

Impacts of COVID-19:

Reflections from practitioners working with young people using violence in the home, April 2020

The COVID-19 crisis is presenting unprecedented challenges in relation to maintaining service delivery for Victorian children, young people and their families. We know from previous instances of natural disasters that times of crisis can result in increased conflict and violence in the home. In this current context, forced isolation, school closures, physical distancing, limited face-to-face service delivery, reduced community visibility of what's happening in homes, and ongoing media saturation about deteriorating health and economic conditions around the world, all provide increased stressors for young people and families.

We spoke with several service agencies about how this situation is affecting the young people and families with whom they work, and how practitioners are making necessary changes to service delivery.

How are young people and families coping?

As at week two of the (Easter) school holidays, the new isolation and quarantine measures seem to be having diverse effects on young people and families.

- Many practitioners talked about being in a 'honeymoon' period where although young people were being kept at home, there were relaxed household rules (and therefore increased screen time) due to it being school holidays. In many cases, this has actually reduced conflict. How families cope in the long run will be determined in coming weeks once the 'novelty' of the situation has worn off.
- There have been some reports of young people absconding from the home, but for the most part they seem happy to withdraw to their rooms and be left to their devices.
- Given the rapidly changing lockdown regulations, families have lots of questions about what is and isn't allowed, and how they should communicate this to their children. This level of change is disruptive for families.
- Families are dealing with a lot of uncertainty around health, income and housing security, which may be particularly triggering for parents with existing mental health conditions.
- In some cases, families who were already engaged in therapeutic processes have been able to use the holiday isolation to practice newly acquired relationship building skills. (E.g. parents are more available, family members are doing activities together.)
- There are some instances of young people with parents who have high risk health conditions have stopped their violence and are overly helpful and considerate out of concern for their parent's risk of exposure to the virus.
- Family court and mediation are being postponed. Men are using this to pressure mothers into granting them additional contact to try to avoid court/mediation altogether.
- Some men are using the pandemic as an excuse to hold young people for extended contact, saying they need additional time as a quarantine precaution.

Young people's use of violence in home isolation

- Some practitioners have reported increases in physical violence. However, the majority of practitioners reported that there while there may be an increase in frustration and verbal abuse, but no increase (and sometimes even less) physical violence used by young people. Again, practitioners acknowledge that it is still early days and that the real test will be once school holidays end.
- Many families have reported that the triggers for conflict have changed.
- There have been no reports of young people using the threat of infection to intimidate or control.
- For young people with problematic substance use, this remains a cause of conflict. (E.g. "If you don't give me money for it and I'm cooped up here, I'm gonna lose it...")

- Practitioners remain aware that isolation makes it harder to monitor safety, and limits parents' contact with people and professionals outside of the home.

Concerns about schooling

- There is universal concern about increased volatility when parents try to encourage young people to engage in at-home learning activities once school term resumes.
- While practitioners report high levels of school disengagement, in some cases young people who were otherwise withdrawn due to peer issues may feel more settled learning at home.
- Some practitioners have concerns about families' access to technology, appropriate workspaces for young people to complete learning activities.

Finding new ways to work with families

- Service agencies have switched entirely to remote delivery of telehealth model, involving checking-in with both parents and young people either by phone or some method of video conferencing. Overwhelmingly, service agencies appear to have responded flexibly with innovative solutions to this challenging new service delivery context. Some were already enabled with remote technology, while others have had to adapt quickly and creatively.
- Practitioners report that for young people and families already well-engaged with the program, this change in service delivery hasn't posed a problem. However, there are concerns that it will be very difficult to build rapport and trust with new clients in this way.
- Parents have responded well to remote delivery, possibly because it is less confronting and more convenient. There are differing views about the extent to which young people are engaging with remote check-ins. This means there may be a shift toward more parent-focussed work.
- There is also concern that remote program delivery will have less of a therapeutic focus, and more of a 'holding pattern' that reduces violence.
- There is some uncertainty about the efficacy of evidence-based programs, as they were not designed or tested to be run remotely.
- Practitioners report that care teams with other professional services are functioning well remotely.

New considerations for safety

The COVID-19 situation has forced all service agencies to re-consider what safety 'looks like':

- Practitioners all spoke about having to review and adjust safety plans due to changed conditions. As always, practitioners report trying to emphasise de-escalation skills; these have also been reconsidered.
- Practitioners need to consider other elements of safety during phone calls (not being able to see body language, ensuring conversation is not overheard) and video conferencing apps (does the technology adhere to privacy concerns?).
- For some agencies who may still be required to conduct home visits during urgent situations, additional hygiene protocols must be strictly adhered to.

What supports do practitioners need?

The Centre will continue work with FSV to produce additional resource materials that will support practitioners working with young people using violence.

- Immediate technical advice regarding privacy of certain video conferencing applications.
- Up-to-date information about isolation regulations
- Tip sheets for parents about how to encourage at-home learning, plus advice on advocating for young people with high-risks to attend school.
- Information about reducing screen time and online safety for young people.
- Tip sheets to support parents encouraging emotional regulation, tailored to isolation conditions.