

Overview of the Parenting Apart Programme and its Effectiveness



The
Parenting
Apart
Programme

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background



There is now growing recognition that early life experiences can have a long term impact on people's health and behaviour, and that those raised in situations where they experience regular abuse, family conflict or are exposed to such issues as mental illness and substance misuse are more likely to display health harming behaviours themselves and have a higher risk of experiencing cancer, and coronary heart disease as adults. i,ii

Analysis has found that children can suffer when their parents' marriage ends, no matter how amicable the split. The divorce rate in the United Kingdom is around 0.8% of those married and has been gradually reducing since 2004, to the extent that it is now 36% lower (2015 figures)iii. Divorce is an emotional and stressful time of change for all involved, but a child has little control over these changes which increases their stress. This, coupled with the long term conflict that is likely to have preceded and to continue after divorce, can increase the stress and anxiety experienced by the child.

Divorce is one of the factors that the research into chronic stressful experiences in childhood now collectively terms an 'adverse childhood experience', commonly known as ACEs. This is not because divorce in itself is seen to be harmful but because divorce is used within ACEs research as a marker of substantive or long term familial conflictiv. It is recognised that it is the effects of long term conflict that can be detrimental to health over time. Family breakdown can be stressful, sad, and confusing; at any age, children may feel uncertain or angry at the prospect of parents separating or divorcing.

A UK report commissioned by Resolutionv; claimed divorce can lead to the children of divided couples achieving poor exam results and turning to drugs to ease their stress. Almost two thirds of children whose parents divorced said that the break-up affected their GCSEs, while one in eight turned to drugs or alcohol. In the UK around 100,000 children under 16 have to contend with their parents' divorce each year; the report found 25% struggled with homework and 12% skipped lessons either at school, college or university.

Professional support to families during the time of separation and divorce, to help deal with the resulting distress and work to reduce the likely conflict, can help and enable the parents to focus on putting their children first and limit the involvement of the children in disputes and arguments between the adults. This support can help parents move to working towards solving problems together rather than trying to win them. Effective communication is a vital skill within this process that parents can easily lose sight of within the trauma of the ongoing conflict.

Unfortunately, there are many occasions when divorcing couples are unable to successfully communicate, to the extent that they are unable to agree on parenting arrangements for the children. In these occasions, the divorcing couple have to go to court to obtain an agreement developed by the court, based on what it perceives to be the best interests of the child. This process can drastically increase the length of time for the couple to reach an agreement and if the case has to go to full trial, can result in further bad feeling and poor communication between the parents. This is likely to continue once the residency and contact arrangements have been decided.

The Family Justice Review 2011 states:

“ Every year 500,000 children and adults are involved in the family justice system. They turn to it at times of great stress and conflict. The issues faced by the system are hugely difficult, emotional and important. It deals with the failure of families, of parenting and of relationships. It cannot heal those failures. But it must ensure it promotes the most positive or the least detrimental outcomes possible for all the children and families who need to use it, because the repercussions can have wide-ranging and continuing effects not just for them, but for society more generally. ”

Further, the review notes the following issues with the process:

- Cases take far too long
- The cost both to the taxpayer and often the individual is high
- Both children and adults are often confused about what is happening to them
- Organisational structures are complicated and overlapping, with no clear sense of leadership or accountability
- Individuals and organisations across different parts of the family justice system too often do not trust each other
- There is no set of shared objectives to bind agencies and professionals to a common goal
- Morale can be low and the status of those working in some parts of the system does not match the levels of skill and commitment
- Information and IT are wholly inadequate to support effective management and processes

The Family Justice Review adds:

“ Children’s interests are central to the operation of the family justice system. Decisions should take the wishes of children into account and children should know what is happening and why. People urged us to consider the need to take great care in consulting children, and for this to be handled sensitively and to take into account the child’s age and understanding.

Children and young people should be given age appropriate information to explain what is happening when they are involved in cases. They should as early as possible be supported to make their views known and older children should be offered a menu of options, to lay out the ways in which they could – if they wish – do this.

The work needs skilled professional support.” Family Justice Review ”

Since publication of the Family Justice Review 2011; the government has published a progress report, where it states:

“ Together, we have come a long way in reforming the family justice system. We are however under no illusion that our work here is done. There is still much more we can do to make the system work better for those who use our courts and other services outside of court. We are committed to continuing to work with you to make family justice better for everybody involved. ”

1.2 The Parenting Apart Programme

The Parenting Apart Programme (PAP) is a well-established Programme designed and developed to support parents and children going through parental conflict, separation or divorce. It aims to offer advice and support unique to each family, so that the outcomes are positive and beneficial to the whole family, whilst prioritising a child-centred approach to safeguard the emotional and physical wellbeing of the child.

The Parenting Apart Programme (PAP) provides selected solutions to the key findings and recommendations made by the Family Justice Review. The PAP supports parents and the emotional wellbeing of children through conflict, separation and divorce, and actively helps parents to act in the best interest of their children.

The aims of the Parenting Apart Programme are to:

1. Change the mindset of parents in order that they prioritise the needs of their children, and place them at the centre of all decision making processes
2. Enable better communication between parents, in order to create a more stable and sustainable parenting environment, which is emotionally beneficial to their children
3. Encourage parents to make their own decisions regarding future plans, through the establishment of Parent Working Agreements

PAP has created a unique methodology to develop and implement a bespoke Parent Working Agreement – ‘PWA’ for parents who have made the decision to separate or divorce. The programme is specifically designed and tailored to support the individual needs of parents and the emotional wellbeing of their children, through separation and divorce. It offers unique and individual advice and support, which enables the outcome to be positive and beneficial to the whole family whilst prioritising the emotional and physical wellbeing of the children.

There is a further and important consideration as we now live in a world of ever changing family dynamics. Such changing dynamics include:

- Ethnic diversity – growing number of mixed marriages
- Ageing population – starting families and marriage later in life
- Cohabitation – starting families out of marriage
- Civil partnerships – adopted families
- Impact of technology and social media on families and children



The Parenting Apart Programme (PAP) operates through an initial structured Programme over 4 weeks. This focuses on establishing trust and developing a positive approach before moving towards the parents holding joint meetings where they can start to communicate positively together in a supportive environment. The Programme works with the parents to develop parent working agreements that can be filed alongside Court orders. In addition, the Programme works to re-establish the relationship between the parent and the non- resident child where this has broken down. The Programme achieves this through a number of approaches: individual one to one and joint face to face consultations; a personal bespoke Parent Working Agreement, review meetings, telephone support and continued advice and counsel through the duration of the Programme. The PWA is a document, which both parents agree to abide by, and can be filed alongside a Court Order. The PWA details how the parents agree to work together in the best interest of their children; covering many of the practical aspects of parenting apart.

All of this is conducted through a child-centred approach, which enables the parents to resolve their differences and arrive at an outcome that both parties are happy to accept and enable them to move on.

Evidence suggests that the Parenting Apart Programme:

- a) Improves communication between parents
- b) Promotes a child-centred approach by parents, in part through increasing the display of respectful behaviour of parents towards each other in front of their child(ren), and
- c) Reduces the length of time of the court process. This is vital since court proceedings can be highly traumatic and can cause complete breakdown of communication between parents, which can have significant emotional and mental impact on children
- d) Gives parents back control and responsibility of making decisions about the future of their children.
- e) Supports the voice of the child throughout the process Supports parents and children in re-establishment of relationship through parental conflict

In addition, research shows that early intervention is important to achieving positive outcomes for the children and their families. Combining early intervention with PAP will reduce pressures and cost on the UK's Court system, social and healthcare, NHS, local GP services and police and crime – ultimately, the UK taxpayer's bill could be reduced significantly; allowing savings to be reinvested in the much needed and other areas of children's mental health and well-being. Further, PAP will help and support children during in their education; reducing absenteeism, the risk of under-achievement and academic performance.

2. Evaluation

In order to assess the effectiveness of the PAP a brief evaluation of a sample of PAP cases is presented below;

2.1 Evaluation Aims and Objectives

The aim of the evaluation was to assess the impact of the Programme by reviewing changes in communication styles of parents during the PAP process; and parents' perceptions of the usefulness and appropriateness of the Parenting Apart Programme;

- a) Does the approach improve parental communication methods?
- b) Is the PAP approach seen by parents to be a helpful approach to moving through divorce, particularly in relation to understanding the potential impact on the child?

2.2 Data Collection

Data currently collected by the Parenting Apart Programme includes:

- Communication style between parents pre-programme through to week 4 of Programme Referrer details: self/ solicitor/ LA/ court
- Whether the meeting is the 1st joint or single parent meeting
- Reason for referral
- Respectfulness of meeting conclusion behaviours: hand shake/ acknowledgement/ ambivalence
- Client perceptions of the Parenting Apart Programme following completion of the Programme



3. Results and Discussion

This brief evaluation focused on the impact of the Parenting Apart Programme on parental communication styles and changes in client understanding of the potential impact of conflict and divorce on the child and skills and resources to mitigate this.

246 client responses to the communications questionnaire were explored (123 fathers and 123 mothers) and a random subsample of 23 client perceptions of the PAP at the end of the Programme were also examined.

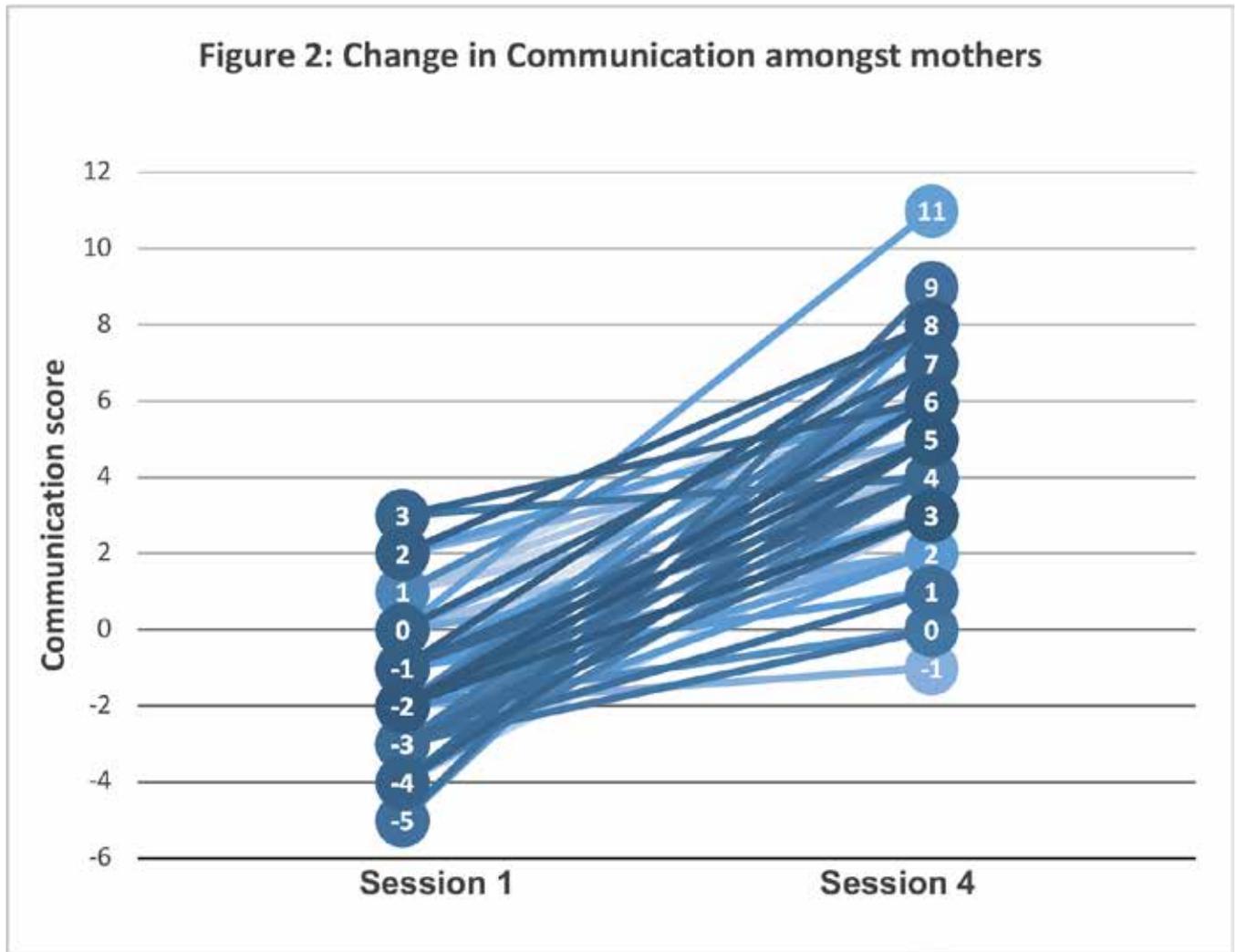
3.1 Communication

Good, positive communication is a key element in conflict management. During the first PAP session all clients are asked about their communication with their ex-spouse, identifying which methods are used and which are hard to use. The Programme gives those that are hard a negative score, and weights face-to-face and solicitor's correspondence over other approaches. The same questions are repeated during each week of the Programme.

As figure 1 below shows, communication was found to improve across all fathers within the sample group (N=123), ranging from initial scores of -6 to 3 at the first meeting to -2 to 11 by week 4, with an average score of -2 in the first week and a move to an average of 5 by the fourth week.

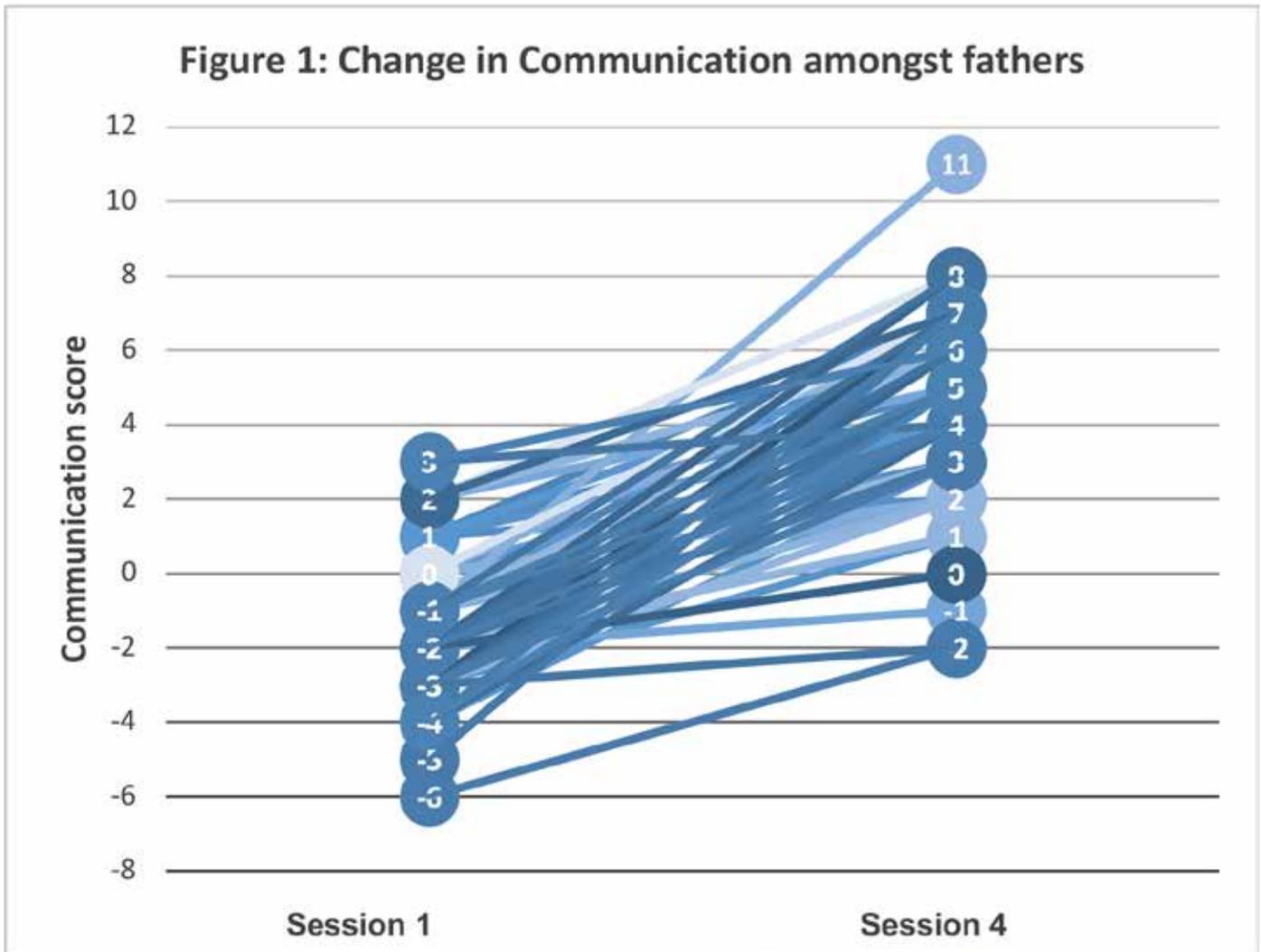


Figure 1: Change in Communication amongst fathers



Women clients showed a similar pattern (N=123), as figure 2 below shows. At week one their scores ranged from -5 to 3 with an average score of -1.5, the most common score being -2. However, by week four the average score was 4.74, with scores ranging from -1 to 11, the most common score being 5.

Figure 2: Change in Communication amongst mothers



The results from this sample clearly show that PAP addresses communication issues between the two parents in a high conflict situation. Through PAP, parents are able to move from a position of little or no informal or positive communication methods to positive and constructive communication methods.

This reflects the general research findings, which is that one of the greatest skills to help with conflict resolution is effective communication. How people approach communicating about issues of concern to them will often determine the resulting outcome

3.2 Client perceptions of the Parenting Apart Programme

A 13 question evaluation form is given to clients to complete once they have been through the PAP approach. It has ten statements and asks the client to rate them using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagrees to strongly agree. Appendix 2 details the statements, and table 1 shows the responses.

As can be seen in table 1 below, 21 clients in the sub-sample (N=23) found the Parenting Apart Programme (PAP) helpful and informative, with 11 strongly agreeing with this statement, whilst 2 neither agreed nor disagreed.

Questions 2 to 4 asked clients about whether their knowledge and skills around the impact of conflict and divorce on children had increased through undertaking the PAP. Again, the majority of clients either agreed or strongly agreed, though both questions 2 and 3 had missing data from 1 client.

Questions 5- 7 asked clients about their knowledge and skills as a parent going through the divorce process. Responses indicate that the majority feel their knowledge and skills have increased and that they have or are now able to make changes to their relationship with their ex-spouse that will help with the divorce process and on-going communication.

Question 8 provoked the biggest variation in client responses and indicates that a minority of clients do not see the Programme as an alternative to the court process but perhaps a complimentary Programme.

Respondents were unanimous in agreeing that they would recommend the Programme to their friends. The ability of parents to think about, discuss and act with the needs of their children at the forefront is a key skill, not only in increasing communication with their ex-spouse but also in reducing or managing their own distress and anxiety caused by the family breakdown and the resulting factors including conflict. Table 1 suggests that parents who have worked through the PAP approach value the skills and knowledge it gives them to transition from a family in conflict to a family who are separated but communicating.



Table 1: Post-Programme evaluation statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	missing
Q1 I found the Parenting Apart Programme helpful and informative	0	0	2	10	7	23	0
Q2 I am more aware about how children respond to divorce and separation	0	0	0	11	11	22	0
Q3 I am now more aware of the impact that high conflict can have on children	0	0	3	10	9	22	0
Q4 I was able to think about and discuss what children need during divorce and separation	0	1	0	15	7	23	0
Q5 I have gained additional knowledge and skills that will help me as a separated parent	1	0	1	13	8	23	0
Q6 I was able to identify one or more changes either that I have made, or would like to make	0	1	2	8	12	23	0
Q7 I have thought about how I might develop a business- like relationship with my ex-partner.	0	0	2	10	10	22	0
Q8 I am considering using our Parent Working agreement as an alternative to court.	2	3	4	1	10	20	0
Q9 The facilitator was well-prepared and knowledgeable	0	0	0	6	17	23	0
Q10 The facilitator treated me fairly, regardless of gender, race, or any other diversity issue	0	0	0	2	21	23	0

	Yes	No	Total	Missing
Q11 I found co- constructed Parent working Agreements helpful	20	2	22	1
Q12 I would be willing to participate in the further development of the programme (briefings, training & policy development, etc.)	18	5	23	0
Q13 I would be likely to recommend the Parenting Apart Programme to others	21	0	21	2

The recent Joseph Rowntree review on divorce and separation and its implications for children notes that there is a lack of research into the interventions that provide family support and their impact on reducing adverse experiences for children.viii This snapshot of results from the PAP approach are one example of an intervention that has a clear positive outcome for divorcing families.

4. Case Study examples

In addition to the information presented above from client data, commentaries from barristers and solicitors working with families in the midst of the court divorce processes demonstrate the effectiveness of the Programme in supporting parents to move through the divorce process rather than become entrenched in bitterness, as the two examples below illustrate, both cases referred to PAP by the court under private family law proceedings.

a) An example of the speed and effectiveness of the Parenting Apart approach:

“at the hearing on 9/12/13 there were significant arguments over residence, schooling, domestic violence, contact and supervision, and extended to bitterness amongst the extended family members. By 15/1/14, thanks to PAP involvement through the Parenting Apart Programme, the parents had agreed residence, change of schools, the setting aside of domestic violence allegations and the progression of contact in the family home to include the extended paternal family, with additional mid-week contact, not to mention a number of detailed agreements about finances and possessions to which the court process would have struggled to respond...”

Barrister A; 1 child, 4 years old; case in court process for over 12 months prior to engaging with the PAP

b) An example of a family about to have Care Proceedings instigated due to their communication issues:

“The family was entrenched in extreme high levels of conflict including high levels of concern around domestic abuse, which was impacting on their child. The PAP worked directly with both parents over a course of an initial eight weeks. The Programme brought both parents together from a position of no direct contact, and supported them to communicate and to change their mind-set. The direct work and strong advice helped change their personal relationship into a more functional parent-working relationship. The PAP was able to help re-educate the parents to implement a more emotionally stable environment for their daughter. Through the Programme the parents were able to compile a Parent Working Agreement which outlined their responsibility and what they were totally committing to, resulting in better communication between them all.....”

Solicitor A; 1 infant; case in court process for 10 months prior to engagement of PAP.

5. Conclusion

Adverse childhood experiences, including family conflict, risk having a detrimental impact on the child experiencing it, both in the short and long term, in terms of poor behaviour, education and health outcomes.

The Parenting Apart Programme aims to improve communication between the ex-partners and encourages the parents to put their child(ren) to the forefront of all planning and communication.

Given the impact that that the PAP would appear to have on increasing positive communication and skills and thus giving some element of control back which helps in reducing the stress inherent within the process, it would appear that this is a family support initiative that is worth investing in.

As the results show, the Programme is strongly valued by those taking part in it. The vast majority of those who took part confirmed that they would recommend the Programme to their friends, and all felt that their understanding of the impact of conflict on their child was enhanced through the Programme. In addition, those who support families going through divorce equally value the Programme for its ability to enable parents to put their children at the centre of the process.



6. Future Potential of the Parenting Apart Programme

The PAP is a structured supportive, universal Programme that has been shown to improve communication and is now ready to be scaled up. The evidence suggests that the intensive support approach of the PAP has a lasting impact on the family.

Rolling the PAP out to scale could be taken forward in a number of different ways. Because the Parenting Apart Programme supports parents struggling with communicating positively, it is believed that the PAP could be applied from prevention through to early intervention. As a result, this parenting Programme could:

- Provide support to those parents concerned about their children's behaviour, including educational attainment.
- Help give teachers the skills to support parents dealing with conflict who need to be helped to refocus on providing a positive, family environment.
- Form part of a Wellbeing at work suite of options provided under corporate health schemes, to support employees going through high conflict family situations.

However, any upscaling of the Programme will need to ensure that the roll out maintains the efficacy of the programme through a quality-assured training Programme. In addition, an appropriate next step would be to evaluate the impact of the PAP on parenting skills and any perceived children's behavioural difficulties that arose during the time of parental conflict.



7. Appendix 1: Communication baseline assessment

The
Parenting
Apart
Programme

Parenting Apart Programme

Communication Questionnaire

URN [0282] Sheet

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Baseline

Weekly adjusted

Overall Change

Current communication, please ✓ all boxes which apply. Leave blank those which do not apply – Please provide scoring rationale if communication 'difficult' then minus the value (if in doubt default is 0 zero) Add both baseline scores. Both weekly adjusted scores are added. Overall change is calculated by adding weekly adjusted scores minus the baseline (the baseline is invariably a minus number)

Father - week 1 (baseline)

Face to face +/- 2

Phone calls +/-1

Skype / face time / fb messenger +/-1

Text messages. +/-1

e-mail. +/-1

Social media - not private messages. +/-1

Letters and cards +/-1

Solicitors correspondence - letters. -2

Other. (please specify below) +/- 1

Mother week 1 (baseline)

Face to face. +/- =2

Telephone calls. +/- =1

Skype / face time / fb messenger +/- =1

Text messages. +/- =1

e-mail +/- =1

Social media - not private messages. +/- =1

Letters and cards +/- =1

Solicitors correspondence - letters. -2

Other. (please specify below) +/- =1

8. Appendix 2: PAP Evaluation questions

Post PAP Parent Evaluation Form

- Question 1)** I found the Parenting Apart Programme helpful and informative
- Question 2)** I am more aware about how children respond to divorce and separation
- Question 3)** I am now more aware of the impact that high conflict can have on children
- Question 4)** I was able to think about and discuss what children need during divorce and separation
- Question 5)** I have gained additional knowledge and skills that will help me as a separated parent
- Question 6)** I was able to identify one or more changes either that I have made, or would like to make
- Question 7)** I have thought about how I might develop a business-like relationship with my ex-partner.
- Question 8)** I am considering using our Parent Working agreement as an alternative to court.
- Question 9)** The facilitator was well-prepared and knowledgeable
- Question 10)** The facilitator treated me fairly, regardless of gender, race, or any other diversity issue
- Question 11)** I found co-constructed Parent working Agreements helpful
- Question 12)** I would be willing to participate in the further development of the programme (briefings, training & policy development, etc.)
- Question 13)** I would be likely to recommend the Parenting Apart Programme to others

9. References

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