



EARLY
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FOUNDATION

REDUCING PARENTAL CONFLICT
IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19:
ADAPTING TO VIRTUAL AND DIGITAL
PROVISION OF SUPPORT

SUMMARY

Reducing parental conflict in the context of Covid-19

Adapting to virtual and digital provision of support

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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

This report focuses on how Covid-19 and the lockdown have impacted on issues relating to parental conflict, and how those seeking to reduce parental conflict can adapt to the current situation using virtual and digital methods.

It builds on two previous reports published by EIF in response to the Covid-19 pandemic – one which set out the challenges and risks relating to virtual and digital delivery,¹ and the other which highlighted the impact of the pandemic on early help services.²

In this report, we present findings from an EIF survey, conducted in June and July, which 42 local authorities and 13 intervention developers and providers used to describe how Covid-19 has impacted upon their ability to support families. We also provide a summary of 12 virtual and digital interventions available to support interparental relationships, and offer practical guidance on how to assess the impact of such interventions and how to appropriately engage parents remotely.

We find that:

- The vast majority of local authorities and intervention developers and providers have adapted their provision to be available virtually or digitally.
 - Prior to the lockdown in March 2020, many responding local authorities (63%) and intervention developers and providers (eight out of 13, or 62%) did not offer virtual and digital interventions targeting interparental relationships. By July, however, three months after lockdown began, almost all – 89% and 93% respectively – had adapted their provision to ensure continued support.
 - Almost three-quarters (74%) of the local authorities who completed our survey report an increase in parental conflict since the start of lockdown. However, it is difficult to develop a clear understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on referrals to parental conflict support services, as local authorities have had differing experiences, with some seeing a fall in referrals at the start of lockdown and others experiencing a steep increase.
 - There have been many challenges faced by the sector in delivering virtual and digital interventions, including difficulties in identifying escalating risk with limited home visits and face-to-face contact, a lack of funding to quickly adapt services, and difficulties maintaining privacy and confidentiality. Despite this, survey respondents suggest that positive changes have emerged as a result of Covid-19 that should be retained in the future, including improved partnership working within local systems and an increase in parental help-seeking behaviour.

1 See: <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/covid-19-and-early-intervention-evidence-challenges-and-risks-relating-to-virtual-and-digital-delivery> (Martin et al., 2020)

2 See: <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/covid-19-and-early-intervention-understanding-the-impact-preparing-for-recovery> (Wilson & Waddell, 2020)

- Most of the pre-existing virtual and digital interventions targeting interparental relationships have yet to show robust evidence that they can improve outcomes for children.
 - Of the 12 virtual and digital interventions on which we conducted a preliminary assessment, most were found to either have **no or limited evidence** or **preliminary evidence** of improving child outcomes, with only one intervention found to have **robust evidence**.
 - While there is little evidence to suggest that virtual and digital interventions are *more* effective than traditional face-to-face approaches, studies comparing these two approaches have found that interventions delivered using virtual and digital methods can be as *effective* as those delivered face-to-face.
- There is an opportunity to generate stronger evidence about the effectiveness of virtual and digital interventions, although this is likely to need support.
 - Most responding local authorities (83%) and all 13 intervention developers and providers are planning to assess the impact of their adapted provision. Of the 13 surveyed intervention developers and providers, seven (or 54%) had already developed an evaluation plan and exactly half of the local authorities were in the process of doing so. This suggests that the sector is interested in using the current situation to test their adapted provision; however, they are likely to need support.
 - Many of the existing evaluation studies of virtual and digital interventions suffer from common methodological limitations, such as attrition, low participation rates and inappropriate outcome measures.

In the final chapters of the report, we provide practical guidance on:

- evaluating virtual and digital interventions targeting the interparental relationship. In particular, we cover planning an impact evaluation, and selecting and using appropriate outcome measures in a virtual and digital context. We also propose 13 measures that can be used remotely in the context of interventions targeting the interparental relationship.
- engaging parents remotely, including strategies for recruiting and retaining participants in virtual and digital RPC interventions, paying special attention to the importance of the therapeutic relationship between practitioner and participant.