



**Relate NI**

**SUSTAINING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS**

**Briefing Paper**

**Imprisonment & Criminal Justice**

## **Introduction**

In March 2022 Relate NI Commissioned Ulster University to carry out evidence based research on healthy relationships and their importance to a range of areas to provide recommendations for improved public policy commissioning. This briefing paper is a summary of the findings relevant to those working in the fields of criminal justice. The full research report with it's 20 recommendations are available on request.

## **Why are Relationships Important?**

Relate NI are passionate about enabling good quality relationships. Through our 75 years' experience of working with people throughout Northern Ireland, we've come to understand that relationships not only give our lives meaning, they are of vital importance to our wellbeing. This project adds further research and evidence to why good quality relationships matter. Evidence indicates that good quality relationships are a crucial protective factor which can prevent propensity towards substance misuse; shield us from the effects of long term health conditions; aid our recovery, and can even prevent illness in the first place. Conversely, poor quality relationships are risk factors for poor health and wellbeing. Not only do people in poor quality relationships have worse health than those in happier ones, but poor quality relationships are also worse for our health than none: unhappily married people are at greater risk of poor health than divorced people.

Put simply, good quality relationships:

- Are a foundation to our health and wellbeing: Evidence demonstrates that people who have good quality relationships have lower blood pressure than those in poorer quality relationships; close couple relationships can slow the rate of decline in people with dementia and even delay admission to hospital or care homes. Relationship distress is linked to anxiety and depression.
- Are important for children's life chances: Evidence indicates that children growing up with parents who have low parental conflict, whether together or separated, enjoy better physical and mental health; better emotional wellbeing; higher educational attainment and a lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours.

## **Context**

Across the life course, our experiences in pre-natal and perinatal life, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age are shaped by the

quality and nature of our relationships with others<sup>1</sup>. This idea is the basis of attachment theory<sup>2</sup>, an integral component to many mental health interventions. Further, research<sup>3</sup> on environmental systems, indicates that the quality of relationships in one system of life (e.g. the family) will influence and be influenced by the quality of relationships on other systems (e.g. school, the workplace).

Thus, our experiences of relationships directly influence our quality of life, wellbeing, and also our capacity to fulfil our potential and be more productive in education, employment and other domains<sup>4</sup>. Developing and sustaining healthy relationships is integral to the functioning of all social systems in which we live, including but not limited to, families and communities, education, health and social care, employment, and criminal justice. Therefore, developing and sustaining healthy relationships in all spheres of life is critical to the prosperity of everyone in society<sup>5</sup>

While the role of healthy relationships is understood by many, particularly those working directly to promote them, and to prevent and intervene on relationship-based crises, the fundamental role of relationships is not explicitly identified in public policy, which in turn affects commissioning priorities.

The Ulster University project team undertook research to demonstrate the core role of relationships in promoting wellbeing and life chances for everyone in society, which could be used to influence and inform public policy to specifically embed the role of relationships as protective and risk factors for meeting public policy objectives. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted further the importance of relationships, and both their positive and negative impacts on families, communities, and services<sup>6</sup>.

The timing of this project is particularly pertinent given the Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031<sup>7</sup>, the COVID-19 context, and the recent local elections and NI Executive Programme for Government to be implemented, making this an opportune moment to intervene and influence policy to define and integrate relationship-based interventions into public policy actions.

## **Findings: The Key themes of the overall project**

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<sup>1</sup> Boyd and Bee, 2014; Waddell, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth, 1972

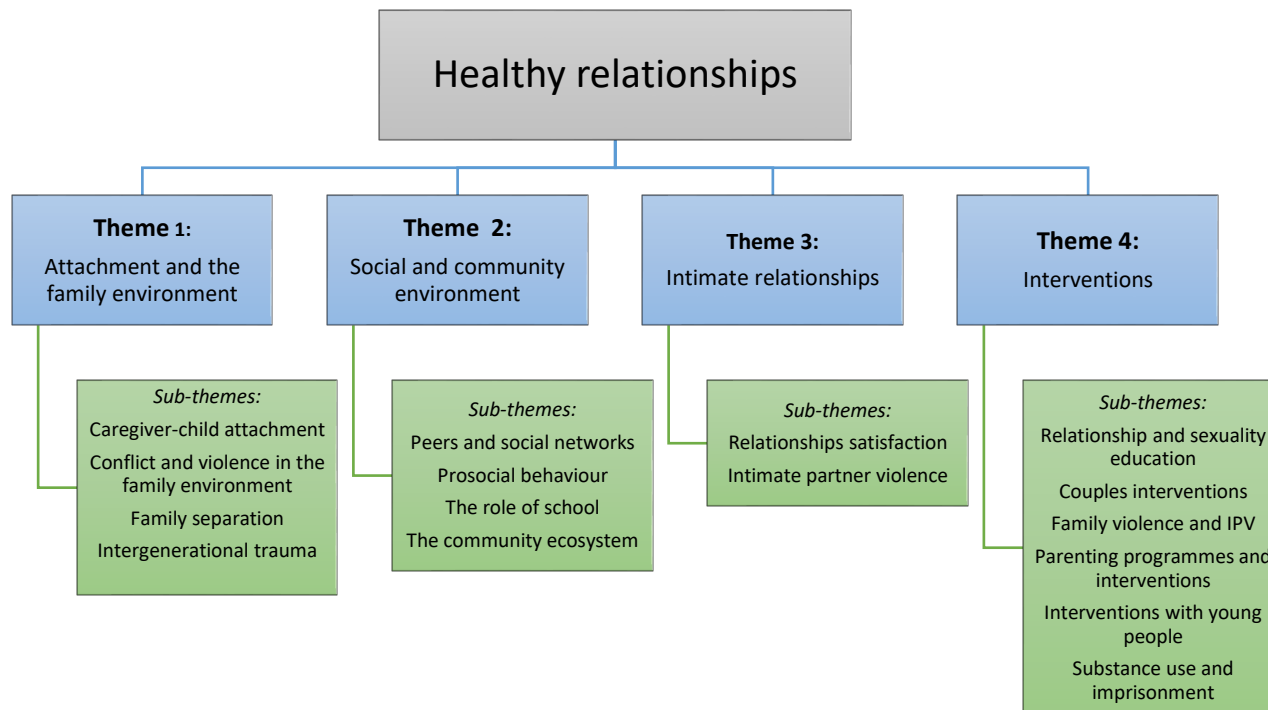
<sup>3</sup> Bronfenbrenner (1995)

<sup>4</sup> Beckett and Taylor, 2019; Waddell, 2019

<sup>5</sup> Dimmock et al. 2022; Hawkins, et al., 2022

<sup>6</sup> Goldstein and Flicker, 2021

<sup>7</sup>Department of Health, 2021



## Themes relevant to this briefing paper

### Imprisonment

Imprisonment can have a significant impact on individuals, with far reaching consequences for their family relationships<sup>8</sup>. Families and incarcerated individuals need support during and after imprisonment, specifically regarding improving, maintaining or rebuilding healthy

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<sup>8</sup> Goodey et al. 2019

relationships with children<sup>9</sup>. This extends to supporting them with economic resources and developing social relationships with like-minded peers. Research<sup>10</sup> has identified a number of predictors of low parental relationship quality and relationships stability in a largescale study on ‘fragile families’ as associated with economic resources.

Some research<sup>11</sup> also suggests that quality of child attachment and time spent with parents is a factor that can protect young men from involvement in delinquent behaviour. Family conflict and breakdown has been found<sup>12</sup> to leave a young person vulnerable socially to befriend peers who take part in anti-social behaviour, peer drug use and criminal activities.

Social networks and friendships have an important mediating role for individuals who are experiencing imprisonment Research<sup>13</sup> reports that for women with a history of criminal offences, stress and mental health problems were described as risk factors for engaging with criminal behaviour and that it was often through social relationships that women were exposed to criminal victimization and activities. Relationship education can support the knowledge and skills needed for maintaining healthy relationships, increasing social resources and establishing friends not engaged with criminal activity, who can act as buffers against life stressors.

Some research<sup>14</sup> recommends interventions aimed at fathers to boost protective factors that support social integration while addressing risk factors particularly negative attitudes towards women and substance abuse. Focusing on fatherhood may be a constructive way to engage men more fully in family violence prevention messaging and education.

Regarding individuals who have been incarcerated, research<sup>15</sup> identified that there is a trauma treatment gap among men and recommends addressing their needs and wellbeing, which can contribute to improving public safety, community health and reducing recidivism. Research<sup>16</sup> also found that women who have experienced incarceration and have a history of substance use also have issues with trauma, depression, and self-esteem. This research recommends the development of gender specific family reunification efforts such as community-based family programming and access to couples therapy that can facilitate the development of healthy and safe partnerships both during and after

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<sup>9</sup>Dill et al. 2016

<sup>10</sup> McLanahan & Beck, 2010

<sup>11</sup> Worthen, 2011

<sup>12</sup> Heerde et al. 2021

<sup>13</sup> (Goodey et al. 2019), Anumba et al. (2012)

<sup>14</sup> Hayward et al. (2018)

<sup>15</sup> Pettus-Davis et al. (2019)

<sup>16</sup> Walker et al. (2011)

incarceration. Other research<sup>17</sup> also recommend early intervention for children with parents who are incarcerated through the use of creative strategies in appropriate counselling groups as they represent an increasingly vulnerable population.

Across the international literature base<sup>18</sup>, it is established that children and young people require comprehensive sexuality education, and there is extensive evidence<sup>19</sup> from the evaluation of relationship and sexuality education programmes that these are effective for increasing knowledge about healthy and respectful relationships, increasing communication and conflict management skills. Importantly, research<sup>20</sup> shows that young people want relationship education and that adolescence is an ideal time for intervention, as this is when young people begin dating<sup>21</sup> which is an ideal opportunity to reduce risky sexual behaviour<sup>22</sup> and before social norms and attitudes embed (Bradford et al. 2014). There is also evidence<sup>23</sup> that Relationship and Sexuality Education programmes are successful with younger with incarcerated populations.

### **Relate NI's Pilot of Sustaining Healthy Relationships Workshops**

In January 2022 Relate NI began piloting Sustaining Healthy Relationships workshops in the community. These psycho-educational workshops teach people the skills and tools to manage their relationships in a much healthier way and allow people to identify for themselves which areas of relationships that require a change in thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours. What is evident is that those of us who did not have healthy relationships modelled when growing up, simply repeat the relationship patterns that we have seen. Through these interventions we are helping people realise that healthy relationship skills can be developed like any other skill such as learning to drive, cook or learning a new language.

To date we have delivered workshops to 250+ people from SureStart participants, young adults with additional needs, women's groups, community support workers, health professionals and parents. The workshops explore relationships as protective factors in our lives and explore all types of relationships tailored to the needs of the individual groups; from romantic, family, friendships, and relationships with ourselves, and

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<sup>17</sup> Lopez and Burt (2013)

<sup>18</sup> Wilson et al. 2018

<sup>19</sup> McElwain et al. 2017; Cleary Bradley & Gottman, 2012; Antle et al. 2013; Cannon & Murray, 2019; Goodey et al. 2019; Adhia et al. 2022

<sup>20</sup> Antle et al. 2013; Gilmer et al. 2012; Cheung & Huang, 2022

<sup>21</sup> Miller et al. 2015; Burrus et al. 2018; Wilson 2018

<sup>22</sup> Clark et al. 2018

<sup>23</sup> Goodey et al. (2019)

children. We use the Gottman Institutes<sup>24</sup> Sound Relationship House to explore the skills and tools required to sustain healthy relationships as well as exploring the four levels of destructive relationship behaviour. The workshops explore relationship stressors, which usually occur during times of transition in people's lives. The workshops explore our relationships with our emotions and how emotional identification is a key component not only in self-regulation but seeing emotions as data and not directives. Conflict resolution and the skills and attitudes required to do this effectively are also modelled. We also look at the key components to healthy relationships as well as the red flags that are evident in unhealthy relationship behaviours. The workshops include videos, discussion, and activities that can be taken away and used later. These 2 x 1.5 hour workshops have been evaluated in house with very positive feedback. Of the five areas evaluated 90%+ participants either agreed or strongly agreed that:

- Attending this workshop has made me think differently
- Information was relevant to the healthy relationship themes
- What I have learned will contribute to my understanding of the area
- This programme has supported my wellbeing mentally
- This programme has supported my wellbeing emotionally

When asked to identify any parts of the workshops that were particularly helpful, comments included:

- *Very interesting and helps tie other things such as behaviours into how we look at relationships*
- *The part about conflict resolution and the 'I feel' statements was very helpful. Very good and very well presented*
- *I really enjoyed this, it has made me feel so positive to move forward- Amazing class*
- *It really made me think*
- *The conflict management self-evaluation and the sound relationship house were excellent. Looking at yourself and how you respond was really helpful*
- *Dealing with conflict, I particularly like the Sound Relationship House. Very useful for all relationships; personal and working. It will be good to see this rolled out to local community groups*

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.gottman.com>

- *Different parts of the workshops will be useful for different groups e.g. parents and tots, or young adults or women's group*
- *Talking about the different ways of dealing with arguments actually works! I loved the colour coded list of emotions, will be using with the kids.*
- *I have a better understanding of ways of making my relationship better with my husband and my kids*
- *I loved learning about how to deal with emotions and relationships*
- *I really liked the videos on sound relationships, destructive behaviours and emotions. I feel I am now able to express myself in a more positive way. Trainer was great at explaining things when asked a question. They were great classes – thank you*
- *I thought the most useful part of the workshops for me was learning about the different emotions and how we can handle different situations in a different way that brings better outcomes.*

As part of this pilot Relate NI partnered with Barnardos and delivered 2 workshops on their Family Matters Programme.

Background to Barnardo's Families Matter Programme in Maghaberry Prison

Barnardo's NI have been working in NI prisons since 1996 supporting families impacted by imprisonment.

As one of the leading Children's Charities in the UK Barnardo's is acutely aware of the impact imprisonment has on families and in particular children.

Children with a parent in prison are more likely to experience.

- poor mental health
- lower educational attainment
- low self esteem
- involvement in the criminal justice system themselves

Families Matter Programme



Families Matter (FM) is a 12-week programme delivered in a designated landing within Braid House in Maghaberry prison. The approach to delivery involves up to 28 dads being housed on the landing for the duration of the programme. The purpose of this is to create a space where offenders who are parents, stepparents or carers are supported to “think family” and put their children and family first. The FM landing is different to other parts of the prison as children and family are at the forefront of all decisions and activities. The programme has a strong focus on family relationships and positive parenting. FM participants sign up to a strict code of behaviour before engaging. Failure to adhere to the agreed behaviours can result in participants being asked to leave the programme. Family members are involved from the outset and a range of family focused visits/events take place as part of the delivery.

The FM programme provides opportunities for parents to reflect on the impact of poor choices on children and families. For many changing the focus from their offending behaviour and instead viewing them as parents can encourage a different perspective and can be a motivator for change. The programme also helps parents identify specific actions they need to complete to be positive role models in their child’s life, even if the parent is still in custody.

A key element of the programme is to encourage parents to work from the present moment, which can help change and shape their and their child’s future. Although separated by imprisonment, there are still many ways fathers can support and nurture their families

## Family Involvement

The key relational aspect which sets this programme apart from others within the prison, is the recognition that families and children are also serving a silent sentence alongside the person in custody. Families are innocent yet often feel blamed and shamed when a loved one is charged or found guilty of an offence. Families taking part in the programme are eligible for an additional monthly visit for the duration of their time on the programme. These visits take place in the Braid visit area and last approx. 4 hrs (usually on a Saturday or when possible, during school holidays). For children attending the visit it is often the only opportunity they have to feel part of a “normal” family doing everyday things that most families take for granted.

The Families Matter programme seeks to engage with families for two main reasons:

1. Reducing intergenerational offending

Families and children are often isolated, and many find it hard to seek help. The additional pressures (financial and emotional) this creates can leave many parents struggling to be fully present in their children’s lives. These circumstances therefore increase the risk of children themselves

suffering from poor mental health, reduced capacity to do well at school, lower self-esteem resulting in poor decision making, and in some cases these children will become involved in the criminal justice system themselves.

## 2. Reducing recidivism

It is well documented that offenders who maintain good family relationships and return to their family upon release are less likely to re-offend. Indeed, for many parents in custody, recognising the impact their offending is having on their children and family can be a catalyst for change, prompting engagement in further offence reduction activities while in custody.

### Families Matter Case Study<sup>25</sup>

John self-Referred to Barnardo's via a peer mentor on the landing who provided him with an overview of Barnardo's support available in Maghaberry prison. He reported that he was a lifer who had his licence revoked due to his recent re-offending. He advised that the offence took place before he knew he was to become a dad. He told me about his daughter Clare aged 6 months and her mother Sue whom he remains married to. John stated that they had been living together as a family in Northern Ireland however when he re-entered custody his wife moved to Scotland to be closer to her family due to experiencing post-natal depression, increased pressures of parenting a baby alone, feelings of isolation and deterioration in her mental health due to him being in prison.

He talked about how much more difficult he was finding being in prison this time as a parent and how he feels sad and frustrated that he is missing out on being there for his daughter and his wife. John said he was interested in engaging with Barnardo's, expressing particular interest in parenting programs to help improve his knowledge of children's needs and enable him to support his wife and child from the inside. Project Worker invited Dad to attend Staying in Touch taster Workshop.

April 2022 -John attended Barnardo's Staying in Touch Workshop – and reported a better insight into the impact on his family of him being back in prison. He also advised that he now realised the importance of speaking with his daughter whilst on zoom calls to Sue, even though Clare was just a baby. John completed Barnardo's Being a Dad course (8 sessions) and reported a greater understanding of his daughter's needs and stated he felt more motivated as he had a better understanding of having a role in supporting his wife with Clare's needs despite being in prison, He also reported better insight into the correlation between how he was parented and his own parenting style. John applied to participate in Barnardo's Families Matter Programme.

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<sup>25</sup> The names of family members referred to in this case study have been changed to protect their identity.

August 2022 John successfully completed Interview for Families Matter pending results of drug test.

September 2022 John passed drug test and was offered a place on Families Matter. John commenced Families Matter Programme. He attended all sessions offered and was fully engaged throughout. Support Provided to John and his family and feedback provided about the positive impact on the family as a result of engaging in Families Matter.

- John had a phone in his cell for the duration of the course which he reported enabled him to contact his family at a time which best suited the needs of his wife and child,
- Family Induction – Sue was provided with practical support & signposting enabling Sue to travel from Scotland to attend the Family Induction to the course, meet Barnardo's and NIPS staff and ask any questions or queries about the program. Sue advised she would not have been able to attend this otherwise.
- Sue and John both reported that had it not been for the Families Matter monthly visits (known as the "Big Visit") as part of the Families Matter course, Sue would not have travelled from Scotland. They advised that the visit offered them an opportunity to fully engage in a close to normal environment where John could care for Clare as if they were at home.
- Sue reported that the weekly telephone call from Barnardo's facilitators enhanced the connection between the couple and their daughter.
- As part of the programme, John was given the opportunity to have a recording made of him reading a story of his choice which was then sent to mum via CD, and she was able to play it to Clare. John said this was very inspiring for him and Sue told the facilitators that Clare recognised and responded to her daddy's voice telling the story and it is now central to her bedtime routine.
- Some of the sessions delivered focused on low cost, no cost play ideas and John was able to create some age-appropriate activities along with other dads during the group sessions which he used to engage Clare in play during the monthly visits and mum could take some of them home. John reported he loved seeing Clare playing with these during their zoom calls.
- During the big visit dad was able to look after Clare's needs whilst mum had a break and an opportunity to mix with some of the other parents attending the visit. In fact, Sue made friends with another mum who arranged to collect her at the airport and take her to the prison for future visits.

- During the “Big Visit” the family were able to have a family meal together and both parents reported this was an integral part of the visit which made them feel “normal”.
- Around December 2022 when Clare was approaching one year old Sue advised that she was ready to return to live in Northern Ireland. She reported that the support the family had received, an increase in self-confidence and the friendships she had made with some of the other parents had contributed to her reduced feelings of isolation. Course facilitators referred Sue to NIACRO Family Links who provide support for families involved in the criminal justice system. Mum received practical support including benefit advice, housing advice as well as ongoing home-visits when she moved into her new home.
- Barnardo’s have been able to provide the family with some funding from a cost-of-living scheme and have given mum vouchers for food and some days out as she continues to experience financial difficulties.
- Through the family’s engagement in Families Matter Barnardo’s facilitators have worked in close partnership with other agencies involved with John and his family (with consent) including prison staff on the landing, senior officers, prison governors, Probation Board NI and the other agencies referred to during John’s engagement in the Families Matter Programme.

## Conclusion

Healthy family relationships, including inter-parental relationships, are critical to children’s life chances and have an impact on the probability of engaging in criminal activity and the criminal justice system. The family support infrastructure in Northern Ireland provides parents, carers, guardians and children with access to invaluable support and services, however more needs to be done to ensure that relational capability is built; relationships are prevented from falling into states of distress in as much as is possible; and people are protected at times of crisis such as relationship breakdown. Parenting and family support often focuses exclusively on parental behaviours, skills and techniques at the cost of focusing on the parental relationship and its impact on children. Overall, this research project has found that relationships have a fundamental role in nurturing and maintaining people’s wellbeing, as well as the quality of family and community environments. The quality of attachment with family, friends, and romantic partners has important implications across multiple domains in society including education, employment, health and social care, and criminal justice. However, currently there is a significant strategic gap in policy, in identifying the integral role of healthy relationships across key priority areas. As such, a key recommendation of this research is the development of a *Healthy Relationships Strategy*, which would involve a centrally driven, structural approach to embedding the role of relationships within government policy.

## Final recommendations and associated policies

<p><b>13. Provide therapeutic interventions for adults who have been incarcerated or subject to post-release supervision</b></p>	<p><b>a. Comprehensive RSE</b></p> <p><b>b. Access to counselling support from the outset of sentencing</b></p> <p><b>c. Supporting social network and friendship development</b></p> <p><b>d. Address trauma gap with men who have been imprisoned</b></p> <p><b>e. Gender specific family reunification programmes</b></p> <p><b>f. Access to couple's therapy</b></p> <p><b>g. Psychological support during and after incarceration</b></p> <p><b>h. Access to community-based interventions after release</b></p> <p><b>i. Policy makers can support with economic resources</b></p> <p><b>j. Support for children of parents and families who are affected by incarceration using appropriate evidence-based approaches</b></p> <p><b>k. Families of incarcerated individuals are provided with economic support</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved economic outcomes</li> <li>• Improved mental health and well-being</li> <li>• Improved family relationships</li> <li>• Improved parent-child relationships</li> <li>• Reduced IPV perpetration</li> <li>• Reduced recidivism rates</li> <li>• Improve public safety</li> <li>• Improved community health</li> <li>• Improved economic opportunities</li> <li>• Reduced substance-use issues</li> <li>• Reduce intergenerational cycles of crime involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Mental health strategy delivery plan for 2021/31 (2022)</li> <li>✓ Making Life Better (2014)</li> <li>✓ Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland (2016)</li> <li>✓ Preventing Harm, Empowering Recovery - Substance Use Strategy 2021-2031 (2021)</li> </ul>
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- 1. Provide or fund programmes to address intergenerational offending**

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