



Working with University College London

Keeping in touch during the Covid 19 pandemic

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News

Welcome back to the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities newsletter: a collaboration by staff at the Race Equality Foundation and University College London (UCL) to help you and your family during the Coronavirus outbreak. This newsletter is here to offer some practical tips and support for you, parents and practitioners alike, direct from the SFSC team, and keep you informed of the latest advice to follow.

SFSC Can help

Solution Building in Lockdown

Every facet of our lives involves making decisions. How and why we make the decisions we make is very much tied up with our self-esteem, self-discipline, developmental age, skills, and experience. We can see obvious negative outcomes from decisions relating to the misuse of drugs and alcohol or in perpetrating violence against others. Less obvious is the impact of our everyday decisions like what to eat, whether to exercise, how we spend our time and money and importantly parenting choices which we often decide unconsciously.



Even when we believe others have made decisions for us including the law, we must still decide whether to agree or co-operate with the decision made. Will you, or won't you; wear a face mask in public, use public transport or send your children to school if you're unsure it's safe, are just a few decisions we are compelled to make at the moment. How we deal with making decisions will often determine our success and happiness, but what is the process for deciding?

In promoting a violence free healthy lifestyle, Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities supports parents in understanding the value of being solution focused and the process for making decisions through the practical application of a tool to support children in developing what appears to be an all-encompassing skill.

Solution building is a powerful technique for managing anger. It can minimise or eliminate problems that create angry feelings. Since parents cannot prepare

children for every situation they may face, it is important that children learn how to 'think'. When parents use solution-building tools to work through their own problems/situations and to guide their children to think in a solution-building manner, children have fewer aggressive/violence behaviour problems at home and at school.

Being solution focused is a mindset, as well as a skill which means it can be learnt and improved upon. Notably, the process for making decisions is similar whether we see a problem, a challenge, an idea, or opportunity before us. In brief, this involves identifying a goal and alternatives to meet the goal *which is a skill in itself*. This is followed by a process of elimination using analytical skills to compare the potential outcome of various alternatives in the short and long term before making a choice and evaluating the result. It is important to recognise that, '*no decision*' is a decision not to act and to accept the consequences of doing nothing.

Solution building skills improve with age and the curriculum provides parents with information to understand developmentally how children might approach solutions depending on whether they are infants, preschoolers, primary, juniors, early or late teens. Effective problem solving which is the ability to break issues down into manageable chunks and find a pathway through is part of the mental rite of passage and supports other important social competence including, entrepreneurial and leadership skills.

In relation to keeping ourselves and others safe - something we have seen to a greater or lesser extent regarding the nation's health during this period of lockdown - effective problem solving skills is also useful for our mental wellbeing, reducing stress, and the risk of anxiety or depression. Solution focused people can respond rationally, be more empathetic, resilient, creative/flexible in their thinking and generally more optimistic. Teamwork and influencing others are also amongst the excellent qualities being solution focused engenders, essential for parenting and valuable in keeping people safe.

Like all SFSC Strategies, the most powerful way to teach this skill is through modelling. Facilitators must support parents' understanding and command of the solution building process/tool so they can assist their children in thinking through their choices, solving problems, and achieving goals. The more competent our children are in solving problems, the better they will feel about themselves (self-esteem) and the more prepared they will be (self-discipline) to achieve goals.



Parenting during a pandemic

The Race Equality Foundation were keen to find out what kind of impact lockdown was having on parenting and what strategies parents and carers put into place to make things easier. Including, whether the strategies and skills learnt through SFSC were helpful.

We asked Uzma Pereen, an experienced evaluator to find out for us. During May she carried out a series of telephone interviews with parents who had recently completed SFSC. Below is the second of two pieces she has written for us.

There's no doubt that the coronavirus is having a huge impact on family relationships, and parenting during lockdown is tough (Parenting in lockdown Part 1). However whilst there may be challenges there may also be huge opportunities to get to know children better, to learn new things together, and to be together as a family.

I carried out telephone interviews with eight parents to find out what life has been like for them during lockdown*. This is Part 2 of discussing the findings. We'll be looking at what's helping parents deal with the lockdown.

Out of the eight parents I interviewed. Nearly all participants agreed that spending more time at home offered them time to rest, reflect and spend time on things they enjoy.

"I am well rested. I probably felt like I was rested before but I wasn't. When people see my now, they're like you look so good and I see the difference myself"

Some parents explained the time away from work and others have made them reflect on their life goals,

"It gives you time to focus on moving forward. What do I actually want to be doing going forwards? Am I going to go back [after the pandemic] to the same thing and not doing much? Or am I actually going to get up and do something different"

Staying at home has meant parents have also been able to share meaningful moments with their children:

"Normally I go to the mosque [in the evenings]...so we don't really spent time during Ramadan. But being at home it's more intimate. So we fast together and strive and suffer together"

Parents also shared that they have been using techniques from the Strengthening Family Strengthening Communities (SFSC). They described how 'taking time out' has helped with cope with lockdown tantrums and arguments. One parent explained how he managed to diffuse a situation with his wife:

"It helped me see things in advance when things are getting difficult and someone is not ready to communicate. I can take myself away and then come back when I see things have calmed down"

A few parents mentioned that the programme had taught them to consider the feelings and views of their child and this was useful when addressing poor behaviour:

"[we] remind ourselves that she is a different person to us...she has her own character and need to take it into consideration how we parent her"

These findings show that despite the challenges of lockdown, the 'stay at home' instructions had benefitted parents in some way. And also techniques and content covered in SFSC programme still remained relevant.

**Interviews were conducted before the lockdown measures were relaxed and the government guidance was to stay at home.*

Helpful Resources

We will be sharing a few useful resources to help us get through this time of self isolation. If there are areas that would like information on, please feel free to drop us a line and we will see what is out there. Our focus in going to be on resources we can access online or via the phone as we cannot get out to get the help we might need right now. Remember that many of the telephone helplines like Samaritans and Childline are taking calls and can also be a source of someone to talk to.



Housing advice and information

Many families are experiencing anxiety as a result of the financial pressures that the Covid pandemic has brought about. For some this can be an insecure housing situation. Advice and information is available on the [Shelter](#)

[website](#) as well as template letters.

Returning to school

Pupils' experiences of the lockdown period will have been very varied. For some, it

will mostly have been a safe and enjoyable time. For others, it will have been challenging or traumatic.

This short [guide](#) by the Mental Health Foundation aims to outline the scale of the challenge that schools are facing and provide practical advice and support. Whilst it is aimed at those supporting pupils as they return to school it has some useful information for all those working and parenting children.



Information and Covid 19 Advice from UCL



Online Group Support for Parents

The online delivery of parenting groups can be a great way of offering parents support during these challenging times. The last few years videoconference has started to emerge as a way to deliver support to parents since parents are likely to experience barriers to attending face to face groups such as lack of childcare, travel, time, and financial constraints. Nevertheless, very little research is available on the suitability of this mode of delivery and some of the challenges that facilitators may face when delivering a support group via videoconference. Researchers at the University of Bedfordshire developed a mental health support group for parents which was delivered via Zoom and have written about the process and their learning to help guide facilitators wishing to use videoconference as a way to deliver group support to parents.

In short:

Preparation is key. Facilitators should make sure they are very familiar with the videoconferencing software they are planning to use. Facilitators should make sure they can guide the participants to join sessions and quickly resolve technical issues. Ideally facilitators have a practise run with each individual participant before a program starts. This should also help the confidence of the participants.

Environment. Although not always practically possible, participants should be encouraged to join the group in a quiet place where they are least likely to be interrupted or distracted. The facilitator should also encourage all participants to mute their microphone when not speaking and use a headset if available to limit background distractions. Videoconference works best on a laptop or tablet so that all members of the group can be seen at once. Using a mobile phone

limits this option and makes it hard to have a natural conversation. The facilitator should ask each participant what equipment they are using so that they are aware of what participants can see.

Expect the unexpected. Participants behave differently online that they do in a face to face group. For example, participants may have their partner join in, or talk to family members during the sessions. Participants can get up to make themselves a drink or leave a session mid-way without explaining. The facilitator should be prepared for these eventualities and plan ahead what to do in such situations. Group rules set out at the start of the program could prevent some of these situations.

Confidentiality. Setting out clear group rules at the start of the program should also cover the issue of confidentiality. Like in face to face groups, full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, however, participants should be encouraged to join sessions in a private place where they can talk freely. The facilitator should encourage a safe and respectful environment and ask participants to respect each other's privacy as well as their own.

Communication style. During face to face support groups, it can be challenging for the facilitator to stay on topic and ensure that everyone has the same amount of time to speak. During online sessions, participants are more likely to 'wait their turn' and wait to be called upon by the facilitator to talk. Although this may make fidelity to the manual easier, it is challenging for the facilitator to get participants to talk to each other instead of to the facilitator only, especially when participants do not know each other yet.

Group size. For the reasons mentioned above, a smaller group size may work better than a larger group and 6-8 was noted as the ideal group size. More than can make it difficult to give everyone a turn to speak and does not allow in-depth discussions. Waiting for their turn to talk also limits natural flow of conversations which is something the facilitator should be aware of.

Although we are all becoming more confident using video conference there are still some challenges to overcome. The parents who took part in the online groups at the University of Bedfordshire however mentioned that the benefits far outweighed the negatives. The ease of being able to attend from their own home and not worrying about childcare, were seen as a big advantage. With some practice and adjustments, video conference may provide a useful alternative to face to face group support.

What is the guidance on facemasks

At the beginning of this year, it was mostly doctors, nurses and healthcare workers we would see wearing masks but it now looks like wearing a face mask or face covering is set to become a new part of our everyday life. The government has announced that from the 24th July it will be **mandatory** to wear a face covering in all shops and supermarkets as well as on



planes, public transport and when visiting Hospital as a visitor or outpatient. This new guidance has got all of us asking questions about what exactly is a face covering? Who is expected to wear one and when? And how do I get my child used to this new part of daily lives? Here are some key points to help you make sense of the current guidance and links to find out more information.

What is a face covering?

The term used to guide us on what we need to wear is [face covering](#). This is described as something that safely covers your nose and mouth whilst still allowing you to breathe comfortably. This could be a scarf, bandana, home-made mask or a shop bought reusable or disposable mask. A face covering is different from a surgical mask or personal protective equipment (PPE) worn by health care workers and those in industrial settings. We are not being expected to wear surgical or medical masks and [wearing a simple face covering safely](#) is felt to be sufficient for our day to day activities. This means that wearing a face covering does not need to be expensive and you can [adapt and make your own](#) from existing clothing and material you have at home.



Why am I required to wear a face covering?

The main aim of wearing a face covering is to protect other people, in case you or the wearer is unknowingly infected and does not have any [symptoms](#). The [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO)

advises that wearing a face covering could help to protect the people around you and prevent people who already have the virus from spreading it to others. Wearing a face covering is therefore primarily intended to help protect the people around you, however, if we all wear one when in close proximity to others, we will collectively help to slow the spread of the virus. Face coverings are not designed to be a replacement for social distancing but an additional protective measure for when in enclosed spaces where social distancing is difficult or where you will likely come into contact with people you do not normally meet.

Who is NOT required to wear a face covering?

The guidance on wearing face coverings applies to all of us but there are some exceptions for those who are not required to wear one based on [age, health conditions and disability](#). It is important to note that babies and children aged under three **SHOULD NOT** wear a face covering for reasons of health and safety. It is also **NOT MANDATORY** for children under the age of 11 or any child or adult who is unable to put a face covering on by themselves or has a respiratory condition to wear one. At the moment face coverings are not required to be worn in school by staff or children and cleaning and hygiene measures are felt to be sufficient to stop the spread in schools. Click [here](#) to find out more information on when it is mandatory to wear a face covering and when the rules do not apply.

Helping kids get used to masks:

Although children under the age of 11 are not required to wear a face covering they will be seeing others wearing them which can be strange and even a little scary and can lead to questions and some anxiety. Face coverings hide part of a person's face and young children in particular rely on faces to make sense of the world. From the time they are babies, young children look at faces for the signals they need to feel safe. When faces are partly hidden by masks, children can't see the friendly smile or familiar look that usually puts them at ease. When children can't see the person's whole face, it's harder to feel safe and it's natural to feel scared but slowly and gently, parents can help children to feel more comfortable. Click [here](#) for ideas on how to make face coverings fun for children.



What is SFSC

Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities is an inclusive evidence-based parenting programme, designed to promote protective factors which are associated with good parenting and better outcomes for children. SFSC is a group based programme for parents of children from birth to 18.

Further information is available [here](#).

What is 'Together'

We are a team of academics, practitioners, policy-makers and parents who are focused on understanding the impact of Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities. In particular, we want to know how this programme might improve the mental wellbeing of parents and their children.

Further information is available [here](#).

Get in touch

We hope this information is useful and helps in this difficult time. Do let us know if you want us to cover other topics in this newsletter by emailing us at donna@racefound.org.uk, Tweeting [@racefound](#) [@TogetherStudy1](#) [#TogetherSFSC](#).

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