Building Strong Families
Theory Manual

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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. 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 Ministry of Justice has published the results of a prisoner census that shows that prison visits, which is acknowledged as a proxy for family ties, makes a massive impact on reducing re-offending (70% for prisoners with no visits, compared to 52% for those with visits).

The Home Office has also published a report based on a survey of prisoners that links the number of visits to increased probability of accommodation and employment. The PSO on 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.

In America there has been substantial research on the relationship between family relationships and recidivism. The most persuasive work has been by. 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%.

has examined whether a similar effect is found with cohabitation 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

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1 Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners.
3 Niven and Stewart, Resettlement Outcomes on release from prison 2003.
4 “PSO 4410: Prisoner Communications - Visits.”
5 National Commissioning Framework 2007-08.
6 Sampson et al. (2006)
7 Forrest (2006)
8 Ibid.
commitment theory outlined below. However, the impact of marriage on desistance depends on the quality of the relationship, the strong emotional attachment and the commitment.

**Fathering in Prison**

The Children of Offenders Review 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.

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.

**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 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, improved resettlement outcomes and reduced likelihood of re-offending. The authors of the report do not dispute the likely causal link between the quality of the relationship and visits (pers. comm. with Stewart).

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.

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.

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.

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9 Stanley, Kline, and Markman, “The Inertia Hypothesis: Sliding vs. Deciding in the Development of Risk for Couples in Marriage.”
10 “Children of Offenders Review.”
11 Clarke et al., “Fathering behind Bars in English Prisons: Imprisoned Fathers’ Identity and Contact with Their Children.”
12 Niven and Stewart, *Resettlement Outcomes on release from prison 2003.*
14 Carroll and Doherty, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs.”
15 Johnson et al., “Marriage in Oklahoma.”
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.

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.

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 relationship stability appropriate for a prison population, can be delivered by non-professionals, and can improve relationship quality, thus leading 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. 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.

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.

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.

16 Einhorn et al., “PREP Inside and Out.”
17 Stanley et al., “Sacrifice as a predictor of marital outcomes…”
18 Carroll and Doherty, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs.”
19 Stanley et al., “Community-Based Premarital Prevention.”
in the early years of marriage but the absence of positive behaviours eventually takes its toll in later years.\textsuperscript{21} 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.\textsuperscript{22} 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.\textsuperscript{23}

On the negative side, negative behaviours tend to be characterized by withdrawal, invalidation, negative interpretation and escalation.\textsuperscript{24} For example, the well-known demand/withdraw pattern is widespread, often characterized by gender differences, and consistently linked to poorer relationship outcomes across cultures.\textsuperscript{25}

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.\textsuperscript{26} 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.\textsuperscript{27}

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.\textsuperscript{28}

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.\textsuperscript{29} 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 cohabitees.\textsuperscript{30}

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.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{21} Gottman and Levenson, “The Timing of Divorce.”
\textsuperscript{22} Stanley, Markman, and Whitton, “Communication, conflict, and commitment: insights on the foundations of relationship success from a national survey.”
\textsuperscript{23} Coan, Schaefer, and Davidson, “Lending a Hand.”
\textsuperscript{25} Christensen et al., “Cross-Cultural Consistency of the Demand/Withdraw Interaction Pattern in Couples.”
\textsuperscript{26} Bradbury and Karney, “Understanding and Altering the Longitudinal Course of Marriage.”
\textsuperscript{27} Gable, Gonzaga, and Strachman, “Will you be there for me when things go right? Supportive responses to positive event disclosures.”
\textsuperscript{28} Cornelius and Alessi, “Behavioral and Physiological Components of Communication Training.”
\textsuperscript{29} Fincham, Stanley, and Beach, “Transformative Processes in Marriage.”
\textsuperscript{30} Kline et al., “Timing is everything: Pre-engagement cohabitation and increased risk for poor marital outcomes.”
\textsuperscript{31} Benson, “Marriage Education – what we know.”
Two of the most contentious issues in relationships are parenting and money.\textsuperscript{32, 33} 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,\textsuperscript{34} the majority of approaches focus on the parent-child relationship (and usually the mother-child,\textsuperscript{35}) rather than on the couple’s relationship with the child, especially if step-children are involved.\textsuperscript{36}

The importance of money has been increasingly recognized in the literature.\textsuperscript{37} 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.\textsuperscript{38}

**Time for Families synthesis**

Working in prisons creates certain additional problems. As is recognised by the Enhanced Thinking Skills Manual,\textsuperscript{39} 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.\textsuperscript{40}

**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.\textsuperscript{41} Love Languages is based on work by Gary Chapman.\textsuperscript{42}

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\textsuperscript{32} Carroll and Doherty, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs”; Stanley, Markman, and Whitton, “Communication, conflict, and commitment: insights on the foundations of relationship success from a national survey.”

\textsuperscript{33} Stanley et al. (2002)

\textsuperscript{34} Dretzke et al., “The effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of parent training/education programmes for the treatment of conduct disorder, including oppositional defiant disorder, in children.”

\textsuperscript{35} Scott, O’Connor, and Futh, “What makes parenting programmes work in disadvantaged areas.”

\textsuperscript{36} Halford et al., “Best practice in couple relationship education.”

\textsuperscript{37} Shapiro, “Money”; Stanley and Einhorn, “Hitting Pay Dirt.”

\textsuperscript{38} Smith et al., *Poverty and disadvantage among prisoners’ families.*


\textsuperscript{40} Carroll and Doherty, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs.”
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. Positive affect represents the extent to which spouses are kind, generous, loving, have fun and are 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 as being particular destructive to relationships: Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt and Stonewalling.

The element on Commitment is based on the recent developments in relationship research 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 and the section on parenting styles is taken from and. The rewards and punishment is based on the Parenting Pyramid.

**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. 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 using his

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42 Chapman, *The Five Love Languages*.
43 Carstensen, Gottman, and Levenson, “Emotional behavior in long-term marriage.”
44 Gottman and Levenson (2000)
45 Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman, “Sliding Versus Deciding.”
46 (1988)
47 Baumrind (1991)
48 Maccoby and Martin (1983)
49 the Incredible Years
50 Tang (1995)
51 Tang et al. (2005)
Money Ethic Scale. This correlates well with 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, and. This is built around a discussion of the role of sharing income and expenditure decisions, as well as 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 Building Stronger Families course needs to be delivered in a way that research has demonstrated to be most effective.

The therapeutic alliance

The NICE guidance on delivering parenting programme 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”

This “therapeutic alliance” includes a desire to empower the participants to find solutions for themselves rather than providing them with pre-packaged solutions. It involves the facilitators being prepared to self-disclose (in an appropriate way) so that participants can recognise problems and see the relevance of particular solutions.

Social Learning Theory

The NICE report also recommends that all interventions are based on social learning theory. We have designed the course to increase self-efficacy 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

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52 Tatzel (2002)
53 Shapiro (2007)
54 Stanley and Einhorn (2007)
55 Vogler et al. (2006)
56 Dretzke et al., “The effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of parent training/education programmes for the treatment of conduct disorder, including oppositional defiant disorder, in children.”
57 Ibid.
58 Bandura, “Self-efficacy.”
perceived self efficacy – they feel that they can never achieve and that they 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 is the dimension of ‘connectedness’\(^59\). 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,\(^60\) whose programme involved non-professionals who had been given training in relationship education. However, this finding partly conflicts with a recent UK study of parenting programmes for the parents of very disturbed children which found that outcomes were better where trainer skill levels were higher.\(^61\) The authors concluded from this that high levels of training and supervision

\(^{59}\) Kirby, “Understanding What Works and What Doesn’t In Reducing Adolescent Sexual Risk-Taking.”

\(^{60}\) Laurenceau et al., “Community-Based Prevention of Marital Dysfunction.”

\(^{61}\) Scott, Carby, and Rendu, “Impact of therapist skill on effectiveness of parenting groups for child antisocial behavior.”
were therefore essential prerequisites. However, these programmes were for exceptionally needy children and their parents, and we have concluded that satisfactory results can be obtained for our client group 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 moved 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 particular skills, ideally there would be sufficient time between each training day for the participants to practise these 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.

The Building Stronger Families course is focused on helping the participants acquire skills, primarily in how they talk together as a couple. This means that for a considerable part of the course the couples are talking together (on a normal course day of five hours about two hours is spent as one-to-one discussion).

The courses are quite intense and many of the participants have difficulties with learning. We seek to balance the quantity of material with the need for the course to move at the best speed for the participants. We test this through the end-of-course survey; 98% of participants (266 out of 272) said the course content was “about right”.

**Evaluation**

Objective evaluation of the effectiveness of this course is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Stanley\(^\text{62}\) highlights the examples below as illustrative of some of the pitfalls:

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\(^{62}\) Stanley et al., “Community-Based Premarital Prevention.”
(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. It is most likely that 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. 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 currently measure changes in relationship satisfaction using an instrument.

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.

References


63 “Introduction to Evaluation.”


“PSO 4410: Prisoner Communications - Visits.”


