Shropshire's approach to Reducing Parental Conflict
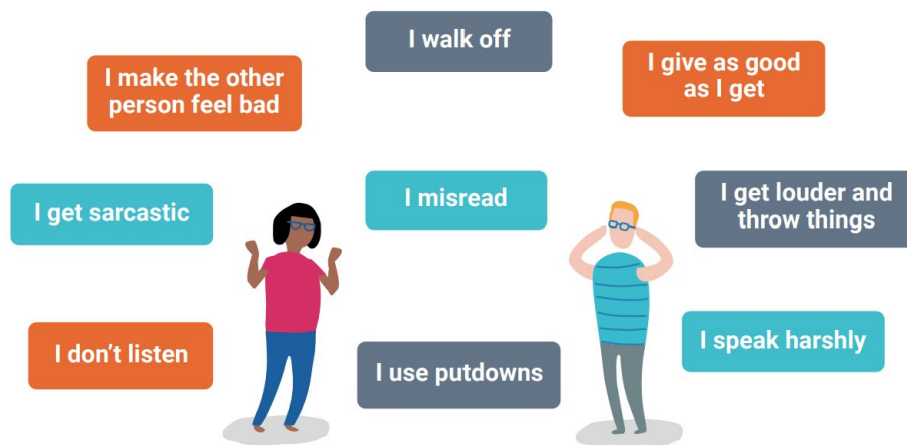
Date Completed	
Status	
Date of Approval	
Approving Body/Group	
Revised	
Due for review	

Contents

Introduction and Purpose

In 2016 the Department For Work And Pensions (DWP) published research on the effects of parental conflict on children. It showed that when interparental conflict is frequent, intense, and poorly resolved it is harmful to children's mental health and longer-term outcomes. This finding led to the creation of the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) programme, which aims to integrate support to reduce parental conflict in local services for families. Its focus is parental conflict below the threshold of domestic abuse. Below is a strategy for reducing parental conflict in individual families. It can be used by practitioners within any service that supports children and families.

What is Parental Conflict?

Some conflict between parents is a normal part of family life. When disputes or arguments are well resolved through respectful negotiation and compromise, good relational skills are role-modelled to children. This is described as *constructive conflict.*

Destructive parental conflict describes more negative patterns of behaviour, such as blaming, accusing, refusing to engage, and acting out. In this document, when we use the term Parental Conflict, we are referring to *destructive parental conflict*, defined as:

<div align="center">

frequent, intense and poorly resolved

</div>

disputes between parents (or anyone in a parental role) whether they are partners, separated, step-parents or non-biological parents*.*

The national initiative to Reduce Parental Conflict has a clear objective – all practitioners working with the family, in any context, have a responsibility, when noticing Parental Conflict, to act through early involvement. The aim is to prevent the conflict from escalating and becoming inter-generational.

For more information: [Why does reducing the impact of parental conflict matter?](#)
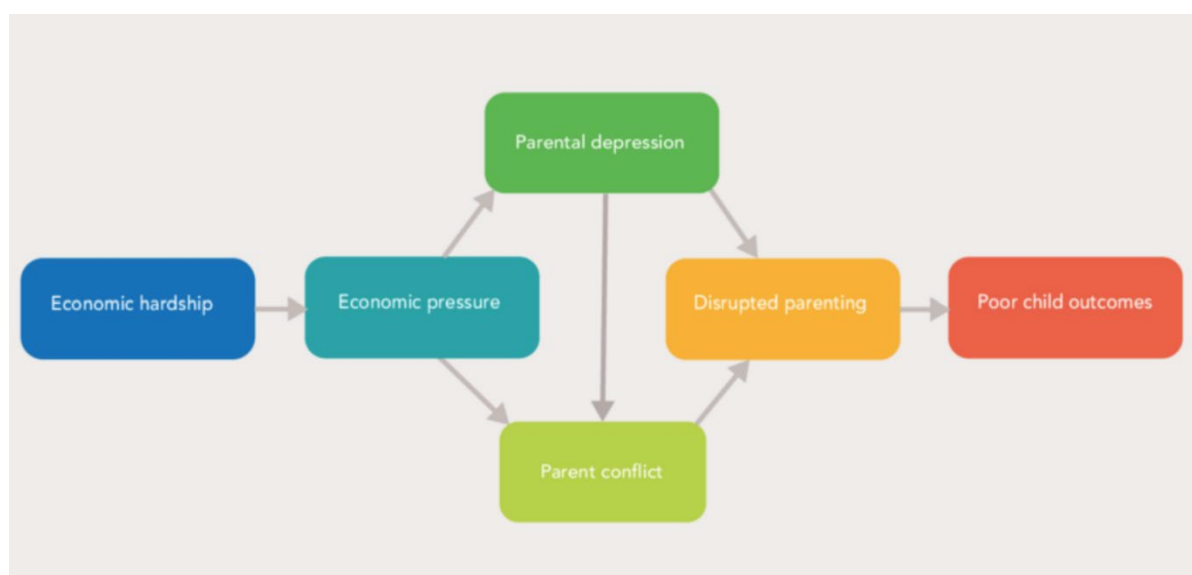
Parental Conflict is NOT the same as Domestic Abuse.

Abuse is not about disagreements. It is one person's use of their physical or psychological power, over another, to control, govern, influence the other person's thinking, feelings and behaviour.

Where there is abuse, there is an **imbalance of power** in the relationship. In cases of Parental Conflict, **power is balanced** between equals. *No one is in fear of the other.*

If you suspect Domestic Abuse, follow this link. [Domestic abuse tools and pathways (procedures.org.uk)](#)

How to work with Parental Conflict
The Approach:

Eric Sheninger (@E_Sheninger)
Image created by @RigorRelevance

A basic framework for improving relationships:

1. Help parents to identify the conflict in their relationship.
2. Explore the causes or behaviours to be addressed.
3. Support constructive communication and alternative ways of managing conflict.

Stage One – Identifying parental conflict
- Use the [RPC Intervention Tool Word version.odt](#) This also exists as a form on the Early Help Module of Liquid Logic (EHM).
- For parents together in a partner relationship, use [1. Stages and changes-Shropshire.pdf](#) to ascertain where they are at present. It helps to normalise the difficult phases and reminds them that things can get better.

- Help parents identify problem behaviours using 3. Conflict styles-Shropshire.pdf
- For separated parents, use 8. Parent roles-Shropshire.pdf and 7. Child roles-Shropshire.pdf to help identify challenging behaviours.

Stage Two – Exploring the causes of the conflict

Encourage the parent(s) to complete either of the following:

- Vulnerability Stress Adaptation VSA Model - What's influencing our communication to help them understand the connection between their stress triggers and their past or their personality type. It links stresses and coping strategies with conflict in the relationship.
- Doc 5 - Our Typical Day to identify when conflict occurs.
- Doc 6 - Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviours Tool helps couples to recognise how they interpret other people's behaviour, which affects the way they feel and respond. This can help couples and separated co-parents understand each other's behaviour.
- Professionals and parents may find the Relate Bot useful in finding constructive, non-judgemental ways of communicating with neutral language. "Sounding board" bot | Relate

Stage Three – Supporting constructive communication

- Doc 9 - You and I Statements.pdf help couples recognise helpful and harmful ways of beginning a conversation.
- Doc 10 - Constructive & Destructive Communication Styles.pdf alternative ways to manage conflict.
- Getting on Better cards support parents to think about their relationship in new ways, reduce tension, and improve communication. (See appendix)

The above strategies and how to use them are covered in the OnePlusOne online courses for parents. The link to the OnePlusOne parent portal is here: Parent resource sign up. It can also be found on the Getting on Better pages: Getting on better | Shropshire Council The practitioner might like to work through the online course with the parents, accessing the resources above alongside the easy to follow Behaviour Modelling videos.

Signposting parents to completing the courses online by themselves, is rarely effective. Setting the course material as homework, with realistic goals, is a time-saving way to help parents complete the courses. Practitioners can access all of the material, as well as guidance on how to use with parents, by setting up a practitioner account here: Introduction

Support for practitioners

We do not need to be relationship therapists to help parents resolve and manage conflict in a way that reduces the impact on children. Any practitioner can achieve this with an understanding of trauma, attachment and risk. Evidence-based approaches underpin this work. This includes solution focused work, motivational interviewing, and relational capable practice.

The most effective way to identify a conflicted relationship, is to ask about it. Make it a normal part of every conversation. Ask, "how are you and your partner at the moment?" Or "how is this issue affecting your relationship with your partner/co-parent?"

Follow the link to video instruction on using resources to Reduce Parental Conflict.

RPC Instructional Videos

- [An Introduction to Parental Conflict](#)
- [An Introduction to Reducing Parental Conflict](#)
- [How to use Getting On Better Cards](#)
- [Using a VSA](#)
- [Using OnePlusOne for parents in conflict, instructional video](#)
- [VSA instruction video](#)

[Tavistock guide to working with co-parents.pdf](#)

A Theory of change

We want everyone supporting families to feel comfortable talking about family relationships including couple or co-parent relationships. In this way, families can receive the support they need, at the earliest opportunity. This can reduce the impact on children and prevent a build-up of the problem. Understanding and learning how to recognise parents' distress is key to this. Working with a theory of change can help us find the best strategy for support.

Helping parents understand the impact of their conflict on their children

Constructive Conflict

Children may be less troubled by conflict when parents are able to resolve an argument. However, 'resolution' needs to be genuine. Parents can't fool children by telling them they sorted things out, then failing to demonstrate how they have repaired the relationship. Parents' actions need to echo their words. Children learn helpful skills from arguments that:

- Involve finding a solution.
- Show compromise and healthy negotiation.

Discussing Parental Conflict with parents

It can be emotionally difficult to help a parent understand the impact of their conflict, but this understanding, held in mind, acts as a strong motivator for change. It may be easier to help parents understand the issue by showing them examples of third-party conflict, so as to make conversations less personal. See it differently has video examples you can discuss objectively with parents.

We believe that families can make positive changes when supported to recognise their:

- Strengths.
- Networks.
- Growing skill set.

Separation and Parental Conflict

The level of conflict both before and after the breakdown of the parental relationship, has the greatest impact on children. Research shows this is greater than the impact of the breakdown itself.[i]

Communication after separation

Poor communication and negotiation skills contribute to relationship problems after separation. Lack of trust is also a factor. Past hurt, poor emotional regulation, and power struggles can amplify this. Continuing conflict damages the ability of children to:

- Adjust to divorce.
- Maintain secure and loving relationships with both parents.

Divorced or separated couples don't always understand how to communicate well with each other. This is particularly difficult when there is a lack of respect, unresolved hurt feelings, and a persisting insecure attachment to each other.

Communicating well with each other is in everyone's interests. It improves individual wellbeing and helps to develop an effective co-parenting relationship. It will also mean that both parents are better able to meet the needs of their children.
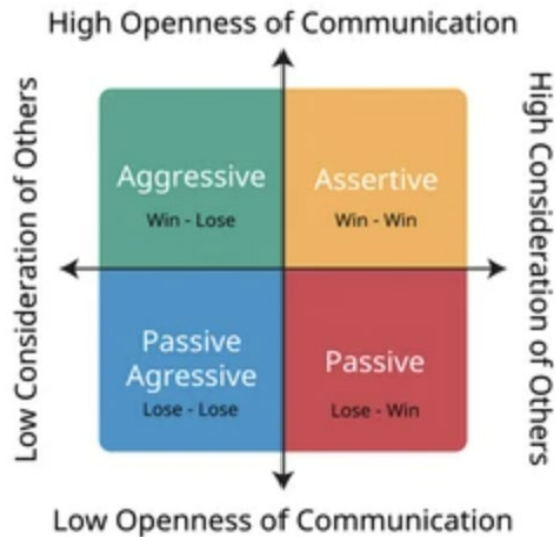
Assertive Communication

Communicating assertively is important in a healthy co-parenting relationship. Parents need to be able to discuss issues relating to their children.

If we want to change someone else's behaviour, we must first look at our own.

Separated parents often say, "it's my ex who needs to change, not me." We are not able to control someone else's behaviour, what we can control is how *we* respond and behave. Changing the way we behave can bring about changes in other people's behaviour.

Helping parents understand this can motivate change.

Guidelines to using assertive communication with a co-parent:

1. Always respect the rights and point of view of the other person.
2. Problem-solve together to generate possible solutions. Focus on what is in the best interests of the children, rather than individual parents.
3. Try to be flexible. Compromise where possible so that both parents are satisfied with the outcome.

The following guidance can help negotiation:

Harvard principles of negotiation.odt

Voss top tips for negotiating.odt

It may not be possible to discuss child-related issues in person without hostility. Consider alternative means of communication such as moderated communication books or apps that support good communication.

Communication book guide.docx

Accessing Mediation
All separated parents with children in the family are entitled to some free mediation.

Family Mediation Voucher Scheme - Family Mediation Council

Working with children on Parental Conflict

Obtaining **the voice of the child** is more than just seeking and recording children's views. It is the active involvement of children and young people in their plan. Practitioners should consider the objectives of asking children and young people about their life and consider how this can inform a working plan.

It also involves helping others understand the impact conflict has on the child's life.

When working with children, confidentiality cannot be absolute. Safeguarding procedures must always be followed. Children may want to share non-concerning information (from a safeguarding perspective), and may not want this information recorded. Careful consideration and liaison with the child or young person, on what is recorded and fed back to others, should be given.

There are lots of ways to help a child to talk about:

- What parental conflict is like for them.
- What they would like to change.

Our tools for helping children understand adult relationships and express how they feel about them are here:
- [Shropshire I Feel Cards](#)
- [Shropshire Seren's Story](#)
- [Shropshire When Families Fall Out Weather Feelings](#)
- [Shropshire Agree or Disagree Sheet](#)
- [Shropshire Alex's Story](#)
- [Shropshire Children Roles Primary](#)
- [Shropshire Children Roles Secondary](#)
- [Shropshire How Would I Feel If](#)

It can be helpful to use tools where they draw or write more freely. This can be more effective than direct conversation: Three Houses, Life Paths or Faces. These types of resources can be found on the PD Hub for Shropshire Council employees or the [SocialWorkersToolbox.com](#).

Children are often anxious talking about their parents. They worry they'll get them into trouble and may feel disloyal. Find an age-appropriate way to explain to children that we are there to help their family. Let children know that their voice matters and can motivate change in their family. We can reassure them that their feelings are important.

Some common practitioner worries are:

- How parents might react when I speak to the child?
- Will this add to the existing conflict in the home?
- Will the child feel guilty about what they have said?
- Will the child worry about consequences?

Parents may feel troubled by what their child shares about the home environment. They may not want to acknowledge the impact of their conflict. Some parents are unaware that children pick up on conflict or have normalised certain behaviours so that they don't see them as concerning. Every family will react differently. Parents experiencing conflict can find it difficult to:

- Talk about it with their children.
- Listen to what the children have to say.

Practitioners can support children to tell their story. They can support them to share their thoughts and feelings.

 A practitioner can:

- Help parents have a conversation in a safe and focused way.
- Encourage the parent to consider their children's feelings about the situation at home.

Sharing the child's voice with parents can have an impact on parental behaviour. Parents in conflict may be hearing it for the first time. This can be an extremely powerful, pivotal moment. It may kickstart the cycle of change.

The impact of Parental Conflict on children and young people

Some of the medium-term impacts:
- Negative peer relationships.
- Poorer academic outcomes.
- Earlier involvement and misuse of drugs or alcohol.
- Negative impact on emotional and social development.
- Increased vulnerability to criminal exploitation.[ii]

Parental Conflict will have different effects on individual children depending on:
- Their character.
- Protective factors.
- Vulnerability.

Even for the most resilient children, evidence shows that ongoing Parental Conflict can affect their long-term life chances in the following ways:
- Increased risk of poor mental health.
- Increased risk of physical health problems.
- Lower future employability prospects.
- Impeded ability to form lasting, functional relationships.

A positive sibling relationship can buffer children from the impact of a high conflict home. However, these sibling relationships can suffer with complicated alliances and divisions emerging within families.

| Age 11 years | Age 12 years | Age 13 years |
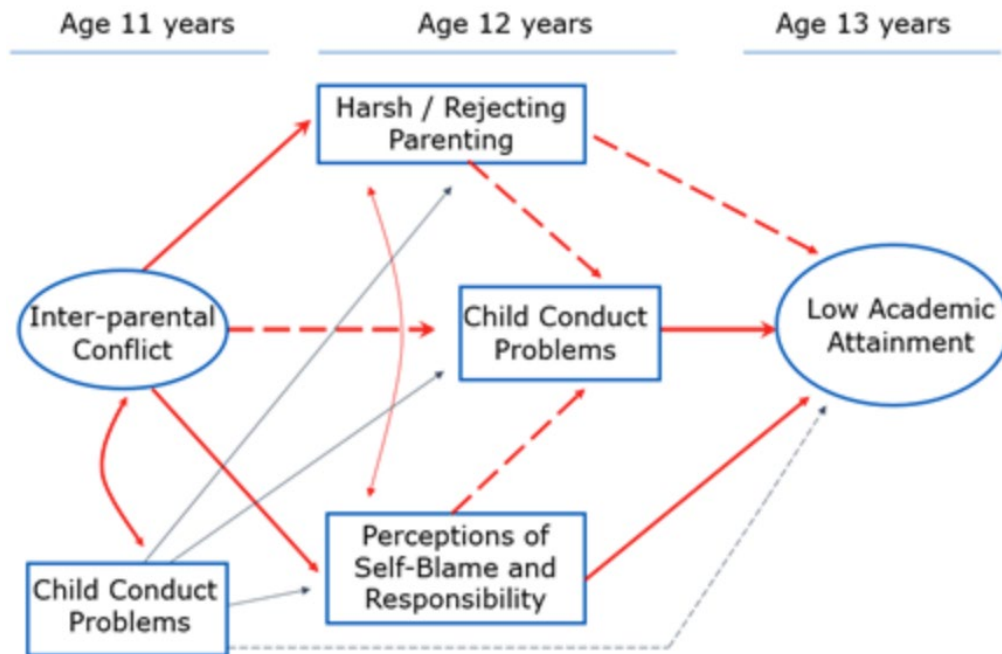
Family dynamics and interactions

Education

Parental Conflict can negatively impact a child's academic attainment. Children exposed to conflicted relationships are less likely to arrive at school ready to learn.

This places significant pressure on schools to support children when there is conflict in the home environment. There are links between exposure to hostile parental exchanges and behavioural difficulties in school. These include social and interpersonal problems with peers and other adults.[iii]

Health

Parental Conflict can affect children's physical and mental health, including:[iv]

- Psychological changes resulting in aggression and conduct disorder.
- Anxiety and depression, fearfulness, self-harm and suicidality.
- Impeded ability to form secure attachments.
- Higher rates of illness and fatigue.
- Reduced physical growth through impact on nervous and hormonal systems.
- Increased risk-taking behaviours, such as smoking, drug use and early sexual activity.

By understanding the evidence and research around Parental Conflict, practitioners are better placed to recognise when it is an issue for a young person and their family, and are better placed to:

- Signpost parents to self-help resources.
- Offer direct support.
- Know which other services can help.

How do we recognise the Impact?
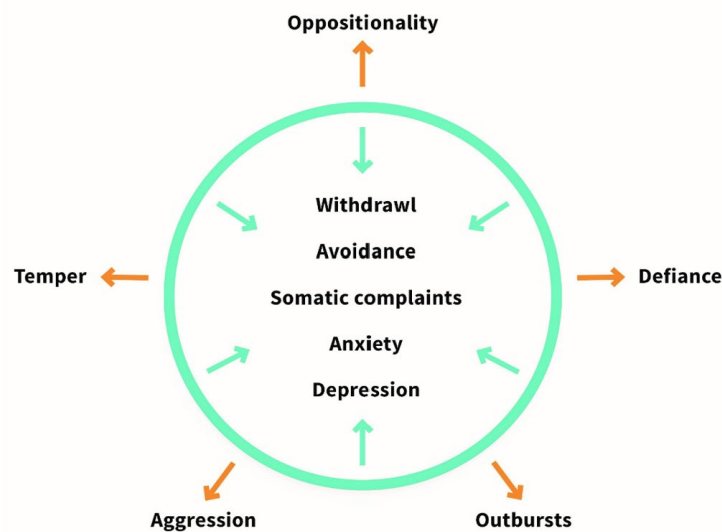
Internal versus external behaviours

We typically see different categories of behaviour, such as:

1. **Externalising behaviours**
- Becoming aggressive towards others.
- Disrupting.
- Struggling to socialise.
- Getting into trouble at school.
- Being excluded.
- Missing from home.
- Engaging in anti-social behaviour.

2. **Internalising behaviours**
- Minimising emotions.
- Withdrawing from friendship groups and activities.

- Less engaged with their environment.
- Being quiet and withdrawn.
- Self-harm.
- Requiring support for mental health.

3. **Child assuming a parenting role**
- Taking responsibility for things that a parent should do.
- Trying to mend rifts between parents.
- Attempting to make things better.

4. **Camouflage**
- Looking 'happy' on the surface.
- Children continue playing, appearing unbothered in the presence of outsiders.
- Behaviours that help them to "fly under the radar".
- Avoiding drawing parents' attention.

Impact of Parental Conflict on Parenting
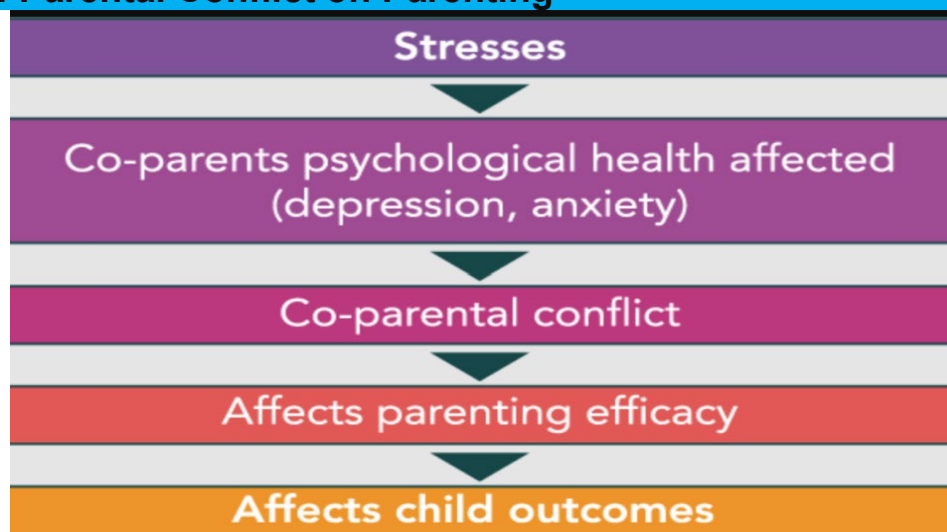
It is challenging to parent well when experiencing conflict with a partner or co-parent because relationship distress causes its own stress, in turn affecting our ability to think clearly and have emotional space for other relationships, such as the parent-child relationship. Therefore, living with ongoing Parental Conflict will impact on parenting.

Many parents use up their mental energy on thinking about, taking part in, or avoiding conflict. This can result in a parent being:

Harsh: conflict is stressful, so it is normal to have a lower tolerance for daily challenges and behaviour. A parent may become harsher or stricter in their parenting style. Harsh parenting can increase risk of negative outcomes for children.

Disengaged: a parent may feel overwhelmed so they may not complete simple parenting tasks as well as they would like. They may 'let things go' more.

Controlling: where a parent lacks relationship control, they may seek control elsewhere. They can restore some sense of control through parenting by being over controlling and micro-managing their children.

Blaming: at times of conflict a parent may look for someone to blame, which may include their child. A parent wants to place blame on others to absolve themselves.

Emotionally unavailable: when conflict consumes or distracts a parent, it takes up head-space which leaves them less energy to meet their child's emotional needs.

Compensating: when a parent knows there is a negative atmosphere they over-compensate. They may:

- Be too lenient.
- Relax the rules.
- Give gifts.
- Spend more on the child.

References

[i] [Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-Being](#)

[ii] [Childhood Predictors of Adult Criminality: A Meta-Analysis Drawn from the Prospective Longitudinal Literature (uwo.ca)](#)

[iii] [Why reducing the impact of parental conflict matters for schools | Early Intervention Foundation (eif.org.uk)](#)

[iv] [(PDF) The Influence of Parental Conflict on Adolescent Depression (researchgate.net)](#)

Appendix

- [1. Stages and Changes Shropshire](#)
- [2. Logs and Fire Shropshire](#)
- [3. Conflict Styles Shropshire](#)
- [4. Magic 5 1 Ratio Shropshire](#)
- [5. Communicate Better Shropshire](#)
- [6. Harmful and Helpful Shropshire](#)
- [7. Child Roles Shropshire](#)
- [8. Parent Roles Shropshire](#)
- [9. Small Gestures 2024 FINAL](#)