



Excluded families and the Coronavirus outbreak

Digital inclusion

Because of staying at home and social distancing, people are turning to digital to communicate important public health messages, to support each other, and to stay in touch. However, for many families, digital is not an option or is a very limited one. Difficult enough at the best of times, digital exclusion is now an even more important matter with serious repercussions for life, health, wellbeing and education.

Issues for families

Digital:

- Huge and rapid move to digital which is difficult for those already lagging behind or excluded
- Being totally dependent in the home on one PAYG device with limited data
- Not having sufficient devices in the house to undertake the multiplicity of tasks that now need to be done digitally

Health:

- Not receiving or understanding key public health messages
- Using social media rather than official news channels to receive news with consequent risk of getting wrong or unreliable advice
- Clarity of messaging and people's digital literacy and health literacy
- Being unable to sign up for free school meals/equivalent during the crisis

Education:

- Not having sufficient devices in the home for all students to continue their education
- Not having any/reliable enough internet access in their home
- Not being able to 'meet' or join in with get togethers with teachers and classmates

Digital inclusion is a big issue for many families. Those with smartphones/ other devices are more comfortable with digital delivery than some people but there is still a sizeable group without digital access. Some family members do not have smartphones, but they have basic mobiles.

People are using social media much more than websites to keep up to date with developments. Using web chat and live chat more than helplines.

Excluded groups

There are various family types who are likely to be excluded from digital communications and may require specific help or support. As well as those covered below, these include:

- Single parents
- BME communities
- Families living in rural communities
- Families whose first language is not English

Parents with learning disabilities

Lack of understanding around the key messages - most parents with learning disabilities (that PAS members work with) do not watch the news or read newspapers and therefore rely on what others tell them or what they read on social media. Given social media is a personalised 'news' stream set up based on their likes and preferences, it can contain misinformation.

Aberlour workers talked to the families they work with about watching the news once a day. Some parents did watch the BBC news but said they felt the language used was unclear, overwhelming and hard to understand.

Changing guidance - the majority of parents are now clear about the guidance. Prior to spending time talking through the announcement about lockdown parents were feeling confused, scared and unsure.

Since the announcement women who are pregnant, for example, have fed back that they now thought they could go to the shops because the most recent announcement didn't specify/ remind/ update what vulnerable groups can and cannot do. The focus seems to have shifted from initially talking about 'only the vulnerable will be affected' to guidance for the general population (ie stay home except for essential shopping, exercise etc).

What's been working? Services have found the most effective method is asking parents what their understanding of virus and the guidance and what does it mean to them. Practitioners have then been talking through information with parents over the phone, Facebook and WhatsApp. They are using the easy read information which is available. As some families can take time to process new information or benefit from reminders practitioners have been talking daily to the most vulnerable and or the families who seem to have the most limited understanding.

Access to supplies/ finance/ income – Initially supplies of baby milk, nappies and sanitary products were the biggest challenge.

In the past services have worked hard with families to ensure they can access the benefits they are entitled to (some families are entitled to DLA for children, PIP and Carers Allowance), and have also worked to have budget plans in place for families and therefore, generally finances have not been an issue in the last few weeks. However, it is likely that in the coming weeks families will be struggling financially as they have been using local shops or buying what is available which can be the more expensive and not discounted items.

Although schools have agreed to provide meals for children, many parents do not want to mix with others at school whilst picking up the food and therefore parents are having to provide extra food and snacks at home.

Families affected by substance abuse

Parents using substances/ in recovery are under massive pressure just now; staying at home is a major issue for many families affected by substance abuse.

They cannot access their usual treatment services or recovery supports and are now stuck at home with their children and/or teenagers. There are also lot of families where one parent is using substances but the other parent is not. Typically, family members are not thinking about their own needs at this point and are struggling with being stuck at home and unable to escape the person using substances.

For families affected by alcohol and drugs, home can become a bit of a pressure cooker situation.

Families affected by imprisonment

Families separated through imprisonment are undergoing particular stress at present. Prison visits have just been suspended, with few alternatives currently in place (Email a Prisoner, through which families can send an email for a small fee, which is then printed out and taken to the person in prison - few prisons have an option for the person in prison to reply via email; and occasional access to very unsterile telephones in crowded prison halls). This means families are exceptionally anxious, with little information yet being shared by SPS and justifiable fears for the health of their family members in custody.

Families affected by disabilities

Rare conditions groups like sickle cell etc should be contacted to make sure they are okay. They rely heavily on each other for support but by the nature of this virus can't make contact with each other to provide practical support – shopping/transport to hospital for transfusions etc so may not have a good support system outside of their group.

Some parent groups asked how they can get enough hand sanitisers for their families.

Some questions that have come through:

- My child has a rare condition and was wondering how this may affect his vulnerability with the coronavirus 19?
- How do I deal with the overwhelming amount of school work that my son (who has additional support needs) has been sent from numerous teachers all with short deadlines, confusing instructions, numerous ways of uploading completed work when I work from home and have limited time to support and guide him?
- Will he be penalised if he is unable to complete the work on time because he can't keep up with the volume and complexity of different digital mechanisms that each teacher is using?
- I am worried about what happens now that my daughter has technically 'left school' and any transition support is now not provided.

Families and relationship breakdown

There will be significant stress for families at home due to:

- Being together constantly
- Home working + home school + limited space / computers, etc.
- Difficult to find privacy for parents for discussions/disagreements

All face to face child contact stopped; contact centres closed.

Courts stopping all family cases (divorce, contact etc).

Frequently asked questions

Some organisations have been collating the questions and answers into a Frequently Asked Questions resource on their websites; these provide a useful insight into what concerns parents have.

One Parent Families Scotland <https://opfs.org.uk/talk-to-us/ask-a-question/>

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs <https://www.sfad.org.uk/faqs-from-families-about-coronavirus>

Changes to services - Relationships Scotland

Working on online relationship support.

Counselling: Developed new guidance for online counselling and mediation
Relationship counselling – moving to online sessions, initially for existing clients and then opening up.

Contact: All contact centres have had to close for face to face contact. Early stages of developing a 'post box' service for child contact cases (this is the safe sharing of messages between children and non-resident parent).

Developing online training for training courses.