

White Paper

Moving in-person family support services online during Covid 19

A review of parenting support provision from Families in Focus during the lockdowns and the implications for best practice in a post pandemic world.

15th December 2022

Francine Swaby, Lesley Chance, and Amanda.Gummer



Executive Summary

Families with additional needs have been significantly impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic. Families in Focus (FIF) provide parenting support to families with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) in Hertfordshire. When the UK went into lockdown in March 2020, and many forms of support for parents and children were suspended, FIF overcame substantial barriers to move their parenting support online.

They realised that there were challenges in building a safe space online, and being able to create the connections required for effective parenting support. This paper outlines their approach and learnings which include:

1. Online parenting support for families with children with SEND can be a very positive experience
2. The benefits of online support outweigh the disadvantages for most service user groups
3. Considerations need to be given to confidentiality, trust and availability of online access when managing online support.
4. More frequent sessions are needed to maximise the efficacy of online support

As a result, FIF are continuing to provide their support, principally online, which allows them to reach more parents. This increases their impact on families in Hertfordshire and beyond. Taking a hybrid approach allows those service users who really value in-person services to still benefit from face-to-face interactions.

Contents

1. Introduction
 - 1.1. About Families in Focus
2. The Consultation
 - 2.1. Concerns and considerations
 - 2.2. Challenges for families
3. The Solution
 - 3.1. Evolution of online provision
4. Observations and reflections
 - 4.1. FIF Arms
 - 4.2. Parents' Network
 - 4.3. General observations
5. Outcomes
 - 5.1. For Parents
 - 5.2. For FIF
6. Conclusion
 - 6.1. Priorities for supporting parents in a post-pandemic world

1. Introduction

As a result of the Government's response to the global Covid Pandemic on 16th March 2020, all in person professional support, schools and caring activities were suspended and schools closed to the majority of children. The impact of this was not consistent across sections of society and there is increasing acceptance that the most vulnerable people, including those families with children who have additional needs, were disproportionately affected by the measures put in place to limit the spread of Covid 19. Children and young people in residential settings, often those with the most profound and complex needs, returned home without the support they needed and relied on.

Many areas of provision in Health and Education were suspended. School routines, clubs, respite and carer support all stopped overnight. Children with SEND, their brothers and sisters and parents were at home together 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Children experienced increased levels of overwhelm, heightened levels of emotional dysregulation including anxiety and confusion as a result of the sudden changes and losses in their daily lives during the pandemic.

Families with children with SEND were already facing significant challenges before the pandemic. Children with learning disabilities and their parents experience barriers accessing mental health services that are related to a lack of information and perceptions of services as being inadequate (Jacobs et al, 2015)

Families quickly reported an increase in children's behavioural challenges such as, hitting, self-harm, lack of sleep, withdrawal and sensory overload, and parents reported an increase in mental ill-health for their children and themselves. Parents reported feeling extremely uncertain and worried that they did not have the knowledge and skills to provide the same levels of education and support provided by well trained and experienced teachers and support staff, which for many also included regular sessions with physiotherapists, psychologists and psychiatrists. Parents also experienced increased anxiety, stress and physical, mental and emotional strain and ill-health caring for children continuously without respite.

Covid 19 had the potential to exacerbate existing challenges for families with additional needs, whilst at the same time reducing access to support. The potential harm to vulnerable families was huge.

1.1 About Families in Focus

Families in Focus CIC (FIF) is a Hertfordshire-based community interest company, providing fully funded, free training courses and therapeutic and emotional support to parents. FIF have developed evidence-based, supportive, and therapeutic parenting programmes, accredited with the CANparent quality mark – the only quality mark that recognises the effectiveness of course content, is evidence based and proven to be effective. The founders of FIF have worked hard to create a safe, judgement free environment in all services to enable family diversity to be acknowledged and validated.

Since 2007 FIF has delivered over 650 specialist training courses and Parent Network SEND peer support and information groups across Hertfordshire. In total FIF has supported over 7000 parents caring for children and young people with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND). In addition to the courses and peer support FIF has a growing social media presence across a range of platforms representing over 5300 parents of children with SEND. FIF has received funding from The Lottery since 2017 to develop and deliver Parent Networks SEND peer support groups.

Before the pandemic all services were delivered in person, within small, interactive, experiential and therapeutic groups building greater cohesion within the SEND community. All sessions were delivered by two experienced, qualified facilitators in community venues across Hertfordshire. Facilitators attended training and received an accredited pass, by CPD Standards Office. (Registration number 21833 since 2018)

2. The Consultation

With considerable increase in pressures in the family home, and postponing of services, parents reported being in need of more support. Parents requested support from FIF more than ever, resulting in an increased parental engagement in FIF support of 126% during March 2020

The FIF directors consulted with parents via social media platforms as this was the primary way parents were able to reach out beyond their families and connect with others in lockdown. Following the consultation it was discovered that:

- 89% parents lacked skills and knowledge to access and deliver specialist online home education with their children and SEND

-
- 85% parents had not used online platforms such as zoom or Microsoft Teams before
 - 26% wanted practical advice on obtaining specialist foods locally and delivery
 - 60% wanted practical advice on getting electronic devices for children and adults
 - 82% parents felt unable to explain covid to children with SEND
 - 46% of parents needed emotional support to help them deal with highly anxious children fearful of covid and death
 - 67% reported an increase in sibling challenges and child to child violence
 - 95% parents felt isolated and wanted emotional support for themselves from others who truly understood the challenges they experience on a daily basis

FIF was also facing financial challenges to its own survival as a result of the pandemic. The fight for survival was second only to the needs parents had for ongoing support from FIF, heightened because so many other support services had stopped. FIF's directors needed to assess the viability of moving to online delivery or halt all services until face-to-face work could resume safely. Moving services from face to face to online delivery initially raised many concerns.

2.1 Concerns and Considerations

The FIF therapeutic courses and Parent Networks are about building safe, relational and non-judgemental spaces so trust can be built and parents can share their concerns, helping them to facilitate change within their families and feel more confident and in control of their families. The directors found it was difficult to imagine how to successfully build trust online so parents could talk about concerns. Active listening is a vital part of FIF's work and the directors had doubts about their abilities in picking up on non-verbal body language on a screen and building strong working relationships.

The directors did not think they had the digital skills to complete this task sufficiently quickly to meet the needs of the parents and the requirements of the funding bodies. They had little knowledge of online delivery or understanding of how course content would transfer, and were unsure if they could facilitate effectively via an online platform. They also had concerns as to whether parents would have the skills to navigate online services and have the time and inclination to do so. This was a new field to many and there was no one to consult to advise on the best way forward.

At the time of the lock down, FIF were part way through a training course for new volunteer Parent Network facilitators. The quality of the relationship with the trainees, and the directors' understanding of families' needs, enabled FIF to pivot and adapt the training content to enable the training to continue and ensure there were sufficient resources to support families.

The directors were unsure parents would use zoom at home and talk freely, gain information and knowledge and more importantly benefit and get emotional support.

FIF had to adhere to budget constraints and no additional funding was available from any of the contracts that were being delivered.

Any new services and delivery methods had to fit within the existing budget and any adaptations agreed with funders before the transition to online delivery.

2.2 The Challenges for Families:

- Parents suddenly realised they were unable to connect with specialist groups and faced extreme isolation and with children with SEND at home 24 hours a day.
- Parents had additional challenges when school routines suddenly stopped.
- Covid safety rules meant going out for one hour a day was impossible as some children were unable to understand they could not get close to others and some children were hypersensitive to catching covid germs, fearful of meeting other people and dying as a result.
- Parents reported being overwhelmed about home schooling children with no specialist knowledge and feared children falling behind.
- Parents also had concerns about keeping the whole family safe when children with SEND in the home saw challenging violent behaviour increasing with the sudden and multiple changes to routines.
- Society and the media reported children with EHCPs were being schooled, but through our social media platforms parents were sharing that far fewer children were able to access school. Often, only those who were identified as being children of key workers attended.
- School staff having covid or fearful of catching covid meant not enough staff and limited access to PPE.

- Parents who were working from home struggled with not enough electronic devices and some reported catching up with work when children had finished online learning or were asleep, and reported feeling exhausted by the pressures of maintaining a job and looking after a family.
- Parents reported missing connections with others, and many did not realise how vital these connections were in propping up their mental and emotional wellbeing.
- Fathers reported missing the in-person connections with other fathers of children with SEND. Pre-covid fathers requested same sex sessions as some felt less confident to speak out in predominantly female groups.
- Once the well-established and regular Just for Dads in-person group transitioned on to online delivery, fathers told us they felt unable to join as they didn't see the benefit of being online as they were doing this so much at work.
- Parents were expressing concern about their capacity to cope and effects on their mental wellbeing and needed to talk to others who truly understood.
- Lack of support for parents and high demands were reported to commissioners at Hertfordshire County Council.
- Many families had limited access to electronics, meaning some families were often sharing one device.

3. The Solution

FIF responded to the urgent needs of parents and researched the easiest tool to use for online delivery and one that would be most accessible to parents. The directors chose zoom and learned how to navigate this tool through repeated practice. They learned how to use powerpoint and connected it to FIF branding and ethos and developed their skills. They produced power points transferring all course resources and information to make it accessible to parents online and easy to deliver. FIF moved all of its programme content and resources to power-points. As parents often used mobile phones to access zoom, they made sure slides were clear and easy to read. The social media administrator created an easy-to-use online evaluation form for those attending online courses. At times, the Directors also completed the evaluation forms over the phone.

Parent Network sessions were adapted and transitioned to online delivery from 24/03/2020. This was just one week after lockdown occurred and demand for sessions was exceptionally high.

Parents wanted more than a Parent Network monthly drop-in and FIF responded by establishing a free weekly evening drop-in online service for parents of children with SEND called FIF Arms on 26th March 2020. A safe space for parents to drop in between 8pm and 10pm (after many children were in bed) and also to enable more parents to access electronic devices. The name FIF Arms was chosen to reflect the drop in the nature of the sessions, a relaxed, adult space free of judgements and to talk about life. Although SEND focussed it was designed primarily to enable parents to connect with each other. The space was to support connections above all else whilst acknowledging that life with children with SEND was challenging. The aim of FIF Arms was to provide frequent, ongoing support to enable parents to connect and leave feeling lighter, more connected and listened to over a sustained period. With weekly sessions, each week for all but 4 weeks per year, this is more than any other support FIF is able to offer. Therefore, FIF Arms is available throughout most school holidays when many services do not provide support.

In May 2020 it was suggested by Hertfordshire CC that FIF transfers all evidence-based training courses from face to face to online delivery during lockdown to support parents. This transition was rapidly implemented and the first online course began on June 5th 2020.

The following weekly evidence-based SEND courses transitioned to online delivery:

- A complete guide to parenting children with SEND
- Handling anger of primary aged children with Autism and/or ADHD

Other courses also transitioned online:

- Parenting with empathy
- Managing anxiety of primary aged children
- Handling anger in your family

3.1 Evolution of online provision

By understanding and using zoom, break out rooms and chat buttons with greater confidence FIF directors were able to maintain group cohesion and trust which in turn enabled parents to share experiences and continue to build relationships and gain from attending courses and Parent Network sessions.

FIF directors further developed and enhanced their knowledge and use of active listening and advanced empathy, a vital part of their effectiveness to create safe, trusted environments where parents are able to share and discuss challenges and concerns they, their children and wider family experience.

During the height of the pandemic, FIF Directors listened and reacted to parents and facilitators concerns and anxiety around the possible death of a family member due to covid. The FiF directors discussed, researched and developed a strategy in case a parent, child or family member died as a result of covid. They trained their team on how to manage discussions around death, and increased supervision to continue to support the team during this challenging time.

To maintain high levels of safeguarding awareness and safety for all, FIF researched and developed an Online Safeguarding Policy to ensure it continued to be effective and ran extra training on safeguarding for its team of parent facilitators.

4. Observations and Reflections

4.1 FIF Arms (weekly)

Parents reported FiF Arms weekly sessions as a vital lifeline for families as they expressed feeling increasingly isolated.

Parents reported feeling more able to manage the daily challenges by connecting with others on a weekly basis and creating a safe online community.

Initially, delivering weekly FIF Arms sessions was on a voluntary basis. When it became clear that the Covid lock down would last longer than anyone had anticipated, specialist funding to continue the FIF Arms was sourced.

Relationships in weekly FIF Arms sessions were sustained and parents reported feeling truly connected and valuing “their” group.

This increased a sense of belonging and decreased isolation, and parenting capacity grew as knowledge increased.

As sessions were weekly, it was also observed that parents developed more robust emotional connections and a sense of enhanced support and increased sense of community as they were meeting every week.

This has been further enhanced by increased regular attendance with parents often asking how particular challenges or events had gone in the week between sessions.

Parents are still engaging with this service and families benefit from connecting with each other on a weekly basis.

Parents report FiF Arms as being the safest place to acknowledge their own neurodiversity and feel able to talk about how their parenting capacity may be affected by their own needs

Case Study: FiF Arms

Background:

Lone parent with Autism and two children with ADHD and Autism.

The Challenge:

Family was in crisis as all support and services had withdrawn due to covid. Parent experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety due to extra demands.

The Solution:

Parent regularly attended FiF Arms and although silent at the beginning, over time as trust built, she began to share her fears, anxieties and concerns with others who truly understood.

The Outcome:

This parent decided, with support from the facilitators and peers, to apply for an EHCP Assessment and was successful in the application..



FiF Arms has been and continues to be a lifeline for me and my family. I now feel connected and I have made some good friends who just get me and my family. I no longer feel lonely and excluded. When I got my letter telling me I had won my sons EHCP assessment I couldn't wait to share the news with my group as I knew they would be as excited and understand how daunting and hard this whole thing had been for me."



4.2 Parent Network (Monthly)

During lockdown FIF had high demand from parents wanting to zoom into monthly Parent Network sessions.

Parents were keen to share with facilitators what topics they wanted to discuss and learn about. For many of the topics we could deliver from the facilitators own learning and experience. However, for some, e.g. Willsand Trusts, EHCP and the Law, Benefits Advice we engaged specialist speakers.

It was also noticed that parents would attend topics that were relevant to the needs of their families but were not being talked about elsewhere. This was different to pre-covid attendance which parents reported was more about meeting and connecting and forming friendships with the parents in their monthly Parent Network groups who also lived in their community.

It was recorded that 65% of parents that had regularly attended their monthly Parent Network sessions prior to the lockdown did not sustain their attendance with online monthly Parent Network sessions.

For 2021 the parents attending monthly online Parent Network sessions were 95% female.

90% of parents attending monthly online Parent Network sessions were parenting children in Early Years, and awaiting diagnosis or on assessment pathways.

Therefore in 2021 FIF set up a monthly Parent Network Early Years (0-8 years) group facilitated by parents also parenting children of a similar age.

FIF also listened to parents of teenagers with SEND who also wanted a group where they could 'build a community of experiences and a safe place to discuss the needs of teenagers. The monthly Parent Network 16+ group was facilitated by parents also parenting teenagers with SEND.

Case Study: Parent Network

Background:

Parent with 3 children with a range of ASD and SEND needs

The Challenge:

Both the parent and all of the children were experiencing heightened, often unmanageable levels of anxiety

The Solution:

The parent regularly joined in Parent Network sessions and developed their listening skills to learn & take on new ideas to change.

The Outcome:

Parent was able to learn techniques for keeping their own feelings aside (in the moment) to calm angry outbursts, and also resist offering solutions which often overwhelmed their children at a time of high anxiety. Parents planned a movie night for all and lightened up the family atmosphere and laughter slowly returned.



I often use the analogy of a toolbox of approaches, and you have helped replenish mine with new strategies and skills for both home life with three neuro diverse children and at school with an ever-changing multitude of challenges. I really enjoyed the way you work together. It was presented as professional, slick, well placed, inclusive and knowledgeable. Thank you for helping us see a light at the end of the tunnel, I just wanted to drop you a note of update and sincere gratitude.



- Fathers reported being less willing and felt very uncomfortable to share concerns about their families whilst others could listen in the home.
- More mothers accessed zoom than fathers.
- Some fathers reported feeling disloyal when sharing concerns with others online from home. Preferring to connect with other fathers honestly away from their homes.
- Fathers reported missing face to face connections where fathers of children with SEND share concerns in specialist “Just for Dad’s” sessions. Fathers continued meeting outside the group and really talking and listening to each other.
- Mothers often choose to continue their connections formed during online weekly courses through WhatsApp groups.

General observations

More fathers came in with their partners to online evening courses than pre covid as childcare was more manageable with both parents still being in the home. When couples attend online courses together, it helps in parenting in a more joined up way “singing from the same song sheet” It allows them to explore different styles of learning, goals and aspirations in a safe contained way. Parenting differently can lead to conflict.

Parents report they are now used to working online because it is easier with no travelling, no extra travel time or costs involved or childcare costs.

Parents report feeling less isolated and more able to carry on with the challenges knowing support is just a click away.

5. Outcomes

5.1 For parents

- Parents signed up, attended and engaged with courses and numbers increased as we were able to reach a far wider audience online across Hertfordshire.
- More couples attended weekly online, evening sessions together than pre-covid as childcare and travel were no longer issues.
- FiF's evidence-based courses continue to prove online delivery is as effective as face to face with our TOPSE evaluations pre and post pandemic.
- TOPSE results for FiF courses have increased slightly since switching to online delivery and FiF continues to be more focused on evidence based researched knowledge and parents appear to be able to listen more online.
- Parents being in the safety of their homes are:
 - more able to talk about concerns
 - have less worries about transport and travel time,
 - able to attend even though children were at home
 - struggling with fewer child care issues (especially benefiting those with more than one child)

- Parents with mental health issues preferred zoom and lessened anxiety about going out of the home, time pressures were eased without travel time, accessible to those in rural areas and those unable to drive.
- Parents benefitted from sharing their journey of having a child with SEND with other couples who shared many concerns in a deep way. The process of adaptation made huge sense and lessened isolation and the couple blossomed from this. They gained understanding on triggers to behaviours, sensory issues, empathy and supporting siblings.



It has been life changing experience for us as a couple and the first thing we have done that helped future feels less scary, real value in attending together and gradually over the weeks we have moved forward in ways I never dreamed of. We now understand our son so much more and we now know how to be parents. For me to be mum to my boy – I knew how to be a mum to my girls but not to my boy with Autism but do now – thank you



5.2 Outcomes for FIF:

- As Directors the decision to move online means the company is able to prosper and continue to develop and evolve.
- FIF's reach is wider and the provision is more accessible to the whole of Hertfordshire for both parents and professionals
- FIF team has developed skills and continues to develop confidence to use online tools and services
- FIF social media is growing rapidly resulting in increased attendance and interactions of all services
- FIF online services are more time efficient without travel time between venues
- Working online appears to be mentally more tiring than face to face because complete focus is required to be successful and monitoring chat buttons, picking up on non-verbal clues as well as facilitating delivery. The directors realised that they need longer breaks in between courses to maintain their own emotional well-being as well as accessing more supervision to remain effective practitioners although budget restraints limit this.

- The directors now have greater confidence and capability to work beyond Hertfordshire and engage with other local authorities
- They are growing the FIF courses and have more time for research and development with substantially decreased time spent travelling.
- Parents and professionals continue to consider FIF as a consistent, reliable and accessible supportive service
- During Covid supervision sessions were also moved online and proved to be effective. It was found that a hybrid approach - meeting face to face as well as on line supervision sessions - was effective and maintained team cohesion and sense of belonging.

Changes to FiF provision post Covid

- Continue with weekly FIF Arms sessions.
 - FiF Arms continues to be effective and successful because the sessions are weekly by the same facilitators for continuity, building safe and trusted working relationships.
 - Parents on weekly FiF Arms, often meeting the same people each week, reported feeling connected and a greater confidence of sharing concerns within the comfort of their own home.
 - Parents' confidence in using zoom continues to grow and is used with more confidence.
 - Facilitators found it is easier to maintain confidentiality working from home.
 - Parents in weekly groups were prepared and more willing to meet with other parents across the county to sustain valued friendships



“As a parent of a child with SEND it meant I could still reach out and talk to others with similar experiences. Time is always precious, especially for self-care and talking to others in the community is a great source of support and understanding.”



6. Conclusion

Whilst the change to online provision was challenging, there is no doubt that it was hugely beneficial for the families that FIF supports. In addition, the move online enabled FIF to support more families due to the reduction in common barriers to access (travel, childcare) and enabled more parents to attend together.

The increased engagement with the courses seems to have lasted beyond the lockdowns. Parents continue to attend and engage with FIF courses and often achieve 100% attendance for the whole course - something that was less common in pre-covid courses.

The online courses seem to be here to stay and are at least as effective as in-person sessions for the majority of attendees. Working relationships with parents are as effective online as they were face to face, although it is acknowledged that more regular (i.e. weekly sessions) are required to develop and maintain good, supportive relationships between group members.

The notable exception to the success of online provision is for some fathers who prefer the in-person sessions. This may be because they traditionally have fewer barriers to attending in-person events (less afraid of travelling alone, more used to being out of the house for work) as well as feeling less able to talk openly at home, and are reluctant to openly challenge partners' parenting decisions if they are the primary carer. There is a sense of emotional safety in the in-person meet ups that the fathers report valuing. This highlights the need for continued research and reflection by the FIF directors to ensure the provision of family support continues to meet the needs of the families engaging with it.

The course evaluation results continue to be excellent, evidencing that the FIF courses are still very effective for parents and families. This is consistent with the parental feedback which continues to be outstanding and parents value the positive effects it has for the whole family. Attending online courses from home means parents are closer to their children's schools and are therefore able to respond quicker to incidents at a school which often occur.

6.1 Priorities for supporting parents in a post-pandemic world

Families in Focus to be run by current directors and to continue to develop and deliver evidence-based courses and workshops that have a proven track record of effectiveness by:

- Continuing to develop evidence based, online courses and workshops.
- Seek funding to enable parents and carers to attend free of charge.
- Exploring other delivery platforms: webinars, You Tube, LinkedIn etc.
- Marketing online courses and workshops to other counties.
- Continuing to research and gather up to date information on the evolving needs of families and parenting trends.
- Exploring and developing evaluation tools to evidence effectiveness.
- Continuing to explore opportunities of future partnership working.

References

Jacobs, M., Downie, H., Kidd, G., Fitzsimmons, L., Gibbs, S., Melville, C. (2016) Mental health services for children and adolescents with learning disabilities: a review of research on experiences of service users and providers - <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12141>