

Early Intervention: Strengthening Families and Relationships

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Divorce and family breakdown affect the health, finances and achievements of adults and children. Early intervention is the key to strengthening families and relationships.



Research shows that relationship quality is important for adults and for children. The physical and emotional well-being of adults is enhanced by stable satisfying relationships, thus reducing costs to health services and the economy (Mansfield et al, 1999). A shift in policy from crisis intervention to early intervention or prevention is recommended. It is key to promote healthy relationships by keeping couples happy, rather than focusing on helping unhappy couples (Mansfield et al, 1999).

SMC has a history of early intervention through working with couples before they marry or enter a committed relationship. We are the sole Scottish licence holder for 'FOCCUS' relationship inventory. FOCCUS aims to help couples learn more about themselves and their unique relationship. Relationship inventories raise awareness of the main issues that lead to successful relationships and also highlight areas where the couple could work on developing their relationship. The predictive validity of FOCCUS was demonstrated by Williams & Jurich (1995). In a study of couples married four to five years who completed FOCCUS before marriage, they found that the inventory successfully classified satisfied and unsatisfied couples at a rate of about 80%.

Research shows that pre-marriage interventions generally improve a couple's communication skills. Conflict management and overall relationship quality also get better. These improvements last for up to 3 years (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Halford (2004) recommends that relationship education be made more accessible and extended beyond those preparing for marriage to cohabitants and new parents.

Mansfield et al (1999) agree on this point and recommend that existing knowledge should be disseminated more widely - to the general public. Couples who understand relationships, how they work and how and when they can go wrong, are in a better position to deal with relationship difficulties when they arise, either by themselves or by seeking help at an early stage. Many couples experiencing difficulties do not seek help from relationship counselling and those who do often leave it too late (Mansfield et al, 1999).

Relationship counselling should be more widely publicised as a form of early intervention to help couples with relationship difficulties in the early stages. Relationship counselling helps

unhappy relationships by reducing stress and changing negative behaviours (McKeown et al, 2002). The act of seeking counselling is in itself beneficial to some couples (McCarthy et al, 2004; McKeown et al, 2002).



SMC also works with young people and young parents to improve relationship skills and aid the formation of positive healthy relationships. Research shows that good relationships *between* parents result in positive outcomes for children at home, at

school and in adult life (Mansfield, 2004; Cowan & Cowan, 1997; Erol & Burman, 1995). Early intervention work with young people builds awareness of important relationship skills such as communication and listening. Research shows that young people find talking about sex and relationships extremely difficult, compounded by a general lack of quality information. In one study, young people reported that the SRE they had received in school was poorly delivered and did not provide them with the tools to help them negotiate the complexities of personal relationships (FPA, 2005). This demonstrates a real need for to work with young people in schools, enhancing emotional intelligence and increasing relationship knowledge. As with adults, young people who have good knowledge of relationships will be better at building and maintaining them.

Reference:

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