

## Telepractice in family work study: a research project into online service delivery



Every year in NSW 108,000 children are substantiated as being at risk of significant harm. In 70% of these cases, the family is not contacted, and no support is offered. This results in thousands of children being removed from their families into out-of-home care. The cost to government, communities, children, and families is substantial.

Since the onset of coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2020, Australian governments have implemented a social distancing policy. While necessary to protect the health of Australians, such policies have radically changed the way family workers operate. Workers have been required to conduct most service delivery using online technologies.

From the end of March 2020 and through the 12 weeks of lockdown, Fams hosted twice-weekly videoconferencing conversations with our network. Through these fora, we learned that family workers adapted traditional service delivery as quickly as effectively as they could to remain connected to families in a rapidly changing and challenging context. More importantly, we discovered a promising innovation that must be affirmed and entrenched post-Coronavirus.

Fams is now undertaking a new research project in collaboration with Southern Cross University to explore the experiences of family workers with children, young people and parents engaged in family work using online technologies. We are working to develop a model of best practice family work using online technologies and create and disseminate guides for best-practice online family work.

We have applied a little rigour to our hypothesis by analysing our weekly conversations, and we are starting to test our early findings with the early intervention workforce. However, much remains unknown regarding delivering family work online, not the least of which pertains to issues of privacy, safety, and efficacy, of providing interventions to vulnerable people this way. Most of the available research has been conducted on online practice in a health context, with limited evidence available of working in child and family, child protection, and domestic and family violence contexts.

The next stage of our project involves researchers interviewing family workers and their clients (children, young people and parents/carers), to explore their experiences of family work that was delivered using online technologies during the time of COVID-19.

This will involve research interviews that seek to understand:

- What worked well
- What issues arose – including, but not limited to safety, agency, who controls the ‘narrative’, security, access, working relationship, etc.
- How these issues were solved (and what was needed to do so), and
- What issues could not be solved (and what they think could have solved the issue, or not).

Following the research, Fams will develop a best-practice model of online practice in family work with children, young people and parents. Fams will:

- Develop a training package for the workforce;
- Develop resources that support children, young people and families to be able to participate in services delivered via digital means;
- Disseminate the knowledge to managers, policy makers and academics.

The move to include online practice into the suite of evidence-based service delivery models to connect children, young people and families to the right support, in the right place at the right time, has been slow. This initiative will create the opportunity to supplement face-to-face practice by removing a critical barrier – connecting a metropolitan workforce with regional, rural and remote clients.

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This will positively change the long-term trajectory of children and young people by increasing safety, education, and health outcomes; and directly contribute to a related reduction in dependence on long term crisis services.