Relationship Counselling Works for People of All Ages and Stages

Research shows that relationship counselling works for people of all ages and stages in their relationships.

The effectiveness of relationship counselling is demonstrated in a meta-analysis of 15 outcome studies, where cases that receive treatment tend to do better than cases that do not (Dunn & Schwebel, 1995). In short, counselling does help unhappy relationships (McKeown et al, 2002). Studies show that counselling works by reducing stress, changing partners’ negative behaviours of criticising, insulting and not listening, and by helping clients to become more satisfied with the partners’ share in housework and childcare (McKeown et al, 2002).

Some people find counselling helps by offering practical advice on improving communication and managing potential arguments (McCarthy et al, 2004). Whereas others find value in the act of seeking counselling itself - a way of doing something to prove the relationship is worth saving (McCarthy et al, 2004; McKeown et al, 2002).

People who go to relationship counselling feel better about themselves afterwards and tend to develop more sharing and affectionate relationships (McCarthy et al, 1998). Following from this, counselling improves relationship satisfaction for around one third of men and one fifth of women (McKeown et al, 2002). Counselling works equally well for both men and women and all social classes (McKeown et al, 2002). Importantly, counselling helps unhappy relationships quickly, with 7-8 sessions being the optimum number (McKeown et al, 2002).

SMC’s own statistics support these research findings, with clients attending on average just 4 sessions. SMC clients come for counselling at all ages and stages in their relationships. There is no most common age group or length of relationship to seek counselling. SMC clients come from all social backgrounds. Less than one-fifth of SMC clients report that their relationship has ended on termination of the counselling process and clients report a high level of satisfaction with our service:

“Very pleased with all the counselling sessions I attended. Don’t think our relationship would have lasted without your help.”

“I think the sessions were very good and it would be difficult to improve in my opinion. I wish we had gone years ago!”
“We found the counselling service met all our relationship issues. Very pleased with the service.”

“The counsellor was excellent and focused on moving forward.”

86% of SMC clients rate the effectiveness of the counselling they received as between 8 out of 10 and 10 out of 10 on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being excellent. Furthermore, almost 100% of SMC clients would recommend our service to a friend.

One fundamental outcome of counselling is that it reduces stress (McKeown et al, 2002) and enables people to manage their family situation much more effectively. Counselling can help separating couples to achieve a more amicable split, smoothing the transition to new families. Counselling in these circumstances does not make divorce easy but it does assist people in coming to terms with the situation and moving into a new life feeling better able to cope (McCarthy et al, 2004). Counselling under these circumstances can be favoured as an alternative to mediation, which is a different type of service to counselling. One study casts doubt on the effectiveness of mediation as most people that attended were not positive that they had achieved any wider benefits and fewer than half were satisfied with the mediation they received. 62% of people left mediation with issues that still required to be resolved (McCarthy et al, 2004).

Moreover, counselling has a positive influence on children too. It is well documented that family breakdown can lead to problems for children at home, school and in adult life (West & Sweeting, 2002; Sweeting et al, 1998; Rodgers & Pryor, 1998; Pagani et al, 1998). It is less well known however that the quality of the parental relationship, even if parents are separated, has a profound effect on children’s development (Cowan & Cowan, 1997). Children from families where there is high parental conflict that is not successfully resolved often experience the same disadvantages as those children who experience family breakdown. The bottom line is that the quality of parenting is disabled by discordant family relationships (Mansfield, 2004). The work done by clients in the counselling room has a positive effect on the adult couple relationship, which in turn is beneficial to children.

References:
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 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:


There is now compelling evidence to suggest that how parents get on - or don’t get on - has a profound influence on children’s lives (Mansfield, 2004).

Crucially, it is not only what the parents do with the child that matters, but also how parents relate to each other. Even if the parents are no longer together, the relationship between them is still important. Healthy relationships between parents are paramount for children’s development and this is true even although parents may be separated.

In Scotland today there are increasing numbers of ‘reconstituted’ families and many children are now brought up in single parent, stepparent and cohabiting couple households (Morrison et al, 2004). The increasing complexity of family relations means that birth parents are often not the only adults involved in a child’s life. How all these partners and ex-partners manage their relationships can have a tremendous effect on the quality of parenting (Mansfield, 2004). In fact, one meta-analysis of 68 family studies consistently found that good parenting is less likely to occur when the parents’ relationship is troubled (Erel & Burman, 1995).

Children seem much more aware of the link between the adult relationship and the parenting process than adults do. In one survey, seven out of ten teenagers questioned considered that ‘parents getting on well together’ is one of the most important factors in raising happy children. Yet only one third of parents questioned in the same survey thought that the relationship between parents was relevant to bringing up children (Mansfield, 2004).

The adult relationship and its impact on children’s lives

There is much research to show children who have suffered divorce and family breakdown are more vulnerable to physical and mental illness; are likely to underachieve at school and are more likely to engage in youth offending and misuse of alcohol and drugs (West & Sweeting, 2002; Sweeting et al, 1998; Rodgers & Pryor, 1998; Pagani et al, 1998).

But this is not the whole story. Cowan & Cowan (1997) found that when married parents have a troubled relationship and fail to resolve conflicts successfully, their children tend to have problems at home and at school. Some children from families where there is high parental conflict experience the same disadvantages as those children who experience family
breakdown. The bottom line is that the quality of parenting is disabled by discordant family relationships (Mansfield, 2004).

**Magic Moment**

Furthermore new research from America shows the time of a child’s birth to be a “magic moment” for intervention. McLanahan et al, 2003 found that unmarried parents are strongly connected to each other at the time of birth, and are motivated and open to learning new relationship skills.

The time of birth tends to be a time when relationship satisfaction falls and conflict rises (Mansfield, 2004; Belsky and Pensky, 1988). In SMC’s counselling experience couples are particularly vulnerable when they become new parents. Often the issues that bring a couple to the counselling room can be traced back to having started after the birth of their first or subsequent children.

Cowan & Cowan (1997) found that new parents who were offered a group intervention reported less relationship disenchantment following birth. The intervention focused on central aspects of family life and key areas for developing successful relationships. By the time their children were 3 years old, 15% of couples who did not receive the intervention were divorced. All the intervention couples were still together.

These findings indicate that relationship skills training would be highly beneficial to new parents to enhance relationship satisfaction and improve the quality of parenting. Giving parents the skills to develop and sustain healthy relationships holds the key to positive outcomes for children.

References:


One stop shopping is the general theory that services can be made more accessible and service delivery can be more efficient by co-ordinating and co-locating services that are normally provided by more than one agency (Yates, 1998).

The Coram Community Campus is an innovative ‘one stop shop’ that serves children and families in the Kings Cross Area of London. The campus houses two nurseries, a parents’ centre, a charity for children with special needs, two homeless projects, and a school for children with autism or related communication disorders.

The Campus is a unique partnership between voluntary and statutory agencies, led by child care charity, Coram Family. Statutory services represented in the campus include Education, Social Services and the local community health trust. Coram’s vision was to establish a ‘one stop shop’ for families and young children, with multi-agency services offering high quality, open access, mainstream provision.

The Campus was evaluated during its first two years in a qualitative study conducted by Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The study assessed the Campus as a whole, focusing on the degree to which, in bringing services together, the Campus has become ‘more than the sum of its parts’. The main findings from the study were:

- Campus organisations had learned how to work together more effectively and were starting to obtain mutual benefits such as easier referrals, joint training and shared resources. Some agencies appealed to common client groups, such as the two homeless projects. Overlaps such as these enabled a greater degree of collaboration between services in terms of referrals and joint working.

- Although the Campus was founded on a partnership approach, the partners were not equal and did not share common accountability. Individual services were responsible to their own boards of management and had attempted to draw a balance between preserving their autonomy and creating a common identity.
• Coram Family had created the vision for the Campus and had worked with senior managers of Campus services to establish a shared ethos. But this did not appear to have produced changes in individual practice. Among project workers, there was less awareness of an overall Campus vision.

• Managers had effectively collaborated on Campus services but at lower levels opportunities for joined up working were more limited. At all levels it was difficult to find time or space to work collaboratively.

• Partnerships with local authority services had different outcomes. The most successful was the assimilation of a child psychology service into the Campus network. This provided a non-stigmatising service and reached families who might not otherwise have accessed this kind of support. Other specialist health services as well as social services had yet to utilise the full potential offered by the multi-agency network. Joint working requires flexibility and an often, different working approach. Some agencies were still learning how to adapt to this new arrangement.

• Although the Campus was potentially able to operate as a ‘one stop shop’ across services, the majority of families had used only one service provider. Many had accessed several services within one provider. There was evidence that, over time, the movement between services was increasing as staff gained confidence in making referrals and families themselves became more aware of what was on offer.

• The researchers concluded that the development of a multi-agency setting is in itself an important achievement. However the network had still to realise its full potential in becoming ‘more than the sum of its parts’. Individual services were beginning to learn from each other, and to share skills and ideas, but the process required time to develop further. However, the general concept of services working collaboratively with a common value base, with some kind of overall co-ordination is one which might be re-worked more widely to fit different circumstances.

References:


A relationship counselling pilot for couples seriously considering divorce

In 1997 a government sponsored pilot project was set up to evaluate the use of relationship counselling and information as part of a proposed move to no-fault divorce. McCarthy et al (2004) recommend the results of the follow up study be used as a guide to family policymakers.

Nearly one in five couples seriously considering divorce stayed together after being given relationship counselling and information about divorce. Although some couples were able to reconcile, for others receiving information had simply been a step in the separation process.

It seems that men were less likely to carry on living with their spouse after contemplating divorce if they had children under age 11. This is the opposite of what might be expected and suggests that the presence of young children can push men away from marriages. Certainly the transition to parenthood is well documented as being a time when relationship satisfaction falls (Mansfield, 2004; Cowan & Cowan, 1997; Belsky & Pensky, 1988).

Marriage counselling was found to play a variety of roles for couples who separated as well as those who stayed together:

- Men were more likely than women to be intent on saving their relationship, while women were more likely to focus on personal issues such as enhancing self-understanding.

- Less than 45% of the people who used marriage counselling indicated that they were doing so in order to ‘save’ their relationship. Many people who went for counselling after they had received information felt they had left it too late and were unsure of what they hoped counselling would achieve. The researchers say that this presents a challenge for policymakers to encourage the use of counselling at key transition points or when something happens that can destabilise the relationship.
• Some people found counselling helped them by improving communication and managing potential arguments. Others find the act of going for counselling beneficial in itself.

• More than two thirds of those who went for counselling either to save their marriage or to make up their mind about whether to save it, indicated they were happy with the service they received.

• Of people who went to counselling and failed to save their marriage: at least one of the spouses had made up their mind that they wanted to divorce.

• Some people found counselling useful in order to help them deal with divorce by helping them to order, confirm and accept their feelings. Counselling in these circumstances does not make divorce easy but can assist people in coming to terms with the situation.

• The research casts doubt on the usefulness of voluntary mediation in helping divorcing couples to resolve their disputes about money, property and children. Only one in four of the couples who went through mediation managed to resolve all the issues in dispute, and fewer than half were satisfied with the mediation.

• The study found divorced parents unprepared for the difficulties of parenting after divorce. The researchers say that there is a strong case for piloting the US-style parent education programmes which tell parents about the difficulties they will face and how to put the advice into practice.

• Marriage counselling seems to be effective in helping couples save their relationships when both partners are committed to doing so. However, counselling is still a last resort for many. Researchers believe counselling would save more relationships if there was a serious cultural shift to people seeking help before their relationships are under severe pressure. They recommend relationship support services to improve the quality of relationships, regardless of whether parties stay together, particularly those of parents.

References:


In 2004 an analysis was carried out of SMC’s Client Statistical Return Forms. It covered the period from January to September. A detailed analysis of demographic information and reasons for attending counselling allowed a clear profile of SMC clients to emerge.

**Relationship counselling for couples and individuals**

The majority of clients (88%) were found to attend counselling as a couple and 1% of these were same sex couples. 12% of clients attended counselling as individuals. The majority of SMC clients attended as married couples and therefore an even split between the two genders was expected. However, 46% of SMC clients are male and 54% of clients are female. This prevalence of females indicates most clients who seek counselling on an individual basis are female.

**Most common age range of SMC clients:**

- 16-24 years (3%)
- 25-34 years (28%)
- 35-44 years (41%)
- 45-55 years (23%)
- Over 55 years (5%)

**Ethnic Group**

Clients were almost entirely of White/European ethnicity (88%) and their nationality was described as British or Scottish (80%). 1% of our clients were of Asian ethnicity and a further 11% of cases did not state the client’s ethnicity, however these clients were most likely to have been White/European. In terms of Scotland as a whole, Black and Minority Ethnic groups make up approximately 2% of the population and so our statistics reflect this overall.

**Religious background of SMC clients:**

- Roman Catholic (43%)
- Church of Scotland (26%)
- No religion (19%)
- Muslim (1%)
- Other religions (3%)
- Not known (8%)

**Social background**

In general, it can be said SMC clients come from *all social backgrounds*. The most common social class of SMC clients was ‘Professional’ with 30% falling into this category. A further 25% of clients were classed as ‘Skilled/Clerical’ and 18% were classed as ‘Semi/Unskilled’. 13% of SMC clients were ‘Unemployed’; 4% fell into the ‘Managerial’ category and a further 4% were ‘Self-employed’. Only 3% of those surveyed were students and a further 3% were retired.
Relationship Status

In terms of relationship status, the majority (80%) of clients were married, while a further 8% were co-habiting. Only 6% were divorced and 4% were single. A further 2% of clients were separated. It was found that clients come for counselling at all stages in their relationships.

Average length of relationship

Although there was no most common stage for seeking counselling, the average length of relationship was 14 years. 22% of SMC clients had been in their relationship for up to 5 years and 18% of clients had been in their relationship for 6-10 years. 20% of clients had been in their relationship for between 11-15 years and 16% of clients had been in their relationship for 16-20 years. Just 10% of clients had been in their relationship for 21-25 years and 14% of clients had been in their relationship for 26 years or more.

Reasons for seeking counselling

SMC clients usually sought help with several relationship issues but overwhelmingly the most common was communication (69%). Most couples find themselves unable to discuss difficult issues such as sex or power share. Others continually argue over the same things and are unable to resolve the conflict until they have dealt with the underlying issues. Other common presenting problems include infidelity (20%), financial problems (15%) and task sharing. On average, the number of counselling sessions that SMC clients attended was just four, supporting research evidence that counselling helps unhappy relationships quickly (McKeown et al, 2002).

Outcomes

- Relationship counselling is a successful early intervention as a high percentage of clients were still married or in a committed relationship.
- Counselling is appropriate for all age groups. SMC clients range in age from early 20’s to late 50’s / 60.
- Relationship counselling is sought by people of all religions and those of no stated religion.
- Relationship counselling is sought by people from all social backgrounds.
- SMC data reveals relationship difficulties are wide-ranging and complex. The professional expertise of trained counsellors is paramount in achieving a good outcome.
- Relationship counselling is a highly cost effective intervention, with an average of four sessions costing around £200.
- Relationship counselling has a positive influence on individuals, couples, families, communities, physical and mental health, and employment.
Counselling is a cost-effective solution that can save the government millions compared to the cost of family breakdown and its drain on local authorities, health and the economy.

COUNSELLING WORKS FOR PEOPLE OF ALL AGES AND STAGES

Research shows counselling helps unhappy relationships quickly, with 7-8 sessions being the optimum number (McKeown et al, 2002). SMC’s own statistics support these findings, with clients usually attending between 4 and 6 sessions over a 6 week period. It costs SMC £40 to deliver a counselling session. At an average cost of £160 per couple this is a value for money service when compared to the £1.5 billion per year cost of family breakdown to the Scottish economy.

SMC clients come for counselling at all ages and stages in their relationships. There is no most common age group or length of relationship to seek counselling. SMC clients come from all social backgrounds. Less than one-fifth of SMC clients report that their relationship has ended on termination of the counselling process and clients report a high level of satisfaction with our service:

- 86% of SMC clients rate the effectiveness of the counselling they received as between 8 and 10 with 10 being excellent.
- Almost 100% of SMC clients would recommend our services to a friend.

Research shows counselling works equally well for both men and women and all social classes. It works by reducing stress, changing partners’ negative behaviours of criticising, insulting and not listening, and by helping clients to become more satisfied with the partners’ share in housework and childcare (McKeown et al, 2002). People who go to relationship counselling feel better about themselves afterwards and tend to develop more sharing and affectionate relationships (McCarthy et al, 1998).

WHY THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD INVEST IN RELATIONSHIP COUNSELLING AND EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES

Research shows that relationship counselling and early intervention services improve relationship satisfaction, strengthen relationships and prevent divorce and family breakdown. Investing in early intervention is therefore cost efficient for Local Authorities and the Scottish Executive rather than providing for high divorce rates and legal costs.
The Economy

Stable relationships are correlated with deprivation to the effect that becoming single increases deprivation and forming a partner reduces poverty (Berthoud et al, 2004). Costs of family breakdown to the economy include welfare support and payments for children and parents.

Employers typically lose out when employees suffer relationship difficulties and/or breakdown. Work productivity decreases and time is lost due to absence and ill health associated with relationship problems (Forthother et al, 1996; McAllister et al, 1995). In one organisational study, 50% of clients said relationship difficulties were affecting their work.

Health

Relationship difficulties spill over into the workplace with men and women in unhappy relationships suffering from increased stress levels and high blood pressure, which increases risk of heart attack or stroke (Barnett, 2005).

Adults and children experiencing family breakdown are more vulnerable to physical and mental illness (McAllister et al, 1995; Sweeting et al, 1998). Stable relationships enhance physical and emotional well-being thereby reducing costs to health services and the economy (Mansfield, 1999; Kamp-Dush & Amato, 2005).

Social Work

Relationship counselling has a positive influence on children as well as the adults involved. Research consistently shows that good parenting is less likely to occur when the parents’ relationship is troubled (Erel & Burman, 1995). Children seem to be much more aware of the link between the adult relationship and the parenting process than adults do. In one survey, seven out of ten teenagers questioned considered that ‘parents getting on well together’ is one of the most important factors in raising happy children. Yet only one third of parents questioned in the same survey thought that the relationship between parents was relevant to bringing up children (Mansfield, 2004).

There is much research to show children who have suffered divorce and family breakdown are more vulnerable to physical and mental illness; are likely to underachieve at school and are more likely to engage in youth offending and misuse of alcohol and drugs (West & Sweeting, 2002; Sweeting et al, 1998; Rodgers & Pryor, 1998; Pagani et al, 1998).

It is less well known however, that when married parents have a troubled relationship and fail to resolve conflicts successfully, their children tend to have problems at home and at school (Cowan & Cowan, 1997). The work done by clients in the counselling room has a positive effect on the adult couple relationship, which in turn is beneficial to children. Crucially, it is not only what the parents do with the child that matters, but also how parents relate to each other. Healthy relationships between parents are paramount for children’s development and this is true even although parents may be separated.
ORGANISATIONAL PROFILE OF SCOTTISH MARRIAGE CARE (SMC)

• SMC is a national family support charity whose services are for everyone without exception.

• SMC has over forty years experience delivering specialist relationship services across Scotland. Thousands and thousands of adults and children have directly benefited from this service.

• SMC is an independent voluntary organisation which delivers services *directly* in 21 locations across Scotland.

• Relationship services available from SMC include: relationship counselling for couples and individuals; early intervention work with couples entering marriage or a committed relationship; relationship education work with young parents and young people in schools and youth groups, peer education projects, youth counselling and young parents counselling.

• SMC has over 100 volunteers delivering a range of tasks. The majority are relationship counsellors, professionally trained to a university accredited standard. Due to this voluntary effort and low running costs, SMC has independently been evaluated as a highly cost-efficient and effective organisation.

• SMC’s turnover in 2004/5 was nearly half a million pounds. 78% was raised from non-statutory sources. 22% came from Scottish Executive grants.

• SMC is an Investor in People.
Celebrating 40 Years of Supporting Families

Relationship Education and Counselling Team-REACT

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REACT is a community project based in Greater Easterhouse, Glasgow. REACT offers relationship services to young people and adults without judgement or discrimination on any grounds.

- 87% of young people in Greater Easterhouse experience problems with relationships. This could be anything from parents getting divorced to arguments with siblings and friends.

- REACT offers relationship workshops and issue-based sessions to young people in schools and youth groups. The workshops enhance awareness of different types of relationships and aid the formation of positive healthy relationships with family and friends.

- We currently work in partnership with several schools, delivering relationship workshops as part of Personal and Social Education (PSE) groups.

- REACT provides a ‘drop-in’ youth counselling service in local schools where young people can work through any issue that is troubling them.

- REACT’s innovative relationship skills training programme is offered to young parents in the community. The course is delivered by peer-educators and focuses on building confidence and self-esteem and raising awareness of important relationship skills such as communication and listening.

- REACT offers young people and young parents the opportunity to train as peer educators and gain key skills which enable them to help others.

Youth Counselling

We offer a one-to-one youth counselling service where young people can talk about any issue that is troubling them.

- The opportunity to be listened to
- Confidential service
- Make sense of your feelings
- No issue is too big or too small
- Counselling can help you if you feel worried, uncertain, trapped, confused, angry or unhappy.

- One fundamental outcome of counselling is that it reduces stress (McKeown et al, 2002) and enables people to manage their situation much more effectively.
Evidence of Need

REACT has had requests from several local schools to establish a youth counselling ‘drop in’ service during break times and after school. This pilot has been an overwhelming success and has produced startling results in young people. Guidance teachers report that REACT’s work has had an overwhelming impact on pupils. Young people targeted by the service included those with behavioural problems, who were disruptive in class, had difficulty concentrating, and had been excluded from school.

Staff indicated that these children seemed more stable as a result of the work undertaken by REACT and were better able to become involved in schoolwork and classroom activities. Moreover, REACT has been invited to provide sessions as a permanent feature of PSE courses, which conclusively demonstrates the success of the counselling in schools pilot.

Following these achievements, we now plan to roll out across Scotland, and aim to have youth counsellors available in each of our centres. We have had several requests from adults and young people across the country for youth counselling services and we are currently unable to meet this need.

Youth Counselling-Research

A study of youth counselling showed that family relationship difficulties, parenting problems and parental separation were the problems presented by almost half (48%) of the young people who sought youth counselling. (Lalor et al, 2006) This is also the case in SMC’s REACT pilot project where young people’s presenting issues were overwhelmingly around relationships.

Young people attending youth counselling report that the counselling experience gave them skills and confidence to deal with the issues in their lives:

‘Made me feel good about myself’

‘Realised I wasn’t the only one to feel this way’

‘Helped me to look at things differently’

‘Helped me to develop a positive attitude’

Many young people value the opportunity to talk to somebody about their problems and find comfort in the fact that somebody was taking their problem seriously:

‘It has given me somebody I can talk to, confidentially.’
CASE STUDY

When 12 year old Kieran first came to counselling he was unsure what exactly would be involved, but understood it would be ‘a chance to talk about things and get stuff off my chest.’ He was willing to give it a try as there were a number of issues troubling him. Kieran had been raised by his gran from a young age. He had never known his father and had been told by his gran that his mother had deserted him when he was a baby. However, at the age of 8, Kieran’s mother made contact and he discovered that she was suffering from a heroin addiction and that his gran had asked her to leave. He was then asked to choose where he wanted to live and decided he would live with his mother and grandad (who was separated from his gran.) However, Kieran’s grandad was frequently away from home, and Kieran was required to take on a number of caring responsibilities for his mother during her rehabilitation. He would ensure she remembered to take her methadone prescription and attended scheduled medical appointments, as well as carrying out the bulk of domestic duties.

When Kieran first came to counselling the major issue causing him concern was the problem he was having with his grandad’s partner, Dorothy. Kieran explained that since she had moved into the house his life was a ‘living hell.’ His loathing for Dorothy was apparent, describing her as ‘evil.’ The conflict between Kieran and Dorothy was occurring on a day to day basis and it was at a stage where he would rather stay out late than go home in the evenings. He acknowledged that it was affecting his performance at school since he would ‘try to do nothing all day to make the day last longer.’ While he was desperate to improve the situation he felt helpless as the only solution he could envisage was that Dorothy would leave and this was beyond his control.

Initially Kieran contracted with his counsellor for a total of six sessions. A number of issues arose when Kieran began to tell his story and through counselling he was able to select a number of short-term goals. Managing his aggression was important, as it was being manifested in other contexts and he was able to see that it was affecting his relationship with his friends. There were issues present regarding his feelings of guilt over choosing to leave his gran for his mother and living with Dorothy heightened his sense of loss. However, the dominant issue for Kieran was how he could live with Dorothy.

Kieran wanted the focus of the counselling to be on how he could maintain his self-control and take ownership of his feelings of anger. It was agreed that it would be necessary to re-contract for a further four sessions to allow Kieran to work on his remaining issues. The counselling therefore lasted a total of ten sessions, by which time Kieran was feeling more in control of his home situation and better equipped to deal with the choice he had made about where to live.

References:
R.E.A.C.T - Young Parents’ Project

REACT is Scottish Marriage Care’s first community project based in Greater Easterhouse, Glasgow. It offers relationship skills training to young parents in the community and peer education projects.

- 87% of young people in Greater Easterhouse experience problems with relationships. This could be anything from parents getting divorced to arguments with siblings and friends.
- Almost one third of all mothers in Greater Easterhouse are under 25 years old.
- REACT provides specialist workshops for young parents with a unique focus on relationships.

- REACT offers young parents the opportunity to train as peer educators and gain key relationship skills which enable them to help others.
- Peer educators take part in workshops on such topics as self-esteem, team building, rights and responsibilities, communication, relationships, finance and participation. They then pass these tools onto other young parents through a similar series of workshops.
- The peer education course offers young parents the opportunity to participate in driving lessons, attend a residential weekend with their children and receive free baby packs.

- The young parents attending REACT benefit from increased self esteem and enhanced awareness of key relationship skills such as communication and conflict negotiation. The aim is to aid the formation and also the maintenance of positive, healthy relationships. This includes not only the couple relationship but also the relationships with children, wider family, peers, employers and the wider community.

The ‘Missing Link’

Research shows it is crucial for children’s development that parents build healthy relationships with each other, as well as with their children. This is true even although the parents may be separated. Children who have experienced family breakdown are more vulnerable to physical and mental illness, are likely to underachieve in school and are more likely to engage in youth offending and misuse of drugs or alcohol (West and Sweeting, 2002; Sweeting et al, 1998; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Pagani et al, 1998).
Furthermore, new research from America shows the time of a child’s birth to be a ‘magic moment’ for intervention. Unmarried parents are strongly connected to each other at the time of the birth and are motivated and open to learning new relationship skills.

The time of birth tends to be a time when relationship satisfaction falls and conflict arises (Mansfield, 2004; Belsky and Pensky, 1988). In SMC’s counselling experience couples are particularly vulnerable when they become new parents. Often the issues that bring the couple to the counselling room can be traced back to having started after the birth of their first or subsequent children.

These findings indicate that relationship skills training is highly beneficial to young parents to enhance relationship satisfaction and improve the quality of parenting. Giving parents the skills to develop and sustain healthy relationships holds the key to positive outcomes for children. It was on this basis that SMC pioneered the innovative REACT community project in Greater Easterhouse.

**Employment Links**

Research also shows that relationships skills training will improve young parent’s chances of gaining and sustaining employment and therefore will reduce their vulnerability to financial exclusion and multiple debt. (Barnett, 2005)

Employees experiencing family breakdown are more vulnerable to physical and mental illness such as increased stress levels and mood and anxiety disorders. This causes work productivity to decrease and work time is lost due to ill health which can increase their chances of losing their job (Forthother et al., 1996; McAllister et al., 1995).

The enhanced awareness and relationship skills of the young parents participating in the peer programme will reduce stress levels and enable them to manage their situation much more effectively. This in turn will increase their chances of sustaining employment.

**Young Parents’ Comments**

‘If it wasn’t for REACT, I don’t think my confidence would be as high as it is now’

‘I met lots of new friends and realised I wasn’t the only one to struggle like this’

‘Helped me to learn new skills and think differently about things’

‘I am really sad the course has ended and I am aiming to train to become a peer educator.’
CASE STUDY

Kerry (20) has two girls; one aged 3 years and another aged 10 months. She lives with her partner. Both are unemployed at the moment but Kerry’s partner is often in and out of work. Kerry came to REACT as she wanted to get involved with the group for her own benefit and also for the benefit of her kids. The creche was what initially attracted Kerry as she wanted kids to socialise with others from an early age. Kerry felt quite confident when she came to the project and she really enjoyed all the group tasks and games. She felt that she learned a lot about herself and her relationships in a fun and informal way. Kerry is now ready to train to be a peer educator as she is keen to gain voluntary work experience. Kerry hopes to go to college when the kids go to full time nursery and views REACT as a stepping stone towards that.

References

12th November 2007.

Better Health, Better Care Consultation  
Scottish Executive  
St Andrew’s House  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

Dear Sir/Madam,

SMC Response to Consultation “Better Health Better Care”
Scottish Marriage Care believes that the Scottish Government should provide relationship counselling services through the NHS in Scotland. SMC very much welcomed the SNP’s Manifesto commitment to “support the development of mental health and well-being services such as counselling and talking therapies” (page 37). From research and practice we know that poor relationships negatively impact on the health of adults and children and effects include poor educational achievement and absence from work. Scottish Marriage Care believes that health and well-being can be delivered for couples suffering relationship problems and our response to the above consultation draws on our views and experience of relationship counselling in Scotland over the last 40 years.

I enclose Factsheets which provide more detail on the benefits of relationship counselling. I would be happy to answer any subsequent questions you may have or to set up visits to our projects or set up meetings with relationship counselling staff in urban and rural areas in Scotland.

Scottish Marriage Care (SMC) works with couples of all ages and stages in their relationship. We have progressed from a church-based organisation focused on marriage breakdown to an independent charity, which offers counselling and support services including: relationship counselling for couples and individuals; support for those whose relationship breaks down; ‘FOCCUS’ which is a relationship inventory for couples planning to enter a committed relationship; ‘REFOCCUS’ which is a ‘relationship MOT’; early intervention initiatives in relationship skills such as communication, conflict negotiation and listening; specialist relationship services for young people and young parents; and accredited training courses. Scottish Marriage Care has 12 full-time staff, and is led almost entirely by volunteers, numbering over 100.

Relationship counselling can prevent problems escalating and can address diagnosed conditions such as stress. Any development of the service can draw on the work undertaken by the Justice 1 Inquiry on the provision of family support services in Scotland, published in December 2006, which revealed that there is a patchiness of service delivery and queues when people actually need speedy access to the service. People may want to take responsibility for improving their health but the lack of professional relationship counselling services where and when they are needed may force people to resort to prescribed medication or to ‘suffer in silence’ which actually negatively impacts on family life and at work.

If you would like any further information, then please do not hesitate to contact me. I am happy for our response to be made public.
Yours sincerely,
Mary Toner
Chief Executive.

ENCS.