

Tips for Managing the Shared Care of Children During the Covid-19 Lockdown Period from the FDR Centre

Based on our experience of working with thousands of families over many years we have put together a few tips that we hope help you better understand what options are available to resolve care and contact issues and how you might best support each other to keep our children safe and well during these challenging times

You can be confident that it is our intention to continue to support separated parents and help them to find the best parts of themselves so that together they can make the best decisions for the care and wellbeing of their children.

These are challenging times

While we each love our children enormously, we will all likely acknowledge that school holiday times can be challenging, especially during winter. Certainly, by the middle of the second week, any rules around screen time will likely become much more flexible than normal and the willingness to withdraw screen time privileges much less strict because ...then what would they do?

So our hearts go out to all parents caring for children during the COVID-19 lock-down period. No schools, no childcare, no grandparents, no going out to parks and playgrounds with other children, no visits to movies or friends' houses...

And of course, if you are separated parents, the whole situation might just feel overwhelming at times. What are you even allowed to do in this situation?

The official position

Last week the Principal Family Court Judge, Jacquelyn Moran, issued a statement offering guidance to parents or caregivers who share custody.

The key points she made (which we whole-heartedly endorse) were:

- Parents must put aside their conflict at this time and make decisions that are in the best interests of the children and their families, as well as the wider community.
- This global pandemic should not be seen as an opportunity for parents to unilaterally change established care arrangements without cause or otherwise behave in a manner inconsistent with the child's best interests or the court ordered care arrangements.

- Generally, children in the same communities can continue to go between their homes, unless:
 - the child is unwell. In this case the child should not travel between homes until they are well;
 - someone in either home is unwell; or
 - someone involved (ie, the child or people in the home they have been in or will go to) has been:
 - overseas in the last 14 days;
 - in close contact with someone who is currently being tested for COVID-19; or
 - in close contact with someone who has the virus or is being tested.

- Parents and caregivers should discuss if shared custody arrangements would allow COVID-19 to potentially spread without them being aware and reach an agreement. This may mean the child may need to stay with one parent/caregiver for the initial 4 week period.

- If children are moving between parents/caregivers in the same town or community:
 - children should be accompanied by an adult when moving between homes;
 - private vehicles should be used, wherever possible - public transport can be used where there are no alternatives; and
 - the overriding consideration is for parents to make decisions that are in the best interest of their children.

- where there is a shared care arrangement and the families are in different towns or communities the safety of the children and others in their family units should not be compromised by movement between those homes, particularly if there are more than two homes involved.

- where children cannot move between homes, the Court would expect indirect contact - such as by phone or social media messaging to be generous.

So, if you co-parent and you already have a Parenting Agreement:

The goal of the lockdown is to limit human interaction and contain the spread of COVID-19, however, if you are able to share the care of your children you can continue to do so but those arrangements will require some careful thought and planning.

Please use your Parenting Agreement and especially the flexibility function. Your Agreement is likely to cover school holidays. The school holidays have been brought forward so they will fall

within the four week lockdown period so apply the school holiday principles you have agreed to and adapt them in the best way for each of you and your children.

When your Parenting Agreement talks about “shared care”, think about how that can work in a situation like the COVID-19 lock down. How can you share the care of your children so that each of you stays sane, all of you stay healthy and your parenting relationships (both co-parenting and parallel parenting) work as seamlessly as possible.

Are there other people to consider in either of your children’s two homes? If for example, you live with your parents, are they vulnerable and how will having your children stay impact on their vulnerability? If you live with flatmates, what impact will having your children stay have on their already stressful lock down situation? – some may have to work from home.

If you change your Parenting Agreement so that the child/ren stay with one parent most or all of the time, what will be the impact on that arrangement on the fulltime caregiver’s life? How can you, the non-caregiving parent support them (in real and practical terms!)

If living with other people is going to prove too challenging to enable the children to stay in their normal pattern of shared care, how can the non-caregiving parent still keep in contact with them regularly? (We have some tips coming up that might help with that).

Whatever arrangements need to be made, please be as kind and considerate to each other as we have all been asked to be to strangers or neighbours. It’s a great opportunity to build up some parental goodwill and to show your children that you both love them and care for them.

If you don’t have a Parenting Agreement or you do have one but it’s no longer workable

There is no need to worry about getting help and support - the FDR Centre can and will help you. Notwithstanding the steps the government has taken to contain the spread of COVID-19, it is very much business as usual (with just a few changes) for the FDR Centre as it focusses on providing a seamless service to help families resolve care and contact arrangements during these uncertain and challenging times – just complete the ‘Contact Us’ form on the FDR Centre’s website at <https://www.fdr.co.nz/contact-us/> and one of our experienced support staff will respond promptly.

Your personal health and safety is important

You must take care of yourself in order to care for your children.

Self-distancing and good hygiene are essential. Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water. If you need to sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or the inside of your elbow and avoid hugs, handshakes, hongis and any other contact with anyone outside your 'bubble'.

It can get lonely for adults, whether you are the primary caregiver or the non-caregiving parent. So arrange to chat with family, friends or colleagues by phone or using video apps such as WhatsApp or Facetime. Arrange virtual lunches, dinners, drinks with friends and family and check on community Facebook pages for support and interesting new ideas.

Eat well. Don't panic buy, the supermarkets are stressing that there is plenty of good food and supplies for everyone. Try and stick to three good meals a day. Try new recipes - good food will boost your immune system and your spirits.

Get plenty of exercise – healthy body = healthy mind. Get outside while the weather is good. Tidy up the yard, do some gardening, do those chores that you have been putting off until you have the time, and go for a walk or bike rides (the roads, footpaths and carparks are a lot safer for cyclists now) – remember to keep the recommended 2m separation from others at all times and be especially careful around the elderly and medically vulnerable people.

It's okay to feel anxious, stressed and afraid. It's natural and understandable but be gentle and kind on yourself and others. Connecting with people who make you feel safe and loved is the most important thing you can do to look after your mental health. The Mental Health Foundation has designed a resource which you can access at mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/covid-19/ on looking after your mental health during COVID-19. And, anyone in New Zealand can free call or text 1737 at any time to speak with a trained counsellor – it's free and confidential.

We understand that the thought of being forced to stay in a place where you may feel unsafe will be terrifying for many. Anyone suffering domestic violence should call 111 or ask someone to call for you. If you feel threatened and you are in danger you should run outside and scream for help. You can also call Women's Refuge for free, 24/7 on 0800 REFUGE or 0800 733 843, or contact - <http://08004wiseguys.org/contact-us/> - a refuge for men in Auckland.

Financial health and wellbeing

Many parents will be facing changes to their economic situation at this time. Either parent may be out of work and child related expenses are likely to have changed. Be creative about what you

can do when money is in shorter supply. Try to be open and honest when discussing financial arrangements – if you know the other parent’s financial security has taken a hit then offering to review the economic support they are giving you can go a long way to creating parental goodwill!

It’s okay to ask for financial help from the other parent if you need it. Be honest. Talk about what is happening or talk about what you are worried might be happening. These are not things we have control over. If your co-parent asks for help, find new ways to give. Be kind whenever you can and explain why you can’t help if that is your honest situation.

You can talk with your children so that they have some (age appropriate) sense of what is going on. The government has put in place safety nets so that it is less likely that anyone will lose their house or won’t be able to buy groceries or pay their rent so there’s no need for kids to worry. But if you have to ration things, tell them that “Everyone is working less and spending less money on stuff for a while because of the lock down.”

Working together collaboratively

The two of you can collaborate to make good messages from both of you to your children We have lots of really good messages from our prime minister at the moment and we know some people who are using a “What would Jacinda say?” technique for decision making about whether or not something is allowable under the lock down rules. You can instigate a “Mum and Dad say...” daily message to your children? The research into what helps kids says that joint messages from parents to children can be very comforting for them.

Ask the children what they know, they may know little about COVID-19 and therefore you can take the lead on how much information you are giving to them. Don’t forget children will pick up on your anxiety, so maybe check the news each day and discuss the current situation with each other, family and friends, after bedtime.

Make the message to your children age appropriate. Can you make the joint messaging fun? Create the message together and take turns to deliver it. Draw pictures or use images or cartoons from the wonderful world of internet resources.

As well as creating reassuring joint messages for the children, can you also reassure each other.

If both parents are working from home, make arrangements so that each has uninterrupted time for that period when the other parent “looks after and plays with the kids” whether that is in person or online.

You might schedule a zoom or facetime chat with each other or exchange an email with each other to check in and share info about the children and how everyone is coping. Try to make this child free.

Remember, it's not a competition – it's collaboration that is required. You don't have to put on a performance. You don't have to be perfect. Support each other to be the best parent they can be. (Big tip here: it's good for children to have the best possible relationship with both of their parents.

Turn up and be in the moment. Big tip: Put the phone away. Close down devices other than the one you are using to be in contact. Turn off the notification option. Use this time to keep in contact and make sure it is child-friendly. Think about what you might talk about before your call.

Have realistic expectations of yourselves as you try to parent, teach and care for your children. Where possible set aside one or two hours a day for supervised learning – perhaps where a parent is working from home, that could be done alongside them. Make it normal, make it fun. Remember a large part of school learning is social time learning to interact with others. If you suddenly tried to give your children hour upon hour of 'schoolwork' at home that would be unfamiliar to them and unrealistic.

Use online services and Apps, like FaceTime, Google Meet/Hangout, Zoom or Skype. Many have a free system and they allow face to face contact across distance.

Create a WhatsApp group for your children and their parents and extended family members.

Let your children create a WhatsApp group for their friends so that they can socialise virtually.

Don't fall into the trap of letting your children sit in front of television or be online all day. Try and have at least two device-free hours daily. Encourage reading and play – that is every bit as important as doing their maths or science homework.

Play cards or other games online – include grandma and grandpa and extended family where you can.

Make ordinary things fun: cook together, teach your children how to play cards, draughts, chess, connect-four, scrabble, monopoly or charades. Maybe try some origami!

Get the other parent to read to the kids over the phone or online, especially at bedtime.

Communicate with each other about what stories the children like and how they like to be read to.

Use the time you have on your own to take a break. Make a cup of tea, sit down, clear your head.

Talk to the children after they have spent time with their other parent and asked what they liked best to help them prepare for their next call or stay. Help them to make a list of what they want to talk about or do.

Support each other wherever possible. Where both parents/caregivers live in the same community it will be far easier for the non-caregiving parent to grocery shop for the caregiving parent and the children and deliver the shopping to their home.

There is a well-known adage in childcare circles that *it's easier to grow healthy children than it is to repair damaged adults*. Children can be incredibly sensitive to change in general and to change that impacts as stress on their parents in particular. They can feel a need to take responsibility for their parents' wellbeing. They might do that by telling you what they think you want to hear. They can feel ignored and then do something naughty to get your attention back. So, what you do together now to support your children (and what we do as professionals to support you, their parents) will certainly impact on the future health of all of us.

Wrapping it up

All of our talking points, guidance and tips require parents to communicate and make great decisions for their children.

We encourage you all to communicate regularly, be open and honest in your communications, and help each other to help your children.

Your children seeing you both working together as a co-parenting team will give them confidence, enrich their well-being and give them a sense of safety in these challenging times.

He waka eke noa – we're all in this together.

These tips and comments are provided by FDR Centre Services Manager Kaye Penney and FDR Practitioners Barbara McCulloch and Darren Rawlins