

BUILDING STRONGER FAMILIES
THEORY MANUAL

SIMON PELLEW
TIME FOR FAMILIES
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17 Sydenham Rd

London SE26 5EX

simon.pellew@timeforfamilies.org.uk

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Introduction

This manual provides the theoretical base for the Time for Families “Building Stronger Families” course. The aim of this course is to strengthen the relationship between an inmate and his partner (the course is designed for male prisoners) so that the relationship survives the prison sentence and the inmate is able to return to the partner. This should lead to a reduction in recidivism.

Relationships and Recidivism

There is growing evidence that intimate family relationships can make a substantial difference to the likelihood of recidivism. In the UK, the primary source is the Social Exclusion Unit’s report (Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners 2002). This report highlighted the fact that 43% of sentenced prisoners lose touch with their families and 22% of married prisoners break up with their spouse. The report stated that “Research shows that the existence and maintenance of good family relationships helps to reduce re-offending, and the support of families and friends on release can help offenders successfully settle back into the community” (p.111).

Since then, the Home Office has published a report based on a survey of prisoners that links the number of visits to increased probability of accommodation and employment (Niven and Stewart 2005). The PSO on Visits (PSO 4410: Prisoner Communications - Visits) also states in its preamble that “Visits are seen as a crucial to sustaining relationships with close relatives, partners and friends. They help prisoners maintain links with the community, and are associated with a reduced likelihood of reoffending”. This positive view of the importance of family links is reflected in the NOMS National Commissioning Framework (National Commissioning Framework 2007-08 2007).

In America there has been substantial research on the relationship between family relationships and recidivism. The most persuasive work has been by Sampson et al. (2006). This research involved tracking 500 delinquent boys from their early teens until their 70s. They found that marriage reduced the probability of offending by 35%. Forrest (2006) has examined whether a similar effect is found with cohabitation (Forrest, W 2006) and was unable to demonstrate a positive effect of cohabitation. He found that the impact of marriage is through informal social control (the wife stopping the man from behaving in a pro-criminal way) and through reducing the husband’s exposure to criminal peers. These findings are consistent with the commitment theory outlined below (Stanley et al. 2005). However, the impact of marriage on desistance depends on the quality of the relationship, strong emotional attachment and commitment.

Fathering in Prison

The Children of Offenders Review (Children of Offenders Review 2007) has calculated that there are about 160,000 children with a parent in prison in each year. Sixty-five percent of children with a parent in prison go on to offend. These findings clearly imply that children’s life chances are damaged by their parents’ offending.

Research has demonstrated that the mother is the gatekeeper to the father-child relationship: if the father’s relationship with the mother breaks down during a sentence, he has a much lower chance of retaining his relationship with his children (Clarke et al. 2005).

Relationship Education

Teaching relationship skills can help prisoners and their partners maintain family relationships, improve the quality of visits, reduce conflict and increase relationship stability post-release.

Although the Home Office research (Niven and Stewart 2005) states that the link between visits and positive post-release outcomes is not necessarily causal, it seems both plausible and self-evident that improving the quality of prisoner-partner relationships will improve the quality of their visits, and this may lead to more visits and improved resettlement outcomes. The authors of the report do not dispute the likely causal link between the quality of the relationship and visits (pers. comm.).

The benefits of stable low conflict parental relationships to a wide range of children's outcomes further enhances the case for strengthening prisoner-partner relationships (Booth and Amato 2001; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

The effectiveness of relationship education as a method of improving relationship quality and stability has been well established in US research, though not yet in the UK. Reviews show that relationship education programmes lasting just a few hours can strengthen family relationships over a period of one to five years (Carroll and Doherty 2003).

Although the majority of current studies of relationship education involve couples who are engaged to be married, the advent of large-scale publicly-funded Healthy Marriage Initiatives in the US is providing good evidence that courses are well received by both low income and prison populations. In particular, the most economically disadvantaged report the greatest interest and openness to such efforts (Johnson et al. 2002).

More specifically, the first major study of the applicability of relationship education programmes in prison was recently conducted by the top research team at University of Denver. The study of 254 male and female prisoners found improvements across all major relationship variables following the programme, regardless of gender or ethnic group (Einhorn, L. et al.).

Provided that relationship education programmes cover certain key factors, there is good evidence that specific programme content is not a critical factor. Carroll & Doherty's review paper concludes that *"the best studies of the best programs consistently find positive outcomes and that the preponderance of studies have identified some of the same basic processes and skills (e.g., communication, conflict negotiation, commitment, etc.) that are key factors in marital success and stability"*. This view is supported by a community study of 3,000 US families that found divorce rates were 30% lower over the first five years of marriage amongst those who had completed a well-organised pre-marriage relationship education programme (Stanley et al. 2006).

In conclusion, there remains a great deal of research that needs to be done to consolidate the rationale for relationship education in prison. However there is already considerable evidence to show that a well-constructed relationship education programme covering the basic key factors in marital stability is appropriate for a prison population, can be delivered by local volunteers with minimal training, can improve relationship quality, and thus lead to improved resettlement outcomes.

Approaches to Relationship Education

Most relationship education research tends to focus on single programmes where benefits have been demonstrated up to 5 years later (Carroll and Doherty 2003). The few broader studies that collate or compare a range of programmes find positive effects where programmes are well-organised and include certain key components (Stanley et al. 2001).

In terms of content, Carroll & Doherty's review highlights that the most effective programmes centre on the same basic processes of communication, conflict negotiation and commitment. Large scale surveys reinforce that how couples argue appears a far better indicator of marital outcome than what they argue about. The one exception is money, where consistent arguments are linked to higher levels of negative communication and conflict (Stanley et al. 2002).

The most plausible justification for including any component or principle in a preventive relationship education programme lies in the extent to which it is an effective predictor of relationship outcomes. Well-researched programmes such as PREP, developed at the University of Denver, have emerged from a combination of predictive and survey research, subsequently tested by outcome research.

Amongst the most compelling predictors of future outcomes is the presence or absence of positive and negative behaviours as separate factors. Although details vary, this principle has been replicated in study after study. For example, the negative patterns of behaviour are most predictive of divorce in the early years of marriage but the absence of positive behaviours eventually takes its toll in later years (Gottman and Levenson 2000). Male divorce potential is more strongly linked to levels of negative interaction while female divorce potential is more strongly linked to lower positive connection in the relationship (Stanley et al. 2002). In most cases positives and negatives are separate factors, although occasionally one can offset the other. For example, the reassuring touch of a spouse can reduce subjective feelings of unpleasantness (Coan et al. 2006).

On the negative side, negative behaviours tend to be characterized by withdrawal, invalidation, negative interpretation and escalation (Stanley et al. 2002; Gottman and Levenson 2000). For example, the well-known demand/withdraw pattern is widespread, often characterized by gender differences, and consistently linked to poorer relationship outcomes across cultures (Christensen et al. 2006).

On the positive side, couples tend to do best when either the level of communication skills or positive affect is high. Positive affect means displays of affection, humour, interest or curiosity. It is only when both communication skills and positive affect is low that couples tend to do badly (Bradbury and Karney 2004). How couples respond to each other's good news also appears to be more important to their relationship than how they respond to bad news (Gable et al. 2006).

Although much relationship research focuses on communication and conflict, their influence on couple outcomes is often surprisingly modest. The Speaker/Listener technique originally developed for PREP is rated consistently highly by course participants as a method of improving communication skills. Speaker/Listener does help couples avoid conflict on difficult issues, as intended, but many couples find it hard to apply with any consistency in subsequent real life arguments (Cornelius and Alessi 2007).

Recent research is focusing on the overarching concepts that reflect attitude – commitment, forgiveness, sacrifice, meaning – and how they moderate the effects of persistent negative

behaviours (Fincham et al. 2007). For example, a lack of dedication, the extent to which individuals view themselves as a couple with a long-term future, is linked to subsequent lower levels of commitment and poorer relationship quality. There are also important gender differences in levels of dedication, especially amongst cohabitantes (Kline et al. 2004).

In summary, stable and happy marriages require the reduction in negative factors, such as poor communication and conflict, and an increase in positive factors, such as commitment and positive affect (Benson 2002).

Two of the most contentious issues in relationships are parenting and money (Carroll and Doherty 2003; Stanley et al. 2002). Stanley et al. (2002) concluded that *“The most frequently reported issue that couples argue about in first marriages was money, and in re-marriages it was conflict about children”*. Although parenting education is well researched, for example by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (Dretzke et al. 2005), the majority of approaches focus on the parent-child relationship (and usually the mother-child, (Scott et al. 2006)), rather than on the couple’s relationship with the child, especially if step-children are involved (Halford et al. 2003).

The importance of money has been increasingly recognized in the literature (Shapiro 2007; Stanley and Einhorn 2007). Money is both a problem in its own right and a powerful metaphor reflecting the values of the couple and how the couple value each other. Of course, for prisoners and their partners there are additional issues around the cost of imprisonment; having a partner in prison can cost a woman. Incomes fall by between £150 and £500 per week and the imprisonment causes additional costs of at least £20 per month (Smith et al. 2007).

Time for Families synthesis

Working in prisons creates certain additional problems. As is recognised by the Enhanced Thinking Skills Manual (Theory Manual for Enhanced Thinking Skills , 13), interventions are most useful in the environment in which the behaviour is to be performed. This is clearly impossible in a prison, but, by bringing in the partners, the course is able to create an environment of real communication which allows the participants to develop and improve their skills.

The Building Stronger Families course focuses on the three main areas of relationship breakdown: couple communication, parenting and money. These are covered over six days which should be sufficient time to make an impact (Carroll and Doherty 2003).

Details of Building Stronger Families Course

Couples Module

The Couples Module covers Communication Skills, Love Languages, STOP Signs, Forgiveness, Resolving conflict, Commitment.

The importance of good communication skills, forgiveness and resolving conflict has been amply demonstrated in the literature (Halford et al. 2003; Laurenceau et al. 2004; Markman et al. 2006; Benson 2002). Love Languages is based on work by Gary Chapman (Chapman 1992). According to Harry Benson, the Director of Bristol Community Family Trust (pers. comm), Love Languages offers a good proxy for positive affect. Positive affect is well-established as one of the most powerful predictors of both relationship stability and satisfaction several years later (Carstensen et al. 1995). Positive affect represents the extent to which spouses are kind, generous, loving, fun and friendly

toward one another. In order to apply Love Languages in a relationship, each spouse must choose to value one another and thus demonstrate positive affect.

In terms of evaluation, which measures immediate perception rather more than longer term relationship outcome, BCFT have found that Love Languages is exceptionally well received by almost all participants as a useful relationship principle. In BCFT's two day relationship course for couples in HMP Bristol (similar to Time for Families' Couples Module), 97% (of 32 evaluations) rated Love Languages as very or fairly useful. 79% rated it very useful, the second highest rating behind STOP signs.

STOP signs is our implementation of the types of negative interaction identified by Gottman and Levenson (2000) as being particularly destructive to relationships: Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt and Stonewalling.

The element on Commitment is based on the recent developments in relationship research (Stanley et al. 2006) which recognises that men and women commit to a relationship in different ways, but that the quality of the relationship can be explained by the level of dedication to it. Although we are not taking an explicitly pro-marriage approach, the findings outlined in the first section of this paper illustrate how important it is to address this fundamental issue if we want to impact on recidivism rates.

Parenting Module

The Parenting Module consists of elements covering: communications (building on the Couple Module), every child is different, styles of parenting, how you were parented, and rewards and punishment. The underlying theoretical basis is Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1988) and the section on parenting styles is taken from Baumrind (1991) and Maccoby and Martin (1983). The rewards and punishment is based on the Parenting Pyramid (the Incredible Years).

Money Module

The Money Module looks at both the meaning of money within the couple and the practicalities of budgeting. The meaning of money is based on the Money Ethic Scale developed by Tang (1995). It has three components: affective (the belief money is evil), cognitive (money is symbol of success) and behavioural (careful budgeting). A typology of attitudes to money has been proposed by Tang et al. (2005) using his Money Ethic Scale. This correlates well with Tatzel (2002) who has developed a typology linking attitudes to money with consumption patterns.

We also examine the aspect of money within a relationship, using research from Shapiro (2007), Stanley and Einhorn (2007) and Vogler et al. (2006). This is built around a discussion of the role of sharing income and expenditure decisions and the underlying trust that is required. We also look at money as a metaphor for security, commitment and acceptance within the relationship.

Course Style

The therapeutic alliance

The NICE guidance on delivering parenting programme (Dretzke et al. 2005) states that parenting support groups should be:

- "delivered by appropriately trained and skilled facilitators who are ... able to engage in a productive therapeutic alliance with parents"

Social Learning Theory

The NICE report (Dretzke et al. 2005) also recommends that all interventions are based on social learning theory. We have designed the course to increase self-efficacy (Bandura 1994) in the participants' ability to communicate effectively with their partners. This is achieved through:

- An emphasis on modelling through using peer facilitators
- A mixture of affective, motivational and cognitive approaches

Social learning theory proposes that it is necessary to address three interacting and co-dependent cognitive or experiential dimensions in order to facilitate a person, a group or an organisation to implement or reproduce a desired behaviour. These dimensions are personal factors, environmental factors and behaviours. Failure to address all three dimensions is likely to result in an intervention being insufficient to enable behaviour change. This is particularly true for people with low levels of perceived self efficacy – they feel that they can never achieve and need to be helped to attain small but repeated gains on a series of steps that Bandura calls 'guided mastery'.

From the personal factors dimension a number of things are clearly key and often may be absent from prisoners experience. Communication skills are often limited by experience of positive models, Language is liberally sprayed with damaging expletives, and often supported by aggressive gestures or postures on the one hand and passivity or even cowering on the other. Gender stereotypes are often extreme. Simply discovering that calm communication can be achieved even in difficult areas is key knowledge. Prisoners are unlikely to have used or often witnessed positive communication, perhaps never in the recalled memory. Other key personal factors such as religious beliefs, values, truth, or beliefs about commitments are clearly key but not appropriate to address in a taught course.

From the dimension of their environment, again couples are likely to have had unhelpful experiences of the ways intimate relationships are managed and how successful or unsuccessful they are. They are likely to view personal relationships as fraught and perhaps more problematic than beneficial. Discovering that their peers and facilitators rate relationships as key influences in happiness and fulfilment is an important and potentially new normative appreciation that will strongly influence participants evaluation of possible benefits that could be available from a new set of skills. Working to collaborative conclusions about normative expectations with their actual peers and informants as like them as possible is key.

Potentially the most difficult dimension to address is that of behavioural experience whether personal or vicarious. Unless people have an expectation of a positive outcome from a behaviour based on their own or observed experience of others and have codified the behaviour in their cognitive memory it will not be possible for them to reproduce the desired behaviour when needed, especially if at that time they are under stress. Thus actually working through examples of desired behaviours in communication, negotiation and dispute resolution they will not have sufficient belief in its efficacy or have the codified memory available to them in the future. The behaviour does not have to be 'for real' in practice – it is a symbolic formulation and the more it is practiced the more robust is the coding.

Other experts in health promotion also recognise the key importance of the relationship between learner and educator the dimension of 'connectedness' (Kirby 2001). The use of ordinary 'couples

off the street' who are recognisably not teachers or experts, but 'ordinary people like us' is hugely beneficial to this process. Clearly the participation of real peers who have experience of prison and similar environments is even more powerful whether they are co-learners or facilitators.

The importance of the participants being able to identify with the trainers has also been observed by (Laurenceau et al. 2004), whose programme involved non-professionals who had been given training in relationship education. This finding conflicts with a recent UK study of parenting programmes in a clinical sample of children with behavioural problems found that outcomes were better where trainer skill levels were higher (Scott et al. 2006). The authors concluded from this that high levels of training and supervision were therefore essential prerequisites. However, these programmes were with exceptionally needy children and their parents, and we have concluded that satisfactory results can be obtained in line with Laurenceau's results.

Course Structure

The course has to balance three tensions: fitting in to the prison regime, being convenient for the partners and being the most-effective for changing behaviours and attitudes.

The prison regime generally requires the course to be run during a week day, usually when inmates get move to the venue during freeflow. Normally, this means the course runs from about 09:30 to 15:30. We encourage the couples to have lunch together, and so the inmates do not normally return to their cells during lunch. Partners may struggle to get to a prison by 09:30, depending on the location of the prison, availability of transport and childcare arrangements. They usually need to leave by about 15:30 to be able to reach home at a reasonable time.

The course has been run in a variety of configurations, including in two day sessions, weekly for six weeks, with a double intake (i.e. two two-day couples modules, followed by parenting and money) or over an extended period. In general, B-category prisons find it hard to retain inmates for six weeks, and very difficult to retain them for longer. C-category prisons have less difficulty with retention, although they are often harder to get to for the partner.

As the courses are teaching skills, ideally there would be sufficient time between each training day for the participants to practise the skills they have learnt. This would mean that the couples would need at least a two week gap between each session to allow for a visit. This would extend the course to 12 weeks, which we think is likely to be too long for both the prison regime and the partner. We have concluded that the best compromise is a six week course, one day per week, with the option of the double intake for prisons with extremely high turnovers, although we recognise this is less than ideal because it means that many participants are only benefiting from the two-day couple module, rather than the whole course. We are currently testing to see what the difference is in impact between the two day course and the six day course.

Evaluation

Objective evaluation of course effectiveness is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Stanley (2001) highlights the examples below as illustrative of some of the pitfalls:

- (1) People tend to be poor evaluators of courses. Responses are biased towards how much they paid, whether they were comfortable, and whether the presentation was good. Consistently positive feedback may simply reflect these factors rather than whether the course is actually any good.

- (2) Couples tend to be poor at evaluating their relationship. Typical responses are biased unrealistically high. When scores are high to begin with, it becomes difficult to detect an improvement.
- (3) The “dynamic” factors that influence couple stability are often very subtle, reflecting body language, eye contact, and the way words are used. These nuances are generally not picked up by the couples themselves but by trained observers using videos of couple interactions. These kinds of studies are both expensive and time-consuming.
- (4) Designing a study comparing couples who do a course with couples who don't is also very difficult. It is hard to make sure that the people who do the course are not the kind of people who would have done well anyway. This is called a “selection effect”. It is also hard to follow-up the group of couples who did not do the course. Most likely those who can't be traced have split up. But that can't be assumed. So there is a problem with “attrition” between groups. This is a particular problem with released prisoners

Given these difficulties the course has two types of evaluation, formative and summative (*Web Center for Social Research Methods*). The formative method is a participant questionnaire conducted at the end of the course. This measures their subjective satisfaction with the experience, the material, the style of teaching and also asks them to judge their learning outcomes (in line with self-efficacy).

We are also developing an approach to summative evaluation, based on changes in self-efficacy. We eventually intend to try to measure outcomes, through testing whether the inmates return to their partners at the end of their sentence, although we have not determined a way of creating a control at the present.

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