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# How are children being affected by high conflict parents in Covid-19?

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# Co-parenting during lockdown – does one size fit all?



- Best interests of the child is the overriding concern.
- The more a child is exposed to other people who may have Coronavirus the more risk they are of infection. This raises the perplexing question about what are sensible arrangements?
- Co-parents can be critical key workers so this might increase anxieties for the other co-parent about what is in the child's best interests.
- Co-parents need to consider any underlying conditions such as asthma or a compromised immune system that each co-parent or the children might have.
- In the two homes the child travels between, co-parents need to make decisions about the child exposing other vulnerable individuals such as an aged or infirm relative or a brother or sister.
- What happens if one the of the co-parents becomes ill? How can we support the co-parents to have a plan in place?
- What happens if the child is an asymptomatic carrier?
- How do we support co-parents to adopt the best interest's of the child over and above their own interests during Covid-19?

# Parental conflict and co-parenting



- Children caught between the conflict and hostility of their parents can have co-parents who are more hostile or less sensitive to their children's needs.
- This leads to children 'internalizing' i.e. suffering with anxiety, poor concentration, disengaging and feeling sad.
- Or it can lead to children 'externalizing' by exhibiting behavioral difficulties to communicate their distress, expressing anger and defiance.
- Lockdown has increased levels of boredom due to the sameness of routines and a lack of sensory stimulation.
- Some children confined to the home with the same parent are finding this stressful because of limited space in the home.
- Separated parents in conflict are anxious too during the lockdown and children tune into their parent's anxiety and need support so they can reassure their children.
- Some children such as those with special needs or existing mental health problems are not in receipt of the services and support they had prior to lockdown and this is causing them and their co-parents to be stressed.

# Supporting children who have been impacted by the experience of loss and separation.



- Lockdown will have put children back in touch with earlier experiences of loss and separation as by virtue of the need to quarantine they will be re-experiencing ambiguous losses just now.
- The children's sense of loss of the family as it was and their attachment to their parents being ruptured and having experienced high conflict between their parents may be re-traumatized.
- Trauma is experience that is overwhelming and threatening. Covid-19 is threatening.
- In the face of the fear of being separated from the other parent children feel helpless and hopeless.
- This leads to stress resulting in the production of stress hormones.
- Hormones help children cope with stress.
- High levels of hormones over a long period of time are damaging.
- Corresponding with the trauma of experiencing high conflict between parents and the experience of stress; children's brains are affected.

# Stress and the Brain

- Due to the effects on the prefrontal cortex, there are connections missing due to neuron damage caused by stress, which affects a child's executive function.
- Poor executive function has several consequences such as:
  - The inability to control impulses
  - Regulate emotions
  - Difficulty handling challenges
  - Traumatic experiences of high conflict parenting creates fear
  - If the co-parents are in conflict about shared parenting this lack of the reliability of a secure co-parenting base can trigger earlier memories of parental relationship distress
  - If the co-parent's are in conflict and co-parents become dysregulated they are not emotionally available to the children.



# ACE's and high conflict co-parenting



- Child affected by parental relationship distress, (CAPRD) was introduced into *DSM-5* to describe children who may react to parental intimate partner violence, acrimonious divorce and unfair disparagement of one parent by another.
- Reactions in the children may include onset and exacerbation of psychological symptoms, somatic complaints, internal loyalty conflict, and in extreme cases parental alienation leading to the loss of the parent-child relationship.
- Research has found that separation and divorce and in particular high conflict divorce influenced by severity, intensity and duration is defined as one of the adverse childhood experiences (ACE's).
- ACE's are common as nearly 64% of adults have at least one.
- ACE's don't occur outside a context so if children have one there is an 87% chance they have two or more.
- ACE's leave children at greater risk of emotional health and wellbeing difficulties, low self esteem, interpersonal relationship problems, anxiety, depression and later mental health problems.

# Children's emotional health and wellbeing prior to Covid-19



- For children who are spending more time at home who are unhappy Covid-19 will be a difficult time.
- The reliance of children on screen relations online with their friends may expose children to more cyber bullying.
- Children's concerns about Covid-19 will impact on those suffering from anxiety and depression.
- For children with hyperactivity conditions such as ADHD being restricted in the home is likely to be challenging.
- Children with special needs and or learning disabilities may need additional support to adapt to changes in routine to understand what is going on.
- Children do not have opportunities to socialize with their peers at school and this may mean they will struggle with their emotional health and wellbeing.
- The experience of financial strain brought about by Covid-19 during childhood is linked to lower emotional health and wellbeing and poorer mental health at age 14.



# Trauma & co-parenting

- Marital relationships may be negatively impacted if one or other of the co-parents has a history of ACE's
- Exposure to childhood abuse increases the likelihood that a person and a parent will get divorced
- Exposure to abuse or neglect may predispose a person towards experiences of intimate partner violence, in either the role of perpetrator or victim
- Children are vulnerable to re-experiencing trauma if there is unresolved acrimony or hostility between their co-parents during Covid-19





# How are children coping with school closure during Covid-19?



- The mental health charity, Young Mind's survey of 2111 children and young people up to the age of 25 with a mental illness history; 83% said the pandemic had made their condition worse
- 26% said they were unable to access mental health support or attend peer support groups or have face to face therapy and some young people have found online support challenging
- Some adolescents are locking themselves up in their bedrooms refusing to engage with the parent, particularly those who are being influenced negatively by a parent against the other parent
- Social distancing measures which result in social isolation in an abusive home can be exacerbated
- Stress on co-parents due to economic insecurity or unemployment can lead to feelings of bereavement and loss by co-parents whose lifestyle changes
- Parent on child violence and child on parent violence have increased since the start of lockdown
- Referrals made by schools, with schools closed, mean children are not coming into contact with teachers who can raise child protection concerns where they exist

# What could the impact during the Covid-19 pandemic be?

- Children have anxiety and fears and have faced enormous disruption to their lives as they once knew
- They are expressing worries about their grandparents and relatives that are living in other countries
- Children and adolescents have been expressing feelings of loneliness because they cannot mix with their friends
- Children have been placing more demands on their co-parents when they are at home with them placing the co-parent under stress and pressure
- Due to the loss of the ordinary structures and routines of the day some children are angry due to being cooped up with their co-parent and other siblings in a small house where they feel they have no privacy
- The longer the lockdown lasts the greater the risk of increased anxiety, depression and poorer psychological health and wellbeing.



# Co-parents interface with the court during the Covid-19 pandemic

- Co-parents who have made applications to have a hearing where there are concerns about a child being unduly influenced against them by their co-parent have been deeply distressed by the cancellation of hearings
- Delays to hearings are consequently drawing out proceedings
- Co-parent's are fearful that time is the enemy to restoring a meaningful relationship with a child where the parent – child relationship is strained or damaged when hearings are cancelled
- Recognising there is a general reluctance to conduct hearings remotely where parents can't be adequately legally represented may fall short of compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and their right to contact



# Methods of support



- trishbarryrelph.com – specialist systemic family psychotherapist, psychodynamic psychotherapy, counsellor, play therapist, ISW, expert witness
- **The Mix Online Community** – free confidential support for young people under 25
- **Kooth** – free online support to young people
- **Childline** – free access to a counselor for young people through an online chat or helpline
- **Apps** – **Mindful Gnats**, to develop mindfulness and relaxation skills
- **MindShift**, to help adolescents cope with anxiety
- **MoodTracker**, is a free, fun, interactive programme to help young people with low mood based on cognitive behavior therapy and interpersonal therapy
- **Recovery Record**, a companion for managing the journey to recover from eating disorders
- **Rise Up + Recover**, based on self monitoring for young people struggling with food, dieting, body image

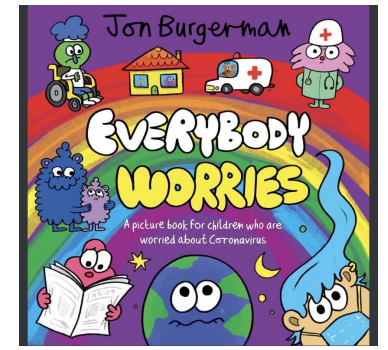
# Methods of Support continued



- **SmilingMind** – meditation for children from 7 years up aimed at de-stressing and staying calm
- **SuperBetter** – free web based programme built by game designers. Playing the game of SuperBetter helps build resilience, stay strong and motivated and optimistic in the face of difficult challenges.
- **Methods of support for co-parents.**
- **NHS Apps** – **Be Mindful**, mindfulness based cognitive therapy to reduce stress and anxiety, **Beat Panic**, to overcome panic attacks, **Big White Wall**, 24 hour support from therapists to help cope with anxiety and stress, **BlueIce**, to help young people manage emotions and reduce self-harm, **Calm Harm**, reduces urges to self-harm, **Catch It**, learn to manage negative thoughts and look at problems differently, **Chill Panda**, breathing techniques to help relax more and worry less, **Cove**, create music to reflect feelings and express feelings, **distACT**, discreet information about self-harm and suicidal ideation, **eQuoo: Emotional Fitness Game**, adventure games designed by psychologists to help increase emotional fitness, **leso**, connect confidentially with mental health therapists using instant messaging and top 25 best mental health apps: <https://www.psycom.net/25-best-mental-health-apps>



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