

Reducing Parental Conflict programme evaluation

Third Interim report: findings from the second and third years of delivery

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This is the third evaluation report covering the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) programme and provides interim findings on implementation from research mostly conducted between January and December 2021.

Background

Studies have found that children who are exposed to parental conflict can be negatively affected in the short and longer term.¹ In 2018, the government established the RPC programme to address harmful inter-parental conflict, below the threshold of domestic abuse, so that every child has the best possible start in life.

Research context

Evaluation is central to the RPC programme. Findings from this evaluation will contribute to the wider evidence base on what works for families to reduce parental conflict and will support local authorities and their partners to embed the parental conflict agenda into their family services. This evaluation consists of 3 strands which correspond to 3 main programme elements:

- **Intervention delivery:** To assess how the provision of 8 evidence-based interventions in 31 local authorities, clustered in 4 geographical areas, is implemented and delivered and the impact of the interventions in reducing parental conflict and improving child outcomes.²
- **Training:** To study whether and how the training of practitioners and relationship support professionals has influenced practice on the ground - focusing on the identification of parents in conflict, building the skills and confidence to work with, or refer, parents in conflict and the overall support available.
- **Local integration:** To examine to what extent local authorities across England have integrated elements of parental conflict support into mainstream services for families, how and with what success.

¹ Harold et al. (2016) What works to Enhance Inter-Parental Relationships and Improve Outcomes for Children. London: Department for Work and Pensions.

² This element was previously referred to as “face-to-face”. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic all delivery shifted to be remote so it is now referred to as “intervention delivery”.

Main emerging findings

Intervention delivery

- Parents who completed an intervention were generally positive, and felt it had a positive impact on them. This was particularly the case for intact couples. However, there were some concerns raised about the sessions.
- From the experience of parents, it appeared that there were 4 key elements to delivering the interventions well: tailoring of content so its relevant to individual situations, good practitioner approach and demeanour, use of practical tools and activities and provision of workbooks to reflect on the sessions.
- The main reasons given for parents not completing the intervention was that their (ex) partner did not want to take part or they felt unable to go without them.
- For those who did not complete the intervention, most felt the session(s) they attended had a limited or no impact on their relationship. Though, most had seen some positive changes in their children and their children's behaviour.

Practitioner training:

- Practitioners were offered training via a Virtual Learning Classroom (VLC) in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, they felt that this format worked well, but generally not as well as face-to-face.
- Much like face-to-face training, the VLC training was useful and relevant, as well as resulting in positive improvements on self-reported knowledge, understanding and skills around parental conflict.
- Many of the practitioners not fully satisfied with VLC mode of delivery would have preferred face-to-face, although they acknowledged the convenience of VLC.

Local integration:

- Local authorities often referenced a focus on awareness raising and upskilling practitioners, in particular, some had developed tailored training programmes for their workforce.
- Case studies and conversations between local authorities highlighted the importance of multiagency working in the success of the RPC agenda. Police and health services were commonly mentioned as key partners to still engage.
- Most often, rather than in-depth provision such as interventions, local authorities had developed self-help tools for parents and practitioners.

Fieldwork

This summary report³ provides findings on research conducted mostly between January and December 2021, based on data collected through the following pieces of fieldwork:

- Online survey of 1,087 frontline practitioners who had attended training delivered via the Virtual Learning Classroom (VLC) or e-learning.
- Thirty in-depth telephone interviews with parents who had completed an intervention and were using Child Maintenance Service (CMS).
- Forty-eight in-depth telephone interviews with parent who had completed an intervention.
- Twenty in-depth telephone interviews with parents who started an intervention session but did not complete the full course.
- A telephone survey of 152 parents who started the intervention session but did not complete the full course. The fieldwork for this survey was ongoing when the data was extracted for this report.
- Forty in-depth telephone interviews with parents who were referred to an intervention but did not start the course.
- An online best practice event with local authorities. Forty-four attendees joined the online event.

Findings explained

Intervention delivery findings⁴

Parents approached interventions with varying levels of conflict, from no conflict to very high levels of conflict, the latter was more commonly the case for separated couples and those that did not complete interventions. Where there was conflict, it was rarely one single cause. Motivations for attending interventions included desperation to alleviate conflict with the other parent and concern over the impact that their conflict had on their children.

Both intact and separated completers alike were positive about the sessions they took part in. This was also the case for some non-completers. Reasons for this positivity included the session being run well, practitioners being praised for delivery and parents feeling they could share in a 'safe space'. Practical tips given were also highlighted by completers.

³ The first report, which provides further details on the evaluation strategy, can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-parental-conflict-programme-evaluation-report-on-early-implementation>

The second report, which provides detail on research conducted between 2019 and January 2021, can be found here: [Reducing Parental Conflict Programme evaluation: second report on implementation - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ Evidence in this "Intervention delivery" section is primarily from qualitative research so proportions are not provided.

Where parents expressed concerns regarding interventions, they mentioned issues with course content, specifically, there was some feeling that it was unrelatable, too general or lacking in structure. For non-completers, they specifically stressed that it was not appropriate for their situations. Linked to this, the main reason non-completers dropped out of the intervention was that their (ex) partner did not want them to attend, or that they felt unable to go without them. They were also frustrated that the sessions did not give them what they needed, others faced practical issues to attending.

The format of the sessions faced some criticism from completers and non-completers, namely, separated parents felt they were not getting enough of their (ex) partners perspective, or disappointment with online delivery rather than face-to-face sessions.

Overall, the interventions had an impact on parents that completed the sessions, however, intact couples appeared to have gained the most. Separated couples tended to have experienced some or a more limited impact. Those who did not complete the sessions tended to feel it had a limited or no impact. Extent of impact appeared to be linked with the initial level of conflict, where this was very high or parents had no contact with their ex-partner before attending the sessions, the impact was lower. Regardless of the impact on the relationship, most parents felt that they had seen some positive change in their children and their behaviour.

Training findings

During the Covid-19 pandemic, provision of Virtual Learning Classroom (VLC) training enabled RPC training to reach over 7,800 practitioners, almost as many as those that took part prior to this. For those who attending VLC training, they generally took fewer modules and were less likely to engage with e-learning.

Practitioner's felt mode of delivery generally worked well, though it did not generally work as well as face-to-face format, this was particularly the case for the Train the Trainer module, where a third stated they'd be unlikely to engage in the training again. Though at an overall level, most (81%) practitioners stated they would be likely to engage in training via VLC again. Where practitioners did not feel it worked so well, they would have preferred a better online platform and for the session to be more interactive. However, many simply would have preferred face-to-face. Despite this, the VLC method was convenient, with no need for travel, ease in fitting around other commitments and it did make the training possible during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite hesitations regarding the method, the VLC training was well-received, the content was relevant and useful, in some cases, even more useful than face-to-face training. Similarly, the level of content was more likely to be viewed as just right for modules one and two than face-to-face.

The training also resulted in improvements in self-reported knowledge, understanding and skills around parental conflict. Most practitioners also felt equipped to apply what they had learnt to their job (75%), but they were less likely to

feel they could put it into practice as regularly as those who attended face-to-face (43% at least weekly vs 49% of face-to-face attendees).

Regarding Train the Trainer, VLC practitioners were equally likely to have delivered training in their area. However, they were less likely to envisage delivering future sessions.

Local integration findings

This chapter is based on a Best Practice Event held online in December 2021 where four local authorities presented on a different element of the EIF planning tool. These were planning, leading change, multi-agency working and evaluation. Forty-four attendees were involved in the event, which also involved breakout room discussions following the presentations.

Local authorities stressed the importance of increasing awareness and training practitioners, with some creating tailored programmes for upskilling the workforce.

Multi-agency working was felt to be crucial in the success of the RPC programme and health services and the police were frequently mentioned partner agencies still to engage in the agenda.

During the breakout session, local authorities outlined how they had developed self-help tools for parents and practitioners rather than structured interventions. However, one local authority did have a six-week intervention offer for families.