

Tips for Separated Parents during Covid-19 crisis

Impact of separation on parents

Parental separation is a stressful experience for all concerned – for each parent and for the children.

During this current time where all of us are being encouraged to observe physical distancing and to remain socially isolated in our small family units, it is even more challenging for separated parents to manage contact between a child and the non-residential parent.

Before the covid-19 crisis separated parents may have been working hard to establish a positive co-parenting relationship, founded on constructive communication between each other to solve co-parenting issues.

Not all separated parents will have been able to achieve that kind of positive co-parenting relationship, and may have experienced real challenges and conflict when trying to establish contact routines, manage extended access periods in school holidays, and come to terms with the inevitable differences in parenting styles and attitudes in the two separate homes.

In the middle of all parental separations are the children who are also learning to be part of 2 separated families, and who need very regular and consistent reassurance that even though life has changed they are still loved by both parents.

Impact of separation on children

Children whose parents are separated can worry – they can be worried when parents give them too much ‘adult information’ such as adult concerns about money, or about feeling that as a parent they cannot cope. Children can also feel guilty – they sometimes wonder if they caused the separation and conflict between their parents. Children can also feel sad – sad that their family is broken up, sad that they no longer see one of their parents every day. They may miss simple routines with that parent and just having them around. All of this can leave children feeling angry about all the changes in their lives and very unsure about what will happen next.

Tips on approaching access during the covid-19 crisis

During this uncertain period of enforced isolation it is difficult for separated parents to know how best to interpret the rules about physical distancing and limiting contact to within their own family units.

There is information out there to help parents make informed decisions about how to manage contact/access during the covid-19 crisis.

Court ordered access arrangements

The President of the District Court Services issued a Family Law Statement (18/3/20) that makes the following key points:

- District Courts will prioritise cases concerning domestic violence and **only in exceptional circumstances** will access disputes be considered for hearing.
- Where there are court mandated access arrangements parents are urged to keep those arrangements in place unless there are health risk grounds to cancel access.

- If physical access arrangements cannot go ahead because of health concerns then parents are encouraged to use other ways of having contact with their child – making phone calls, using video messaging, sending cards and photos. This kind of approach to contact is important for extended family too such as grandparents who are over 70 or in the vulnerable categories due to underlying health conditions.
- Another important point made is that it would be considered unreasonable to a child and the non-residential parent for access to be denied simply because of the crisis if there are no health risks in the family situation.

For more detailed information about the legal guidelines follow the link below:

<https://www.treoir.ie/2020/03/18/covid19-information-and-updates-for-parents/>

What is the best approach for parents?

The best approach is to imagine finding solutions to these challenging dilemmas. This is going to involve being open to communicating with the child's other parent and being willing to work with what is possible at this time. This may not be what everyone **wants** but it may be what everyone can manage safely.

The best approach is to communicate early with the child's other parent if changes need to be made to access arrangements. If parents are in a position to talk with ease to each other this facilitates the negotiation; for parents who find verbal contact challenging it may work out better for them to send a text or email flagging the need to change arrangements and then a follow up text or email with the suggestions of the change.

It can be helpful for parents to keep an open mind and try to understand the other parent's perspective. The scenario example below illustrates how two people can interpret a situation differently and how this can influence the thoughts, feelings and behaviour in a given situation:

Scenario

Mother sends text to father to say access cancelled due to covid-19 virus

Mother's thoughts and feelings	Father's thoughts and feelings	Outcome for child(ren)
<p>She is worried about the covid-19 crisis. She has asthma and fears that the children could carry the virus home after contact with dad. She is not sure if dad can manage all the hygiene advice and has told the children they will have to tell dad to get sanitiser.</p>	<p>Dad feeling angry to be told without consultation that access is cancelled. Dad feeling worried that he won't see the children for a long time. Dad replies with threat to contact solicitor as he knows access is his right.</p>	<p>Children can worry about their parents becoming ill and even about death. Children become upset when they cannot have a relationship with both parents easily. Children become distressed when they have to pass messages between their parents rather than parents communicating directly with each other.</p>
What can help? Effective communication	What can help? Effective communication	What can help children manage?
<p>If possible phone to talk about feeling worried. The other parent may share similar concerns. We are all a bit worried in this strange time.</p> <p>Acknowledge that it is hard for the other parent if there are times when access cannot go ahead. And it is also hard for the child.</p> <p>Check in with other parent about what ways they are managing the covid-19 advice re hand washing, social distancing etc</p> <p>Use the questions below as a way of judging if access can safely go ahead.</p> <p>If there are actual health grounds against arranging access then cancelling on this occasion is safest option.</p> <p>If not then the advice of the Court Services is to continue arrangements observing hygiene practices.</p>	<p>Be open to a temporary change in arrangements. This time of restricted movement will pass.</p> <p>Be open to understanding the other parent's concerns and worries.</p> <p>Think of alternative ways of connecting with your child if physical access has to stop for a while.</p> <p>These need to be age appropriate and ideas include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live video chat via social media apps • Recorded video message – sing a song, read a short story, talk about a memory of a previous visit • Send card/letter/small gift • Prepare a weekly journal of the things you are doing that the children would also enjoy and share that regularly • Send a recipe of something you'd like to make with them 	<p>Children need some age appropriate information about decisions that are made that affect them e.g. let them know that access may need to change for a while.</p> <p>Children need reassurance that both parents love them. They will benefit from time spent tuning in to really listen to their worries at the challenging time. Spend time simply being with them - you know it's going well if they are talking and you are listening.</p> <p>They can be involved in planning decisions that affect them – e.g. if access has to change they can think of other ways of keeping in touch with the other parent.</p> <p>Children need information about importance of keeping their hands clean, social distancing, coughing etiquette</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind them in each contact that you love them, miss them and look forward to the next time 	
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Questions to consider before arranging access:

- Do you or the other parent know anyone diagnosed with Covid-19?
- Do you and other people in both households feel well?
- Do you or anyone in either home have symptoms – flu-like, cough, temperature?
- Have you contacted the GP and what advice has been given?
- Are both parents in a position to perform effective hygiene practices and to support the children to do this too?

If the situation is safe and healthy based on the above questions it is reasonable to continue with access arrangements that are in place. If either parent can identify risks when answering these questions it is reasonable to think again about access and to be willing to be flexible about looking at alternatives to physical access until the risk factors are no longer present.

What’s best for your child?

- ***Maintaining contact***

It is important that contact between the child and the other parent is maintained so every effort to support this, even if it has to be ‘virtual’, should be made.

Some children may be of an age to manage their social media contact with the other parent themselves whereas younger children will need this to be organised and supported by an adult.

- ***Tune in to your child***

In both of the above situations children need to feel supported by their parents and parents can best do this by **tuning in**. This means listening with full attention – turn off the phone, turn off the TV, look at your child and let them know you are fully available. A good time can be bedtime for the younger ones and for older children it can be if you are involved in play, out walking or just sitting having tea and biscuits.

For the non-residential parent it is more challenging to tune in if there are times when physical access can’t go ahead. In this situation a parent will be reliant on technology or cards and letters to let the child know that they are thinking of them. Whatever way a parent can tune in to their child then that is what’s best for them.

- ***Be consistent***

Children respond well to routines and predictability, especially during times of change. If parents can agree times for contact if using social media and stick to those times this can reduce anxiety for children. And it is important to follow through with the call or video call.

- ***Keep children in the loop, but don't overload***

Children need to be informed about changes that are going on in relation to contact with the other parent BUT they do not need to be informed about parental worries about money, parental anxiety about covid-19, challenges and changes to legal orders that may follow in future.

Better to focus on helping children look after themselves well in these challenging times. See below for links around physical and mental well-being for children at this time:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources/>

<https://autism.ie/information/covid-19/> - for parents of a child with autism

<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Announcements/guide-for-parents-supporting-children.pdf> - all about routines

<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Announcements/advice-to-young-people-while-schools-are-closed.pdf> - advice for young people

<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Announcements/blank-plan-for-the-day.pdf>

And all the other email links about resources for children and families!