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Responding to parents' well-being needs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic – a critical reflection on the experiences of vulnerable parents and frontline service providers

Lauren Maguire

Barnardos Ireland, Lauren.Maguire@barnardos.ie

Niamh McCarthy

Barnardos Ireland, niamh.mccarthy@barnardos.ie

Hannah Stynes

Barnardos Ireland, hannah.stynes@barnardos.ie

Grainne Hickey

Barnardos Ireland, Grainne.Hickey@barnardos.ie

Siobhan Greene

Barnardos Ireland, siobhan_greene@barnardos.ie

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Cover Page Footnote

We would like to acknowledge all of the parents, children and families we work with throughout Ireland and in particular those who participated in the various surveys and research which provided insight for this article. We would also recognise all of the Barnardos children services staff teams across the 55 services who deliver frontline services to children and parents daily. This article was a collaborate piece across Barnardos Teams and we would like to acknowledge the input of the Research, Best practice and Electronic Record Keeping team in writing this article.

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Lauren Maguire

Niamh McCarthy

Hannah Stynes

Grainne Hickey

Siobhan Greene

Abstract

In March 2020, a range of public health measures were introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Ireland, including the closure of non-essential services and schools, and restricting the movements and social interactions of the majority of the population. The social and economic upheaval caused by these measures led to increased stress, strain and worry for parents, significantly heightening the risk for detrimental effects on well-being. Barnardos, Ireland's leading children's charity, responded quickly to the crisis by adapting its existing therapeutic services and creating a range of new services to support the needs of parents and families. This paper uses the lens of parental well-being to review the situation in Ireland experienced by vulnerable families during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of the disruptions and the service response. We explore the research background to parental well-being and detail the specific challenges faced by parents as reported in organisational surveys during the pandemic and in feedback from our frontline services. We also outline the complexities for services in responding innovatively and urgently to evolving family needs, and demonstrate facilitators and barriers to engagement. The paper concludes with a summary of the current and anticipated future context for families, and some recommendations for key actions around promoting and sustaining parental well-being.

Key words: Parenting, Well-being, COVID-19, Trauma-informed care

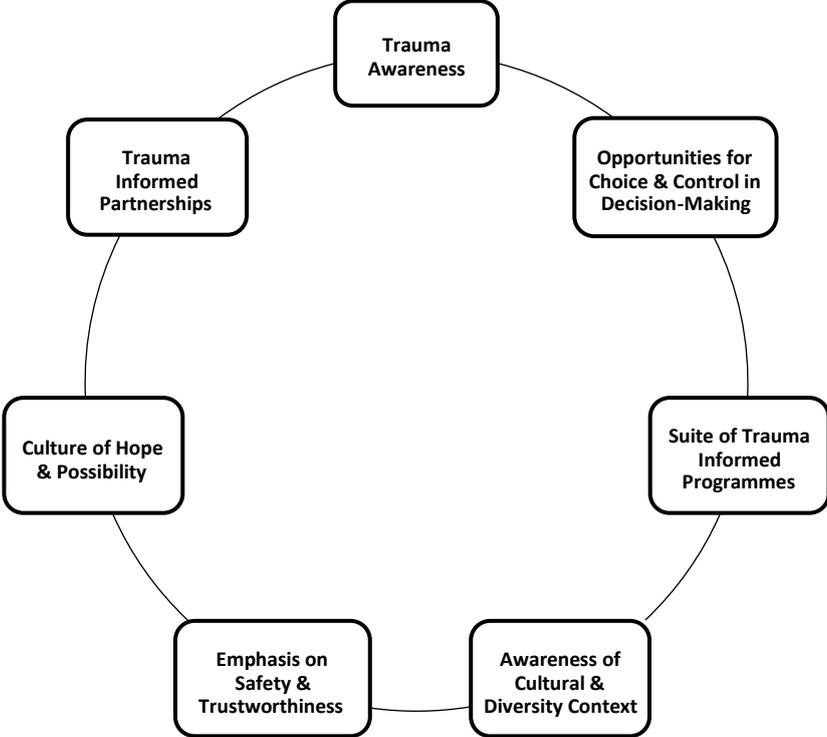
Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had, and continues to have, an unprecedented impact on parenting experiences. Whilst the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been universally felt, the severity has been disproportionate across differing societal groups. Frontline service providers have seen first-hand the unique challenges faced by many vulnerable parents during this period, as well as the concomitant and ongoing impact on family health and well-being. Barnardos Ireland are a frontline service provider who work with families, communities, and partners in order to support the health and well-being of vulnerable children and adults. The approach adopted by Barnardos is rooted in a recognition of the lifelong and inequitable impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)¹ and interpersonal trauma.

¹ **Adverse Childhood Experiences** (ACEs) are stressful and traumatic events experienced by children under the age of 18 which are associated with poor physical and mental health outcomes in adulthood (Koita, et al., 2018). The original ACEs study was conducted by Felitti et al., (1998) which examined the link between high-risk behaviour and disease in adulthood; and adverse events experienced in childhood (e.g. emotional abuse, household dysfunction etc.). The ACEs measured in this study related to psychological, physical or sexual abuse; living with household members who had been imprisoned, experienced mental illness or substance misuse; and violence against mothers (Felitti, et al., 1998).

Barnardos is trauma-informed in its approach to service delivery, which means we take a holistic approach to interaction and intervention. Through understanding the impact of childhood trauma on children and adults, we work hard to enact the principles outlined above in order to reduce adversity, build resilience, and strengthen coping mechanisms in children and families.

Figure 1: Barnardos Trauma Informed Principles



Our key focus from the outset of the COVID-19 crisis has been to continue to provide essential services to the most vulnerable parents and children in our society. In 2020 and 2021, we continued to work with almost 35,000 children and families across forty-five of our centres in Ireland. In this paper, we critically reflect on the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on the lives of vulnerable parents. We

also outline the service response, which was established to support their well-being during this unprecedented period of disruption. Finally, we outline a range of service and policy actions, which are now needed to tackle and prevent ongoing adversity amongst the families most impacted.

Parental Well-Being

Parental well-being is directly associated with child well-being. Changes in parenting culture have also been recognised, wherein raising children has become a more demanding and complex task (Faircloth, 2020). Supporting parents has become an increasingly important priority. Indeed, the well-being of parents has been consistently shown to influence the nature and quality of parenting and, in turn, child developmental outcomes (Tronick & Beeghly, 2011; Zietlow et al., 2019). When parents are equipped with the skills and resources they require to enhance parent-child interactions (such as positive emotionality, sensitivity and limit setting), there is evidence of sustained benefit on child social competence, prosocial behaviour and academic achievement (Bates et al., 2012; Koblinsky et al., 2006) as well as meaningful gains in child well-being (O'Farrelly et al., 2021). Lower levels of externalising behaviour difficulties including aggression and conduct problems have been observed longitudinally in the children of mothers who engage in positive parenting practices (Chronis et al., 2007). On the other hand, parent mental health difficulties, such as depression, anxiety and parental stress, are factors that can impact parenting practices, parent-child relationships and maladaptive child social, emotional and behavioural outcomes (Ostberg & Hagekull, 2013)

The stressors related to providing care for children can interweave with a range of life circumstances and factors. Some parents, because of their own experience in

childhood and/or because of the environmental circumstances in which they are parenting, can struggle to provide adequate support and nurturing care for their children (Lange et al., 2019). For example, evidence has demonstrated that parents who themselves experienced trauma in childhood are at greater risk of experiencing ongoing adversity and mental health difficulties in later life and, in turn, perpetuating harmful cycles of neglect and abuse (Lange et al., 2019). The wellbeing of parents can also be influenced by a range of personal characteristics and familial circumstances, as well as attitudes towards, and ability to cope with the role of parenting (Piehler et al., 2014). Teen and lone parenthood, disadvantage and deprivation, marginalisation and discrimination, stressful life events, and inadequate social support have been linked to poorer parent functioning (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020).

COVID-19 in Ireland and the impact on parents

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, the closure of schools, childcare facilities and other institutions was ordered in March 2020. Playgrounds were closed and both indoor and outdoor sporting activities were cancelled. People were asked to work from home, unless employed by an essential business or service and mobility was substantially restricted (Kennelly et al., 2020). Later governmental responses saw a shift from a short-term emergency response approach to a medium-term approach to managing risk and developing a strategy for living with COVID-19. Subsequently, Ireland has experienced a series of lockdowns and re-openings, including two extended school closures. Almost two years on, in February 2022, the Irish government announced that the majority of public health measures could be removed.

The COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted on the experiences of parents throughout Ireland. Parents' lives were significantly disrupted with the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions almost two years ago, the effects of which can still be seen. Common issues faced by parents as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic include; unemployment, financial concerns, lack of available child care, reduced social supports, concerns of infection, isolation and increased stress and anxiety (Prime et al., 2020). In Ireland, the vast majority of working parents experienced their employment situation being impacted including reduction in hours, temporary or permanent layoff, change in work hours, and change of work location (e.g. working from home). Moreover, a quarter of all parents aged 35 to 44 reported significant childcare issues during this period, with women being particularly affected (CSO, 2020).

A growing body of international and national literature has demonstrated the impact of COVID-19 on the health, well-being and overall functioning of families (Aguiar et al., 2021; Prikhidko et al., 2020). Research has demonstrated that many parents experienced significantly increased stress and distress during this period (Cluver et al., 2020). Since 2020, increases in parent burnout (such as exhaustion and emotional distancing) have been documented, particularly amongst mothers and lower income families (Aguiar et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2021). Irish reports have also highlighted the impact of severe restrictions on the mental health and well-being of more at-risk parents and children (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Other Irish studies conducted in a national context highlight parents' feelings of social isolation and loneliness, whilst home-schooling and keeping children occupied were also identified as a significant source of added stress and pressure (Flynn et al., 2021; Hickey & Leckey, 2021).

Parents' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and impact on well-being in Ireland

In 2020, Barnardos captured family's experiences of school closures through an annual 'Back to School' survey which was adapted to capture the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and families (Kelly et al., 2020). A mixed methods approach using both open and closed questioning was taken to carry out this piece of research. This national survey was completed online by parents with school aged children across Ireland during the month of July 2020. The survey was advertised via social media channels and by email with Barnardos contacts, the results of which are published and available online (Kelly et al., 2020). The findings from parents (n = 1,765 parents: 1,204 with children in primary school; 561 with secondary school aged children) highlighted the additional costs incurred by families, including extra food, leisure activities and technology expenditure. The results also highlighted significant parenting stressors, with more than half of respondents (53%) reporting increased difficulty coping with bedtime routines, whilst many parents also reported increased conflict and behavioural difficulties (e.g. arguing, temper tantrums, dissociation), as well as increased tension in the home. In line with other findings, lone parents and those with young children were most likely to feel the pressure of COVID-19 restrictions and a greater proportion of those 'co-parenting but living apart' or 'lone parents' reported feeling sad or low during this period (31% and 28% respectively).

A subsequent follow-up 'Back to School' survey was carried out in 2021 which captured the costs of going back to school, and parent's thoughts and views about their children returning to school after significant educational disruption caused by

the COVID-19 pandemic (Moffatt et al., 2021). In total, 1,473 parents completed the survey, 1,023 with children in primary school and 450 with children in secondary school (Moffatt et al., 2021). Almost one in three parents (33%) reported that they did not feel confident supporting their children's learning at home, whilst many parents reporting increased hardship and adversity during this period, including increased stress and mental health difficulties, isolation and inadequate social supports (Moffatt et al., 2021). Over two hundred parents (15%) also reported increased substance use – a finding which echoes early survey results from the CSO (2020) which highlighted increased alcohol and tobacco consumption during the lockdown, in addition to negative changes in health behaviours (increased consumption of junk food and sweets, and increased time spent watching television or using a mobile phone).

Frontline Services Experiences - Vulnerable Parents Accessing Barnardos

Services

Research has consistently demonstrated that marginalised families and those with lower socioeconomic status were highly burdened and disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hails et al., 2021; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021; Skripkauskaite et al., 2020). Demand for Barnardos' services increased significantly during 2020, with a 21% increase in referrals for our intensive family support services compared to 2019. The requests for support centred around issues including; food poverty, increased anxiety and stress, home-schooling difficulties, domestic violence, substance abuse, and increased mental health difficulties.

Barnardos found the increased financial pressure on already disadvantaged families, with some turning to money-lenders or seeking loans to support their

families. The closure of schools also resulted in parents taking on the role of educating their children with little or no experience of home schooling. Although many families throughout Ireland experienced these difficulties, we found that these challenges were compounded for vulnerable families with literacy difficulties, mental health issues and a lack of access to technology or internet, as well as over-crowded accommodation and a lack of appropriate space to facilitate learning. These challenges were further intensified by the removal of services, as well as usual supports such as childcare, family and friend networks. Under normal circumstances, the availability of such resources were crucial buffers in the lives of stressed families, and had previously enabled parents to engage in self-care and improve their own well-being. Overall, Barnardos were concerned for the welfare of vulnerable families throughout the pandemic, particularly for those who were experiencing the exacerbating trauma and adversity associated with marginalisation and isolation, risk of homelessness, mental health difficulties, substance misuse and domestic violence.

Supporting Parental Well-being during COVID-19

As an essential service working with vulnerable families, Barnardos responded quickly to the crisis to ensure that essential services could continue to be delivered to vulnerable parents and children across Ireland. A COVID-19 response plan was developed which was underpinned by the organisation's commitment to trauma informed service delivery and focused on building connection, collaboration, and ensuring therapeutic alliance. Adaptation and innovation in delivering services to parents was required in order to ensure that vulnerable parents continued to receive crucial practical and emotional support.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis our service response changed substantially. We began offering services to children and families through a 'layered approach' to service delivery which varied according to the presenting needs of the parent or child, with staff working to identify the most vulnerable families and developing holistic interventions to support them. This included 'check ins' via phone, video call, face-to-face sessions in centres, door step drops of food and other essential supplies and home visits in cases where we were concerned about children and/or their parents. Barnardos frontline staff maintained regular one to one contact with all families who attended our services pre-pandemic and also offered support to the families on our waiting lists. Our focus during lockdown periods was on safety planning, establishing and maintaining routines, offering support to manage crises and supporting engagement in home-schooling. The smooth operation of services proved challenging given the continuously changing COVID-19 public health measures and lockdown requirements and a framework was developed to guide safe working and to maintain service provision for vulnerable families. Further examples of innovation in service delivery during this period are outlined below.

Delivering Targeted Parent Support Services during COVID-19

The ongoing delivery of targeted and trauma informed family support services was identified as a key priority for vulnerable families. Parents with historical experiences of adversity and trauma have been found to engage in more negative parenting practices with consequent poorer outcomes for child emotional/behavioural problems during COVID-19 (Hails et al., 2021). Overall, connection and collaboration is identified as vital in supporting the needs of at-risk parents and in mitigating the risks of continuing maladaptive outcomes in children.

Connections with vulnerable parents were supported through a blended approach of face-to-face and virtual service delivery. The types of services offered to parents both, in person and virtually, included practical family and parenting support, as well as one-to-one parenting sessions and parenting programmes.

In the early stages of lockdown, the Irish Government ordered the closure of all Early Years Centres. In response to this, the Early Years services delivered by Barnardos shifted from group centre-based support to one-to-one family support in 2020. For parents and their children, the strict initial restrictions meant spending significant periods of time in their homes with few outlets or supports. Barnardos staff worried that families would experience feelings of isolation and increased stress and, in response, transformed their services to combat these issues.

Food poverty was a key issue for vulnerable families during the pandemic. Staff within Barnardos Early Years services were re-deployed to enable the provision and distribution of hot meals and food parcels to families who were at risk of going hungry. During 2020 we provided 6,482 food parcels and 9,880 hot meals to families in the communities we are based in. This initiative was supported by Barnardos partners within local communities. Parents who availed of this service reported to Barnardos staff that they felt that this relieved some of the financial and time pressures they were experiencing. This feedback from parents also indicated that this service helped them to ensure their families were fed, made them feel supported, and that someone was caring for them. Parents also felt that this supported them in spending quality time with their children, enabling them to have fun and enjoy each other's company. These opportunities were key in helping to maintain positive parent-child relationships and in supporting family well-being. In order to strengthen skills and capacity, parents were provided with recipes and

ingredients to make simple and healthy meals for themselves and their families. This allowed for restored confidence and independence and building on their strengths and achievements. Additionally, delivering hot meals and food parcels provided opportunity for “check ins” with all family members including parents and children during times of limited face-to-face contact. This not only facilitated connection between parents, children and Barnardos staff but enabled parents to receive advice and reassurance and allowed staff to observe and assess the needs of the family during this disrupted period.

Keeping children entertained was identified as an additional stressor for parents, particularly when outside time was limited, access to playgrounds was restricted, and social distancing was in place. Barnardos developed and distributed individualised activity packs to families, the content of which depended on the child’s age and stage of development. 6, 387 activity packs were compiled and distributed to families from March to December 2020. According to Barnardos staff, parents looked forward to receiving these packs as the suggested activities inside gave them new ideas of things they could do with their children. Other supports included the printing and delivering of homework and schoolwork materials for parents of children attending primary and secondary school, whilst homework support sessions were also conducted online via Zoom. Where possible we accessed additional resources to provide parents with computers and other equipment required to engage with online education. These were vital supports in reducing the overall levels of stress experienced by parents, enabling them in turn, to provide appropriate supports to their children.

As restrictions eased, an assessment was undertaken with each parent to agree on the most suitable method of intervention for them going forward and to discuss

what the focus of the sessions would be. Some parents expressed a desire to attend all sessions face-to-face. For others, a blended approach of virtual and face-to-face sessions suited them best. The reason for this choice was that it was anticipated that a flexible, hybrid model combining in-person and virtual service provision had the potential to increase access and address barriers to engagement for families. Barnardos have carried out a primary piece of research with staff members, children and families to evaluate and assess this hybrid model of working in the Barnardos context '*Working Together Online*' *A Barnardos Evaluation of Online Work with Children and Families*'. A mixed methods approach was employed for this evaluation where both quantitative and qualitative data was collected through online surveys with parents engaging in Barnardos services, an online survey and focus groups with Barnardos staff members, as well as interviews with children attending Barnardos services. The qualitative data collected was subject to thematic analysis and quantitative data was analysed by the Barnardos Best Practice Team. The findings of this evaluation were extensive and outlined many instances where both staff, children and families had received benefits from online service delivery and where access to services had increased. The report also highlighted the challenges of working online and has demonstrated that this model of working is not suitable in all cases (e.g. in circumstances where a child protection and welfare concern exists) but can be beneficial to increase accessibility of other support services to parents and families (Dunne & McCarthy, 2022).

Broadening the reach of parent support to all parents in Ireland during COVID-19 - organisational response and challenges

Barnardos offer a range of universal services and interventions to parents including group-work programmes (e.g. mindfulness for parents, parenting when separated, parent and baby groups and information seminars, and programmes supporting

parents of children with challenging behaviours. Provision of these group-based supports was greatly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions; however, where possible these programmes were facilitated online. Feedback gathered from participants of online supports was largely indicative of positive experiences. Notably, parents felt that online supports were important for those experiencing isolation, enabling them to feel supported and connect with others who were in similar situations or faced similar challenges. The easing of restrictions saw the re-introduction of face-to-face group programmes, with some modifications required to comply with public health guidelines. The number of parents allowed to attend group-work programmes had to be reduced temporarily but these services have been important in reducing feelings of isolation and enabling parents to experience a sense of community connection. Notably, this mixture of face-to-face and online delivery of programmes has continued up to present with important learnings for service innovation being gathered at an organisational level.

More generally, in recognition of the increased need for parenting support, Barnardos launched the National Parent Support Line (PSL) providing practical support and guidance on a variety of topics including talking to your children about COVID-19, managing children's routines and home-schooling, accessing fun and educational activities for families, and managing children's behaviour and worries. A resource section on the Barnardos website was also developed, which collated a range of resources under the themes of "Heart, Body and Mind". These focused on promoting parents' understanding and managing of emotions, and encouraged parents and children to foster feelings of kindness towards themselves and others. Breathing and relaxation exercises were included to help parents and children release tension from their bodies and connect with the present, as well as

mindfulness techniques. This online resource bank also provided supports for parent's own well-being and tips on how to engage in self-care. Additionally, the rapid move to online work and social activities was also identified as a potential threat to child safety during this period. In response, a series of videos were created to support parents and build their capacity to ensure children stay safe while online. These videos covered a range of topics such as helping your child cope during COVID-19, using parental controls on the internet, digital well-being and screentime, and how to encourage critical thinking online.

Where are we now?

As the restrictions associated with COVID-19 have gradually been removed, it is worth noting that not all families are experiencing recovery. Recent research in the UK highlighted how the easing of restrictions was associated with improvements in the social, emotional and behavioural well-being of children, yet vulnerable groups, particularly those with special educational needs and neurodevelopmental disorders and those from low-income families, did not experience this post-lockdown recovery and have continued to show elevated mental health symptoms (Skripkauskaitė et al., 2020). As a frontline service, Barnardos are witnessing continued increased demand for services, as parents struggle to re-introduce routines and structure in their households. Others continue to experience financial strain as they attempt to re-pay money borrowed from lenders during very challenging times of high-level restrictions and recoup lost savings. This comes at a time when Ireland is experiencing rising costs of living, with the CSO (*Consumer Price Index December 2021 - CSO - Central Statistics Office, 2021*) reporting price inflation for the fourteenth month in a row in

December 2021. An increased number of parents are also being referred to our services, struggling with a combination of mental health issues, homelessness, domestic violence, addiction issues, and relationship difficulties, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Without doubt, parental well-being has been negatively impacted because of the COVID-19 crisis. Our concern is, for not only the well-being of parents, but that of their children too. If left untreated, pandemic-related consequences felt by parents will cascade down and be reflected in the wellbeing of children. These early life experiences have the potential to determine lifelong health and well-being outcomes (Möller et al., 2016). Thus, the adverse impact of the pandemic on parents and their children must be addressed through a coordinated and long-term system of supports and services.

Sustaining parent well-being – learning from the COVID-19 pandemic

The experience of Barnardos, as a frontline service provider throughout the COVID-19 pandemic is illustrative of the need for a flexible, agile response to the difficult circumstances and evolving needs of vulnerable parents during this period. Key actions which were vital to supporting parental well-being included providing a free advice phone line for parents, developing online, well-being focussed resources. For more vulnerable families, a move to online service delivery, coupled with the maintenance of face-to-face support through socially distanced garden visits and (restriction compliant) home visits were a key aspect of the organisational response. Crucially, a recognition of parents and children's needs was central to shaping service provisions. Key issues such as economic hardship and food poverty were addressed by offering families hot meals, parcels of non-perishable goods and supermarket vouchers. Practical supports were also important in enhancing home environments during periods of isolation. A trauma-informed lens was brought to

all supports and interventions delivered during this period. This enabled us to maintain a sense of connection and support parents' well-being and promote positive parenting practices even in the face of unprecedented disruption to family life.

At present, we are supporting families to address issues that were amplified as a result of the COVID-19. We are noting an increase in parents being re-referred for support services as they face the increased stress and pressure associated with lockdowns and restrictions. We endeavour to meet the needs of all children and families who access our services in a flexible and responsive manner and will support them to strengthen parent-child relationships, to manage anxiety, to access services for housing, domestic violence and abuse, mental health and substance misuse, and to re-establish routines or healthy habits which they may have lost. We will continue to bring a holistic, heart body and mind approach to the delivery of our services, to promote well-being and to build resilience. Our organisational strategy for the period of 2022-2027 will build on and extend our trauma-informed work and will aim to support those who have experienced additional adversity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic longer term.

Recommendations

Barnardos will continue to develop and provide evidence-based and trauma informed services, which emphasise the importance of family well-being, prioritises mental health and aims to strengthen resilience. It is imperative that adequate government policy is developed and that funding is made available for practice provisions targeting vulnerable families in order to ensure that the gaps that were magnified by the COVID-19 crisis are closed, rather than deepened. In particular, we need to see:

- Commitment to expanded funding and financing for community and voluntary family support service provisions. These services are best placed to identify and respond rapidly to parent and family needs.
- While the COVID-19 pandemic placed strain on all families, the crisis has had disproportionate impact on vulnerable parents and children. Measures designed to support the most at-risk members of Irish society are vital. Government investment in children and families must be prioritised, including the introduction of measures to address poverty amongst vulnerable parenting groups and expanded funding of prevention and early intervention supports.
- Commitment to research and evaluation exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parental and child well-being in the Irish context and the effectiveness of supports targeted towards helping families recover from the recent upheaval and societal change.
- Additional resources are also needed to support access to mental health services for adults and children, particularly those who experience domestic violence/abuse, and for those individuals and families affected by substance misuse.

Conclusion

For the past two years, parents have faced great uncertainty and disruption in their lives with disproportionate impacts on the most vulnerable members of Irish society. For others, it has presented parents with, and forced them to confront, adversities for the first time. In order to improve life chances for children, we work

in collaboration with parents to increase their well-being and support them in the difficult task of parenting. We understand that promoting well-being and building resilience can combat toxic stress and adversity that has been compounded by COVID-19. As an organisation, we believe that we demonstrated great agility and flexibility in our approach to responding to the needs of vulnerable parents throughout the COVID-19 crisis. These changes to service provision were made possible due to the commitment and resourcefulness of all staff involved. However, we have seen the COVID-19 pandemic widen the gap of vulnerability for some, and we are concerned that closing this gap will be a significant challenge. Policies and practice, therefore, must be directed towards new approaches, which can promote resilience and support mental health and well-being in families. Given the enormous costs of developmental inequalities, the provision and evaluation of supports for parents to help them recover from the challenges of COVID-19 is vital and can have potentially far-reaching benefits for community well-being and the reduction in the need for later costly interventions.

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