



EARLY
INTERVENTION
FOUNDATION

MEASURING PARENTAL
CONFLICT AND ITS IMPACT
ON CHILD OUTCOMES

SUMMARY

Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes

Guidance on selecting and using valid,
reliable and practical measures to
evaluate interventions

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Disclaimer

This guide includes a selection of measures that could be used to assess if the outcomes of parents and children affected by parental conflict have improved after an intervention. It does not include an exhaustive list of all measures and is also not prescriptive, meaning that it does not recommend one particular measure.

The inclusion of a measurement tool in this guide does not necessarily constitute our endorsement of the tool. Instead, the guide provides an objective assessment of how valid, reliable and practical the included measures are. Due to time and resource constraints, the methodological approach used in this review did not involve an exhaustive search of all the literature underpinning a measure. There is therefore a risk that we have missed relevant evidence when applying our measurement assessment criteria, meaning that our assessment of each measure may be incomplete. We also did not involve the measurement developers in this work, although we did contact some developers where we felt it was necessary.

Finally, we have only assessed one version of each selected measure, with the exception of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, where we have assessed the DAS-7 and DAS-32. In the summary and full measurement reports we have listed all the available versions identified from our review of the literature. It should not be assumed that other versions of the same measure would yield an equal rating to that presented in this guide.

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The aim of this report is to support policymakers, practitioners and commissioners to make informed choices. We have reviewed data from authoritative sources but this analysis must be seen as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, professional judgment. The What Works Network is not responsible for, and cannot guarantee the accuracy of, any analysis produced or cited herein.

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About EIF

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.

EIF is a research charity, focused on promoting and enabling an evidence-based approach to early intervention. Our work focuses on the developmental issues that can arise during a child's life, from birth to the age of 18, including their physical, cognitive, behavioural and social and emotional development. As a result, our work covers a wide range of policy and service areas, including health, education, families and policing.

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Summary

Conflict between parents – whether together or separated – is a normal part of relationships. However, as set out in our 2016 review in collaboration with Professor Gordon Harold, there is a strong body of evidence suggesting that **when parental conflict is frequent, intense and poorly resolved, it can have a significant negative impact on children’s outcomes.**¹

Supporting healthy relationships between parents is therefore an increasingly important focus for early intervention and local family services. However, it is not always easy to select child and family outcome measures that will tell you if an intervention is making a difference to the lives of families.

This practical guide has been developed to improve understanding of **how to measure if the outcomes of the parents and children affected by parental conflict have improved after an intervention.** The guide identifies measures that can be used to assess progress for individual families, and explores how valid, reliable and practical these tools are. While the guide is framed with reducing parental conflict in mind, it could also be of value to those involved with children and family services more broadly.

There are many measures that could be used. **This guide includes a selection of some of the most relevant and frequently used measures rather than an exhaustive list.** It is also not a prescriptive guide, meaning that it does not recommend one particular measure. The outcomes we focus on are informed by the Family Stress Model, which was developed by Professor Gordon Harold, building on the work of Conger and colleagues.² This model shows that the quality of the interparental relationship (including parental conflict) is a central mechanism through which social and contextual family pressure (such as economic pressure) can impact on both parenting and children’s outcomes.

Child outcomes include:

- **Internalising behaviours**, characterised by symptoms of withdrawal, inhibition, fearfulness, sadness, shyness, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and suicidality in its most extreme.
- **Externalising behaviours**, characterised by a broad set of behavioural difficulties, including aggression, hostility, non-compliant and disruptive behaviours, verbal and physical violence, anti-social behaviour, conduct disorder, delinquency and even vandalism.

Interparental (or couple) relationship outcomes include:

- **Relationship quality**, including factors around couple satisfaction, commitment, communication, respect, consensus and shared interests.
- **Parental conflict**, specifically the frequency and intensity of conflict, conflict resolution skills, and children’s perception of and adjustment to the conflict between parents.
- **Co-parenting practices**, including parents’ ability to cooperate and communicate when performing parenting duties.

This guide includes 18 measures, seven assessing child outcomes and 11 assessing interparental (or couple) relationship outcomes. Each measure has been assessed against EIF criteria for how valid, reliable and practical they are.

¹ Harold, G., Acquah, D., Sellers, R., & Chowdry, H. (2016). *What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children*. Early Intervention Foundation: London. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/what-works-to-enhance-interparental-relationships-and-improve-outcomes-for-children>

² Conger, R.D., Ge, X., Elder, G.H., Lorenz, F.O., & Simons, R.L. (1994). Economic stress, coercive family process, and developmental problems of adolescents. *Child Development*, 65(2), 541–561.

Summary of assessments: Child outcome measures

| | Child measures Outcomes assessed | Respondent Who should complete this version of the measure? | Target population: Who is the measure developed for? | Psychometric features: How valid and reliable is the measure? | Implementation features: How practical is the measure? |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|
| Internalising & externalising behaviours | Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL/6–18) This measure assesses the child's emotional and behavioural problems, including (but not limited to) anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and aggressive behaviour. | Parents of children aged 6–18 years | Children aged 6–18 years | 4/4 | 1/4 |
| | Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) This measure assesses the child's emotional and behavioural problems, including (but not limited to) prosocial behaviour, hyperactivity, conduct and peer problems. | Parents of children aged 4–17 years | Children aged 4–17 years | 4/4 | 4/4 |
| Internalising behaviours | Mood and Feelings Questionnaire (MFQ) This measure assesses the child's feelings, thoughts and behaviours associated with depression. | Children aged 8–18 years | Children aged 8–18 years | 4/4 | 4/4 |
| | Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) This measure assesses the child's symptoms of depressive and anxiety disorders. | Children aged 8–18 years | Children aged 8–18 years | 3/4 | 3/4 |
| | Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) This measure assesses the child's symptoms of different anxiety disorders. | Children aged 8–18 years | Children aged 8–18 years | 3/4 | 3/4 |
| Externalising behaviours | Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI) This measure assesses the frequency and severity of disruptive behaviours manifested by the child. | Parents of children aged 2–16 years | Children aged 2–16 years | 3/4 | 2/4 |
| | Parent Daily Report (PDR) This measure assesses negative behaviours displayed by the child at home. | Parents of children aged 4–10 years | Children aged 4–10 years | 3/4 | 3/4 |

Note: Measures have been rated according to the assessment criteria presented in appendix C, table C.2. The colour code has been based on the following ratings: 4/4 = green; 3/4 = grey; and 1/4 or 2/4 = red. Measures for which we obtained insufficient evidence to establish validity (for example PDR) have also been labelled red, irrespective of their total scoring, as validity is considered to be one of the most important psychometric features of a measure.

Summary of assessments: Interparental (or couple) relationship outcome measures

| | Interparental (couple) relationship measures Outcomes assessed | Respondent: Who should complete this version of the measure? | Target population: Who is the measure developed for? | Psychometric features: How valid and reliable is the measure? | Implementation features: How practical is the measure? |
|-----------------------------|--|--|--|---|--|
| Relationship quality | Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-16) This measure assesses how satisfied a person is in their relationship and how they feel about it. | Adults in a relationship | Intact couples | 2/4 | 4/4 |
| | Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-32) This measure assesses how satisfied a person is in their relationship, the feelings associated with the relationship, and the issues causing disagreements between partners. | Adults in a relationship | Intact couples | 3/4 | 4/4 |
| | Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-7) This measure assesses how satisfied a person is in their relationship and the extent of agreement or disagreement among the couple over important aspects of life. | Adults in a relationship | Intact couples | 3/4 | 4/4 |
| | Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (GRIMS) This measure assesses how a person feels about their own and their partner's behaviour within their relationship as well as their attitudes and feelings about the relationship. | Adults in a relationship | Intact couples | 2/4 | 4/4 |
| | Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) This measure assesses how satisfied a person is in their marital relationship and the extent of agreement or disagreement among the couple over important aspects of life. | Adults who are married | Married couples | 3/4 | 4/4 |
| | Relationship Quality Index (RQI) This measure assesses how satisfied a person is in their relationship and the extent of agreement or disagreement among the couple over important aspects of life. | Adults in a relationship | Intact couples | 3/4 | 3/4 |
| Parental conflict | Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) This measure assesses parental conflict from the child's point of view, particularly in terms of the frequency, intensity, resolution and perceived threat of the conflict. It also focuses on how the child responds to the conflict, including questions around self-blame and coping mechanisms. | Children aged 9–17 years with intact or separated parents | Intact and separated couples with children | 2/4 | 3/4 |
| | O'Leary Porter Scale (OPS) This measure assesses the frequency of couple hostility observed by the child, including quarrels, sarcasm and physical abuse. | Parents in a relationship | Intact couples with children | 2/4 | 4/4 |
| Co-parenting | Parenting Alliance Measure (PAM) This measure assesses how cooperative, communicative and mutually respectful parents are when caring for their children. | Parents who are in a relationship or are separated | Intact and separated couples with children | 2/4 | 3/4 |
| | Parent Problem Checklist (PPC) This measure assesses the extent of agreement or disagreement between the parents over child-rearing issues. | Parents who are in a relationship or are separated | Intact and separated couples with children | 2/4 | 4/4 |
| | Quality of Co-parental Communication Scale (QCCS) This measure assesses the extent of mutual support and hostility over child-rearing issues with the former spouse. | Parents who are separated | Separated couples with children | 2/4 | 3/4 |

Note: Measures have been rated according to the assessment criteria presented in appendix C, table C.2. The colour code has been based on the following ratings: 4/4 = green; 3/4 = grey; and 1/4 or 2/4 = red. Measures for which we obtained insufficient evidence to establish validity (for example MAT) have also been labelled red, irrespective of their total scoring, as validity is considered to be one of the most important psychometric features of a measure. Please note that many of these measures have items assessing more than one of the three outcomes listed on the left-hand side column. Measures have therefore been grouped according to the outcome most prevalent within the measure.

More information on each measure can be found within the individual **summary reports**, included in appendix A. The **full measurement reports**, including details of the evidence used to assess each measure against our predefined psychometric and implementation criteria, are supplementary to this report and can be downloaded from the EIF website.³ We strongly encourage you to engage with this more detailed evidence so that you understand the strengths and limitations of the measures you are considering, and can make more informed and evidence-based decisions.

We conclude the guide by providing readers with some **key recommendations on how best to select and use outcome measures**, including practical tips to consider. In terms of selecting appropriate measures, for example, we encourage users to:

- select validated measures that are consistent with the intervention's theory of change and capable of assessing at least one of the intended outcomes
- consider measures that are appropriate for the target population under consideration, paying special attention to participant age, level of need, demographic characteristics and preferred language
- select an adequate number and appropriate combination of measures that will not overburden participants and will take into consideration the time and resources available for the evaluation, as well as the cost, licensing, ease of scoring and training requirements of each measure
- consider including measures completed by different respondents and/or collect administrative or observational data, if interested in conducting more robust and ambitious evaluations
- conduct further due diligence by consulting with subject-matter experts, to decide whether the selected measures are the most suitable ones.

We also provide some guidance on how to use measures appropriately, suggesting readers:

- ensure measures are completed at least twice, once before participants receive the intervention and then again after the intervention has been delivered
- use measures in their entirety, without changing, adding, deleting or altering the order of any items
- administer measures in a standardised way, to ensure data is collected validly and reliably
- consider logistical aspects of research, including ethical approval, informed consent and data collection, as set out by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
- introduce measures in a sensitive manner and respond appropriately if the data collected highlights a particular safeguarding risk
- use the information collected from participants to assess whether the intervention or service has worked
- acknowledge the authors and developers of the measures used
- be aware of the strengths and limitations of the measures used.

Ultimately, the guide is intended to support improvements to the quality of evaluation, contributing to more high-quality evidence on the effectiveness of early intervention programmes in the UK.

³ See: <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/measuring-parental-conflict-and-its-impact-on-child-outcomes>