) to identify relationship difficulties at an early stage, and the provision of appropriate, timely and accessible support where applicable are leading requirements (Coleman et al, 2010).

Existing research and gaps in the research

Who are parents?

Often plural 'parents' are referred to, or generic 'parent' in the literature. As this does not differentiate between genders, it can be difficult to gauge any differences between the needs and experiences of mothers, fathers or female / male carers. Some literature does differentiate when exploring particular issues, such as financial circumstances following separation, child contact and non-resident parents, domestic abuse and childcare. We have reflected any distinction where possible, otherwise we refer to 'parents' in the same way that the literature does.

Distinctions between cohabitation and marriage vary in the research

In this review, we did not try to examine whether there are differences in the support needs of cohabiting or married couples. We have taken 'relationship' to mean any type of arrangement, and distinguished the type of relationship only where the literature states. Otherwise we refer to 'relationship' or 'couple'.

Couples with or without children

Research is variable in how it refers to couples. We have therefore not differentiated between couples who do or do not have children unless the literature specifically states this. The issues around maintaining and supporting couple relationships are relevant to all types of families.

Different family types

The circumstances and experiences of different family types, such as step-families or adoptive families, are rarely distinguished or referred to by the literature. We have referred to generic 'families' and specified a family type only where indicated in the literature.

LGBT families

Most research is based on heterosexual couples, a small amount on LGBT couples. However, many of the issues in this review will be relevant to all types of families. Recognising the unique experiences and needs of different groups is important.

Discussion

Parents with disabilities

Literature relating to families affected by disability tends to focus on children, rather than parents, with disabilities. There is a lack of information on the relationships needs and experiences of parents with disabilities. Literature about families including children with disabilities tends to focus around preventing, rather than supporting, relationship breakdown. Family support is often seen as being delivered through short term breaks.

Approach to disability

There tends to be focus on the difficulties and pressures associated with living with disabilities or long term conditions. While it is important to acknowledge and address these challenges, the prevalence of this view can give the impression that having a disabled child will inevitably lead to difficulties and relationship strain.

Outcomes for children and parents

A large quantity of research exists which focuses on improving outcomes for children rather than the parents themselves. Parenting support literature tends to relate to families considered to be 'at risk' (e.g. affected by substance abuse), and evaluations of social control interventions (e.g. reducing anti-social behaviour). However, a number of reviews looking at relationship support with a focus on parents' experiences of relationships and separation have been published by national charities and government departments and are referenced in this report.

Other relationship factors

In looking at research, it can be difficult to assess the precise contribution that couple relationship breakdown has on the reported impacts e.g. whether relationship breakdown contributes to alcohol use rather than vice versa. Also, it is not possible to rule out other influences such as behaviour, genetics, personality (Coleman et al, 2010).

What Next?

Informing service provision

This report will be used by voluntary and public sector agencies to assess what action needs to be taken based on the evidence presented. *About Families* will work with these agencies to develop, implement and evaluate action plans based on the needs they identify.

About Families aims to ensure that the changing needs of parents, including families affected by disability, are met by providing relevant and accessible evidence to inform service development.

Gathering evidence

About Families links research with the experiences of parents, practitioners and disabled people to identify and explore key challenges facing parenting and disability services and the families they work with.

Sharing information

Information and evidence are presented in user-friendly topic reports which help services to identify clear routes to developing service provision. Free downloads of all our topic reports are available on our website.

Informing action

Voluntary and public sector agencies use our topic reports to assess what action needs to be taken based on the evidence presented. *About Families* works with key agencies to develop, implement and evaluate action plans based on the needs they identify.

Join our mailing list and find out more at www.aboutfamilies.org.uk

If you are interested in being involved in one of our forum events to discuss the implications of our research findings for service development, please contact Katrina Reid on 0131 651 1941 or katrina.reid@ed.ac.uk

***About Families* is a partnership between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, Parenting across Scotland and Capability Scotland.**

5. Appendices

Appendix i) Research

a) Literature search method

Searching: An initial scoping was carried out to see what types of evidence and information are currently available around relationships and change. *About Families* carried out research using the Web of Knowledge social science database, as well as searches of online resources accessible from Scottish and UK governments, the voluntary sector and NGOs (Scotland and England), relevant UK research centres and national statistical bodies.

The terms used to search for evidence were: parent, family, relationship, marriage, co-habit, marital, blended, co-parenting, predict, moderate, adopt, step, divorce, support, lone, disruption, breakdown, separation, contact, mother, father, partner, spouse, couple, single, remarriage, re-partner, lesbian, gay, same-sex, accessibility, disability, mediation, counselling, sexuality, ethnic minority.

Research standards: To ensure high quality all evidence drawn on is peer-reviewed*, publicly funded or produced by government bodies. This report has

been peer-reviewed by a panel of academics. Service providers have also given comments.

**peer review is a process used to ensure the quality of academic work through a process of academics with similar expertise reviewing each other's work.*

Referencing: Some of the literature reviews drawn on are extensive and give multiple citations of other works. Where this is the case, we have referenced the literature review we have drawn on, rather than the original sources cited, as the latter would have made this review overly cumbersome. Original sources can be found in the reviews referenced in the bibliography. Where one specific author or piece of work is referenced in a literature review drawn on, this is cited and included in the bibliography.

b) Breakdown of research

A range of publications were drawn on, including literature reviews of existing research, research findings reported in journal articles, reports of longitudinal studies (e.g. Growing up in Scotland), analysis of other longitudinal studies (e.g. the Millenium Cohort Study) analysis of survey data (e.g. the British Household Panel Survey), government reports, research and reports by the third sector, as well as statistical data.

Type of publication	
Literature review	11
Longitudinal study report	2
Statistical information	9
Briefing	2
Secondary analysis of survey data	3
Secondary analysis of longitudinal data	3
Secondary analysis of longitudinal data and survey data	1
Secondary analysis of qualitative and quantitative data	2
Secondary analysis of qualitative data	1
Research study: qualitative and quantitative	9
Research study: qualitative	8
Research study: quantitative	1
Service website	2
Service evaluation review	2
Article	1
Total	57
Place of publication	
Scotland	16
Ireland	1
UK	32
USA	8
Total	57

Appendices

c) 1 in 4 Poll research

As noted in section two, families affected by disability were generally not referred to across the range of literature on relationships. We therefore conducted a survey and interviews with disabled parents and parents of disabled children. We presented some key issues around relationships or breakdown and asked whether they thought they would be different or the same for families affected by disability. This research was small scale and is not representative of the views of families affected by disability across Scotland, since that is outwith the scope of this work. The intention was to include some reflections from disabled families to inform discussions of what action is needed to meet the relationship needs of parents, and to ensure that the voice of disabled families was included.

The research was carried out in two ways:

- a self-completion questionnaire was sent to parents on Capability Scotland's 1 in 4 Poll, parents on the Cerebral Palsy Register for Scotland, and users of Capability Scotland's services. 600 questionnaires were sent out and a total of 100 completed questionnaires were received, a response rate of 17%.
- telephone interviews were conducted with 10 parents in order to explore views in depth.

Of the 10 interview participants, nine were mothers, one was a father. One participant was disabled, nine were non-disabled. All had disabled children living at home, eight were living with their partner, and two were divorced/separated.

Some survey responses added up to more than 100% due to multiple responses. Where responses added up to less than 100% this was due to "no replies".

Profile of respondents to the survey and interviews:

	Number of responses
Profile of family	
Disabled child	99
Disabled mother/father	7
Respondents relationship to child	
Mother	93
Father	6
Other (grandmother)	1
Children living at home	
Yes	93
No	7
Relationship with mother/father of child	
Living together (either married or cohabiting)	75
Separated for one year or less	1
Separated for more than one year	8
Divorced	9
Other (single parent/partner died)	5

Appendix ii) Policy context

The policy context is not described in detail since those this report is aimed at would already be familiar with the key areas. In brief, this report is relevant in the context of national initiatives in Scotland aiming to increase parental capacity, empower service users, and take a holistic view of the child and family, including Getting it Right for Every Child, Curriculum for Excellence, Early Years Framework, Achieving our Potential, the Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act (Scotland) 2009 and Equally Well.

Appendix iii) Bibliography

- Amato, P.R. (2000) 'The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1269-1287
- Ballard, R.H., Holtzworth-Munroe, A., Applegate, A.G. and D'Onofrio, B. (2011) 'Factors affecting the outcome of divorce and paternity mediations', *Family Court Review*, 49(1), 16-33
- Barnes, M., Chanfreau, J. and Tomaszewski, W. (2010) *Growing Up in Scotland: The Circumstances of Persistently Poor Children: Summary Report*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Government
- Bauman, S. (2004). *Parents of children with mental retardation: Coping mechanisms and support needs*. Doctoral Dissertation
- Baucom, D.H., Shoham, V., Mueser, K.T., Daiuto, A.D. and Stickle, T.R. (1998) 'Empirically Supported Couple and Family Interventions for Marital Distress and Adult Mental Health Problems', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66(1), 53-88
- Beresford, B. (1994) *Social Care Research Findings, 54: Caring for a severely disabled child*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Breinlinger, S. (2009) 'What is the Evidence Base for Couple Therapy?' in *Relate: The difference we make*. Doncaster: Relate
- British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (2011) <http://www.bacp.co.uk/>
- Callan, S. (2006) *The State of the Nation Report: Fractured Families*. London: Centre for Social Policy Justice
- Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (2010) 'Why Relationships Matter', Edinburgh: Centre for Research on Families and Relationships
- Chang, Y. and Barrett, H. (2009) *Couple Relationships: a review of the nature and effectiveness of support services*. London: Family and Parenting Institute
- Clarke, H. and McKay, S. (2008) *Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No 514: Exploring disability, family formation and break-up - Reviewing the evidence*. Norwich: Department of Work and Pensions
- Clarke-Stewart, A., and Brentano, C. (2006) *Divorce: Causes and Consequences*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Coleman, L. and Glenn, F. (2010) *When couples part: understanding the consequences for adults and children*. London: One Plus One
- Corman, H., & Kaestner (1992) 'The effects of child health on family structure', *Demography*, 29(3), 389-408
- Disability Agenda Scotland (2011) *Manifesto 2011: Equal Lives?* Glasgow: Disability Agenda Scotland
- Disability Wales (2011) *Social Model of Disability*. Available at <http://www.disabilitywales.org/social-model,2>
- Dowling, E., and Barnes, G. (2000) *Working with Children and Parents Through Separation and Divorce: The Changing Lives of Children*. London: Macmillan
- Dunn, R. L. and Swebel, A. I. (1995) 'Meta-analytic review of marital therapy outcome research', *Journal of Family Psychology* vol. 9, No. 1, 58-68
- Edwards, R. and Gillies, V. (2004) 'Support in Parenting: Values and Consensus concerning who to turn to', *Journal of Social Policy* vol. 33, no. 4, 627-647
- Ermisch, J. and Francesconi, M. (2000) 'Patterns of household and family formation', in R. Berthoud and J. Gurshuny (ed) *Seven Years in the Lives of British Families: Evidence on the Dynamics of Social Change from the British Household Panel Surve*. Bristol: The Polity Press, 21-44
- Fagan, J. and Barnett, M. (2003) 'The Relationship between Maternal Gatekeeping, Paternal Competence, Mothers' Attitudes about the Father Role, and Father Involvement', *Journal of Family Issues*, 24 (8) 1020-1043
- Family Mediation Helpline (2006) *What is mediation?* Available at: <http://www.familymediationhelpline.co.uk/downloads/12-what-is-mediation-final.pdf>
- Gardner, J. and Oswald, A. J. (2006) 'Do divorcing couples become happier by breaking up?', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 169, part 2, 319-336

Appendices

- General Register Office for Scotland (2008) Scotland's Population 2007 The Registrar General's Annual Review of Demographic Trends 153rd Edition, Edinburgh: General Register Office for Scotland
- General Register Office for Scotland (2010) Scotland's Population 2009 The Registrar General's Annual Review of Demographic Trends 155th Edition, Edinburgh: General Register Office for Scotland
- Glenn (2007) *Growing Together, or Drifting Apart? Children with disabilities and their parents' relationship.* London: One Plus One
- Green, S. E. (2007) "We're tired, not sad: Benefits and burdens of mothering a child with a disability", *Social Science & Medicine*, 64, 150-163
- Harrison, J. & Woolley, M. (2004) *Debt and Disability: The impact of debt on families with disabled children.* York: Contact a Family & Family Fund.
- Hartley, S. L., Barker E. T., Floyd, F., Greenberg, J., Orsmond, G. (2010) 'The Relative Risk and Timing of Divorce in Families of Children With an Autism Spectrum Disorder', *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol.24, No. 4, 449-457
- Hartrey L. and Wells J.S.G. (2003) 'The meaning of respite care to mothers of children with learning disabilities: two Irish case studies', *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 10: 335-342
- Hatton, C., Emerson, E., Graham, H., Blacker, J., Llewellyn, G. (2009) 'Changes in Family Composition and Marital Status in Families with a Young Child with Cognitive Delay', *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, vol. 23, 14-26
- Heiman, T. (2002) 'Parents of children with disabilities: Resilience, coping, and future expectations', *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 14(2), 159-171
- Kelly, J.B. (2004) 'Family Mediation Research: Is There Empirical Support for the Field?', *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 22(1-2), 3-35
- Kersh, J., Hedvat, T. T., Hauser-Cram, P. & Warfield, M. E. (2006) 'The contribution of marital quality to the well-being of parents of children with disabilities', *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 50(12), 883-893
- Khamis, V. (2007) 'Psychological distress among parents of children with mental retardation in the United Arab Emirates', *Social Science & Medicine*, 64, 850-857
- Laing, K. (2006) 'Doing the Right Thing: Cohabiting Parents, Separation and Child Contact', *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 20. 169-180
- Laing, K. and Wilson, G. (2010) *Understanding Child Contact Cases in Scottish Sheriff Courts.* Edinburgh: The Scottish Government
- Lewis, C., Papacosta, A. and Warin, J. (2002) *Cohabitation, Separation and Fatherhood.* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- MacLean, M. (2004) *'Together and apart: Children and parents experiencing separation and divorce.* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Marryat, L., Reid, S. and Wasoff, F. (2009) *Growing Up in Scotland Study: Sweep 3 Non-resident Parent Report.* Edinburgh: The Scottish Government
- Michaels, M.L. (2007) 'Remarital Issues in Couple Therapy', *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 6(1-2), 125-139
- Myers, M., (1989), *Men and Divorce.* New York: The Guildford Press
- O'Connell, P. & Rustin, C. (2006) 'Health and Social Services', in J. Reynolds (ed.), *The RITE Transition: The only way forward.* Brighton, UK: The DARE Foundation
- Office for National Statistics (2005) *Focus on Families 2005.* London: Office for National Statistics
- Office for National Statistics (2007) *Social Trends no. 37, 2007 edition.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan
- Office for National Statistics (2008) *Social Trends no. 38, 2008 edition.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan
- Office for National Statistics Scotland (2010) *Scotland's People: Annual report: results from 2009 Scottish Household Survey.* Edinburgh: The Scottish Government
- Office for National Statistics (2011)^a *Households and Families: Social Trends 41.* London: Office for National Statistics
- Office for National Statistics (2011)^b *Statistical Bulletin: Families and Households in the UK, 2001-2010.* Newport: Office for National Statistics
- One Parent Families Scotland (2008) *Briefing for MSPs: Employability issues for Lone Parent Families affected by Disability.* Edinburgh, One Parent Families Scotland

Appendices

- One Plus One (2007) Predictors of Relationship Quality. London: One Plus One
- Parentline Plus (2008) "Love your children more than you hate each other." The impact of divorce and separation on families: Views of parentline plus service users'. London: Parentline Plus
- Parentline Scotland (2008) A Snapshot of Concerns Raised in Calls to ParentLine Scotland. Edinburgh: ParentLine Scotland
- Perry, A., Douglas, G., Murch, M., Bader, K. and Borkowski, M. (2000) How parents cope financially on marriage breakdown. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Poulsen, S.S. and Thomas, V. (2007) 'Cultural Issues in Couple Therapy', *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 6(1-2), 141-152
- Quinton, D. (2004) Supporting parents: Messages from research. London: Jessica Kingsley
- Ramm, J., Coleman, L., Glenn, F., Mansfield, P. (2010) Relationship difficulties and help-seeking behaviour – Secondary analysis of an existing data-set. London: Department for Education
- Relationships Scotland (2008)a About Family Mediation. Available online: http://www.relationships-scotland.org.uk/family_mediation.shtml
- Rodgers, B. and Pryor, J. (2001) Children in Changing Families: Life after Parental Separation. Blackwell: Oxford
- Rogers, S.J. (1999) 'Wives' income and marital quality: Are there reciprocal effects?' *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 61, 123-132
- Sakraida, T. J. (2008) 'Stress and coping of midlife women in divorce transition', *Journal of Nursing Research*, Online First, 1–19.
- Scottish Executive (2004) Contact Applications Involving Domestic Abuse: Feasibility Study. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive
- Scottish Government (2008) 2007 Scottish Child Contact Survey. Edinburgh: Scottish Government
- Scottish Government (2010) Statistical Bulletin: Divorces and Dissolutions in Scotland, 2009-10. Edinburgh: Scottish Government
- Shapiro, A. (2003) 'No Time for Us': Relationships between Parents who have a Disabled Child. A survey of over 2000 parents in the UK. UK: Contact a Family
- Smart, C. and Neale, B. (1999) Family Fragments?, Oxford: Polity Press
- Sproston, K., Woodfield, K., and Tisdall, K. (2004) Building Bridges? Expectations and Experiences of Child Contact Centres in Scotland. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive
- Statham, H. (2002) 'Prenatal diagnosis of fetal abnormality: the decision to terminate the pregnancy and the psychological consequences', *Fetal and Maternal Medicine Review*, 13, 213 – 247
- Tibble, M (2005) Review of existing research on the extra costs of disability, Leeds: Department for Work and Pensions
- Todd, S., & Jones, S. (2005) 'Looking at the future and seeing the past: the challenge of the middle years of parenting a child with intellectual disabilities', *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 49(6), 389-404
- Trinder, L. (2008) 'Maternal Gate Closing and Gate Opening in Postdivorce Families', *Journal of Family Issues*, 29(10), 1298-1324
- Trinder, L., Beek, M., and Connolly, J. (2002) Making contact: How parents and children negotiate and experience contact after divorce. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Turnbull, A. P., Turnbull, H. R., Erwin, E. J., & Soodak, L. C. (2006) Families, professionals and exceptionality (5th edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/ Prentice Hall
- Valentine, S. and Weston, H. (2011) 'For Better or Worse? Relationship Counselling in Scotland Today', in *Counselling in Scotland, Counselling and Psychotherapy Scotland*, Spring 2011
- Wade, A., and Smart, C. (2002) Facing Family change: Children's circumstances strategies and resources. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Walker, J., Barrett, H., Wilson, G., Chang, Y-S. (2010) Understanding the Needs of Adults (Particularly Parents) Regarding Relationship Support. London, Department for Children, Schools and Families
- Wasoff, F. and Neale, B. (2006) Private Arrangements for Contact with Children. UK: ESRC and Scottish Executive
- Wates, M (2003) "It shouldn't be down to luck". Results of a DPN consultation with disabled parents on access to information and services to support parenting. London: Disabled Parents Network

Appendices

Wilson, B. (2010) 'Children with a non-resident parent', in Population Trends 140, Summer 2010. UK: Office for National Statistics

Wilson, B., Gillies, J.B., Mayes, G.M. (2004) Fathers as Co-Parents: How Non-resident Fathers Construe Family Situations. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive

Wooley, M. (2004). Income and expenditure of families with a disabled child. York: Family Fund

Woolfson, L. (2004) 'Family well-being and disabled children: A psychosocial model of disability-related child behaviour problems', British Journal of Health Psychology, 9, 1-13

Appendix iv) Acknowledgements

This report was researched and prepared by Karen Mounthey for the *About Families* team, managed by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships,

with input and advice from Parenting across Scotland, Capability Scotland and an Evidence Review Panel of experts in the fields of families and disability:

- Professor Rosalind Edwards, London South Bank University
- Professor Lynn Jamieson, University of Edinburgh
- Professor Nick Watson, University of Glasgow
- Jill Cook, Manager, ParentLine
- Stella Gibson, Chief Executive, Scottish Marriage Care
- Stuart Valentine, Chief Executive, Relationships Scotland

Research assistance was provided by Marlies Kustatscher.

Research with families affected by disability was carried out by Scotinform on behalf of *About Families*.

