

Mediation Now: Reducing Parental Conflict

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A summary of evaluation outcomes – what worked?

Mediation Now approached Anna Springett Consulting in April 2019 to support them in evaluating their programme to reduce parental conflict (supported by the Innovation Fund). There were two key requests: 1) support with designing the evaluation process before the programme began, and 2) support in drawing together the final evaluation at the end of the programme. This document summarises the findings, outcomes and recommendations of the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) programme, as highlighted through the evaluation process.

Brief overview of the programme

The Mediation Now RPC programme combines existing mediation techniques with specific education, the child's voice, and a 'whole family' approach. This programme started in April 2019 and continued over 12 months (finishing in June 2020 with a three month extension). The aim was to engage 100 families; 50 families started the programme, with 95% remaining engaged through to the end. Five mediators (trained child consultants) delivered the programme. The programme consisted of the following elements:

- An initial 30min individual safeguarding meeting or telephone call
- Four 1.5-hour sessions, as follows:
 - Session 1: With parents - covering family background, education on the impact of conflict on children, sharing of resources, and preparation for session 2.
 - Session 2: With child/children - child consultation using a feelings-based method
 - Session 3: With parents – feedback of child consultation to parents, identification of potential child-focused solutions, exploration of restorative approach
 - Session 4: Ideally with whole family – support in making family decisions using family meetings
- Data gathering and evaluation (attempted / completed in the following ways):
 - Client information and all case activity was recorded throughout the programme using a case management system (ResolveIT), enabling e.g. monitoring of parent engagement over a specific time period
 - The Parent Alliance Measure (PAM) completed at the beginning and end for each parent; this is a validated tool, measuring cooperation in parenting, and suitable for separated parents
 - Written and verbal feedback was requested from parents and children at the end of each session attended and at the end of the programme
 - Outcomes were also measured throughout programme by mediator observations and feedback from the courts and other referrers
 - Follow-up was attempted a month after completing the programme to assess the impact on the family (initially by telephone and email, then by post)
 - Case studies were recorded by Mediation Now at the end of the programme
- Governance involved:
 - Monthly Mediation Now team meetings to monitor outcomes, targets and evaluation data, and to respond and adapt as appropriate
 - Three-monthly Steering Group meetings, involving a range of key stakeholders from across the system, providing advice and challenge as well as monitoring feedback

What worked – elements to keep

The experience of Mediation Now in combination with the feedback collated from parents and children, suggests the following aspects of the programme be retained for any future versions:

- Programme sessions and process:
 - Session 1: Use of communication tools and conflict-reducing strategies, sharing thoughts and feelings about the children, planning and goal-setting
 - Session 2: The overall approach seems to be highly endorsed by the children involved (100% positive feedback), specifically: the use of feelings cards, writing and drawing, specially chosen snacks and treats.
 - Session 3: Parental engagement with this session was high, due to a desire to know what the children said in Session 2. Aspects specifically to retain: Feeding back from Session 2, communication and planning, the supportive environment
 - Session 4: Having a whole family approach to planning for the future and improving communication, letters from parents
- Programme evaluation – engagement and response rate:
 - PAM: High level of engagement. 88% of parents completed one or more Parenting Alliance Measures.
 - The End of Programme evaluation response rate was 52%
 - *Suggestion to increase the evaluation return rate are included below under ‘key recommendations’*
 - Children’s evaluation: Session 2 evaluation data was successfully gathered, suggesting that the approach works with this population (The Bears Feelings Cards)
 - Observations of mediators: collated at the end of each case by the mediator.
 - Feedback from stakeholders in the system: feedback in particular from Portsmouth County Court
- Programme governance:
 - Regular team and steering group meetings enabled regular stakeholder involvement and discussion, leading to specific adaptations to the programme based on the evidence and feedback gathered to date, for example: review of feedback in team meetings led to changes to session 4 to increase use of family meetings which had received positive feedback from parents and children and simplification of terminology in documents. Review of referrals in the Steering Group meetings meant that a low number of referrals from the Magistrates was identified and Mediation Now was asked to provide more information for Magistrates about the programme.
 - Inclusion of influential stakeholders in the steering group is believed to have increased visibility of the project and therefore referrals. For example, referral numbers from lawyers increased over time. Parents reported that their legal representative had told them to do the programme before they issued court proceedings, as they would only be referred on to it during the proceedings otherwise.)

Key recommendations and suggestions – learning to take forward

The learning from running the Mediation Now programme suggests the following considerations and amendments for the future:

- Programme sessions and process:
 - Referrals are most successful when they come from the court *AND* having existing relationships with the courts is a key factor in this: This suggests investing in court

relationships as a key strategy for successful referrals, and working with mediators and child consultants with existing positive court relationships.

- Consider training up more mediators/child consultants than initially indicted to allow for loss of staff members and unforeseen circumstances; this will minimise the risk of delays due to recruitment and training of new staff
- The programme would benefit from lengthening to further embed the learning and increase the positive impact; this would also allow for children to be more involved in the process, which has been a key factor in the success of the Mediation Now approach; further funding will be required to make this possible (and is currently being pursued)
- Session 1: Parents made only two suggestions for improvement here, which were to do more practice, and to have time to go over what was not resolved and why.
- Session 2: Children requested more resources (e.g. games, books), and more creative methods to be included (or more of the same – they enjoyed the drawing and colouring)
- No specific suggestions were given for improving Sessions 3 or 4.
- Programme evaluation:
 - Evaluating the lasting impact: requires longer-term evaluation e.g. include a 6 and 12-month check
 - *For consideration: If children continue to be involved in the same manner, involving them in longer term evaluation has been decided against; however, if the programme is lengthened and children are involved more frequently, it may become appropriate for a suitable tool or approach to be identified to assess the longer-term impact on children*
 - *For consideration: A longer programme may benefit from inclusion of some 'emotional management strategies' for the children (e.g. how to manage my anger / anxieties)*
- Programme governance:
 - Having originally planned to include parents in the Steering Group as key stakeholders of the programme, it was decided not to do this due to a conflict of interest
 - Inclusion of local contact centres and social workers in the Steering Group in future iterations is likely to further enhance the profile of the programme

Key barriers – areas to consider

This section summarises those activities and ideas that Mediation Now tried but that did not work in the ways intended, for whatever reason. These have been highlighted as barriers that will need addressing in future programmes.

- Programme process:
 - Social workers referred a high rate of unsuitable families to the programme; 50% of social worker referrals did not engage at all.
 - Some parents were too conflicted in reality to qualify for this 'early intervention' approach
 - *Key questions to consider: How can the referrals process be tightened up to avoid such issues going forwards? For example: Would engaging social workers in the Steering Group reduce this effect? What might the role of education, partnership or closer engagement be in this?*
 - Unless both parents are eligible for Legal Aid, they will not be eligible to access the course under a Legal Aid certificate (which the MoJ has confirmed for this

programme). Further funding will be required to ensure that working parents (including e.g. those on zero hours contracts) will be able to access the course.

- *For consideration: Parents blaming each other / not seeing their own part in it: How might we improve self-awareness, ownership, and responsibility for action? Might there an approach that could be included in future programmes to reduce the 'blaming' so as to further enhance overall outcomes?*
- Programme evaluation:
 - For various reasons, not all sessions were evaluated (e.g. emotional or stressed parents)
 - *For consideration: Train mediators in the importance and application of evaluation processes to create a learning loop for the long-term benefit of the families and children*
 - *For consideration: Use support staff to collate evaluation material verbally from parents immediately at the end of each session, typing the answers into the system as given; this may reduce barriers linked to literacy as well as reducing the time needed both in the session and also later for transferring written data into a system; using a completely different person who is trained for the job and uninvolved in the sessions in any other way may also avoid participants feeling judged or nervous.*
 - Follow-up evaluation emails and calls were unsuccessful (no reply or answer, mobile numbers changed). Sending SAE led to an improved response rate, though still poor overall (6% return rate). *How could the medium- and longer-term impact be more successfully measured?*
 - The long-term impact on the children cannot be fully understood without longer-term evaluation, both because children's input is currently only being gathered at one point, and also the potential benefits of reduced parental conflict in the long term cannot be assessed without seeing how the learning is embedded in families



Key data – to understand and evaluate the anticipated learning

An overview of the participant data, evaluation data and questions for consideration

Engagement with the programme, and overall outcomes

- Programme engagement: Out of 94 respondents The data shows that families attended an average of 3 of the 4 sessions, with 36% attending all four sessions
- Outcome - Reduction in parental conflict
 - Where a Parenting Alliance Measure was completed at the beginning and end of the programme, 90% recorded an improvement in their levels of cooperation. Some alienated parents continued to feel alienated following the child consultation
 - *For consideration: How might a new programme address this or reduce this going forwards – how might a longer programme specifically address the challenge of alienated parents?*
- Outcome - Parents exiting the court system
 - Of the 42 parents in court proceedings when referred to the programme, 60% reached an agreement, leading to a consent order: 25 families came out of the justice system
 - This is estimated to have saved approximately 3 weeks of court time in a year (Portsmouth County Court)
 - There was also a reduction in intention to issue court proceedings, although the confirmed data is not currently available for this (c16 families decided not to issue court proceedings)
 - *For consideration: How might a programme successfully reduce conflict AND exit court system, as this programme suggests that it is possible to leave the system with little reduction in parental conflict.*

| Anticipated learning (<i>measured by...</i>) | Strongly Agreed / Agreed | Neutral (<i>or no comment</i>) | Disagreed |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------|
| Increased parental awareness of the negative impact of parental conflict on children | 90% | 10% | 0% |
| Increased parental awareness of support and resources available to them free of charge – were these useful? (<i>end of programme evaluation</i>) | 68% | 28% | 7% |
| Parents to have new ideas for how to communicate as a whole family (<i>end of programme evaluation</i>) | 70% | 21% | 9% |
| New agreements on family arrangements in place (<i>end of programme evaluation</i>) | 50% | 37% | 13% |
| Children feel listened to through the programme (<i>verbal feedback</i>) | 100% | 0% | 0% |

Evaluation of Session 1

- 100% of respondents agreed that Session 1 was easy to understand
- In reply to 'Which parts were most helpful?' (*a summary of key themes*):

- Helpful and empathetic mediators
- Clear explanation of the session and programme
- Hearing each other's thoughts about the child, agreeing about our children
- Understanding our lack of communication, understanding each other
- Talking about feelings and misunderstandings
- Finding ways to reduce conflict, learning about communication tools (STOP, HALT)
- Having the opportunity to voice thoughts in a safe environment
- Setting goals, laying out expectations, working together
- Stopping arguing and putting differences aside
- Sorting out contact
- 'What new things have you learnt?':
 - To listen and communicate; that there are two sides / multiple perspectives
 - The barriers to communication, the importance of communication
 - How to prevent conflict
 - Understanding how children think
 - That we want to same thing for our children; that's it's all about the children
 - Resources that are available
- 90% of respondents said they would use something from Session 1 (7% of respondents said they would not use anything; the remainder were unsure)
- In reply to 'How could the session be improved?', the only suggestions were to do some more practice, and to have time to go over what was not resolved and why.

Evaluation of Session 2

- Respondents were unanimously positive
 - The children used predominantly 'happy smiley face' stickers to indicate how they felt about the session
 - Those who were able included comments such as 'it was good/useful', 'it took a lot of worries away', 'it was fun and made me feel more relaxed about seeing dad', and 'it was good because I managed to tell them how I feel'.
- 'What was the best part for you?'
 - When we finally had the courage to tell dad
 - I think it was useful for mummy and daddy, and I don't know if it was useful for me yet
 - The drawing part / the cards
 - I could talk freely / talk about my feelings / talk about my worries
 - The biscuits / food / sweets
 - Reading my letter
- 'What was the least good part for you?'
 - When we talked about the iPad
 - Bringing back bad memories / my nerves
 - Lots of 'nothings' and an 'I loved it all'
- 'What could make it even better for you?'
 - Resources / surroundings: *It felt like an interview because of the layout of the room / get some games / children's books / need music*
 - Refreshments: *Nice chocolate / cheese and crackers / healthy / different sweets*
 - Overall: *Nothing could make it better / it was excellent / it was well done / beautiful job*
 - Specific suggestion: *Help my dad to change and be better*
 - Specific suggestion: *Writing, drawing, colouring (available to do while talking)*

- Specific suggestion: *I would like to learn how to deal with anger*

Evaluation of Session 3

- 100% of respondents agreed that Session 3 was easy to understand
- 'Which parts were most helpful?'
 - 36% of respondents mentioned hearing / understanding what their children had to say as being most helpful to them.
 - 18% of respondents mentioned sorting out a childcare timetable as being important.
 - There were also comments about reduced conflict, improved communication, and the supportive environment that enabled all of these outcomes.
- 'What new things have you learned?' (22 responses to this question)
 - 45% of responses were about understanding how the children feel.
 - 27% were about communication and conflict
 - And a further 23% were less specific positive statements such as 'I feel less alone', 'It feels more positive', 'to give it a chance'.
- In response to 'Will you use anything from today's session?' 80% of replies were positive, with specific plans including:
 - Writing letters / emails / making videos to communicate with children
 - Being aware of impact on children, 'children as audience'
 - Seeking out further support such as counselling
- In terms of improving the session, all but one of the comments were positive (i.e. no improvement needed), apart from one suggestion to look more at how to turn the children's views into action. *[Note that the negative remark seems out of place and an anomaly.]*

Evaluation of Session 4

- 92% respondents agreed that Session 4 was easy to understand
- 'Which parts were most helpful?', sample answers:
 - Coming up with a way to move forward
 - Understanding ways to resolve conflict / makes talking a lot easier
 - Discussing issues with the children / all being together
 - Having someone there to keep us focussed on what we were talking about (mentioned twice)
 - Putting a structure in place
- In response to 'Will you use anything from today's session?' 83% of replies were positive, with specific plans including focused mainly on family meetings and taking a planned approach

Key data regarding families involved in the programme and their outcomes:

| Area being measured (data from 94 respondents) | No. before | % of total (before) | No. after | % of total (after) | % Shift over time |
|---|------------|---------------------|-----------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Average number of children per couple / family | 1.8 | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| Highest number of children per couple / family | 4 | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| Average age of eldest child | 10 | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| Parents with children from previous relationships | 5 | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| Parents in a new relationship | 40 | 43% | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| Parents NOT in a new relationship | 44 | 45% | n/a | n/a | n/a |

| | | | | | |
|--|----|-----|--------------|-----|------|
| Parents who did not comment re new relationship | 8 | 8% | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| No. of parents thinking residence was agreed | 72 | 77% | - | - | 0% |
| No. of parenting thinking residence NOT agreed | 20 | 21% | - | - | 0% |
| No. of parents unsure if residence agreed | 2 | 2% | - | - | 0% |
| No. of parents agreed on contact (<u>88 respondents for end of programme data</u>) | 8 | 9% | 60 | 68% | +60% |
| No. of parents NOT agreed on contact | 83 | 88% | 28 | 32% | -56% |
| No. of parents unsure if contact agreed | 3 | 3% | 6 (no reply) | - | - |
| No. of parents happy with maintenance arrangements | 40 | 43% | - | - | - |
| No. of parents NOT happy with maintenance arrangements | 42 | 45% | - | - | - |
| No. of parents who did not comment re maintenance arrangements | 8 | 8% | - | - | - |

