

# THE SHACKLETON RELATIONSHIPS PROJECT SUMMARY REPORT

Recent legislation requires schools in England to teach their students more about relationships

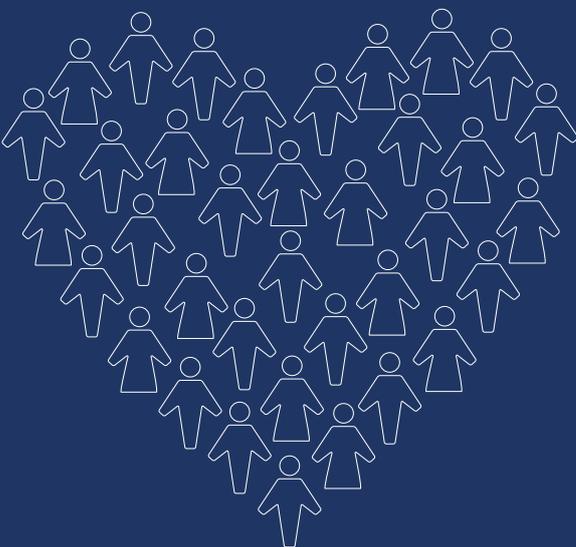
This research project aimed to provide an evidence base to inform a fitting relationship programme for young people

We considered the main causes of relationship breakdown and reflected on views of family law practitioners and couples on how it might be avoided

The main focus of the project's investigation was on the characteristics and skills leading to long-lasting happy, healthy couple relationships

We explored its findings in workshops with young people aged 14-18 in schools and community groups

We worked with young people to co-design the foundations of and best formats for an innovative relationship toolkit



## About the authors

**Anne Barlow** is Professor of Family Law and Policy at the University of Exeter Law School.

**Jan Ewing** is a Research Fellow at the University of Exeter Law School.

**Astrid Janssens** a Senior Research Fellow in Child Health at the University of Exeter Medical School.

**Sharon Blake** is the Shackleton Scholar at the University of Exeter Law School.

### For correspondence -

**Anne Barlow, Jan Ewing and Sharon Blake may be contacted at:**

University of Exeter Law School: Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX4 4RJ UK

**Astrid Janssens may be contacted at:**

University of Exeter Medical School: St Luke's Campus, Heavitree Road, Exeter EX1 2LU UK

## About this study

The interdisciplinary study was conducted by the authors, led by Professor Anne Barlow, at the University of Exeter and funded by Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia LVO.

The full report is available to download from:

<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/law/research/groups/frs/projects/shackletonrelationshipsproject>

For further information about the study, email Anne Barlow: [A.E.Barlow@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:A.E.Barlow@exeter.ac.uk)

# Report and key findings

Recent legislation<sup>1</sup> requires schools to teach pupils the characteristics of healthy relationships. This research aimed to provide an evidence base to inform the design and production of a fitting relationship programme.

## Couple relationships and Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) provision

Relationship breakdown often affects children very directly. We know 42 per cent of marriages break down across the life course nationally, approximately half in the first 10 years of marriage.<sup>2</sup> Cohabiting relationships, including those with children, are statistically more fragile still.<sup>3</sup> Given this, there is a need for high quality RSE using innovative formats that will engage young people and help them to make healthy relationship choices through life. However, in 2013 Ofsted reported that sex and relationship education required improvement in almost half of secondary schools, with too much emphasis placed on 'the mechanics' of reproduction and too little on relationships.<sup>4</sup> We therefore aimed to provide an evidence base of what drives healthy, thriving relationships to complement knowledge about relationship breakdown and inform the development of fitting relationship programmes for young people.

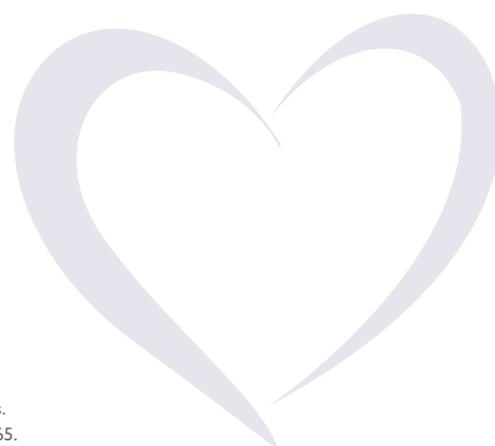
## What drives thriving relationships?

Using methods outlined below, this study shows that what drives thriving relationships of different lengths and forms is remarkably consistent although different skills may become more salient over time. Couples in thriving relationships chose a partner with whom they are a 'good fit'. Qualities of friendship (respect, shared interest and humour) were important to all. Couples had realistic expectations of the relationship and would seek professional help if needed. There was no 'right' relationship; what is important is that couples build a relationship that is deeply meaningful to them. Married couples and cohabiting couples expressed their commitment differently, but all those in thriving relationships worked at maintaining a good connection by talking regularly and being pragmatic and solution-focused

in approach to conflict. They loved their partner compassionately, being aware of the other's faults but viewing their partner as an intrinsically good person. They anticipated change and pulled together during stressful seasons. Most had built networks of family and friends to support them on their journey.

## How do young people wish to learn key skills?

Including young people in the design and development of a programme empowers them and might improve future implementation and uptake of the intervention.<sup>5</sup> We shared the evidence from the couple interviews and the systematic review we undertook in workshops in schools and community groups with young people aged 14-18 to co-create the foundations of a new relationship toolkit. School was the preferred setting for delivery of skills learning since it is universal and more likely to reach those who need it most. A whole day theatre/interactive drama piece would be welcome. We may need more than one method to reach all young people. Apps were preferred to websites and an interactive game would also be appreciated. Young people were clear about what they did and did not want and wished to be part of the development of any future intervention.



1 Children and Social Work Act 2017, s34.

2 ONS. (2017). *Divorces in England and Wales 2016*.

3 Goodman, A. & Greaves, E. (2010) *Cohabitation, marriage and Child Outcomes*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

4 Ofsted. (2013). Not yet good enough: Personal, social and health education in English schools in 2012: No. 130065.

5 Denning, J. & Verschelden, C. (1993). Using the Focus Group in Assessing Training Needs: Empowering Child Welfare Workers. *Child Welfare*, 72, 569-579.

## The Shackleton Relationship

### Project methodology

The project explored what the critical questions are that should be asked prior to entering a relationship intended to be permanent to increase its chances of thriving. It also aimed to identify common reasons for relationship breakdown. From the research findings we built checklists of relationship attributes and skills and undertook some preliminary work with young people to assess willingness to engage with relationship educational programmes to help them to form healthy, enduring relationships. The project was conducted in three interlinking phases:

**Phase 1 – Practitioner perspectives:** Interviews with 10 divorce lawyers/mediators and 2 judges (‘the Practitioner Sample’) to identify key elements of relationship failure.

**Phase 2 – Couple perspectives:** Interviews with 43 couples married for 10 years (‘time 4’) who Ewing had previously interviewed three times over the first four years of marriage at three-six months (time 1), 12-18 months (time 2) and three-four years (time 3)<sup>6</sup> including four separated couples interviewed at time 4, and a further two couples who separated between times 1 and 2 (Couple Sample 1). To obtain data on couples across a wider demographic and over a longer time span, we purposively recruited and interviewed 10 couples; married, cohabiting or civil partnered in same-sex or opposite-sex relationships of at least 15 years’ duration (‘Couple Sample 2’).

#### Phase 3 – Young people’s perspectives:

We undertook a systematic review, searching 10 electronic databases for programmes that teach relationship skills to young people aged 11–18. Using the skills identified here and in Phase 2 we engaged with young people and teachers in schools and community groups to co-create the foundations of a new relationship toolkit to help young people make healthy relationship choices.

**All participant identities have been anonymised. Names used are pseudonyms.**

## The Practitioner Sample

Overall, there was much unanimity among the practitioner sample about the common causes of relationship breakdown and this in turn broadly fits with the academic literature. The practitioners recognised that divorce petitions were often a constructed narrative. Obvious relationship stress points such as violence or adultery were identified as major triggers of breakdown. No one advocated staying in dangerous or abusive relationships. However, it was also recognised that it is often how people cope with life pressures which can make or break relationships. The most commonly cited were transition into parenthood (as different parenting styles were often not resolved) and different attitudes to financial issues. Couples who did not manage these transitions well often report loss of communication.

Of the common predictors of relationship failure identified, two – incompatibility and unrealistic expectations – related to things which could and arguably should have been discovered prior to marrying:

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“*Nobody is doing that deep dive in terms of do we have enough here to sustain us.*

**Joanna Braithwaite**

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A further two – failure to deal with issues and failure to nurture the relationship – exposed a lack of relationship skills which could in many cases be addressed:

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“*Typically, what would be said in mediation is, ‘You never told me that there was a problem,’ and the other person would say, ‘I tried time and time again to tell you there was a problem but every time I tried to say you shut me up’.*

**Thomas Ellington**

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<sup>6</sup> Ewing, J. (2014). *Maintaining and enhancing marital quality: An examination of the mechanisms by which marriages become more or less satisfactory over the first four years*. PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge.

## The Couple Samples

We identified 10 key attributes and skills that drove thriving relationships across time:

**Choosing carefully:** Many of the thriving married couples in Sample 1 were ‘friends first’ with intimate relationships developing slowly after a period of testing the ‘goodness of fit’ within the boundaries of friendship. Few couples in the more diverse Sample 2 transitioned slowly into relationships. Sample 2 participants described physical attraction and a fate to their matching but careful thought about formalising their relationship. Several separated participants spoke of the asymmetry in desire to progress the relationship, with one person often keener to progress to cohabitation than the other.

**Underlying friendship:** Friendship was the hallmark of thriving Sample 1 relationships:

“*the glue that sticks everything together*”

and friendship was instrumental in getting couples through harrowing life events (e.g. bereavement) or breaches of trust (e.g. an affair). Only a few Sample 2 couples described themselves as friends explicitly but elements of friendship: respect, shared interest and humour (having fun) were important to all. Many Sample 1 couples in thriving relationships (and 30% of Sample 2 couples) were ‘friends first’ with friendship deepening over time. For the remainder of Sample 2, rather than a ‘friends first, love second’ trajectory, companionship grew over time, often replacing passionate love. Separated couples’ relationships often lacked a firm foundation of mutual friendship.

**Being realistic:** Couples in thriving relationships in both samples had realistic expectations (often shaped by what parents and other significant family members had modelled). They knew it would not all be plain sailing, expected to have to work at their relationships and were open to professional help if needed. They had aligned values, hopes, dreams and expectations of the other and of the relationship. Couples in Sample 2 showed that this alignment may not always be there at the start but can develop over time. Persistently unmet or unaligned expectations were cited as causes of unhappiness or relationship breakdown.

**Seeing the best:** An ability to see the best in their partners was a given in all but the unhappiest relationships. When satisfied in the relationship,

participants viewed their partner as intrinsically good and attributed negative behaviour to circumstance. Partners in thriving relationships love compassionately; they communicate acceptance by being aware of but making allowances for the other’s shortcomings. Compassionate love can grow over time and this underpinned the thriving relationships in Sample 2. Significant stress can make retaining a positive perspective about the relationship difficult. An ability to overview the relationship and to look to the ‘relationship horizon’<sup>7</sup> aids re-establishment of positivity. However once persistently negative, relationship breakdown is difficult to avoid.

**Working at it:** Overwhelmingly, couples in thriving relationships accepted the need to ‘work at’ their relationships but such work is not ‘hard work’ provided couples are a ‘good fit’. Couples in thriving relationships were creative and intentional both about carving out time as a couple and about ensuring that each had time apart to spend with friends and pursuing individual interests. They showed they cared in the daily rituals and small regular acts of thoughtfulness that communicated appreciation in ways that were meaningful to their partner. Effective relationship work entailed working on oneself, where needed, as well as on the relationship. Relationship work is reciprocal in thriving relationships. In couples who separated, mutual blaming was commonplace, with each partner feeling that their efforts were not reciprocated.

**Being committed:** Commitment to the relationship but not to the institution of marriage is a prerequisite of thriving couples. Most Sample 1 couples saw the relationship as lifelong and being married deterred separation at difficult times. Cohabitants and two same-sex couples who had formalised their relationship rejected notions of ‘the one’ and ‘for life’. In Sample 2 couples emphasised adapting to change to get through testing times. Cohabiting couples describe formalising their relationships as unnecessary to prove commitment. Couples who were parents described a moral commitment to staying in a relationship to provide stability and role-modelling for their children. This was seen as positive by happy couples and a constraint by unhappy couples. For Sample 2 only, structural commitment featured for couples in relationships of longer duration who emphasised practical difficulties of leaving as well as a moral obligation to stay as your partner ages suggesting that commitment type may change over time.

<sup>7</sup> Gabb, J. & Fink, J. (2018). *Couple Relationships in the 21st Century (Extended Edition)*. Palgrave Macmillan.

**Keep talking:** Thriving couples carved out time to talk about the minutiae of the day or deeper level issues as needed and this open communication fuelled intimacy. They expressed dissatisfaction promptly, were pragmatic and solution-focused when issues arose and once resolved, did not revisit them. In Sample 2, those with divorced parents described finding open communication something they had to learn. Couples in thriving relationships often disclose a pattern of communication improving over time as they learned to accommodate their partner's approach. In Sample 1, unhappy husbands withdrew, internalising their distress. Unhappy wives vocalised their discontent initially but felt unheard leading them to stop seeking desired changes. Relationships broke down asymmetrically; one party had often given up on the relationship and emotionally disengaged some time before separating, making attempts at reconciliation mostly doomed to failure.

**Building the relationship that suits you both:**

Couples in thriving relationships built the relationship that suited them, often defying cultural or societal norms to do so. There is no one 'right' thriving relationship. What matters is that the relationship that the couple co-create has meaning for them. Sharing a common purpose strengthened the team perspective in thriving couples. For some couples in Sample 2, common purpose developed over time. In Sample 1, dissonance occurred when couples struggled to agree a shared plan and for some this led to estrangement and eventual relationship breakdown.

**Adapting to change:** An ability to adapt to change seemed to stem from a strong team mentality and was essential to thriving relationships. When couples pulled together during periods of adversity, they often report a strengthening of the relationship as a result. In Sample 2 (perhaps because they had experienced more change in their longer time together) openness to change and an ability to adapt to it, along with compassionate love, were the foremost characteristics. When the relationship was compromised prior to parenthood, common reasons were a lack of a shared vision or because friendship was not strong. Often, parenthood itself polarised couples where inability to adapt was fatal.

**Building a support network:** Close, supportive networks of family and friends enriched the lives of couples across the spectrum of family forms. Women drew substantial support from their mothers, sisters and/or girlfriends. Many men relied primarily on their wives for emotional support, but for most this was not

problematic. Couples drew support from the many communities in which they are a member e.g. work, school, church and LGBTQ+ groups, particularly if kinship groups were geographically dispersed. Lack of available family or other support was cited by separated participants as an additional pressure on ailing relationships.

**What do young people think?**

Given the interest in developing a new RSE curriculum, we wanted to involve young people in the study. Our aim was to find out in workshops what skills they regarded as important to develop healthy intimate relationships, how these compared with those identified from our couple research and whether school was seen as a good place to learn about this. We also wanted their pragmatic views on which design format might best motivate young people to engage with an educational relationship programme. We therefore worked with groups from five schools and two community groups to co-produce the building blocks of a potential future intervention: appropriate age-range, key skills to teach, educational tool (vehicle to deliver the message), duration, and whether and how this could be included in the school's curriculum. A systematic review of relationship programmes found 39 skills or skill domains currently taught across these. Through cross comparison of these skills and the skills we had identified through our couple samples, 18 skills were selected and used in a ranking exercise in the workshops. The same workshop was run in all schools and community groups and consisted of two main exercises. Task 1: students ranked relationship skills from most important to least important in groups split by gender and consequently in mixed groups. Task 2: in pairs or threes, students brainstormed on delivery methods for learning about relationship skills. At a final workshop, two pupils from each of four of the participating schools worked with experts in game design, website/app design, and drama/role play to further develop ideas for teaching relationship skills through these platforms.



### Task 1

There was variation in the ordering of the relationship skills between groups, but 'respect' and 'open communication' were both ranked highest skills in all groups. Top scoring skills for all-boy groups were: 'respect', 'open communication' and 'showing you care'. Highest scoring skills in the all-girl groups were: 'respect', 'open communication' and 'Identifying signs of an abusive relationship'.

### Drama/role play

Pupils suggested a school day's worth of applied drama activities to open discussion on intimate relationship skills. This would require no outside action from students e.g. downloading an app and would be taught around the idea of respect, linked to the other relationship skills. The content would change yearly to avoid repetition and to ensure it is age appropriate. Content would need to be sensitive to different genders and sexualities.

### Website/app

The group focused on an app for reasons of accessibility, privacy, and it being a more current information platform. The app would contain discussion forums, information and advice pages, and video interviews of couples or 'experts' in the field. The app would have to look professional and should have an authentic and welcoming feel.

### Online game

The group suggested the game would not primarily focus on learning skills. Users would play for fun, with skills incorporated. They suggested an online game using a player room where you can interact with others. You would play as an avatar and complete missions related to intimate relationships which increase your 'skills'. Players would be able to do missions or be paired to promote working with a partner.

### Future intervention

The couple sample findings and the work with young people both support 'open communication', 'commitment', 'empathy' (love compassionately), and 'show you care' as skills that are important for young people. They were also identified as key factors to a successful relationship according to people in long-term relationships. Thus, we propose these as a suite of important relationship skills that should be covered by a relationship skills programme for young people.

## Key Findings

- Two common predictors of relationship failure – incompatibility and unrealistic expectations – could and arguably should be discovered before a couple agrees to commit to each other.
- A further two – failure to deal with issues and failure to nurture the relationship – exposed a lack of relationship skills which could in many cases be addressed.
- Ten relationship attributes and skills were identified as driving thriving relationships –

*Choosing carefully;  
friendship; seeing the best in each other;  
communication; being committed;  
building a relationship that suits you both;  
willingness to work at relationship;  
adapting to change;  
building a support network*

- More relationship education in school was seen positively by young people and they wanted to be involved in the future programme design.
- Young people saw *open communication, mutual respect, showing you care and identifying signs of an abusive relationship* as most important, but agreed discussion of commitment and empathy should also be included in relationship education.

From the identified relationships skills and attributes, we went on to draw out critical questions for each partner to reflect on individually and then use as a basis for discussion with their partner before committing to a relationship intended to be permanent. To sustain a happy relationship, we also recommend that they be revisited from time to time, particularly at key moments such as deciding to marry or have a child.

Ten critical questions are set out overleaf.

**Before committing to a relationship intended to be permanent, we suggest each partner should ask themselves and each other ten critical questions.**

## **The critical questions**

- **Are my partner and I a 'good fit'?**  
(Can we work well as a team? Do we have similar values and outlook on life?)
- **Do we have a strong basis of friendship?**  
(Do we have fun together? Share interests and humour? Appreciate each other?)
- **Do we want the same things in our relationship and out of life?**  
(Do we each feel that we can jointly agree a plan for our lives together? Can we negotiate?)
- **Are our expectations realistic?**  
(Do we accept there will be ups and downs? Understand the need to make effort?)
- **Do we generally see the best in each other?**  
(Can we accept each other's flaws? Respect our differences?)
- **Do we both work at keeping our relationship vibrant?**  
(Do we make time to spend together and time apart? Each show the other that we care?)
- **Do we both feel we can discuss things freely and raise issues with each other?**  
(Do we deal with issues promptly and constructively? Enjoy talking and listening to each other?)
- **Are we both committed to working through hard times?**  
(Do we both 'give and take'? Work on ourselves? Look to a positive future together?)
- **When we face stressful circumstances would we pull together to get through it?**  
(Can we each adapt well to change? Would we seek professional help if needed?)
- **Do we each have supportive others around us?**  
(Do we each have a good support network we can turn to or call on for help if needed?)



Northcote House,  
The Queen's Drive,  
Exeter EX4 4SB  
UK



Web: <http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/law/research/groups/frs/projects/shackletonrelationshipsproject/>