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Supporting children's mental health when working with separated parents

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Panellists:

- Vanya Libardi de Almeida (Child and Family Partner, SA)
- Roxanne Nathan (Social Worker / Family Dispute Practitioner, Relationships Australia, SA)
- Helen McMullan (Service Manager, Family Relationship Centre, Uniting Communities)

Facilitator: Chris Dolman (Senior Practice Development Officer, Emerging Minds)

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Chris Dolman (00:01):

Well, good evening everyone, and welcome to this webinar, supporting Children's Mental Health when Working with Separating Parents, presented by Emerging Minds and the Mental Health Professionals Network. Hi, my name's Chris Dolman. I work with Emerging Minds and I'm really delighted to be joining you this evening and along with our panellists to consider and reflect on some of these really important practises and key ideas that can underpin our work with parents who are separating to support their children's mental health and wellbeing. So thanks so much for setting aside a time tonight to join us. I'd like to begin by offering a acknowledgement of country as well. So next slide please. Thanks Ben. And yeah, both emerging Minds Mental Health Professionals Network and all panellists. We recognise and pay respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As the traditional owners of the lands we work, play, and walk on throughout this country, we acknowledge and respect their traditional connections to their land and waters, culture, spirituality, family and community for the wellbeing of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families Really acknowledge the skills and know-how that First Nations communities bring to the care and protection of children that we all continue to benefit from today.

(01:30)

Okay, so yeah, this webinar is the second in this series around Infant Child Mental Health presented by Emerging Minds and MHPN. There's some further webinars already planned in the coming months. There's one in relation to child mental health and ADHD in November, child mental health in First Nations communities in February, understanding children's mental health and wellbeing in culturally diverse communities in April, and practise strategies for working with children in particular in relation to bullying behaviour in June. So yeah, really rich array of topics to immerse ourselves in the coming months. So please, if you want to keep in touch with those, please sign up to the Emerging Minds E-News or the MHPN portal as well. You won't be left out. Then a special welcome to those that are joining us for the first time tonight. And so just to orient you a little bit to the platform in front of you, there's a three dots and ellipsis there.

(02:31)

If you click on that, you'll be able to get access to information, ask a question of the panellists as well. So please, yeah, if you'd like to put a question forward to the panellists, please use that functionality. There's also technical assistance available as well. Also, we do have a chat functionality as well. So really encourage people to engage in a



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different way if that suits you using the chat function to connect with each other and maybe put forward dilemmas or things you're thinking about in your practise in relation to the topics that the panellists are discussing, so there's that available for you as well. Next slide please. So in terms of tonight's webinar, you've probably already seen these from the material that's being sent around, but yeah, in terms of the learning outcomes and the focus of this topic tonight, our panellists will be discussing and responding to your questions in relation to strategies for supporting parents' wellbeing during separation, as well as practise strategies for engaging parents to explore and understand and respond to their child's experience of separation, as well as strategies for supporting parents to take a child focused approach to parenting will be expanding on all of those themes the next hour and a bit.

(03:51)

We've got a wonderful panel tonight that brings lived experience, practise experience, service, delivery experience in relation to working with families, navigating separation and supporting children's wellbeing. So yeah, I'd like to welcome Vanya, Helen and Roxanne. Folks, you've probably already read their bios that were sent around as well, so we're not going to spend time going through those right now. Instead, I thought I'd invite the panellists to introduce themselves through responding to a question and firstly, Vanya to you. Vanya is an emerging minds child and family partner, lived experience, advocate and Vanya for you, what's it been like for you and how come that's been important for you to be stepping into sharing your lived experience in these kind of forums?

Vanya Libardi de Almeida (04:47):

It all started just through my children and they've been through quite a few different experiences as have hired some good, some not so good. So to be able to provide a voice of both the children and the parent from my point of view and parents' point of view, it means the world to me to be able to help practitioners and those around us to understand maybe a bit deeper what is going on rather than maybe just the surface or what's being read about in textbooks or general life. So I've really loved and still love working with emerging minds to provide that voice for parents and for children.

Chris Dolman (05:38):

Great. Thanks Vanya. Yeah, really looking forward to you sharing some of your hard one learnings and insider knowledge really around this topic. So thanks so much, pat. Yeah, Helen, welcome to you. In your role as a service manager, like working with your teams, what would you say you are most keen to encourage in your staff, in your colleagues, in terms of how they approach this work?

Helen McMullan (06:04):

I think what we really like to reinforce and hold in our minds that we are understanding that people are coming to us and they're not their best versions of themselves. So they're going through highly distressing, challenging times, things that they've probably are left to field the perhaps never been in a position where they've been help seeking. So we really liked to wrap the team around families to let families know that there is support available when they might not know what is possible. The other thing is I think we ask the staff to really hold the hope for families by being very child-focused and understanding that what they might not see the light at the end of the tunnel, if we can hold that hope for them to get them through some of the tougher days that hopefully there will be something that will help change their experience of something that they probably weren't expecting. And then we really like to align our own personal values to the work too. So I really like listening to people's own versions of their lived



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experience, of their own wisdom going through life, and I think that really helps unpack some of the experiences for the people that we meet.

Chris Dolman (07:52):

Great. You've begun to touch on some important themes there as well, Helen, so thanks so much for that. Looking forward to your contributions through the evening, and yeah, welcome to you as well, Roxanne as a social worker, a practitioner that works in many different, I guess context in relation to children and families and separation. As you've been doing so for a little while, what continues to draw you to this area of practise?

Roxanne Nathan (08:22):

What continues to draw me to the work, Chris, is really around repair and supporting knowledge for families and children and young people. We know that families that work well enough, that is key to long-term mental health outcomes for children in particular, but if we can support those outcomes through repair and through knowledge, then that's my job. That's what I'm here for.

Chris Dolman (08:48):

And there's something about that that you're drawn to in that sense. Yeah,

Roxanne Nathan (08:52):

Absolutely. And I think when I see those outcomes, when I see a family member have that light bulb moment, that's when I'm drawn back into that work again to go, yep, that's what I'm here for.

Chris Dolman (09:03):

Great, thanks Roxanne. And yeah, to you two, looking forward to hearing what you bring to our discussion this evening. Okay folks. So in terms of the format for tonight, each of our panellists will be speaking to those learning outcomes, those key themes that we'll be addressing this evening, and then we'll have a period of question and answer as well. So yeah, please, yes, submit those questions via the chat. Thanks to people that have already submitted questions as part of your registration, that's much appreciated. We'll be responding to some of those as well as we go. Okay, so I'd like to now hand over to Vanya to reflect on it and Vanya in reading the case study about Anne in relation to Anne's experience, were there things that really stood out to you that caught your attention that you'd like to speak to?

Vanya Libardi de Almeida (10:01):

Absolutely. This could be the case study of Vanya. It does kind of map out exactly what I went through when I was trying to separate. There was domestic family violence, there was a failure in the system. So I will be talking from Anne's point of view, but to me it's quite personal and I'm fine with that and sharing with you. So I think to help support parents' wellbeing, you need to build a strong rapport to really understand. So as Anne points out, no one would listen to her. They would either tell her to stay or she felt confused. So if you build a rapport then and through being observant and curious, I found that say Anne's case, they could have probably got to the bottom better of what actually was going on. So pick up on the signs that the parent might be struggling. As Helen said, as



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a parent going through separation divorce, you're not usually in your right head space or the right frame of mind. You might be embarrassed or don't want to divulge that there's domestic violence going on. So when I say delve deeper into what may or may not be going on and doing that with sensitivity, that is just vital.

(11:35)

I also think that with focus on the positive actions that have already been taken that would provide the parent with a feeling that they can actually do this, they can get through it, they can be there for their children. So focus on the positives, create an action and plan of or who they could see, what help they can get and schedule a follow-up session. As a parent, you really want to know that you've been heard and to check in, to be checked in to see if it's working and then those support options when you're in the heat of the moment or you've been in the moment for a year or so before, you can leave, catch it early so that you don't and wouldn't have to go through a year before it all happened for her. Next slide please.

(12:37)

So strategy is for engaging parents to explore, understand, and respond to their child's experience of separation. So depending on the age, obviously it doesn't say how old Connor and Millie are, but mine were four and six and a half and I found it initially hard to talk to my children about what was going on. There was lots of blame and guilt and things thrown at me from my kids, but with the help of a psychologist, she allowed me to find ways to talk to them, but they would understand and it worked much better after that, encourage the parent not to only think of right now, but look to the future. The future doesn't have to be doom and gloom. There's lots of things good that may come out of divorce. Separation, safer environment for the children, safer environment for the parent. Provide information about support groups that the children could be involved in because that can help them make a new range of friends and there might be people in similar situations that they can talk through with that discuss the different approaches to parenting that may be taken, whether that be co-parenting, parallel parenting, because me personally and I didn't really even think about how parenting was done, it was just I'm a parent.

(14:05)

So discuss different ways and what might work for the given family and provide positive feedback once again, really hone into the fact that they are doing well, even if it's the slightest thing that they're doing a great job on, focus on that and build and see what else is out there. Next slide please.

(14:29)

Strategies for supporting parents to take a child-focused approach to parenting. It is always important to remember the child first. I think from the first step, the first strategies of how the parent, you need to help the parent first before they can help the child. So once that's reached, then you can focus on the child more, provide the resources, build a strong positive relationship with the child. If they're comfortable, they will open up and they will speak for themselves if and when they're comfortable. And that can be a great way to get through a difficult stage. Obviously create a plan that both the parents and child agree to because no matter what age they're, it's still their life as well. So it needs to be a collaboration between everyone, parent, child and practitioner. And once again, follow up with the parent and child to see if they're coping with the changes and saying that she finally found refuge. That would be a massive hurdle for her. So if you do follow up, make sure they are coping. It's just absolutely vital to do so. I think that's me done. Thank you so much for listening and I hope that was helpful.



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Chris Dolman (16:07):

Yeah, thank you Vanya, some really key perspectives and understandings there. Thank you. Looking forward to hearing you explain those even further as we continue on through the hour. Folks, before we continue, just in response to a question someone's putting yes, this is being recorded and you will be sent a link to the recording in the coming weeks. Okay, so I'd now like to hand over to Helen to give her perspective as a service manager on some of these themes. And Helen, for you again as you read the example of Anne, what really caught your attention through that lens.

Helen McMullan (16:48):

Thanks and thanks Vanya. I really appreciate always having opportunities to have more understanding of lived experience because it really helps us understand whether we're on the right track as well. So it's always such an invaluable opportunity to have that wisdom. When I read the case study, I think for me what stood out was Anne's experience of the failure of the system. And so I suppose the things I'm going to talk about are really sharing what we think are the way finding options for people to sort of have more of an informed beginning and to hopefully provide that hope that there are actually really good services out there that can hopefully give you some more informed. So we start with families that come to us and ask them to go and get some legal advice and there's lots of community legal centres that can give you those free legal advice sessions.

(18:11)

They'll help navigate separation and also reduce stress because if we are talking about a really distressing time, the opportunity to know what is actually in your favour or what you can and can't do, it will help you move forward to make some better decisions. The family relationship centres there are national federally funded service, so we do care arrangements and property settlements for families. So again, we have other staff who can help individuals, families and children around support information and referral. We have in-house supports plus external partnerships that we can also provide warm referrals to. I think it's also important for everybody that comes to us to also understand what they think they're going to need for themselves to parent well and to think about what you might not even think is possible. Conflict coaching to actually understand your conflict style, that can be a really nice way of knowing that I can be in control and that's the most important thing that I can focus on. And then also what keeps you going? You've arrived at this point, you have strengths to lean in and use the strengths because they will be very helpful at this time. Next slide please.

(19:57)

When we look at the children's experience separation, I think there is a lot of good data around children's ability to flex and be open to change, but where we have families who are living in high conflict, we do have a lot of poor attachment. The loss of trust not only between family members but their wider friendship groups, they lose confidence in themselves and sometimes they just don't know where their outlet of overwhelming emotions need to go. So that can in the longer term make it very difficult for them to know what a healthy adult relationship looks like. So they may join in a cycle of another unhealthy relationship because that's what they have witnessed. We do have child inclusive mediation where children do have the opportunity to be interviewed and their voice and experience of separation is heard believing in your children. And if you can imagine that what they hear, see and feel of your stress is then transferred to themselves. Next slide.

(21:30)



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When we talk about taking a child-focused approach, it's really about thinking do you have the time to sit and listen and understand how your children are feeling? And we sort of use terms like are you being with their fear, their joy, their shame? If you can sit with some kids every day and understand that emotions are safe and that we can manage them together, they then can rebuild trust as you as the parent who understands what they are going through. And it's not easy sometimes for parents in their own distress to hear that their children are actually distressed. We talk about building solid bridges between two homes. So when you are separating and you have got now parents living in different houses, how can you help children transition from one house to the other? How can you make that child feel safe to leave you and then welcome the other parent when you've got shared care arrangements?

(22:39)

So some of that is to agree that routines and handovers are important. How can we manage that the best that we can? Because we do know that respecting the other parent might not be the easiest thing at that point in time, but if you are insulting the other parent, then you are insulting part of that child because the child is made up of both parents. So we really encourage that respect to be shown to the children, to understand that there are different parenting styles, whether you are together separated, you've been brought up differently, you're not going to agree when you're together or when you're apart. So have boundaries around your own parenting so that when the child's with you, and I think it was a bit like Vanya mentioned, the parallel parenting when they're with you, they're your house, your rules, and when the other parent is spending time, it's their house, their rules, future focused. I really encourage parents to ask the question, will I be invited to my children's 21st or my wedding when they look back, how were they experienced on how we managed separating? So do you have good communication? And a lot of families really struggle with this. So if a child is seeing a silent parent, silence can be as loud as shouting. It's communication that will help children understand that even though parents aren't together, we can still be a family in the sense of where we originated from.

(24:26)

I think to be future focused, it's one of those ongoing living documents and acknowledge that the past issues weren't working, but what do we want to do to move forward for the future and to think about the quality of a child's relationship with you. I think that's me.

Chris Dolman (24:49):

Thanks Helen. Yeah, I really appreciate this coupling of child-focused and future-focused. I think keeping both of those themes in mind can offer us many sort of possibilities for different inquiries with people while still not brushing over or certainly still paying attention to the current context and circumstances and what parents are up against as well. So really appreciate you speaking about that. Look forward to hearing some more. And so thank you and Roxanne to you, what stood out to you from the case study of Anne bringing that social worker family dispute resolution practitioner lens to that?

Roxanne Nathan (25:30):

Yeah, thank you Chris. The thing that stood out to me the most as a professional in the area is when I read the case of Anne, I was really drawn to the discussion about disclosure to maybe a non-professional in the area. Maybe it was a volunteer at a community centre, maybe it was someone who's in Allied Health who actually hasn't been involved in family and domestic violence cases before and felt like she just in that moment could let those people



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know what was happening for her. And in reading the case, how can you offer support when this isn't your area of expertise, when it's not something that you are really well versed in and maybe you might be a bit confronted or afraid of how to respond. So what I would like to say to that is be the secure base as the professional and don't dismiss the distress of the person as well.

(26:28)

So if you are a non helping professional or you're in a different area, it's really simple sentences you can use that sounds really scary, I'm so glad that you told me, or how are you going with what's happening? That sounds really overwhelming. So you're not dismissing, you're not offering advice and you're allowing that person to not feel shut down either by your not knowing how to react. It's really important to not use minimising language. So things like, are you sure or I haven't seen that person behave in that way before or maybe this is just a misunderstanding. Those sorts of things make people question themselves and they start to shut down at a point, at a really important point when they feel like I need to tell someone what's happening for me. Really importantly, get other services involved. Don't feel like you have to do it all on your own and start to, if you are a practitioner who's listening today that maybe doesn't have those relationships, start forming them.

(27:32)

Start understanding where your family relationship centres are in your area or who your community services are and even just ring up and ask what services do you provide or look on their website. That's a really easy way to get started and it's really important if part of the fear is thinking that you somehow have to prove that violence occurred. It's really important to understand. You do not need to prove anything. You're simply there to listen and to acknowledge that this person sitting in front of you is in a level of pain at the moment. Next slide please.

(28:07)

So what can you do? Maybe if you an allied health professional or maybe you're a GP or maybe you're in another field but you are not in a family and domestic violence field, letting the person know that you've heard them. This must be a really hard time for you right now. I'm glad that you've let me know. Are the kids okay? Is it safe for you to go home today? If it's not safe, do you have somewhere safe that you can go? Does anyone else know what's happening for you? Is another really important one. Sometimes if a problem's happening for us, we can sometimes minimise what's happening, but when you tell someone else and they're also worried for you, that can sometimes make you understand that the problem is there and the problem is happening. And what would be helpful for you today? What can I do for you that might be helpful? Next slide please.

(29:04)

So what if the person is, maybe they're just starting to ask questions about separation. They're not coming to you with big stories of family violence, but they're starting to ask some questions about separation, asking what it might look like, asking for general information. They might be talking about their relationship isn't going well, they're not communicating well or they're not feeling good about their relationship. Generally these questions are testing the water questions. So they might be there seeing how you might react. They might be wondering by saying things out loud, how bad is this for me? I kind of need to put it out into the air and see if someone catches anything. And again, another thing that you could just say is it sounds like you're having some big things happening for you right now. Would it be okay if I gave you some information and you could talk to some professionals in the area about how you are going right now?



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(30:01)

So again, you're not having to solve any of the problems, but you're offering them a pathway forward to someone that will have more knowledge or will be able to put them into the right programmes or the right services to help out. Next slide please. So what if you do have someone who comes to you and they're expressing some real concern about their safety or their children's safety or they're telling you that they're in a family violence situation? Is there space in your office for the person to stay and call 1-800-RESPECT the police or the national DV hotline? And that will be that the best people that they can talk to at that time if they feel that they're really unsafe. Can you as a professional or as someone who is in a helping industry, can you make time to check in with them again? If they've got to come back next week, could you spend a few minutes just to let them know to check in with them about what's happened?

(30:54)

Can you use your space to get them to meet up with domestic violence professionals or the police? Could your place be the one place where they're able to access those professionals in a safe way? Can you make a plan for if that person doesn't come back at an agreed time, is there a friend or a family member you could contact to check in? Or do you think it might be worth calling the police and doing a welfare check? And that's something you might have to talk about with your service managers or with your staff at your workplace. Next slide please. So how to support children and young people. So for all children, the best support for them is to support their parents to manage the situation. Kids need to know that the parents are okay and that they've got this and they're working with other adults to manage their situation.

(31:43)

If a parent's telling you that their child is expressing suicide ideation or the child is telling you they have a plan for self-harm, I typically direct straight to the emergency department for an urgent assessment. If the child is expressing that they're just not coping with things that are going on, it's all too big and it's all too hard. School counsellors are a great referral or your local family relationship centre as well is a great place to start parents off if parents are worried about or if you are worried about the medical needs of a child, I'd certainly go straight to the GP first. And if a child is maybe wanting to or a young person is wanting to maybe manage themselves a little bit, kids helpline is a wonderful place to send kids to straight away understanding that children have their own experience of separation as well, and it should be different from their parents' version of separation and really encouraging parents to acknowledge that their child or young person has their own experience. So simple sentences like, you're right, this is a hard time, but we love you both and we're going to get through it. Next slide please. Oh, that's me. That's the end.

Chris Dolman (32:47):

Yeah. Thanks so much, Roxanne. Yeah, for those really specific practical steps that practitioners can take to respond. So thank you for that. Folks, we've moving into a q and a time now, so please continue to submit some questions thanks to those that already have. But please put forward some questions for our panel and yes, we'll move into that. Now Van, I'd just like to follow up with a comment you made about how a psychologist that you're working with guided you to engage more fully with your children in relation to separation. Do you have some reflections around what is the best strategy to suggest to parents for speaking with their children about separation?



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Vanya Libardi de Almeida (33:43):

The way I did it myself personally was when my parents separated, it was an awful, awful, awful situation and I know that I didn't want to do that to my children. I didn't want to continue the cycle of that. So with the psychologist help, we just talked about strategies that your mom and your dad love you just as much now as they always have. It's just that we need are not working together as a family. Your father and I don't speak badly. Like I said to 'em, dad loves you so much and I love you so much. And then after it took about, I don't know, maybe six months and as they were growing older for them to realise actually mom and dad are actually so much happier being apart and the blame from them saying it was your fault you left dad. They then began understanding why I did it and I still keep checking in with them. They're now 10 and 12 and I still keep checking in with them just not all the time, but just randomly I'll say, Hey, how's things going? And things are going great. So that help at the start from the psychologist did and has set me and my family up for success five, 10 years down the track. So that would be my advice, make it age appropriate and just really listen to the parent what their needs are and the needs of their children.

Chris Dolman (35:24):

Helen F, is there something you could add to Voya's reflections around best strategies to support parents to speak with their kids about that?

Helen McMullan (35:32):

I think as Vanya said, it's important for children to know it's not their fault that they don't have any blame in what was an adult decision to separate. And I think to encourage that conversation and keep it really about the focus is on what do the children need now rather than children feeling like they've got to be part of the problem. So I've got to now be part of the solution and they will go off in their own direction and really be overwhelmed by adult concepts. So I think as Vanya said, you've got to perhaps think what is appropriate to tell a child? At what age do you say something to a child that makes sense to them, but really reassure them that there is a chance for us to live as a family but just not together.

Chris Dolman (36:44):

Thanks for that. Helen. Thank you for everyone that's submitting questions so far. There's quite a few coming through already. Roxanne, for you, there's a question about how we can best support the child when just one parent is engaging. Yeah. Do you have some?

Roxanne Nathan (37:00):

Absolutely. Yeah. And this is a very common problem as well. Sometimes a parent's grief becomes so overwhelming after separation that they can't see the forest for the trees so to speak, so they're not able to support their child in a way that their child needs them to because they're caught in their grief. If you are the other parent, the parent who is able to be more all you can offer as Vanya and as Helen have both said as well, not speaking badly of the other parent, despite the fact that they might be doing some really frustrating and annoying things, they might be doing some things that are really not helpful for your child, making sure that you are saying things like things are different at dad's house and they're different here. You're here with me now and let's try and concentrate on these things over here or redirect the play if they're younger or if they're a little bit older,



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acknowledge that those things are frustrating and how can you help them here in your home because that's all you can control is the things that happen when you're at your home with them and being available to them.

Chris Dolman (38:09):

Thank you. Roxanne, I'd like to ask some follow up questions. We've got so many more coming in. Helen, could I ask you about differences in parenting approaches between parents and particularly how you might go about working with separating parents who have quite differing views around their parent, around the parenting of their young children?

Helen McMullan (38:36):

We talk about the three main styles of parenting and I think Vanya mentioned cooperative parenting, parallel parenting and conflicted parenting. And a lot of the families that come and see us are probably around the conflicted style of parenting where they all express that they've blocked each other on Facebook. They won't take each other's phone calls and there might be good reasons, they might be repeated messages that just doesn't stop. So the communication is not helpful. So when there is poor adult communication, the children can pick up on that and that's the conflict, as I said, which is a silent conflict that then can lead into miscommunication because they don't necessarily pick up on the right cues because the handovers then have a lot of tension because they haven't been able to plan how it might go. So again, the children are picking up on that conflict.

(39:54)

So we do encourage to understand your conflict, understand your triggers, think about what are some of the things that you can change, the things that you would like to see yourself handle better when we move into parallel parenting. And I do think a lot of parents would be very happy to settle with parallel parenting because it is a businesslike relationship. When we talk about if you were in a workplace, how would you be expected to behave around your workmates? You might not have very much in common, but there is a certain expectation of respectful communication, the ability to get along when you need to. And so if we can move parents out of conflict to parallel, then they will respect each other's boundaries when they are with their children and when they're not with their children, not to check in, have you put the lunchbox in the lunch in the school bag?

(41:03)

Have you made sure you've done this? And there's this expectation that my rules are the best rules and that causes conflict. So if we can be parallel work side by side, but not together, that is probably a good outcome. For a lot of parents and cooperative parents, they would probably live close by. They agree on good outcomes for education, for health, for children to flourish with their sporting activities, for their friendship groups, to be able to think about outside of care arrangements, how do we support children's relationships, their wider world, and that would be what we would love parents to work and afford their children to have that cooperative parenting.

Chris Dolman (42:02):

You, Helen Vanya, what about for you in terms of what would you say to allied health professionals when they're working with separating parents who don't agree on say, parenting practises or even there's a question around diagnoses when parents aren't agreeing on the required diagnoses?



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Vanya Libardi de Almeida (42:26):

Sure. I found that this was quite a hard situation. My son was diagnosed with autism and my ex didn't agree. He just thought I wasn't bringing him up correctly and that he was spoiled and when I knew there was something there and he was diagnosed with autism, so then it was more about providing my ex with the information. So make sure the parent has the information and if they're in a position to do so, to give to the other parent and back up the person, back up the parent to say, well, it's written here that this isn't the case. Here's some information. If you've got any questions, feel free to ask. So keep it neutral, but definitely make sure you'd give that information on whichever diagnosis it might be.

Chris Dolman (43:31):

Yeah. Is that the situation you've come across at times in your practise, Roxanne, and where there's differences around how parents are responding to interventions or diagnoses?

Roxanne Nathan (43:42):

Absolutely, and it often does come with any diagnoses that would fit into an N D I S criteria, really where a child would then be supported through the N D I S. I think it's really important to the person who does the diagnosis, has to go through so many rafts of different assessment tools and et cetera to reach that conclusion. So it's important to remember that that is fact regardless of if a parent understands it or not. I think that what I see in practise with families is again, going back to that grief that parents feel when their child has been diagnosed with something, have I failed as a parent because my child's been diagnosed with something? Or then there's the blame as Vanya spoke about, oh no, it must be because of the other parent and the way that they're parenting, and I really agree with Vanya as well around information sharing is so important and to even do that through the mediation stream as well, through family dispute resolution.

(44:42)

If you feel like you can't have those conversations with the other parent, bring them to mediation, bring them into counselling, and we will help you with those conversations with that other parent and that information sharing. And there may even be space to stay with that other parent in their grief and in their disbelief of what's happening and try and mould it into something that is more child-focused around, well, let's say that this was true and your child needed these things to actually function to a full capacity in their life. Why wouldn't we want your child to get there? Why wouldn't we want your child to function at that higher level that they could achieve with these help and supports? Just like a child might need tutoring or a child might need a different pen grip in reception, they're all things that aid them in being the best little person that they can be.

Chris Dolman (45:35):

Great, thank you. Roxanne. There's been some questions about transitioning between two homes. Helen, I might put that to you if that's okay. About a couple of people have asked for tips or suggestions in relation to this transition period between two homes and ways to allow better emotional regulation and stability, ways to support, I guess kids' experience and all of that. There's some, in what ways do you encourage parents to be mindful of that?



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Helen McMullan (46:08):

Well, I guess each family is going to be very individual, but sometimes we will find transitioning between two homes can be difficult when children are asked to carry all their belongings and take it to their other parent's house. Or it could be that the children take nothing because the other parent is, sorry, the other parent is expected to have everything for the child. And so there's this tension between, well, it's actually the children that have all these belongings and they are the owners of their clothes, their toys. So sometimes building bridges can be as difficult for some parents to accept that I bought this toy, therefore it stays in my home, but it's not the parent's toy, it's the child's toy. So some of those transitions are really helpful when we accept that we are sending the children with what they need to get a safe transition to the other person's house so the children will be able to let them know what's going to be helpful.

(47:34)

The other thing that we talk about is actually preparing the conversation. There are some children that will be worried about leaving one parent because miss me, so what can we do when you get there? Do we have a quick phone call? Can you send me a text message? Let me know what you're doing. How did you go at netball? So the transition between two houses is ongoing. The getting from one door to the other is one thing, but the ongoing transition is what's helpful to know that a child can have access to both parents if the child feels that they need to touch base and again, be reassured that there's both of them there when they're needed. We also talk about getting to understand what is the routine for that child, so if it is a helpful routine, I think Vanya touched on that. If a professional has indicated that a certain child needs a structural routine in their day, that again, building those bridges so that the child knows that just because I'm going from one house to the other, my routine or my safety schedule will be on each other's fridges or my plans on how I need to do certain parts of my bedtime routine.

(49:14)

I'll know what to do because the parents have understood that that's what I need for transitioning from one house to the other.

Chris Dolman (49:24):

Great. Your comments really highlight for me too about children have some knowledge about this, don't they, in terms of what works for them. And I appreciate how you've highlighted being interested in their perspectives as well and what they know about say routines, what they know might support them through that as well. So yeah, thank you for that. Roxanne, I might ask you a question about when children might be saying negative things about the other parent through the and yeah, how you encourage parents to respond to this.

Roxanne Nathan (50:13):

I think that we need to absolutely, it is difficult. It's difficult for the child and it's difficult for the adult to hear and it's difficult to manage as a parent, and I think we need to remember the language that we use about the other parent is the language our children will use about the other parent. So that goes both ways and in both homes that respect that Helen and Vanya were talking about across homes is so important. And if you do have a child that says, I really don't like it when this parent does this or that parent is really frustrating or annoying me, or maybe using some very colourful language if they're a young person because we know that young people can do that to express themselves, is really helping them to unpack what they actually mean. What are you really trying to say to me about what this other person is doing? What is it that you don't like? Ah, okay, it's that. So it's about helping



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that child to unpack that feeling and that emotion that's coming in the words that they're using and being really conscious of how you speak about the other parent as well.

Chris Dolman (51:24):

Thanks, Roxanne. Vani, do you have reflections on that circumstance as well?

Vanya Libardi de Almeida (51:29):

Sure. I found it best to listen to my children. I found there was a lot of negative comments coming back that the children would relay to me. So initially it upset me, no end, and I just said, oh, I don't want to know. But then I thought, that's not fair because that's cutting their voice off. So I said, well, thank you for telling me that this is an adult conversation between your dad and I, so it's adult talk and I'll chat with dad about it next time. So I think age appropriately obviously as well. Once again, just point to them that it's not their responsibility to be in the middle. It's up to the parents to sort that out first before they're even in the middle. That's what I found.

Chris Dolman (52:34):

Thank you. We've had a few questions too about yeah, this notion of this language of weaponizing the child, one parent weaponizing the child. So question, how do you convey the importance of a child first mentality to parents who begin to weaponize the child? So yeah, Roxanne, could you respond to that a bit? Perhaps even just saying a little bit about these practises of weaponizing and that parents might encounter and that practitioners might hear about.

Roxanne Nathan (53:07):

And if you have a parent who is actively using the child to pass on negative messages to pass on their disdain for the other parent or to pass on knowing that they're those missiles that really hit that other parent like Fania was talking about, having to hear her children talk about her in a way that she knows is not true about herself. Children are children don't mean those mean things that they're saying first of all, and it can be really confronting as a parent to have those missiles thrown at you from your children when you are trying your absolute hardest to be the opposite of what's happening as well. All you can do is let, so from a parent perspective, letting from a worker perspective as well, who's trying to encourage that child focused mentality for parents, letting them know that I'm sorry, that you have to hear those things when you go to dad's, what's true when you're here with me, what things do we do together or what things do you know about your home with me here?

(54:27)

And so you're trying to give them a comparative or a reframing of what's happening without, of course throwing the other parent in the mud. If you want to try and have an adult conversation that's supported with that other parent around, Hey, I really need you to understand that these things are happening and maybe that's hard for you to do as the other parent and maybe you do need support with that. That's what things like mediation are for mediation, family therapy, what we call family law counselling for parents who are separated, we can try and help to support to get underneath those things. There are some people who won't stop those things. There are some parents who have decided that is the way I'm going to behave. That is the way I'm going to co-parent with not even co-parent with you. That's the way I'm going to choose to parent as a separated person. What they will find is that young people will vote with their feet. So once the children are a little bit older, they get sick of hearing those



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things. They remember that one house is calm and the brain always seeks peace. So your child will seek the piece of the parent who's not offering that weaponization.

(55:43)

They will move away from that parent and then that parent is going to be left to have a good, long, hard think about their actions.

Chris Dolman (55:52):

Sure. Yeah. And it reminds me too of some, or links to some other questions in relation to coercive control, I guess, which is a pattern, isn't it? That I guess probably began prior to separation, may not have, but could well have, right? And so this is what the other parents up against, I guess. Yeah. So there's a question about what are some strategies when there's subtle use of coercive control, and so yeah, can say a bit more maybe Helen as well, about what might be some strategies to support parents facing those practises of coercive control in the context of separation.

Roxanne Nathan (56:36):

Did you want Helen to speak to that or myself, Chris?

Chris Dolman (56:38):

Yeah, Helen, have you got some reflections around that, around responding to these practises of coercive control and how to support parents that are being subjected to that?

Helen McMullan (56:48):

Just probably going on from what Roxanne said, I think there are some really good opportunities through mediation. Firstly, we do a very comprehensive intake and assessment where there are a lot of exploration around domestic violence, drug and alcohol. Where as practitioners, we do look for the multiple or occasions of coercive control where both parents give their perspective of what happened when they were together, and certainly is it still happening? So we understand leading into the mediation, what are some of those more pervasive acts that may still be impacting on the other parent in terms of control, and how do we help reestablish a balance of control for the other parent to come into mediation and feel like they do have a voice and they have informed decision-making that takes away the control of the perpetrator really also, I guess, reinforce the bill of rights for children and that the children have the rights in their care and parents have responsibility. So parents have a responsibility to have a mutually beneficial relationship. So some of those more nuanced points around coercive control can be explored around how is it beneficial for children to be around a parent that is exercising the control. So I think it's a really such an important point, and mediation can explore how children are going to be safe in that environment.

Chris Dolman (59:04):

Helen, did you have some reflections as well, Roxanne about that? Okay, sure.



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Roxanne Nathan (59:11):

Very much agree with what Helen said. The only thing I want to add is, well two things. For anyone that's working with parents and they're unsure, parents don't have to do this in isolation. It can be really hard to try and manage someone who has controlled you and is now controlling your children after the separation and you are quite triggered by what's happening or it sends you back to a place that you've tried to leave. So don't do those things in isolation. Do it with support and help. And the only other thing I want to add is around the use of cultural control. So we do see a lot of culturally different families come through the mediation stream and the use of cultural control as a way to say, no, I expect my children to do this even though they're not in their home country anymore. And something that we often explain to families who are in that situation is, your child needs to exist within Australian systems now, within Australian education systems and Australian systems of high school and all of that kind of stuff, how do you think those two things can be balanced in a way that reduces some of those areas of control as well

Vanya Libardi de Almeida (01:00:37):

To make sure they ask all the questions to pick up on it? I know when I was going through separation, I didn't speak up about domestic violence or coercive control that my husband had over me. And so we ended up doing a media session together, but I was so under his thumb, I couldn't say what I wanted to say. So going back to what I was saying in my slides on how to help parents through separation, really do try and delve deeper if you aren't sure. I wasn't very open. I didn't want to admit it. I was embarrassed that I was going through this, and also he was right beside me, so I couldn't say anything. So yeah, build that rapport with the person, pick up on those signs, be observant, dig that bit deeper, and then they might be likely to open up and then they can be given the best help that they need rather than it taking years like it did with me before I was able to share my story. Thank you

Chris Dolman (01:01:44):

For adding those perspectives in. We've had some questions too in relation to lots of different things, including managing consent around a child accessing services as well where one parent, so managing consent when one parent isn't present, but there's perhaps a court order. I guess there's lots of variations on that question, isn't there? But in terms of matters of consent from both parents in relation to children accessing services, I guess what are some considerations there as or there are ways to navigate that? Roxanne again? Yeah, did you have some?

Roxanne Nathan (01:02:26):

This actually depends on funding sometimes. Sometimes, for example, our I Kids programme requires both parents to consent. That's the funding model. However, our programme requires one parent to consent. So it does depend on the programme that you're trying to put your child in, but a good family relationship centre should help guide you with that. Something like a GP mental health care plan is obviously different. Again, private practitioners will have their own areas of consent or their own directions around consent. Certainly if a parent is incarcerated, we don't seek their consent. If there is a domestic violence restraining order, we won't seek the other parent's consent because there's something in place if it's a court ordered that both parents must consent and we maybe only have one parent at that point who's registered the child and has given us the court papers, but we have a court direction that we can work off of.

(01:03:29)



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The other thing is when young people turn 15, they're actually able to go and get their own Medicare card from wherever you get your Medicare card service essay. I think it's, and they're able to go in and request that themselves. So I've had situations where young people are living in very, very dysfunctional families and they need support, and when they've turned 15, they've actually been able to go and get their own Medicare cards and seek their own support, which is often free because of their age and also Headspace for those older children over 15, they don't need parental consent to go into places like Headspace.

Chris Dolman (01:04:11):

Roxanne, Helen, there's been a question in relation to supporting children who are unable to communicate their experience functionally, but still showing that they're not coping well. I guess I'm wondering a bit about how your service might respond to children who have perhaps complex communication needs or difficulties speaking or communicating their experience. I know given your commitment to child-focused practise, are there ways you've found to navigate that in some way?

Helen McMullan (01:04:45):

Well, we at the Family Relationship centre would not necessarily have appointments with the children, but similar to what Roxanne was saying, there is family mental health support services, which is also another national free service, and they work with families going back to consent, they only require the consent of one parent. And we do believe that if a child is experiencing difficulty, they have the right to access the appropriate supports. So we love that service. They work quite closely around the family relationship centre in terms of understanding children's development needs. They do understand autism spectrum delays in their education, which can come from so very many varied barriers in their life. So we would encourage parents to think about what is it that the children need around understanding separation and how to talk to their parents. And though the practitioners would talk with the family together to help navigate some of those conversations in a way that the child can use whatever medium or modes of communication that's helpful, whether it's through play or some sort of other therapy that children can find a way of expressing how they're experiencing separation. But the other thing is, and it would depend on the parents who might be interested in child inclusive mediation, the child can be interviewed and again, it's the experience of the child consultant to navigate which way a child could actually articulate their experience. That would be helpful.

Chris Dolman (01:07:04):

Thank you. Helen. I'm mindful of the time and it's going quick, but I have just, Roxanne, I would just ask you the final question about, because there has been a couple of questions about when siblings, children are kind of in different homes and people have concerns about supporting their relationships or nurturing those relationships for you and your teams, your colleagues, how do you go about doing that? Or what are some,

Roxanne Nathan (01:07:32):

I think it's really important to know as well that siblings, sometimes it's okay that certain children spend more time at one house than the other, or sometimes the siblings spend time, they don't necessarily spend time with their parents together. Those things are all okay, as long as they're okay with the children and as long as they're functioning well for the parents. Sometimes children after separation have always preferred the parenting style of one parent over the other, and in a low conflict family where there's maybe not violence and some of the other things that we've spoken about, then when you are separated as a family, those parenting styles are all that. You



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don't have the other option of going to mom because dad's annoying you at the moment or something like that. So there's no problem with siblings going, actually, I preferred dad's parenting style, so I feel like I want to spend more time with him post-separation.

(01:08:29)

Or actually, I've always preferred mom's parenting style, so I want to spend more time over there. There are so many ways you can still reconnect siblings. That might be that the siblings play sports together and that you really encourage those things. They might go to school together and maybe it's about going out after school and letting them have a milk check together or something like that. And then they can go to their respective homes that they're feeling more comfortable in at that time. Family events, making sure that they can during the school holidays, maybe take them bowling together or something like that. There's still time for, really importantly, Jen Macintosh, who is the gold standard of post-separation parenting people. She always says it's about time, not how much time, sorry, quality of time, not how much time. So as long as siblings are getting really special time together and that's encouraged. If they're choosing to spend more time in one or the other parent's house, that is all. Okay, that's not a problem. And you can talk about that again through mediation, through child-focused mediation can bring those things out as well.

Chris Dolman (01:09:40):

Thanks, Roxanne, for those sort of that sense of possibility around lots of different options there. So thank you for that folks. There's been a lot, we've covered a lot more still to cover, but we haven't got time to do all of that. Thank you so much for those that have submitted questions and engaged in the chat as we finish. Perhaps I could just ask each of our panellists, is there something in particular like to really reinforce a quick minute reinforcement of something or something that stood out to you from what's been talked about during this hour? So Vanya, for you, what might stand out for you?

Vanya Libardi de Almeida (01:10:22):

Sure. I always like to think that as a parent, we know our children best. We're the experts and things like that. So I think I'm just putting it out there that really do listen to the parent. They really do have a lot of knowledge on how their child may be feeling or if their behaviours have changed and be interested in that. As I've said, support the parents as much as you can because without them being supported, they can't support their children. So I think that would be my main thing. Great. Thank

Chris Dolman (01:11:04):

You. Yeah. Thanks Fanya. Yeah. For Helen, what would you like to reiterate or what stood out to you from the conversation?

Helen McMullan (01:11:14):

To be the best version of ourselves as parents, we do have to invest in ourselves first and then really provide that version of ourselves to our children. And if we can block out some of the white noise, which is unhelpful, which I think we, from Vanya expressing some of the traps of what is going on in the other household, really reframing it as an opportunity to nurture and build your relationship with your children, because that's really what you have control to do.



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Chris Dolman (01:12:05):

Thank you, Helen. Roxanne, for you, again, something that caught your attention or you'd like to reiterate.

Roxanne Nathan (01:12:12):

I just really want to reiterate, don't do it alone. Don't think that you have to be the only professional in the mix. Don't think that you as a parent are alone in what's happening for you and your family. Reach out for support. There is so many low cost, no cost services to help support your family repair and your education and knowledge of your family. Just reach out.

Chris Dolman (01:12:43):

Thank you. Yeah, the importance of connections really is what you're describing there. So I think that's a wonderful point to end on given this is part of the intentions, I guess, of mental health professionals network to connect practitioners with others who have passions for similar areas of work. So thanks everyone for your participation in the chat, the questions you've submitted. Yeah, it'd be great if you could complete the feedback survey before you log out that really helps us get better at what we do. Your responses to that, you'll get a statement of attendance in the next few weeks that'll be emailed to you and you also, as I've mentioned earlier, receive a email with a link to a recording of today's webinar as well. So thank you for that. Yeah, there's a whole raft of different webinars. I've gone through some M H P N and Emerging Minds webinars already.

(01:13:36)

There's a couple others there you can see in October around trauma-informed care in November around identifying and treating panic disorder provided by M H P N, those ones as well as the one in December I've already mentioned. So that's coming up with this series. As many of you know, the M H P N network supports a stack of different networks right across the country, focused on different areas of practise where you can meet in person online to be encouraged in your work and to be extended in your practise and your thinking and to network as well. So yeah, please look up the M H P N site for other network opportunities to get together with others around similar themes or our email, M H P N in relation to that as well. Particularly if you'd like to set up a network in your area of interest, that would be terrific to offer that to others. So yeah, time to finish. I'd just like to again reiterate that this webinar is co-produced by M H P N and Emerging Minds for Emerging Minds, the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health Project, the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Programme.

(01:14:55)

So again, just a reminder about the feedback and again, thank you very much for your participation and we look forward to seeing you next time. Hope you all have a good evening. Thank you.