REDUCING PARENTAL CONFLICT TO IMPROVE PSYCHOLOGICAL OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

- How family relationship experiences affect child and adolescent mental health and development

    – A focus on the inter-parental/carer and parent-child relationship(s)

    – A brief review of theory and research

    – Challenges to past research – implications for practice (and policy)

- Examples from research (UK and International)

    – Highlighting <u>how</u> inter-parental relationship dynamics affect children's emotional, behavioural and social development

    – A focus on identifying mechanisms (intervention/prevention focus)

- Translating research to practice and policy

    – UK Examples – The Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) programme; Family Court (CAFCASS CYMRU/Wales)

    – The importance of and future opportunities for effective Trauma Informed Training (as a framework) – Rudd Centre

    – Bottom line interest: Engaging research to positively inform policy, practice and the everyday lived experiences of vulnerable families and children

# MENTAL ILL HEALTH AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

- Mental health is an issue of significant national and international priority

  - Mental ill health is recognised as a leading cause of disability in the UK

  - 1:4 adults and young people experience mental ill health (>£100B UK; $16T globally; 2030)

  - UK: Rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, substance misuse, conduct disorder and others among the highest in economically well-off countries (OECD); Not just increased reporting

  - 75% of serious psychiatric disorders in adulthood are in place before the age of 18 years, mental ill health has significant impacts on education, physical health and other outcomes (IGT)

- Domestic experiences/family relationship dynamics and child-adolescent mental ill health

  - Economic disadvantage/Economic stress (poverty through to day-to-day challenges, JAMF)

  - Adult/parent mental health (e.g., depression)

  - Parenting behaviour/practices (e.g., attachment; parenting styles)

  - Inter-parental conflict/Domestic violence/Parental separation-divorce (IPC)

- Moving from correlates to processes (mechanisms) – improving understanding/intervention

  - What factors affect family relationship dynamics, how do relationship dynamics affect individuals, how do individuals affect future family relationship dynamics, how do we interrupt negative intergenerational transmission cycles? How do we provide evidence-based support to help families and children today (parents 'tomorrow')?

THE EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC STRESS ON FAMILY DYNAMICS: PAST AND PRESENT (AND LIKELY FUTURE WITHOUT CHANGE …)
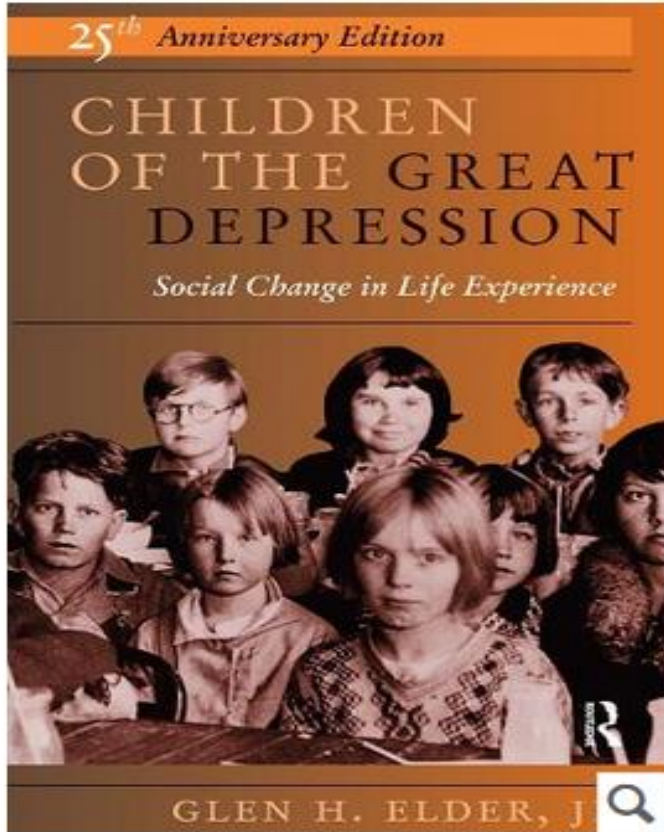
"The primary effects for children of the American Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s were hard labor, malnutrition and hunger, and displacement. Many young people also developed emotional and psychological problems as a result of living in constant uncertainty and of seeing their families in hardship … [lifecourse developmental outcomes]"
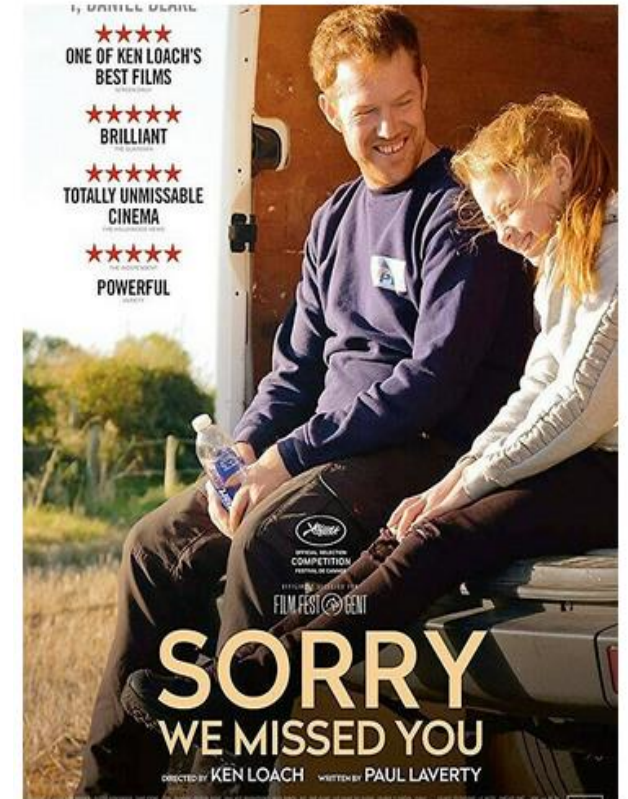
Process Model of Family Relationship Influences on Child Mental Health



Conger and colleagues, FSM 1989-2019+
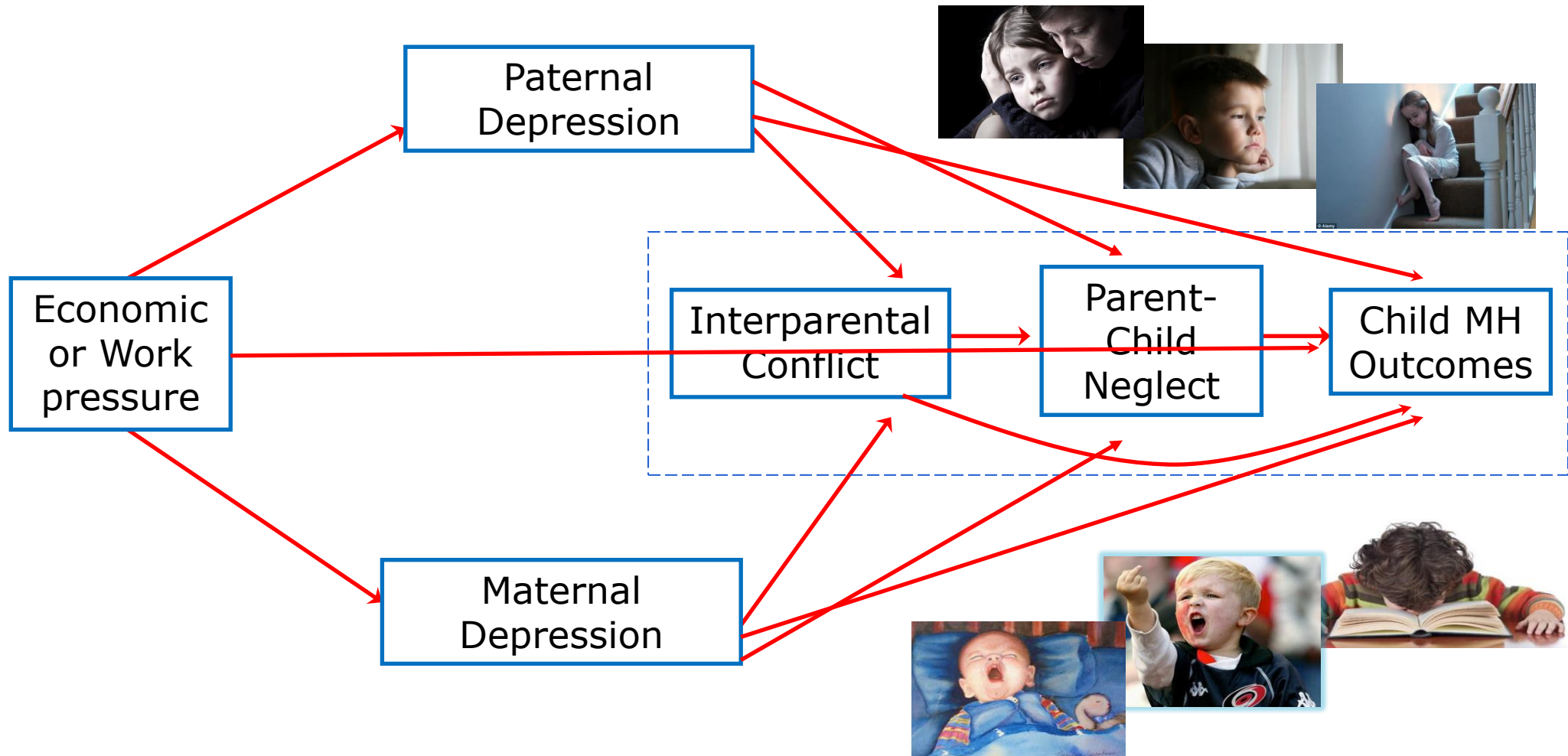
INTER-PARENTAL CONFLICT AND OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN: PUTTING 'CONFLICT' IN CONTEXT

CHALLENGES FOR PAST RESEARCH

- Salience of the family environment ?

  – Predominantly conducted with biologically related parents and children

  – Limited examination of maternal AND paternal influences on outcomes

- What if it is all in the genes?

  – Associations between parental behaviour (e.g. IPC, parenting practices/style) and child behaviour is BECAUSE children share genes with their parents??

- Disentangling genetic factors (nature, G) from rearing environment factors (nurture, E)

  – How can we show that E matters relative to G?

  – The role of research design
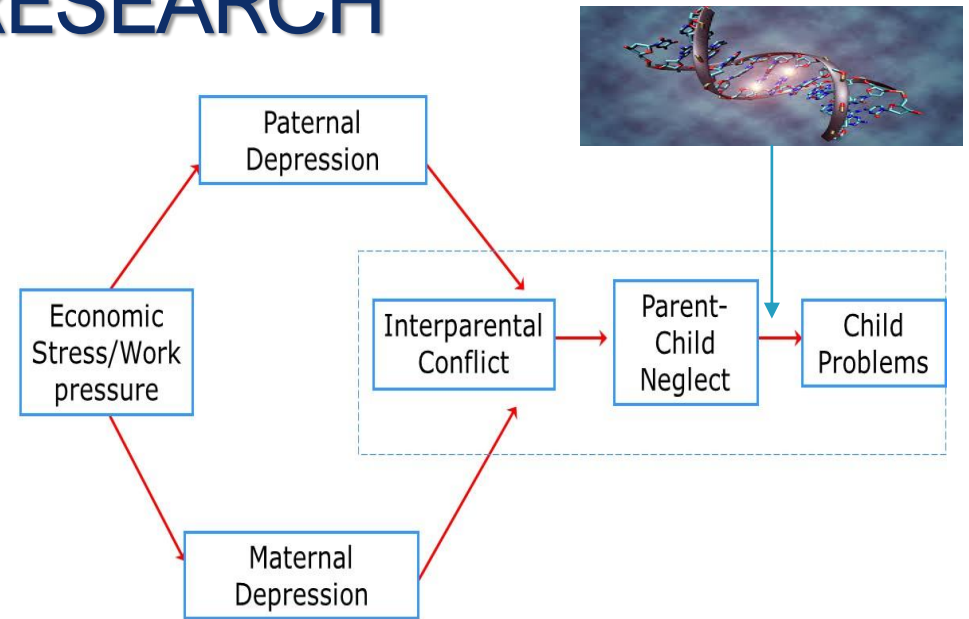
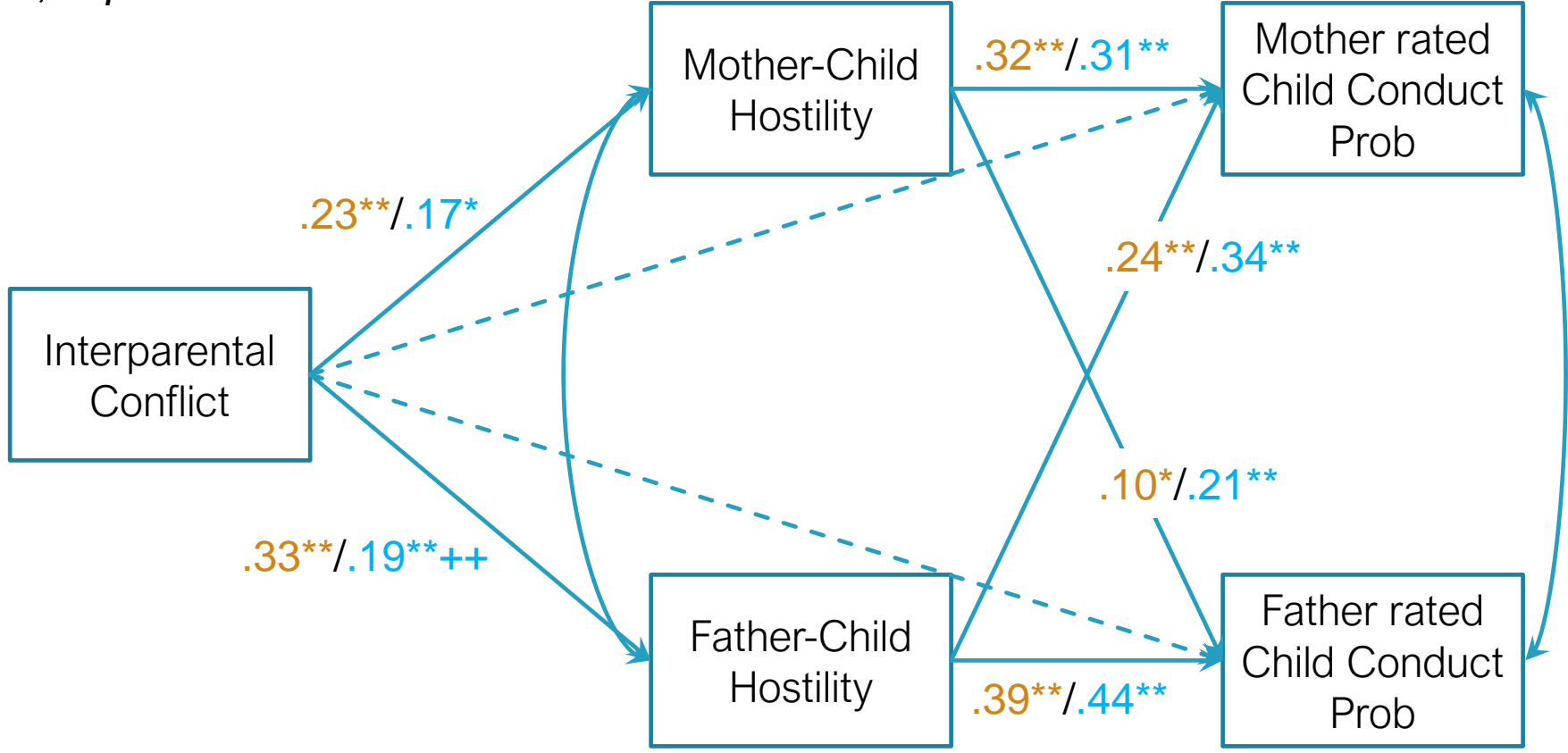"So, how do you want to play this? Nature, nurture, or a bit of both?"

FAMILY RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AS A 'NURTURING' INFLUENCE: THE CHALLENGE OF GENE-ENVIRONMENT CORRELATION
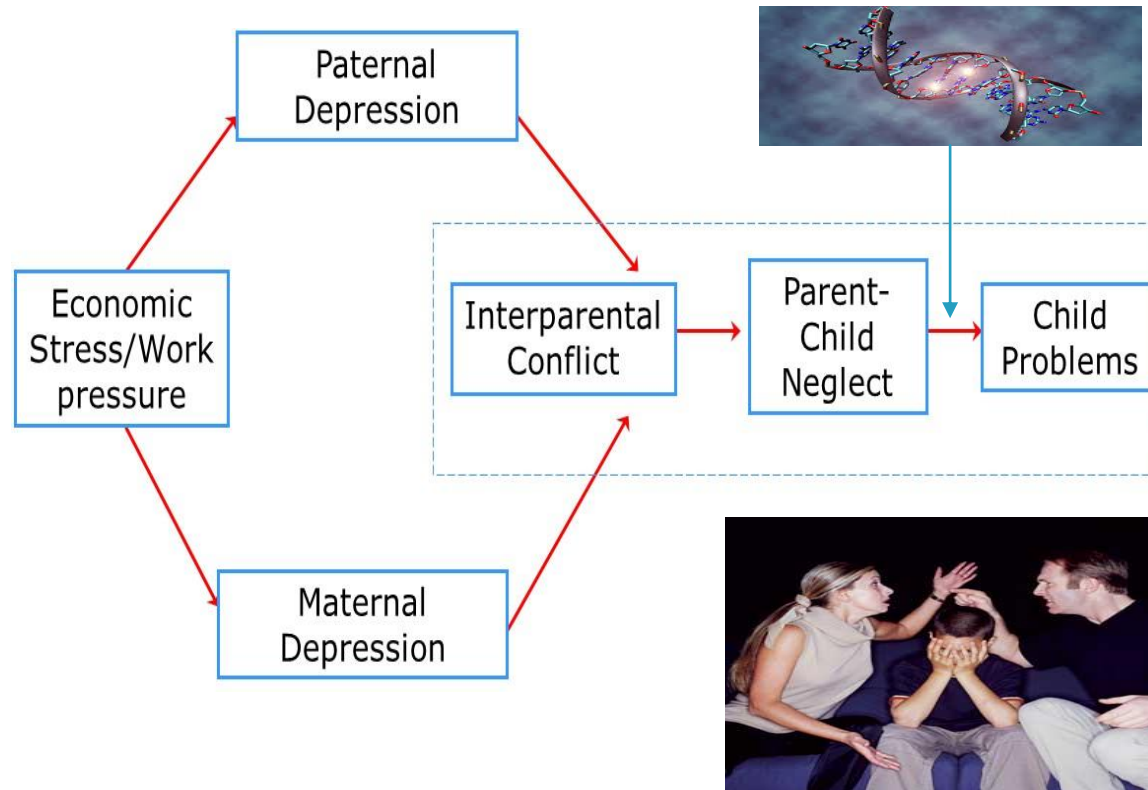
- **Disentangling Nature from Nurture: Two novel research designs (others intl.,)**
  - Early Growth and Development Study (US)
    - Longitudinal adoption-at-birth study (>500 children, biological and adoptive parents, 2004+)
  - Cardiff *In vitro* fertilisation Study (UK)
    - Adoption at conception study (genetically unrelated mothers and fathers; >1000 children, parents, 2006+)
- **Bottom-line impacts of research**
  - Associations between family and school-based relationship experiences/environments and child behaviour/outcomes CANNOT be due to common genes shared between biological parents and children

FAMILY RELATIONSHIP PROCESSES AND CHILD CONDUCT PROBLEMS
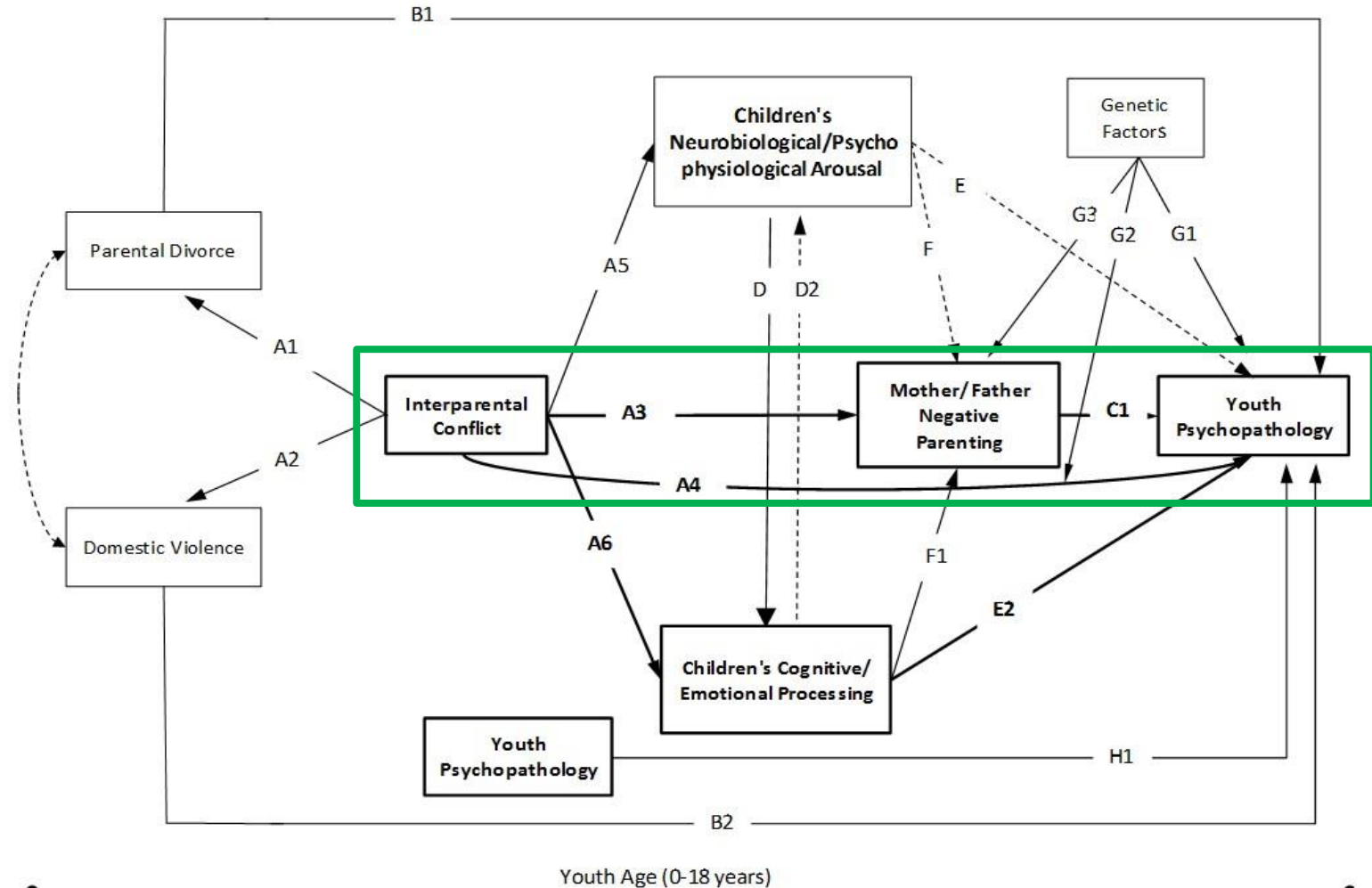## (IVF-H / EGDS)

*p <.05, ** p < .01

Interparental Conflict → Mother-Child Hostility: .23**/.17*

Interparental Conflict → Father-Child Hostility: .33**/.19**++

Mother-Child Hostility → Mother rated Child Conduct Prob: .32**/.31**

Mother-Child Hostility / Father-Child Hostility crossed paths: .24**/.34** and .10*/.21**

Father-Child Hostility → Father rated Child Conduct Prob: .39**/.44**

Harold, G. T., Leve, L. D., Elam, K., Thapar, A., Neiderhiser, J., Natsuaki, M., Shaw, D., Reiss, D. (2013). The Nature of Nurture: Disentangling Passive Genotype-Environment Correlation from Family Relationship Influences on Children's Externalizing Problems. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 27(1), 12-21.

HOW CONFLICT BETWEEN PARENTS AFFECTS YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH (AND IGT)

The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry

Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 59:4 (2018), pp 374-402   doi:10.1111/jcpp.12893

Annual Research Review: Interparental conflict and youth psychopathology: an evidence review and practice focused update

Gordon T. Harold, and Ruth Sellers

University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

HOW FAMILY PROCESSES AFFECT CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

- **The salience and significance of family relationship processes for children's MH**
  - The quality of the inter-parental and parent-child relationships (whether adults are living together or not, whether they are biologically related to a child or not) significantly affects children's mental health and development
    - Anxiety, depression, conduct problems, academic problems, substance misuse, psychosis, self-harm, suicidality – interpersonal violence (intergenerational transmission)
  - Children's appraisals and perceptions of IPC significantly affect mental health and dev.,
- **Implications of research evidence for practice and policy**
  - Interventions that promote positive inter-parental relationship dynamics promote more positive parent-child relationship dynamics, positive mental health, education and long-term outcomes for children and adolescents
  - Supporting parents/adults to effectively manage conflict in their own relationships substantially enhances mental health and other outcomes for children and adolescent, as well as improving adult mental health, parenting practices, adult substance misuse, reduction of intergenerational interpersonal violence 'cycles', improved physical health and wellbeing, adaptation to parental divorce
- **Applying the research to UK practice and policy**
  - Working with policy makers/advisors, practitioners, parents and families
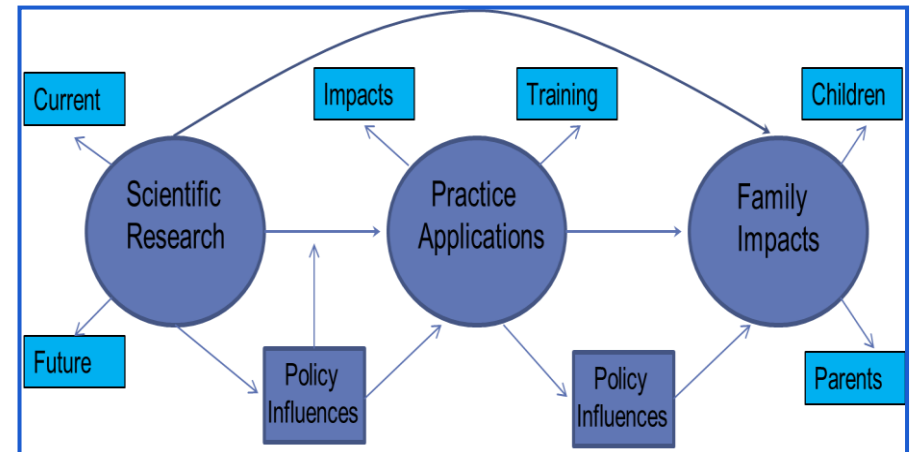
The Rudd Centre

Welcome to The Andrew and Virginia Rudd Research and Professional Practice

Centre, University of Cambridge

Promoting world-leading research, professional practice training and policy engagement that

meet the needs of families and children in a changing world.

Current — Scientific Research — Impacts — Training — Children

Future — Policy Influences — Practice Applications — Policy Influences — Family Impacts — Parents

UK GOVERNMENT – THE REDUCING PARENTAL CONFLICT PROGRAMME (DWP 2018-22; 2025+)

- **Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Programme (England)**
  - Inter-parental/parent-child relationship support (>£70M, 2018+)
    - Inter-parental and parenting focused support
    - Child outcomes (mental health)
- **Transforming front line practice/provider capacity**
  - Practitioner training/capacity building in relationship quality assessment, adult and child mental health, referral to evidence-based programmes (2018+)
    - 16,000+ practitioners, managers and leaders have attended regional and national Communities of Practice events, with 4,800 parents from approximately 3,000 families participating in one of eight RPC focused intervention programmes.
  - Local authority Assessment of Need/Referral (questionnaire)
  - An intergenerational perspective (early prevention significantly more cost effective than late intervention); Inter-parental/parenting focused support and child/adolescent mental health and related outcomes
  - Current extensions to programme focus (DfE; DHSC, MoJ)
  - Importance of rigorous practitioner training/implementation/evaluation

FAMILY JUSTICE SYSTEM – PRIVATE LAW WORKING GROUP (2019)

A REVIEW OF

THE CHILD ARRANGEMENTS PROGRAMME

[PD12B FPR 2010]

REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE FAMILY DIVISION

PRIVATE LAW WORKING GROUP

[June 2019]

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family
solutions
group.

Inter-Parental Conflict and Family Separation
Prof Gordon Harold (University of Cambridge)

A simple summary of the evidence as regards Inter-Parental Conflict and Family Separation:

- Family separation is always a stressful experience for children and teens **in the short term**. But what drives the **long term impact** on them is the level of conflict they witness before, during and following parental separation.

- It's normal for it to take about 2 years for children and teens to adjust to a family separation. The higher the levels of conflict, however, the harder it is to adjust and the longer the ripple effects continue for poor outcomes (e.g. mental health).

- High levels of conflict between parents are shown to have many poor outcomes for children. These include anxiety and depression, academic failure, substance abuse, conduct problems, criminality, peer problems and adversely affected brain development. Patterns of conflict can even be passed on to the next generation.

- These outcomes stretch on into adulthood. Acrimonious parental conflict is a common childhood factor in adults who experience mental ill health, relationship difficulties, substance abuse, homelessness, criminality.

- By contrast, actions designed to reduce the level of inter-parental conflict are associated with positive long-term outcomes. There are clear improvements in mental health, behaviour, school outcomes and long-term relationships.

- These positive outcomes have benefits not just for the individuals but for the whole of society. They produce widespread cost savings, ranging from the education system to the health and social care system, the civil and criminal justice system and they also produce positive future employment outcomes.

Bibliography

Feinberg, M.E., Jones, D.E., Kan, M.L., & Goslin, M.C. (2010). Effects of family foundations on parents and children: 3.5 years after baseline. Journal of Family Psychology, 24, 532–542.

Grych, J. H., & Fincham, F. D. (1992). Interventions for children of divorce: Toward greater integration of research and action. Psychological Bulletin, 110, 434–454.

Harold, G. T., Sellers, R. (2018). Interparental Conflict and Youth Psychopathology: An Evidence Review and Practice Focused Update. The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 59 (4).

CAFCASS CYMRU: ASSESSING IPC AND CHILD MENTAL HEALTH IN PRIVATE LAW CONTEXT – A PRACTITIONER PROGRAMME

CAFCASS CYMRU CHILD AND ADOLESCENT WELFARE ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST (CC-CAWAC)

gcclbt cymru cafcass

PRACTITIONER ASSESSMENT HANDBOOK (PRACTITIONER USE ONLY)

DEVELOPED BY PROFESSOR GORDON HAROLD

Acceptance	Score	
	mum	dad
Total		
1. Makes me feel better after talking over my worries with her		
2. Almost always speaks to me with a warm and friendly voice		
3. Smiles at me very often		
4. Is able to make me feel better when I am upset		
5. Enjoys doing things with me		
6. Cheers me up when I am sad		
7. Often speaks of the good things I do		
8. Seems proud of the things I do		

Acceptance: Child completed	Normal	Moderate risk	High risk
	20–24	18–19	8–17

Acceptance: Adolescent completed	Normal	Moderate risk	High risk
	19–24	16–18	8–15

- Adoption and Children Act (2002, 2006) – "Seeing or hearing ill treatment of another is a child protection issue"

- Assessing inter-parental conflict and child-adolescent mental health
  - Youth mental health, IPC, parenting, educational engagement (others)
  - Standardised scoring protocol
  - Training (full day): Research background, Implementation, Scoring, Report writing
  - Court aligned report/recommendations
  - All practitioners (children, families, schools, 2016+)

Working with Families, Parents and Young People (Home Environments Matter: Video)

SUMMARY AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

- Summary of Research Evidence

  - Mental health of children and adolescents in the UK and Ireland (OECD and related comparison groups; pandemic)

  - Family relationship dynamics are associated with mental health and other outcomes for young people (e.g., education)

  - The quality of the inter-parental relationship is a fundamental pillar of influence for children's mental health across the socioeconomic spectrum (an important site of support in the context of household economic disadvantage)

  - Supporting the inter-parental relationship improves children's experiences of parent-child relationships, their mental health, future interpersonal relationship experiences and life chances (multiple government department benefits – intervention-prevention framework requires a Policy Paradigm Shift (Moving from Silos to Synergies; Outcomes only focus to processes that affect outcomes focus; sites of intervention and support)

  - Cost benefits of early prevention versus late intervention

  - Opportunity to sustainably improve long-term outcomes for young people today – and to promote positive outcomes for the next generation of parents, families and children (breaking cycles)

- Opportunities for the Future

  - Supporting public health professionals and others to deliver evidence-based relationship focused support programmes to promote positive outcomes for children and adolescents (a Trauma Informed Training Framework, Rudd Centre)

  - Shifting the focus from mental ill health crisis management to mental health support and early intervention/prevention (e.g., the RPC programme; aligned practitioner training)

  - Equipping professionals with evidence-based training to deliver programmes that promote improved outcomes (specific to primary groups/communities of interest/need; "Trauma Informed Training" engagement/evaluation)

  - The importance of engaging evidence-based programmes, employing Communities of Practice strategies to design, implement and evaluate programmes and good-practice sharing – without substantive system change and a move to early intervention/prevention strategies, the current trajectory of mental ill health and related problems will not be interrupted – really is time for a change in thinking and strategy!

Questions/Discussion

Thank you

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