

# How to argue better

**A toolkit for positive communication to build stronger relationships**



## Introduction

Evidence suggests that conflict between parents is normal, but if exposure is frequent, intense and poorly resolved, this can have a damaging impact on children, resulting in long-term mental health issues and emotional, social, behavioural and academic problems as they grow up.

People may stop getting along and find communicating with each other challenging because they have stopped listening, they don't acknowledge other people's thoughts and feelings and they get drawn into wanting to win rather than resolve. It's easy to get stuck in this destructive cycle and then poor communication and a lack of closeness and harmony in the relationship becomes normalised.

Whether you are in a couple parenting relationship, a co-parenting relationship, or a relationship between you and an extended family member, this toolkit is designed to enable you to communicate in a more positive way. It will take you through a few tools to support you to improve communication and build stronger relationships and provide a starting point to begin to reflect on some key elements of the ways you communicate.

Please note that these tools are not designed for use where there is any domestic abuse present in the relationship. This site is helpful if you are not sure [I'm not sure if my relationship is healthy - Women's Aid](https://www.womensaid.org.uk) (womensaid.org.uk)



# Enhancing inter-parental relationships to improve child outcomes

The quality of the interparental relationship is recognised as a primary influence on effective parenting practices and children's long-term mental health and future life chances.

Children of all ages can be affected by destructive interparental conflict, with effects evidenced across infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

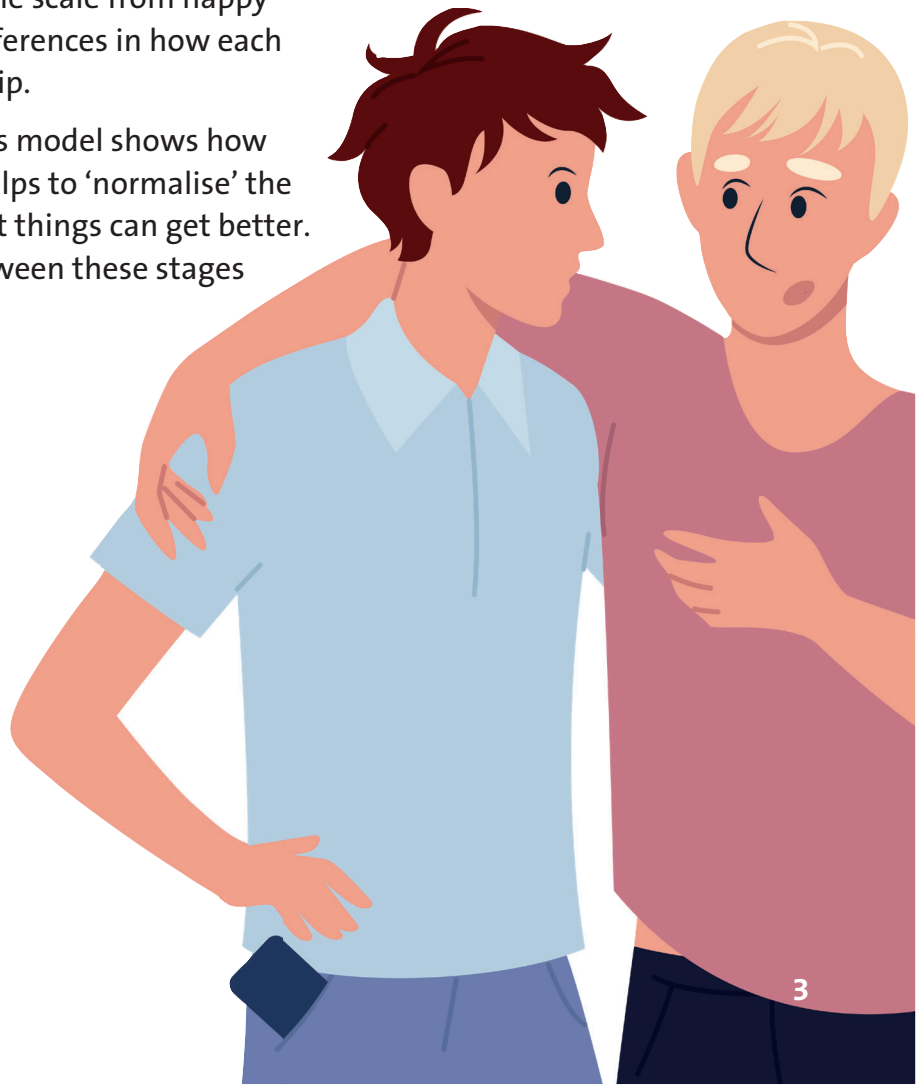
The context of the wider family environment is an important factor that can protect or exacerbate child outcomes in response to exposure to interparental conflict.

## Tools to help you

The following list shows tools that help you to have relationship insight and tools to 'do it differently'.

### Stage 1 – Identifying parental conflict

- **Relationship scaling tool** ([page 5](#)) Use this to explore how each person rates their relationship on the scale from happy to distressed. This can highlight differences in how each person experiences their relationship.
- **Stages of relationships** ([page 6](#)) This model shows how relationships evolve over time. It helps to 'normalise' the difficult phases and reminds us that things can get better. It is often during the transition between these stages that conflict occurs.



## Stage 2 – Exploring the causes of the conflict

- **What's going on for us? VSA (Vulnerability Stress Adaptation) – [page 7-9](#)** Using the VSA model helps give us insight to understand the connection between stressful life events, past histories, and the methods we use to cope with stress or conflict.
- **Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviour ([page 10](#))** This model can be used to help couples to recognise how they internalise behaviour that they observe which in turn affects how they feel, impacting on their response. This can be used to help couples understand each other's behaviour.
- **Our typical day ([page 11](#))** Use this table to identify how you see your typical day. Once completed, use it to consider when conflict is more likely to happen and what triggers it. Use this information to discuss what you could change to address and better manage conflict.

## Stage 3 – Supporting constructive conflict communication

- **What's my arguing style? ([page 12-15](#))**
- This helps parents reflect on their own conflict style and consider how it makes the other person feel. The table on [page 12](#) can be used to help parents identify the behaviours they use.
- **Constructive or destructive prompt cards ([page 16](#))** These cards give some examples of constructive and destructive behaviours within conflict and can be used in a variety of ways to help you explore what is going on for you now and help plot a path to take in the future. You might want to identify the constructive alternative to the destructive behaviour. You could also create your own.
- **Reflection and action ([page 17](#))** An opportunity for parents to reflect on the impact of their behaviour on their children. Walking in the shoes of your child may feel uncomfortable but it can be a great motivator for change. On [page 18](#) there are some ideas about ways of behaving differently.
- **Role Cards ([page 19](#))** You could review these cards and give examples of situations you might get into and consider the role you are asking the child/ren to take on.
- **You vs. I statements ([page 20/21](#))** These cards can help to describe how you feel in a constructive way by using 'I' statements instead of 'You' statements to prevent conflict.
- **Speaker Listener Technique & top tips ([page 22](#))**

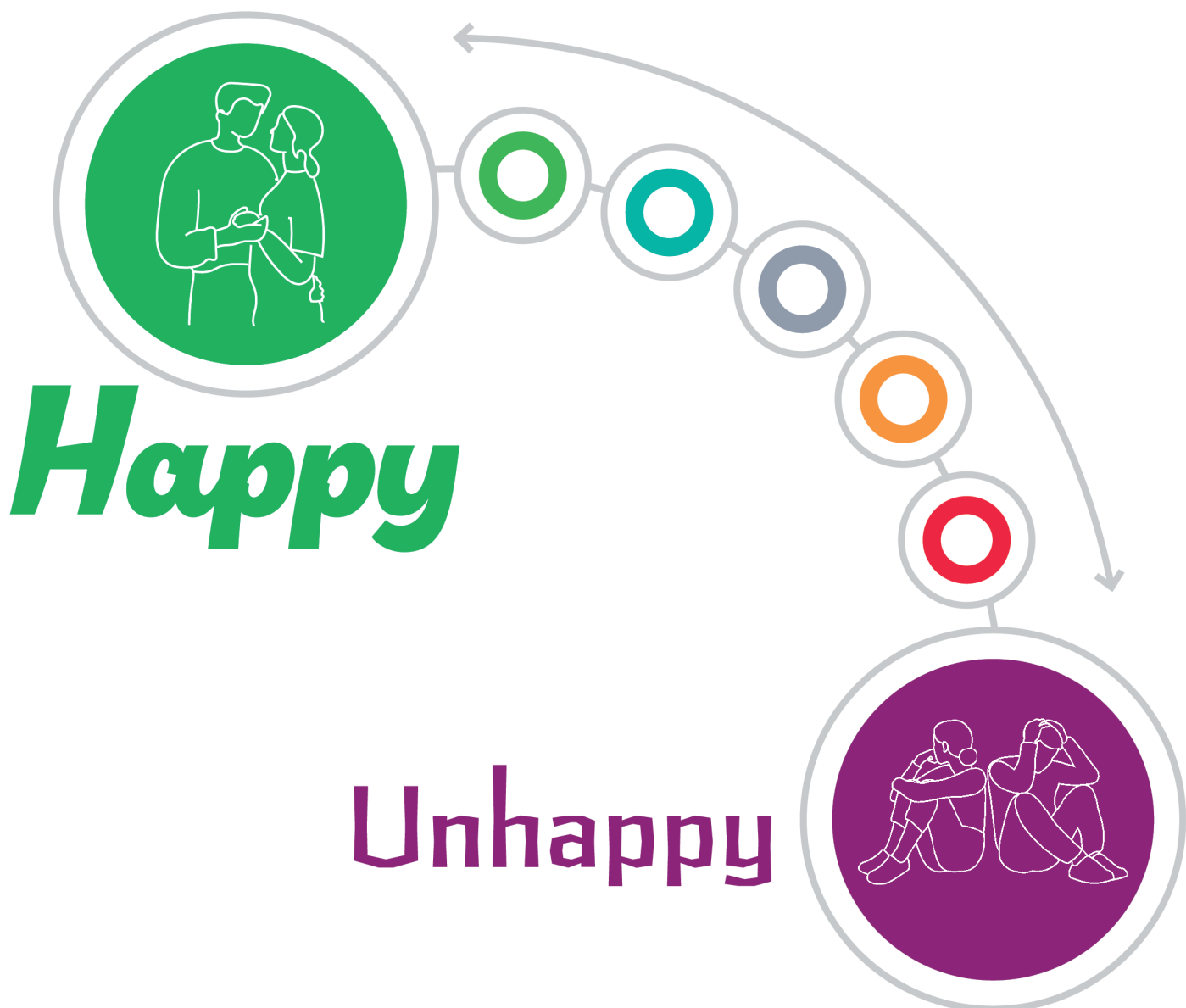
More resources to help parents experiencing relationship difficulties ([page 23](#))

## Relationship Scales

### Solution-focused questions

- If you felt like your relationship was in a better place, what would be different?
- What would you both need to do differently to get there?
- What might get in the way of you making these changes?
- How could you help each other to overcome these barriers?
- What support do you need?

### How are we doing?



# Stages of relationships

Relationships develop over time

Respect and  
Understanding



Acceptance



Finding yourself



Power struggle



Reality



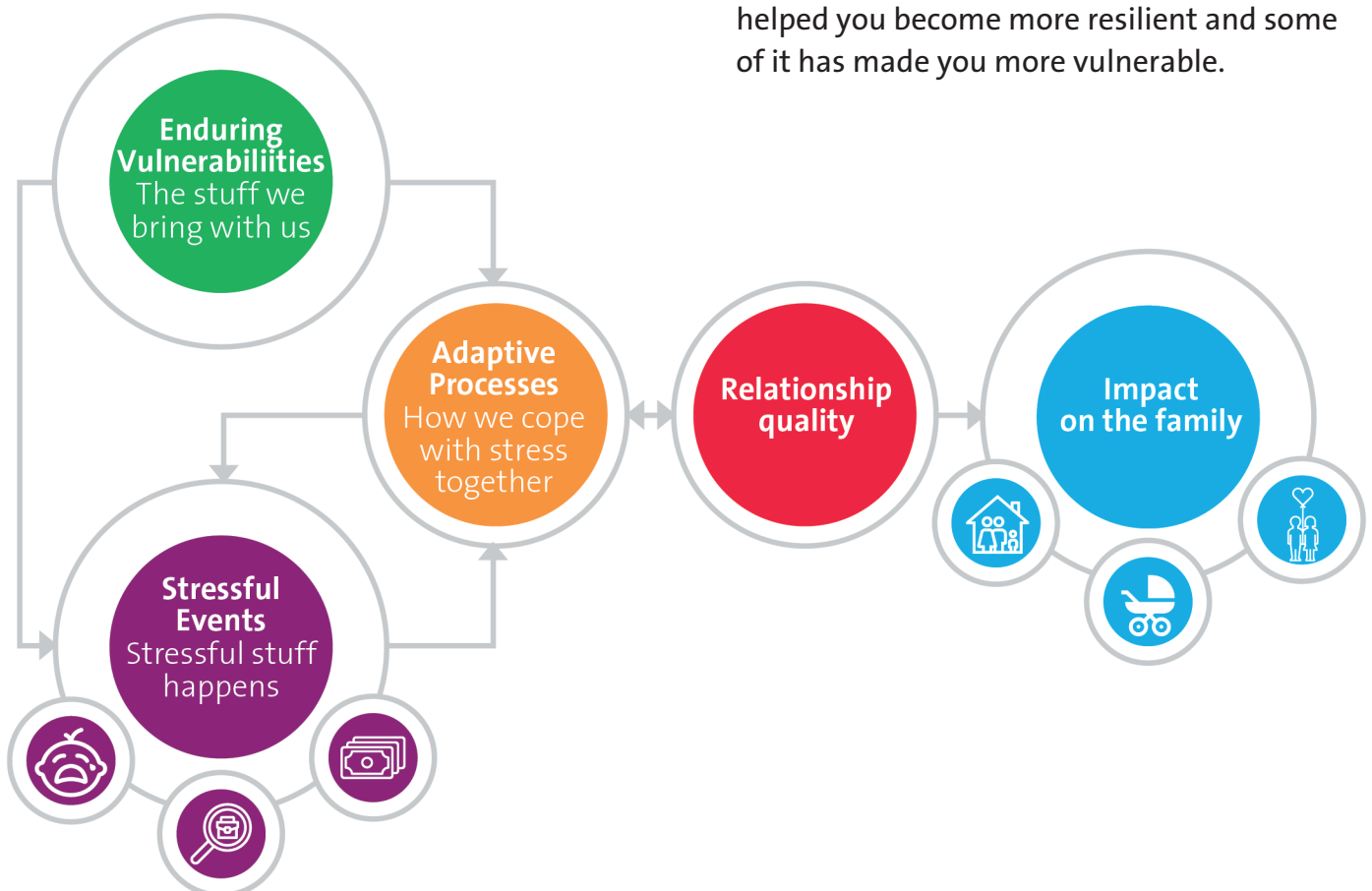
Romance



# Vulnerability Stress Adaptation Model

The Vulnerability Stress Adaptation model (Karney and Bradbury, 1995) helps us to understand the impact of stressful life events in the context of our past histories and the methods we use to adapt in these circumstances:

- **Enduring vulnerabilities** – The ‘stuff’ we bring with us (some helpful, some not) may be things such as:
  - The way you were parented
  - The culture and the community you have lived in
  - Your genetic make-up, your personality
  - The socio-economic environment you have lived in
  - Your past relationships, romantic and family.
- **Stressful events** – The life events you encounter, such as having a baby, illness and unemployment, increase partners’ need for support at the same time as reducing their capacity to provide it. The way relationships function overtime can change with new responsibilities and priorities. Being able to adjust well together, sharing what makes you feel vulnerable and what you feel able to cope with, will help you adapt more successfully.
- **Adaptive processes** – How you communicate, behave, and cope during difficult times. Some of your experiences helped you become more resilient and some of it has made you more vulnerable.



Understanding one another's life experiences and making allowances for it enables better adapting, better communication, and a healthier relationship. Coping with life experiences means finding a way to meet each other's needs in a balanced way.

Successful, healthy relationships are ones where each person concerned has worked out a way of meeting the other person's needs in a way that is achievable and acceptable to them both. That is what being a team is, using each other's strengths and supporting each other's vulnerabilities at times of stress and adaptation. The best outcome of mastering the parenting relationship is the positive impact on the children involved.

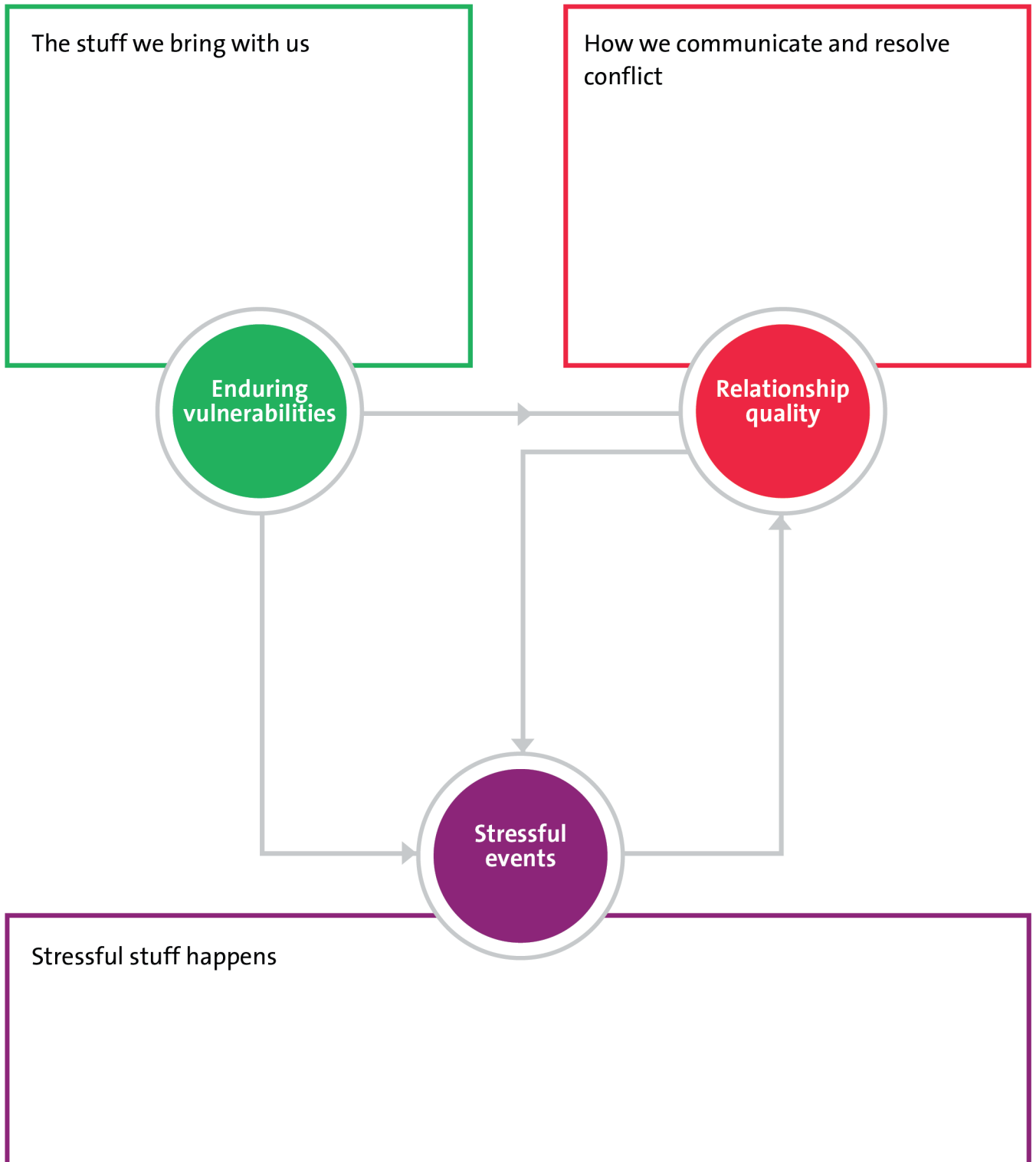
Take the opportunity, if possible, to explore what you are bringing with you, what is causing you stress and how well you are working as a team.

- What have we learnt about the other person?
- What could we do together that would improve our teamwork?
- What life experiences has each person brought with them into their relationships that has an impact on how we behave?
- How might these experiences be affecting how we communicate and cope with stress?
- What might we do next that would be valuable?



# What's going on for us

## Vulnerability Stress Adaptation Model



## Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviour

This tool is useful to explain how misreading or misinterpreting leads to negative thoughts that lead to feelings then to behaviours and responses that escalate the argument.

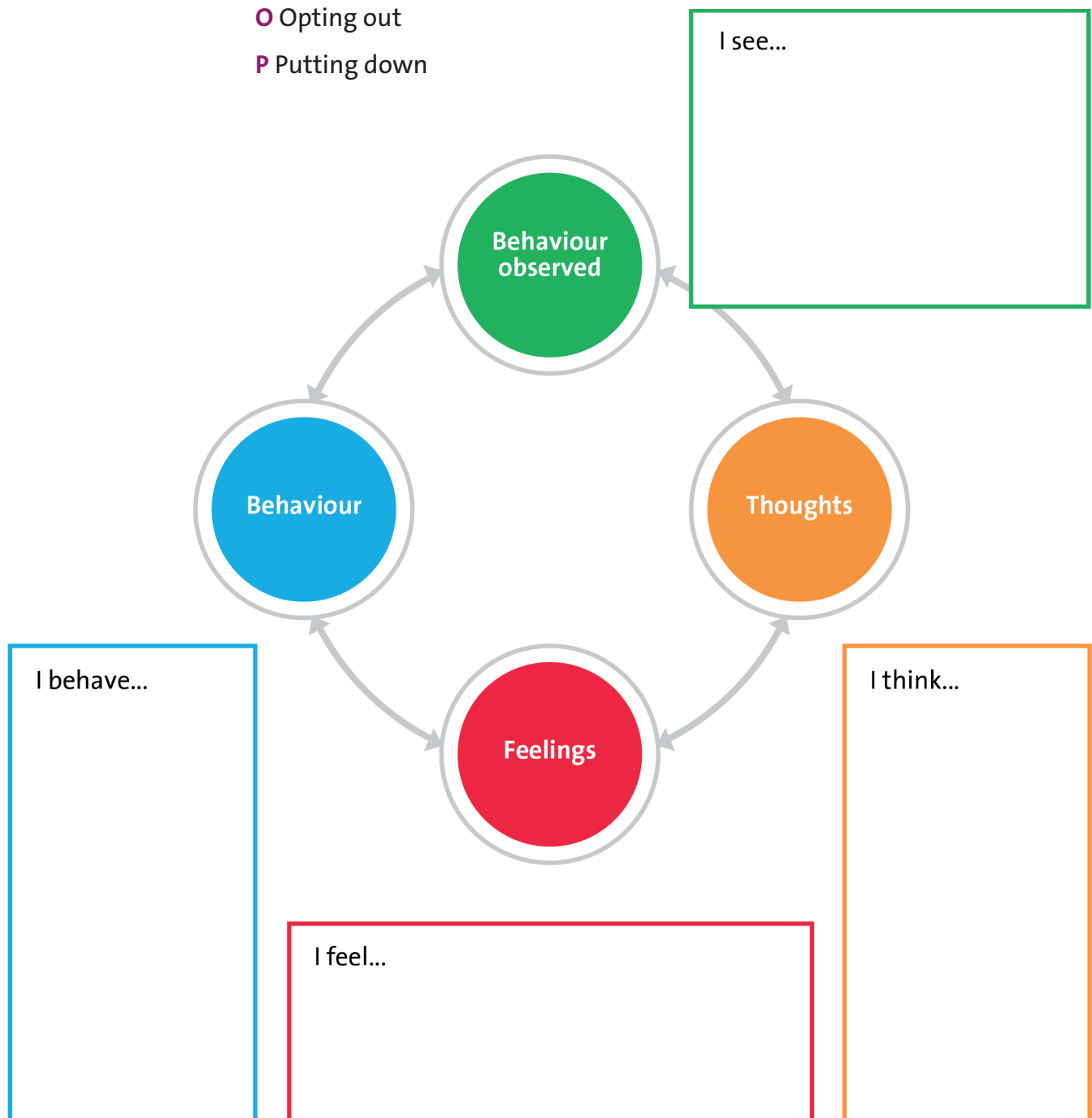
A good acronym is **STOP**:

**S** Scoring Points

**T** Thinking the worst

**O** Opting out

**P** Putting down



## Our typical day

	What my day looks like	Triggers to conflict
Morning		
Afternoon		
Evening		
Night		

## What's my arguing style?

When we are clear about what is causing our arguments, it is helpful to consider how each person reacts. Everyone has their own way in which they respond to conflict. How a person behaves during a conflict is going to have a significant impact on whether a resolution can be found. The reasons for behaviour may be misunderstood. For example a person who "walks" may need physical space in order to process the situation. However, if the person they conflict with is a 'pusher' they may feel walking away is disrespectful and want to push their partners into a discussion. This may make the situation worse. Misunderstanding a person's behaviour during conflict can be a key contributor to more frequent and unresolved arguments. Taking responsibility for how we behave and the effect it has on others is a positive step towards better communication.

### Sulker



A person who uses silence and withdrawal to get what they want. They often feel resentful and are trying to gain sympathy from others to get a certain outcome that suits them. Some people are capable of long periods of sulking. Often the partner of a sulker can't stand the atmosphere so will give in to the demands being made to restore peace.

### Walker



Walking away from conflict is a self-preservation strategy a lot of the time. You feel overwhelmed by the conflict and are struggling to find a resolution, walking away provides the opportunity to process what is happening and hope that things calm down so a more productive conversation might follow later on.

### Pusher



Pushing for discussion, for the other person to engage and 'get things sorted out' in the moment is a common arguing style. This behaviour is often what causes the other person to walk away. The need for discussion to be immediate, to see things through at the time that they happen feels important but that feeling may not be shared by the other person.

## How might you use this knowledge about arguing styles?

What style best describes how you engage with conflict? How does your conflict style affect your co-parent?

When you are able to be open about how you engage with conflict it can help communication in a more constructive way.

When you are stressed or angry, the impact of adrenalin means that the brain and body function differently than when you're calm and you go into flight or fight response. Can you identify the behaviours you use when stressed? (on the next page).

### Stonewalling

Withdrawing to avoid conflict and convey disapproval, distance and separation.

**Antidote:**  
Do physiological self-soothing.

### Defensiveness

Victimising yourself to ward off a perceived attack and reverse the blame.

**Antidote:**  
Take responsibility.

### Contempt

Attacking sense of self with an intent to assault or abuse.

**Antidote:** Build a culture of appreciation.

### Criticism

Verbally attacking personality or character.

**Antidote:** Describe your own feelings and needs.

Gottman's "[four horseman of the apocalypse](https://www.gottman.com)" (1994) (gottman.com)

Which of these do you do?

**We get  
sarcastic**

**We try to  
make the  
other  
feel bad**

**We give as  
good as  
we get**

**We don't  
listen**

**We turn off**

**We misread  
what they  
say and do**

**We use  
putdowns**

**We speak  
harshly, get  
louder, and  
throw things**

**We score  
points**

## In our relationship we...

Always



Sometimes



Never



## Constructive or destructive

These cards give some examples of constructive and destructive behaviours within conflict.

Asking each other's point of view

Interrupting to get your point of view across

Recognising that whilst you may not agree, your partner has a valid point

Listening to the other point of view without interrupting

Withdrawing from the conversation as it's not going your way

Using examples from the past to prove you're right

Considering issues from somebody else's point of view

Pointing out your partner's flaws when they support your argument

Raising your voice to make sure you get your point of view across

Allow each other the opportunity to express your views

Choosing the right time

Explaining how the situation is making you feel

Tell your partner what they should do

Using insults to make your point and share your feelings

Offering possible solutions to problems but be willing to compromise and listen to other suggestions

Having a solution in mind to the problem and don't change your mind

Check out what you agree about

Accepting that you might disagree

Show you understand the other person's point of view

Ending an argument both feeling that you have been heard

Explaining why you feel the way you do

Ending an argument upset and angry

Come up with lots of possible solutions

## Reflection and action

Thinking about the experience your child is having may not feel comfortable, but many people find it a great motivator for change. No one chose for their child to have a bad experience because of something they have done. You can support each other to do things differently to keep in mind your child's needs and what they are being exposed to, is it helpful or harmful?

Watching the [See it differently videos](https://seeitdifferently.org) (seeitdifferently.org) is a helpful way of thinking about the impact on your children when they see you arguing or know there has been an argument eg. they probably feel anxious and unsure of what might happen next.

Children need to learn communication skills from their parents and significant others. This can include how to listen, show respect, accept another person's view even if you don't share it, how to disagree without doing damage to a relationship. They don't need a front row seat to shouting, blaming, criticism and sarcasm, if that's what they see then that's what they learn. A good video that makes this point is [Children See Children Do](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1v1v1v1v1) (youtube.com)



This is also a helpful video [Brené Brown on Empathy](#)

## How to do it differently

Listen	State your different views	Explain your position	Choose the right time	Say what you agree about
Show your appreciation	Show you understand	Work out a solution you're both happy with	Check the response	Ask for their point of view
Accept you don't agree	Come up with lots of possible solutions	Let them know you've understood	Check the response	



## Role Cards

Review these cards and give examples of situations you and your partner might get into and consider the role you are asking your child/ren to take on.



### The mediator

When your child feels they have to be the mediator between parents, keeping everyone happy and solving problems



### The judge

When you criticise your partner or ex and expect your child to decide who is right and wrong



### The confidant

When you share too much information with your child and expect them to fill the gap due to lack of intimate communication with your partner or ex



### The spy

When you ask your child questions about your partner or ex and rely on them to find out what is going on



### The messenger

When you ask your child to take information between you and your partner about money, contact etc



## You and I statements

Use these cards to help you to describe how you feel using 'I' statements instead of 'You' statements. It helps the other person to empathise if they can understand and share the feelings of another. 'I' statements also invite a more positive response because you are not blaming the other person but taking personal accountability.

There are two important skills to remember to do this well.

First, pause and think about your feelings for example, are you feeling disappointed, hurt, lonely, anxious, jealous or left-out, embarrassed, confused or resentful perhaps? Breathe in and out this acknowledgment as both an act of kindness and a way to regulate your nervous system. A good selection of feeling words 'when your needs are not satisfied' can be found here [Feelings Inventory | Center for Nonviolent Communication \(cnvc.org\)](https://www.cnvc.org/feelings-inventory)

Then practice starting every sentence with an 'I' statement. You can do this with a friend, partner, family member or just give it a go in front of the mirror. Talk about a topic you really love for 3-5 minutes.

Now practice using 'I' statements instead of blameful 'You' statements. Think of a time when you've said something critical to your partner or co-parent starting with 'You' and change it to, I feel \_\_\_\_ (feeling word), When \_\_\_\_ (event that brings up this feeling).

**Tip: It's also worth thinking about your tone of voice.**

You could go on to add 'Because' \_\_\_\_ (reason you feel this way). And if you want to, you could add an assertive statement about what you need or want (see in italics).

Here are some examples of 'You' statements next to "less blameful" 'I' statements.

### You statements

'You never call or text me when you're out.'

'You're always late and unreliable.'

### I statements

'I feel hurt when I don't hear from you because *it's important to me that we keep in touch.*'

'I feel let down when you're late. *I'd like you to be on time or let me know if you're going to be late.*'

### You statements

'You contradict me all the time when I am speaking to the kids.'

'You just expect me to clean up after you.'

'You're always on the phone texting or reading.'

'You never seem to want to have sex anymore.'

Empty box for writing a 'You' statement.

### I statements

'I feel frustrated **when** I am contradicted in front of the children, *I would like us to back each other.'*

'I feel overwhelmed and unappreciated **when** I don't get help with the housework. *I'd like more help.'*

'I feel sad when you are on your phone **when** we're doing something together. *I'd like us to put our phones away more often.'*

'I feel hurt **when** we don't have physical intimacy. *It means a lot to me to have hugs.'*

Empty box for writing an 'I' statement.

## Speaker Listener Technique and top tips

Resolving an argument:

1. Decide who will speak first and have the floor (hold talking piece to signify who has the floor)
2. Speaker uses 'I' not 'you' (don't make assumptions about what the listener thinks)
3. Keep statements brief and to the point
4. Stop to allow the listener to paraphrase periodically (speaker holds the talking piece)
5. Listener paraphrases what they've heard the speaker say
6. Listener needs to focus on the speaker's message not their own reaction to what they are hearing
7. Remember to share the talking piece
8. Seek first to understand
9. Work on solutions later.

Go to [PREPMedia on YouTube - How to talk without Fighting: the speaker Listener Technique](#) (youtube.com) to see a video of how the speaker listener technique is demonstrated. At 11.44 mins in is a couple using the technique well discussing their struggle to find time for each other.

### Top tips for parents to keep in mind are:

- Don't make assumptions
- Be curious – can you try to walk in the shoes of your partner or co-parent?
- Appreciate each other – kindness wins over blame every time
- Remember not everyone feels able to make changes and someone needs to want things to be different to make change happen
- Don't try to fix your partner or co-parent. You can only change yourself and offer support to your partner or co-parent.



## Further help for parents

See the Family Hub website

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/bristol-family-hubs>

## Free downloadable quizzes

### **Parent Problem Checklist** (Dadds & Powell, 1991)

This questionnaire lists parenting disagreements and asks parents to indicate whether each has been a problem and to rate its severity over the past four weeks.

### **The Relationship Quality Index (RQI)** (CT Department of Children and Families)

This questionnaire is 6 questions, 5 with an agreement scale 10-point happiness scale. Parents in a relationship complete these.

### **Quality of Co-parenting Communication Scale – 10**

For separated or separating couples this measures how effectively co-parents communicate about child-related issues.

### **Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict (CPIC) Scale**

A Child's View tool for children ages 9-17. In every family there are times when the parents don't get along. Questions designed to ask what children think or feel when their parents have arguments or disagreements.





**Documents available in other formats:**

You can request alternative formats of this document by contacting:  
[relationshipsmatter@bristol.gov.uk](mailto:relationshipsmatter@bristol.gov.uk)

Stay in touch with your council [www.bristol.gov.uk/signup](http://www.bristol.gov.uk/signup)