

Celebrating World Social Work Day Royal Holloway, University of London, 16 March 2021

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“Inequality and Rights: Contemporary Challenges in the Child Protection & Family Justice Systems before and during the Pandemic”

Throughout the pandemic parents have had pressure heaped higher and higher upon them than ever before.

Now, I don't mean the challenges that have been faced by many as they juggle home education and working from home. To be sure, this has been a balancing act.

However, on a wider scale, those challenges are the easiest and most rewarding. To work is to be able to pay your bills, to educate and entertain your child is to have your child at home, safe in your loving arms. To be with your child is a privilege we deny many parents in this country.

During the pandemic, many parents apart from their children went months, some nearly a year without any direct contact with their most precious and beloved children.

For many parents, the parents of the 80,000 children in the care system, their struggle through the pandemic has been greater than anyone truly gives credit. The PFAN - Parents Families and Allies Network ran focus groups with parents who had experienced family court hearings during the first lockdown, and the experiences which these families shared were harrowing, indeed. To begin we asked parents to contact us by phone or email. Most replies came through text message. It became clear, that the internet was not in fact the easiest go-to method of communication.

We took a most careful and considered approach to achieve the most empowering and valued approach to working with these families and at all times ensured that they had the time (we provided substantial time before, during and after each focus group to give every participant as much time as they need to fully explore whatever they needed to share and to help them isolate the relevant experiences to the focus group topic), and resources (in the shape of top-up vouchers to enable full participation). We found the gap between those who had solid wifi connection and laptops and those on their wobbly handheld phone images was wider than we anticipated.

As the courts moved online families told us of the challenges, they faced trying to participate in the legal processes that could have forever effects on their families.

Many of the parents we spoke to had to make do with accessing their hearings over the phone. This left them trying to participate on a very small screen. These parents told us how hard it was to follow along and understand who was speaking. It made it almost impossible for them to know where and how they could contribute.

These parents told us time and again that they did not feel heard or seen. 'They couldn't see me or what kind of person I am' One mother shared. Others expressed concerns that not being able to be seen might make it easier to forget they were there or that they were a person at all.

One of the many upsetting revelations that came out of listening to these parents' experiences was the knock-on effects on legal support. Unlike in court where a parent could ask their solicitor a question, have a brief exchange, feel they had access to legal advice – parents accessing hearings on their phones were completely cut off for this basic aspect of support. They had no way of quickly and easily communicating with their solicitor.

If they had a solicitor.

Many of these parents were self-representing, which is a significant challenge for anyone in the most ideal circumstances. Parents expressed their concerns with the challenges they faced submitting and accessing documents, and the grave consequences for those who received important documents late due to the delayed post. While some parents had chosen to self-represent of their own accord. Others did so because accessing legal support became more difficult as law firms closed their doors and began working from home.

With schools closed, some parents had children at home. Childcare became virtually non-existent for those who required it for attending hearings. Parents shared with us the unimaginable strength that it took to sit alone in their bedroom hearing life-changing and distressing news online and then having to go make dinner and pretend to their children that all was okay. For other parents receiving devastating news alone, isolated, with no opportunity for human contact, for support, for even daily routines and normal coping skills... virtual hearings greatly affected mental health.

Across all the experiences shared there were numerous examples of how technical problems impacted hearings. From internet connections cutting out, screeching and background noises were both challenging and, in some cases, far more than simply a distraction.

These parents spent the pandemic separately trying to jump through hoops to meet the needs of their children. Sometimes to impossible heights. Some were required to attend support groups that closed or move inaccessibly online. Others were meant to complete courses the inexplicably ended without final assessments needed to full their responsibilities. Leaving these parents unable to continue taking the steps needed to achieve the best outcome for their families.

(1 in 10 homes did not have wifi in 2018!)

Families are the building blocks of our communities, of our country and yet, to be with your child is a privilege we deny many parents in this country.

Let's re-phrase that – to be with your family is a privilege we deny many children in this country.

We can do better!

Covid -19 has cleansed the lens, provided the quiet we needed to reflect, to help us to really see the inequalities around us. We have seen that it is possible for the world to stop! The skies were closed! City centres emptied – pollution reduced to unprecedented levels.

The impossible – has been shown to be possible.

There is a most important opportunity that must be seized! We need to ensure that our most vulnerable people, our children AND their families receive the support and care they need to thrive. We must work together to transform the tired ways of yesterday to ensure that people are enabled to fully and equitably participate in the decisions that are being made about them! And we must address the many factors the broaden the divide and continue to marginalize and keep people impoverished.

Question: What's your advice to social workers?

When you go visit families, throw the sat nav out the window because you don't know where you are going. Ask families what they need from you. If they trust you, they'll tell you what they need. And if they don't, you need to build that trust. But throw out the sat nav so you can find out where you're going together with the family.

In court, parents come into that room cold while others have done this a thousand times. It's so hard for parents to prepare for those meetings. Even the basics are alien to them. I've had parents ask me, 'What do I wear?' But by the time they're in court, the situation is so adversarial and it's often too late to change the outcome.