Promoting emotional health in the transition to parenthood

In this article, One Plus One, the UK’s leading relationship research organisation, outlines the important role both statutory and voluntary support services have in supporting parents, and discusses how the organisation’s Brief Encounters® training model can help enhance practitioners’ knowledge and skills to support parents during the transition to parenthood.

An effective family policy must start with supporting strong couple relationships.1

There is now compelling evidence of the importance of a stable family relationship to the emotional well-being of children and adults.2,3,4 Poor quality parental relationships, whether parents are living together or not, particularly those characterised by destructive conflict, are associated with poor parenting, poor quality parent-child relationships and poor long-term social emotional and educational outcomes for children.5 Recent government policy in England such as the Department for Children, Schools and Families report Children’s Plan: One Year On® and The Child Health Promotion Programme7 have acknowledged the significant role that the couple relationship can play in parenting and subsequent outcomes for children.

During the transition to parenthood, there are significant challenges facing new parents, and many will experience some level of deterioration in the quality of their relationship during this time. Early intervention is of paramount importance if this erosion is to be stemmed, as it is known that at least one in three children in the UK will experience parental separation before the age of 16.8

Transition to parenthood

In a recent survey, 50% of new parents reported a severe or moderate decline in relationship satisfaction.9 Clearly some relationships are more vulnerable, particularly those where there are pre-existing problems, disagreements about starting a family, poor childhood experiences, insufficient resources and postnatal depression.10 Many parents find themselves arguing more, spending less time together, struggling with changing roles and identity and a loss of sexual intimacy. They also lack the time to nurture their relationship and build the factors that will help protect it during times of stress.11 Couples who lack the resources to cope with these pressures can get trapped in a downward spiral of poor communication, distress and conflict.12

Impact of relationship distress on families

The additional pressures encountered in the parental relationship at the time of the transition to parenthood can lead to increased conflict which in turn can have a number of long-term effects on the child.13 It is difficult to establish causal links in the complex processes of infant and child development; however, research has found an association between maternal stress arising from relationship problems in the antenatal period and poorer cognitive development, behavioural and anxiety disorders, attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity.14,15 Distress in the couple relationship also affects the parent’s capacity to parent.16,17 A well-functioning couple relationship is linked to sensitive warm and accepting parenting essential in the development of secure infant attachments.18 Furthermore, the amount of support the mother receives from her partner has been linked to her care-giving ability which in turn impacts on the quality of the mother-infant bond. In the same way, it also shapes the father’s positive involvement which again is vital for the well-being of children.4
**VOICES Training**

NCT’s VOICES workshops are designed for members of MSLCs, Labour Ward Forums and Breastfeeding Support Groups. It aims to give user reps the confidence to work in effective partnership with health professionals and maternity service managers and commissioners.

They are designed to help you:
- Understand how to operate as a member of the group and improve committee skills
- Increase confidence building and problem solving
- Appreciate the perspectives of all those involved in healthcare
- Learn how the health services works
- Explore effective partnership working
- Access and understand policy documents.

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:
- Recognise the barriers to effective user involvement and choose appropriate strategies/solutions
- Identify effective communication strategies for meetings
- List different methods for gathering user views and identifying issues relevant to service users to aid service development
- Recognise ways of developing and presenting an effective case for change
- Identify support needs and networks.

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**Early intervention: supporting couple relationships**

The vast majority of fathers are involved with their partners around the birth of the baby and both parents are usually optimistic about the future and motivated to do the best for their baby. A ‘magic moment’ is often referred to when NCT workers involved in the antenatal period and early weeks are in an ideal position to intervene and prevent a decline in relationship satisfaction, turning a vicious cycle into a virtuous one. (See diagram above.)

**A framework for practice**

The Brief Encounters® model is designed to help anyone who works with families to feel confident when responding to relationship difficulties raised by parents. The model follows the helping process and provides an easy guide to essential skills and incorporates evidence-based information about couple and family relationships.

Enhancing the skills of frontline workers in this sense is not about developing relationship counsellors. But rather it is about helping practitioners to be more psychologically-minded and able to discuss relationship issues without feeling out of their depth, giving parents time, attention and respect to help them work out their own solutions. (See diagram on page 11.)

**Step 1: Recognising the signals**

Whilst most parents who experience some kind of relationship dissatisfaction would not consider seeking relationship counselling, they may have ‘turned to’ an antenatal or postnatal worker or breastfeeding counsellor for help during this time. Alternatively, the NCT specialist worker may have picked up some other signal of distress such as feeding difficulties, behaviour difficulties or anxiety. At this stage the practitioner is in a position to make an offer of time, attention and respect:
- **What:** Would you like an opportunity to talk?
- **When:** We could talk now or I could come back on....[suggest when].
- **How long:** I have ten minutes now.
- **Where:** Let’s just find a quiet corner over there.

Explaining the limits on time and resources helps practitioners to avoid feeling overwhelmed and keeps the discussion focused.

**Step 2: Listening, exploring and understanding**

At this stage it is important to resist the temptation to ‘fix it’. Instead it is about working together to gain a shared understanding of the problem and potential solutions. Using enhanced listening skills the helper encourages the parent or parents to explore what is going on for them and uncover the hidden issues that are causing problems in the relationship. This is about discovering what is really going on. Reflecting back to the parent and summarising what has been said helps the parent and the helper to get a better shared understanding of the underlying issues and how they might be resolved.

**Step 3: Review**

The third step is about reviewing progress and ending the encounter. This helps the parent to think about where to go next, and may involve setting goals or sensitive referral for more specialised help.

One Plus One has developed this highly effective model to enable practitioners to...
specialist workers are ideally placed to support family relationships at an early stage and prevent relationship breakdown. If they are equipped with an understanding of what makes relationships work and are able to use enhanced listening skills, they will be able to assist parents in finding their own solutions. The Brief Encounters® training is recognised as an example of good practice in The Children’s Plan and Child Health Promotion Programme and is key in helping frontline practitioners to promote family relationships and enhance the emotional health of children and their parents.

References

Summary
It is clear that a supportive, caring relationship is a potent protective factor in promoting the emotional health of children. NCT supports relationships at an early stage. After training, 97% of health visitors said they felt more confident in their ability to support parents with relationship problems and 88% had learned to manage their time more effectively during visits. Further guidance, resources and information are available in a source book for practitioners (for a review of this source book, see page 16) or from the One Plus One website (www.oneplusone.org.uk).

Resources for healthcare professionals and NCT specialist workers

The Continuum Concept
Jean Liedloff (1986)
American writer Jean Liedloff spent two and a half years in the South American jungle living with Stone Age Indians. The experience led her to a radically different view of what human nature really is. She offers a new understanding of how we have lost much of our natural well-being and shows us practical ways to regain it for our children and for ourselves.

Feelings after Birth: The NCT book of Postnatal Depression
NCT/Heather Welford 2002
High expectations coupled with a lack of support can lead to loneliness, exhaustion and feelings of failure and guilt. Postnatal depression affects the whole family and can have serious consequences for the baby. The good news is that women do recover and this book, aimed at both parents and professionals, will help them do just that.

Babyshock!
By Elizabeth Martin (2001)
A book that acknowledges the pressures as well as the pleasures of parenthood, covering a wide range of topics, such as: adjusting to parenthood, coping with domestic chores, work, dealing with money, your sex life, and handling rows.

See www.nctresources.co.uk or call 0845 8100 100

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