

OnePlusOne digital interventions

Further guidance for working with parents



Introduction

This guide has been put together to supplement the training for OnePlusOne's digital interventions. Depending on your practice and the families you work with, you might find that some parts are more relevant than others, so please use whatever you find helpful.



For a detailed step-by-step guide to the interventions, refer to the main sections of the practitioner guide.

Please note: To access the QR codes with your smartphone, simply hold your camera app over the code and tap on the link that comes up. If you get a message saying, 'Requirements have not yet been completed', you can unlock the hidden pages by going through the course and marking each section as complete.

Behaviour Modelling Training

All three courses use Behaviour Modelling Training (BMT), which refers to the clips where you see actors portraying different conflict scenarios. These clips show a conflict scenario going badly, followed by a different version where a few adjustments make things go more smoothly. They also show the parents – and sometimes the children – reflecting on what happened and how it made them feel.

As a practitioner, you can encourage and empower parents to take the learning from these videos and make positive changes in the way they interact with their partner or co-parent, and their children.

Helpful approaches to engaging parents

When introducing parents to any of the interventions, you might find it helpful to link to something they have said, particularly if they talk about stress or arguing. These conversations might happen when you have a sense of the family, perhaps on a second meeting.

You might say something like:

- ➡ *What you said earlier made me think about this resource, which I thought you might find helpful. Would you like to have access to it?*
- ➡ *You said some things last week that sounded really tough. Would you like to try this course about communication? It could be helpful with the issues you've brought up.*

This section outlines some helpful approaches you can take when working with parents.

The reflective approach

One way to engage parents with the digital interventions is to pick out relevant pieces of content and encourage them to reflect on what they are seeing.

When sharing a video with parents, ask them to reflect on the experiences of the children and families onscreen. Ask them about the parents' behaviour, whether they thought it was helpful or unhelpful, and how it might be affecting the children involved.

This approach can be easier than thinking about their own family dynamics, which can feel challenging or stigmatising and may lead to a defensive response. You can think of this as forming a collaborative relationship with the parents. This allows you to reflect together on what can be learned about children's lived experience of parental conflict, as well as healthy and unhealthy ways of behaving when conflict arises.

Here are some ideas of how you might reflect on the parents' behaviour and the children's responses when watching a video together:

- ➡ *What do you think about Mum using an 'I' statement? Why might this feel less confrontational than the way she spoke in the 'going badly' video?*
- ➡ *It worries me that the children are hearing their mum and dad have this heated conversation. What might those children be feeling?*

When using a reflective approach, try to avoid making direct references to the parents' own behaviours or how their own children might be feeling. If they bring this up themselves, you can see it is an invitation to explore further. Acknowledge what they have shared and ask a follow-up question about their family dynamics.

- ➡ *Thank you for sharing that, it sounds like an important thought. What would you like to be different now that you've recognised this?*
- ➡ *Is there anything we've learnt from these resources that you might like to try to help bring about some change?*

Encouraging bridging

The BMT videos are designed to show parents how their communication and body language might be affecting their children. In the second part of each scenario, they will see healthy conflict resolution, which can encourage them to make positive changes in their own lives.

Some parents may need a little more support to bridge this gap between seeing the videos and making real changes when a conflict situation arises. You can facilitate this by asking solution-focused bridging questions:

- ➡ *Having seen a few ideas of how things can be done differently, what might you like to try?*
- ➡ *What might we change about the way we start a conversation when we recognise that we're feeling frustrated? What about the time and place?*
- ➡ *If I were a fly on the wall, what would I see you doing differently with your body language or your tone of voice? What would I hear you saying differently?*
- ➡ *Are there any ways of phrasing things, or handy sentences like 'I' statements that we could practice together?*
- ➡ *How could you let your partner or co-parent know that you'd like to try some new ways of interacting and talking?*

As with all of the suggestions in this guide, it is important to consider the individual needs of the people you are working with. Some may need this extra support, and others may not.

Remaining neutral

Sometimes, a parent might ask you to take their side in a disagreement or affirm a negative view of their partner or co-parent. To support effective family work and facilitate positive behaviour change, it is important to maintain neutrality.

If you are asked to take sides, you might want to try one of these two systemic relational approaches:

➔ Transparency

I hear what you're saying but for me to work effectively with your family, I can't take sides. I am here to help all of you so it wouldn't be right for me to express an opinion or judgement in favour of one person or another. I'm sorry if that feels unhelpful but I am listening so please do continue to share your thoughts and feelings.

➔ Curiosity

That is a very interesting statement. Could you tell me how you think it might help if I were to agree with that opinion? Who do you think it would help less if I were to agree with that perspective?

Using the three digital interventions

Overarching aims

Whichever intervention you are using the overarching aims for parents are to:

- ➔ Raise awareness of the ways they argue, and how this might be harmful to their children.
- ➔ Help them to reflect on their own behaviour.
- ➔ Promote and encourage helpful ways of communicating and resolving arguments.

You will find your own way of introducing these interventions to families you work with. Trust and honesty are crucial, and it's always important to consider the characteristics and needs of the individual families. This will help you tailor the sessions so that parents get the best out of them.

In some cases, you might introduce the digital resource as part of an existing offer, such as Early Help Family Support, so that it becomes part of the wider work with the family. It is also possible to incorporate it into a more formal group sessions or parenting programmes.

Please see page 17 for tips on using the digital interventions in groups.

Whichever intervention you use, it is important to get familiar with the content before sharing it with parents so that you can facilitate the discussion. Build in time for reflection and goal setting at the end of each session.

Me, You and Baby Too

This course is aimed at new and expectant parents. It is designed to help them prepare for the changes in their lives and deal with the conflicts that can arise from the added stresses and strains.

It's most effective when parents work through the whole course, but you might want to pick out a relevant video to engage them in the first instance.

We have selected two videos that you might want to show to parents as a route into the course. If you are working through the course alongside parents, you can also use these ideas to 'stretch the content', helping them to get the most out of what they see.



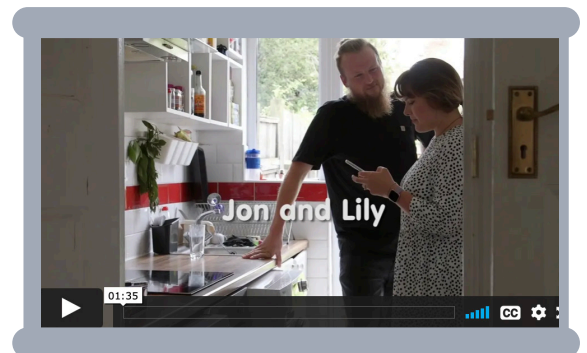
When arguing is bad for your baby

You can find this video at the start of Section 1 of *Me, You and Baby Too*. Professor Mary Rutherford shows images of a developing baby. This video helps to demonstrate how babies can pick up on stress even before they are born.



Choosing how to bring up your baby

You can find this video at the start of Section 1 of *Me, You and Baby Too*. It shows two couples talking about their own childhoods and how this may have influenced the way they are bringing up their own children.



This clip, and the other documentary clips of real families, can be useful for introducing the idea of **family scripts**. A family script is a way of describing how parents approach family life and parenting.

Here are some questions and prompts you can use to explore this:

- ➔ Encourage parents to reflect on their own **family scripts**: *What do you want to bring to the family from your own childhood experience? What do you want to leave behind?*
- ➔ Ideally, a family script would include ideas from both parents' backgrounds, rather than one being dominant.
- ➔ Explain to parents that the best approach is usually to try and have an **adaptable script**. It's important to be flexible when you go through stressful times, or changes in life stages and circumstances.
- ➔ Be mindful that some parents can get stuck in what's known as a **corrective script**, where they work hard to avoid doing what their own parents did.

For more information on family scripts, see:

Byng-Hall, J. (1985) "The Family Script: a useful bridge between theory and practice", *Journal of Family Therapy*, 7: pp. 301-305.

Byng-Hall, J. (1986) "Family scripts: A concept which can bridge child psychotherapy and family therapy thinking", *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 12:1, 3-13, DOI: 10.1080/00754178608254780

Arguing better

This course is aimed at parents who are under stress or arguing more than they would like to. Parents can learn valuable skills for stress management and conflict resolution.



Kids talk

You can find this video at the start of the 'Introduction' section of *Arguing better*. It shows a series of real children talking about their parents' conflict and how it affects them.

Watch this video alongside parents and encourage them to reflect on what they are seeing and hearing from the children. This video lends itself to the reflective approach as outlined on page 3 of this guide.



Here are some questions and prompts you can use:

- ➡ Why might the children be reacting this way? How might they be feeling?
- ➡ Note the nonverbal cues, like fidgeting and smirking. What could this mean?
- ➡ Notice the little boy who knows that his family are arguing about money. Even though he is very young, he is still picking up that his grandparents are arguing about money. What worries could this lead to for him?
- ➡ Sometimes we think an argument won't affect a child as long as they can't hear it but that's not always true. Notice how even a tense atmosphere can change the way a child feels.
- ➡ If you were a child and you heard an argument but didn't hear the resolution, would you be worried about the future? Sometimes children fear the worst because they don't know any different.
- ➡ One girl talks about feeling 'a frost coming inside' when her parents are in conflict. What would it feel like to have a frost inside you? Would you feel stuck?
- ➡ How might it affect you if you didn't know when you were going to feel frosty and when you were going to feel the summer coming back? Could the frost come when you're at school? Could there be summer one day and frost the next? How might that affect you?
- ➡ Notice the group of girls who reflect on adulthood and the choices they might make in the future. How do we feel knowing that children are thinking about things like that?

- ➡ Notice the physicality of the girl who says she wouldn't know which parent to choose if they were to split up. In the video, she leans one way and then the other, physically mirroring a sense of being torn. What might that feel like?

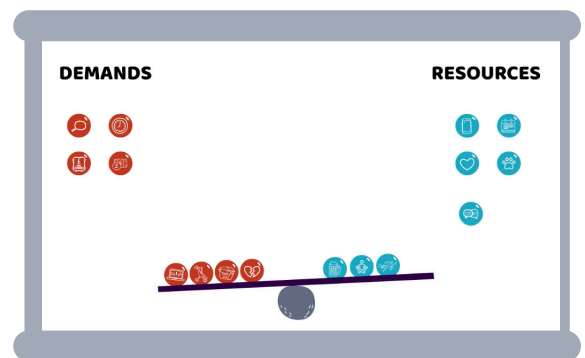
This video can be particularly helpful as a reflection tool without asking the parent about their own children. Keeping things more general can help avoid feelings of judgement or defensiveness for the parent. Then, at a follow-up session, you can ask something like: *Have there been any further reflections on the video we watched last week?*



Balance of stress

You can find this animation in Section 1 of *Arguing better*. It explains how stress can come about when we don't have enough resources to meet the demands in our lives.

As you think about the parents' demands and resources, here are some factors you might want to consider:



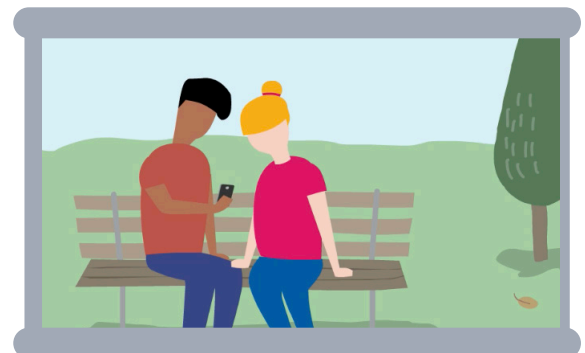
- ➡ As well as thinking about *what* the demands are, try to notice *when* they are most stressful. What's the difference between being able to cope and feeling overwhelmed?
- ➡ Be particularly aware of anything that one partner considers a resource and the other considers a demand. These could be something like a hobby, a second job, or involvement from in-laws.
- ➡ You can use the idea of demands and resources to help the parent create an ecomap that explores the support systems and figures they have in their social environment. Having support can help to alleviate parental stress, which can reduce couple or co-parenting conflict.



Darren's story

You can find this animation under 'Stress and relationships' in Section 1 of *Arguing better*. It tells the fictionalised story of a relationship where problems have not been addressed and conflict has escalated.

- ➡ Often, maladaptive behaviours and emotional crutches like drinking aren't noticed until they are already entrenched. At this stage, the behaviour may already be contributing to a vicious cycle in the relationship dynamics.



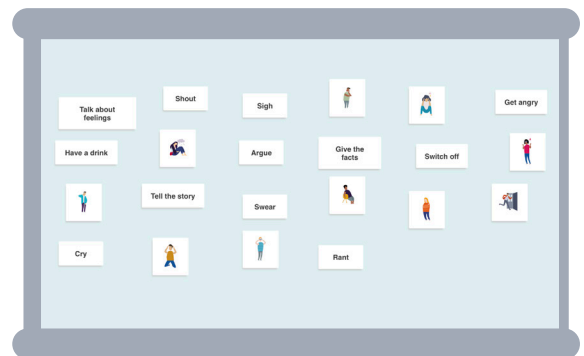
- ➡ In the story, Darren's partner seems quite laid back. Could it be that she thinks it will take the pressure off Darren's stress? If Darren needs something different from her, he will need to find a way to communicate it. How might he go about doing that?
- ➡ When supporting couples or co-parents, it can be helpful to work from a systemic frame – in doing so, you will want to reflect on any external stresses and how they spill into the relationship. In Darren's case, **money** and **alcohol** are both external stresses that end up affecting the relationship.
- ➡ You also have an opportunity to change the narrative from problems being *caused by a person* to being *a result of struggling with external stressors*. Helping parents to see things from this point of view can open up the possibility for perspective taking, empathy, and learning to develop healthy interpersonal skills.



Symptoms of stress (interactive)

You can find this activity under 'Symptoms of stress' in Section 2 of *Arguing better*. It is an interactive activity that allows parents to select three symptoms of stress for themselves and for their partner.

Encourage parents to reflect on both sets of choices. Having done so, they can go on to think about ways to respond in the future. Here is a prompt you can use:



- ➡ When we can recognise our own symptoms of stress, it can sometimes help us to notice if our behaviour is unhelpful. For example: *When I shout, my partner shuts down. Maybe I need to learn to give the facts instead.*




Logs and fire

You can find the 'Logs and fire' animation under 'How do conversations get out of hand' in Section 3 of *Arguing better* (It's also in Section 3 of *Me, You and Baby Too*, under 'Understand why arguments happen').

This animation uses a fire analogy to talk about how arguments get out of hand. When helping parents to reflect on the BMT clips, the following prompts might help:



- ➡ Thinking about the fire analogy, notice the matches, fuel, and water in the conflict scenarios. What triggers the argument? What makes it worse? What calms it down?

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- ➡ Looking at where things didn't go so well, what could the families have done differently?
 - ➡ Remind parents to maintain a positive attitude and to keep trying. It can be helpful to point out that we sometimes strike a match when we're feeling stressed. In these moments, it's important to recognise what's happening, and blow it out quickly with a healthy relationship behaviour. This could be an 'I' statement, acknowledging the other person's feelings, seeing it from the other person's perspective, changing your body language, or asking for some time out.

Getting it right for children

This course is aimed at separated and separating parents. It is designed to help them communicate better as co-parents and resolve conflicts without putting their children in the middle. The course uses Behaviour Modelling Training to demonstrate key communication skills through five family scenarios.

Whether you are working through the course with a parent or talking to them after they have been through it, the following tips and prompts can help.

- ➔ Encourage parents to reflect on the BMT scenarios and the children in the videos without drawing attention to their own families: *What did the parents do that helped the situation? What did they do that was less helpful?* This can help them approach the skills more openly without feeling judged or defensive.
- ➔ Encourage parents to reflect on how the children in the videos might be feeling. Again, this can be less challenging than focusing on their own children as it allows them to find their own route to thinking about how they might want to adjust their behaviour.
- ➔ Use solution-focused questions. The bridging approach outlined on page 4 has some suggestions that may help facilitate learning from the BMT videos in *Getting it right for children*.
- ➔ If only one parent wants to do the course, reassure them that they can still make a difference. They might feel like it's not worth doing it if the other parent won't. However, it's still helpful when one parent models good communication behaviours. They can also learn to establish boundaries and get clear on how they contribute to interactions with their co-parent.
- ➔ It can often be easier to explore the content more deeply with only one parent present. The parent you're working with can take time to explore the content and practice how they might use the new skills without being inhibited by the presence of their co-parent. With both parents present, emotional states may be heightened, which can make it harder to learn and reflect.
- ➔ In some cases, you'll be able to 'warm the context' for the other parent: *I'll tell your co-parent that you're going to be trying this communication technique so that they know to expect it.* It is important to ask the parent if they're happy for you to do this, and only share what they have consented to.

Remember to share the five *Getting it right for children* skills cards with parents who are doing this course. These are a helpful reminder of the main skills from the videos. You can download them from the 'Extra material' section of the practitioner guide.

Additional techniques

How to talk to families about 'soft start-ups' and 'stonewalling'

Notice the *starts* of the arguments in the videos and think about harsh and soft start-ups. Often, people will want to talk about their own stresses and frustrations, and this can quickly turn to accusations and blame. It's OK to bring up frustrations, but there are softer ways to do it, such as using 'I' statements or asking the other person how they are doing before talking about our own issues.

Another behaviour you might want to address in your work with couples and co-parents is the idea of stonewalling or giving the silent treatment. This might be seen when one parent refuses to talk about certain issues or walks out during an argument. While this might end the immediate conflict, it can lead to feelings of bitterness if the other parent feels that their frustrations are not being acknowledged.

If you see this kind of behaviour, it's best to approach it with empathy. You might say something like this:

I notice you shut down sometimes. I wonder if that's because you're feeling overwhelmed. I wonder if, when you close down or walk out, it's because you're struggling and feeling overwhelmed? What do you think of that idea?

I can see why it might be helpful in the short term as it stops the interaction, but it might not be as helpful in the long term.

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of your partner or co-parent. What might it feel like for them when you shut down or walk out? It may feel like they're not being listened to or acknowledged.

What could you do differently? How could you tell your partner that you're feeling overwhelmed, and that you can't cope with the argument at the moment? How could you acknowledge their feelings? Could you offer a way to come back and discuss this issue later?

Couples and co-parents sometimes need to agree to say something like: *I can't cope at the moment. This isn't helpful or doesn't feel healthy. I'm going to leave now but we'll come back to it later when we're both feeling calmer.*

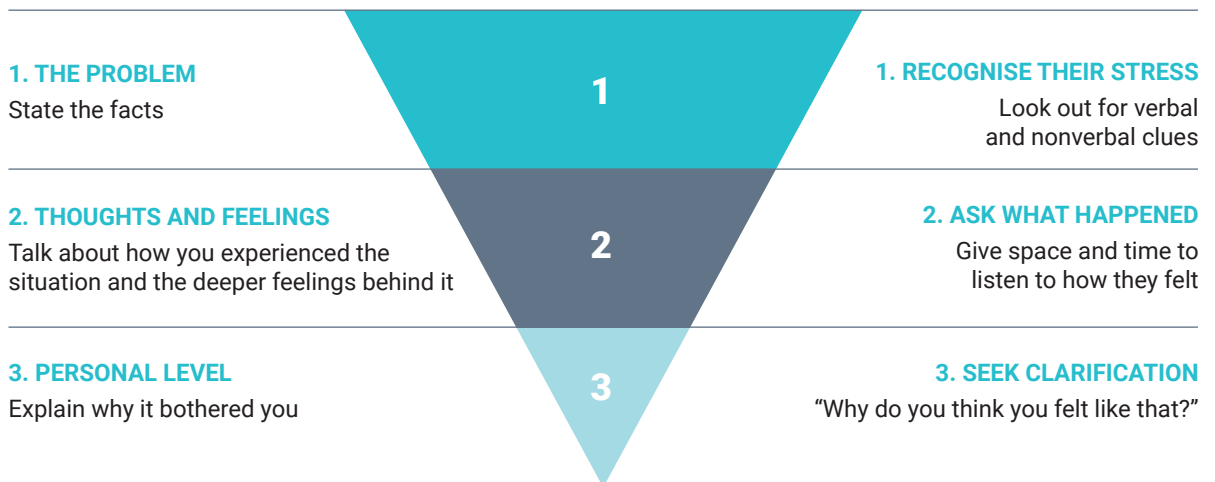
This kind of agreement can be part of a healthy communication, as long as it includes an agreement to come back to the conversation, rather than leaving the other person without a response. However, if one partner uses this as a controlling tactic, constantly shutting the other person down, it could be seen as psychological abuse, so it's worth being aware of. You will need to use your professional judgement combined with your knowledge of the family or the relationship history of the people involved.

The funnel method

The **funnel method** is a communication technique designed to explore an issue and find out what might be underlying it. It uses **open-ended questions** to gather information, and then **more specific questions** to clarify or address the issue.

TALKING TO YOUR PARTNER

LISTENING TO YOUR PARTNER



This model was developed by psychologists Bodenmann and Shantinath (2004) to help couples learn how to talk about stress. It is based on conversational skills that can be very helpful to learn, enabling people to work through difficult conversations in their relationships with others. A similar technique is used in the counselling world.

For those in couple and co-parenting relationships, using the funnel method can help them **acknowledge each other's thoughts and feelings**, and **stop being reactive and defensive**. It can be a positive step towards solving problems together.

If you want to link it to the digital resources, you can refer to the following content:

- ➡ *Arguing better*, Section 2: 'Five rules for talking about stress'.
- ➡ *Me, You and Baby Too*, Section 3: 'How to listen to each other'.

Funnel method activity

This is an activity for two people – a speaker, and a listener. You can encourage couples to do this together, but you may want to model it with one parent first. When working with co-parents it may be best if they practice the skills separately with you.

In the first instance, the parent will be the **speaker** and you will be the **listener**.

Explain to the parent that you are going to try an activity where you will both practice skills that can help keep a conversation in the **listening and discussion zone** rather than the **arguing zone**.

➡ PART 1

Invite the parent to speak about a recent time when they were frustrated. Explain the speaker skills from the funnel method and ask them to try to follow these steps as they talk. They can talk for a maximum of five minutes:

1. Explain the problem.

- State the facts.
- Avoid accusation and blame.
- Use 'I' statements, not 'you' statements.

2. Describe your thoughts and feelings.

- Talk about how you experienced the situation.
- Describe how it made you feel.
- Focus on the situation, not the other people involved.

3. Explain why the situation worried or bothered you.

As the listener, you are going to model active listening skills. Demonstrate the three steps of **listener skills** from the funnel method:

1. Recognise stress – acknowledge and empathise.

2. Ask what happened – explore how they felt instead of reacting.

3. Seek clarification – ask questions to find out more instead of going on the defensive.

➡ PART 2

Now it is the parent's turn to be the listener. Explain the listening skills from the funnel method that you have just modelled and invite them to have a go themselves.

This time, you will speak for five minutes. Keep it light, using a topic that is not too personal and is appropriate for a service user to know.

As the speaker, make sure you model the **speaker skills** from above.

Encourage the parent to practise the **listener skills** as they respond to you.

When you have finished the activity, you may want to offer the parent another turn now that they have seen you modelling both the speaker and listener skills.

If you are working with a couple, you can ask them to practice this approach together. If you are working with someone in a co-parenting dynamic, invite them to try the techniques when interacting with their co-parent.

Using the digital interventions in groups

The digital interventions are usually used with individual couples and co-parents, but they can also be used with groups. If you are working in a group setting, please consider the following dos and don'ts.

Do:

- ➞ Set boundaries for discussions, such as:
 - *We don't speak negatively about ourselves or others.*
 - *We don't make accusations or judgemental statements about our partners or co-parents.*
- ➞ Use the resources to encourage non-judgemental group discussions.
- ➞ Ask open questions about the group's thoughts on aspects of the resources.
- ➞ Base discussions on the group's reflections on the resources.
- ➞ Use bridging to encourage behaviour change – ask parents to reflect on what they might take away from the session and how they might like to do things differently as partners or co-parents.
- ➞ Acknowledge people's feelings.
- ➞ Praise helpful reflections and healthy ideas.
- ➞ If both people from a couple are present, encourage them to reflect on the content for the group discussion and follow up any personal discussion of their relationship at home, rather than sharing with the group. Not everyone is comfortable sharing personal information, and there can be a difference even between partners.

Don't:

- ➞ Don't ask direct or closed questions.
- ➞ Don't make or agree with judgemental statements.
- ➞ Don't make assumptions related to gendered behaviour or cultural differences in relationships.
- ➞ Don't allow negative talk about partners or co-parents who are not in the room.
- ➞ Don't encourage examination of individual couple or co-parent dynamics of those who are present in the group setting.

Overcoming obstacles and challenges

Parents often have doubts about trying out the skills and tips included in the digital resources resource. Change can be met with resistance:

- ➡ *It wouldn't work like that.*
- ➡ *It's different in my family.*
- ➡ *I've tried that before.*
- ➡ *I'm too stressed and I don't have time.*
- ➡ *I don't need this. Arguing is just a part of life.*

Practitioners can reiterate the key message – it is better for children when parents can stay calm and sort out their differences without shouting and criticising or giving the silent treatment. Even if one parent makes a change, it can have a positive effect on how things go in an argument.

A note on domestic abuse

OnePlusOne's reducing parental conflict courses are designed to be used as **early intervention**, meaning they are most useful for couples and co-parents *before* conflict is entrenched.

These resources are **not suitable** for situations where the conflict is deeply embedded conflict or where domestic abuse has been identified.

Sometimes, however, abuse will not become apparent until after you have started working with a family. It is important to maintain a professional curiosity and be aware of any warning signs. The following case study from a OnePlusOne trainer is an example of how this has been done in practice:

In a recent case, there had been a big argument between a couple and the police were called. Social care came and did a brief assessment. The couple wanted to stay together so I was called in.

I had a discussion with the family, holding a professional curiosity. The first flag was when the mum said she was doing a beauty course on Thursday evenings and the dad said, 'I don't know why she bothers, she's too stupid'. This was a warning sign that there might have been psychological abuse happening.

I kept going back, having chats, focusing on healthy and unhealthy signs, and practising healthy ways of talking. The children were clingy, and I noticed that the dad was shooting the mum down, giving her looks that seemed to say, 'Don't say that'.

When I got the mum on her own, it started coming out that there was physical and psychological abuse. She was describing distressing incidents of physical violence and normalising them, which we know is not appropriate.

In this case, the practitioner picked up on the important difference between **tit-for-tat personal insults** which can be part of non-abusive parental conflict, and **signs of putdowns and minimising the other person** which can be indicative of psychological abuse.

The practitioner then stopped working from a parental conflict approach and followed her local authority's procedures around reporting domestic abuse and managing risk regarding the safety of the mother and children.

When working with families in conflict, it's important to maintain a professional curiosity. If you notice any signs of domestic abuse, follow your local authority's policies and practices.



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