



Let's Work It Out



Dublin
Community
Mediation

treoir

**RETHINK
IRELAND**

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PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY

 Riádas na Mínanas
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Let's Work It Out

An innovative response to the challenges of shared parenting

Summary

Let's Work it Out is an innovative pilot project to assist parents who wish to parent together but do not live together and who wish to develop their communication and collaborative shared parenting skills with the help of alternative dispute resolution methods.

Shared parents often have to rely on difficult to access Family Mediation Service or court proceedings to resolve disputes related to parenting or get appropriate supports where mediated agreements break down. Delays in accessing services or adversarial court processes often result in escalated conflict & parental relationship breakdown and have an adverse effect on their children's wellbeing.

Dublin Community Mediation (DCM) and Treoir have collaborated to provide timely supports for parents to resolve disagreements in shared parenting collaboration. The Treoir information service is the main entry point for shared parents who may then be referred to DCM using a screening process.

The benefits for parents include reduced conflict and increased communication skills, collaborative decision making and better conflict management by parents.

The aim of Let's Work it Out is better shared parenting; happier children; less parental stress and increased parental confidence.



Let's Work It Out

Let's Work It Out (LWIO) is a national pilot research and service delivery project offered by Dublin Community Mediation Services (DCM) in partnership with Treoir, an information and advocacy charity supporting lone parents. LWIO is focused on those who wish to share parenting of their children but live apart.

The Identified Need

The project is a collaboration between Treoir & DCM which provides online shared parenting support for parents who do not live together but parent together.

The need for such support has been identified by Treoir research and based on some 2000 calls per year for information and assistance in dealing with parental conflict. The Family Mediation Service with whom we are also conducting a sub-pilot of LWIO has also confirmed the enormous need for such a service and which they are unable to provide and they are very supportive of LWIO as delivered by DCM.

Our work with over 70 parents has shown how effective such timely interventions can be but it is resource intensive and currently, solely dependent on DCM volunteers for delivery. The pilot project is currently being evaluated by an independent researcher and results will be available in September 2022.

Aims

The project aims to address an existing service gap by focusing on the provision of tailored interventions aimed at building the confidence & skills of parents to manage their own parenting communication, collaborative parenting relationships & dispute resolution capability.

The Let's Work It Out programme aims ultimately to improve outcomes for the children of parents who do not live together but who wish to co-parent. It takes place against the backdrop of increasing rates of both relationship breakdown and births outside of stable relationships in Ireland, and limited options for parents in terms of access to appropriate support and assistance to effective joint parenting.



In 2020 Dublin Community Mediation, in collaboration with Treoir began discussions as to how DCM might be able to support Shared Parenting through the use of mediation. Through the combined experience of the two organisations, backed up by international research and anecdotal evidence from other agencies in the field of family support, it became clear that a new approach, beyond simply offering a traditional mediation service, was needed to meet the needs of parents who live apart but parent together.

This led to the development of a number of illustrative parenting models to guide and conceptualise our intentions and a range of focused alternative dispute resolution services which it was hoped would address the challenges faced by these parents to collaborate more effectively in their efforts to shared parenting. This also required considerable upskilling of our volunteer mediators and referral processes with in Treoir in our efforts to meet the needs of parents who were committed to develop their ability to share parenting their children.

The project does not offer parenting advice but sets out to use volunteers' knowledge of conflict resolution, prevention and containment skills and approaches to support parents shared parenting goals. A range of conflict management and alternative dispute resolution service offerings to support parents' joint decision making, communication skills development, and dispute resolution capability in the context of shared parenting. The development, testing and evaluation of this empowerment "model" of response to parents identified shared-parenting needs and goals is at the heart of the evaluation of LWIO pilot project which is currently underway.

Access to the service for the duration of the pilot project will be directly through referral from Treoir's Shared Parenting Officer for the duration of the pilot project which will continue until July 2022.

A link to Treoir is also available on the [DCM website](#). Further information on the project is also available on the [Treoir website](#).



Achievements To Date

To date, Phase 1 of the Let's Work it Out pilot project, which Dublin Community Mediation has been offering in collaboration with Treoir and FMS, has achieved the following...

- ✓ Supported 70 parents
 - ✓ Provided 350 online service delivery sessions (500 + hours)
 - ✓ 120 children benefited
 - ✓ Alleviation of courts lists, welfare, and family mediation services (not measured).
 - ✓ A New model of practice has been developed, trialed and refined in light of implementation (ongoing).
 - ✓ Developed a sub-pilot with FMS.
 - ✓ Ongoing training of 43 volunteers in model delivery,
 - ✓ Trained 20 volunteers in conflict management coaching, difficult conversations facilitation, restorative practices, etc.
 - ✓ Conducted reflective practice sessions (30) for parent support persons, mediators and conflict management coaches
 - ✓ Evaluation of pilot project (proof of model report available 31.8.22)
 - ✓ Strategic development and scaling plan supported/funded by Rethink Ireland.
 - ✓ Applied for funding for license for Reducing Parental Conflict resource materials and training from One Plus One (UK).
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Acknowledgements

The project has been overseen by a joint management group from Treoir and DCM.

This includes the project management and development team within DCM, who have so generously given an enormous contribution of their time, expertise and commitment to realizing the vision of the project and developing the operational protocols, practices, and administrative systems needed to deliver and evaluate it.

The project could not have succeeded without their immeasurable contributions, those of the 43 volunteer DCM mediators, and the DCM board who maintained the enabling governance structures and oversight of the project as it evolved.

Likewise, the success of the project could not have been achieved without the financial support and guiding hands of the Treoir CEO and Shared Parenting officer whose vision and enthusiasm for shared parenting provided one of the two pillars of the project.



DCM and Treoir were presented with an award by Rethink Ireland to develop this project in 2021 which has provided funding and consultancy support for the development and delivery of the services as well as the evaluation of the project.

This funding has enabled DCM to hire a paid part-time administrator for the duration of the project; provided consultancy support through their Accelerator Programme to develop a strategic plan for the scoping and scaling up of the project and with expert consultants to assist generate the funding necessary to maintain and scale the project in the future. Rethink Ireland have also funded the production of a promotional video and animation for the project. The project has hugely benefited from this recognition and support.



Future of Let's Work It Out

It is hoped that, building on pilot project and proof of model evaluation findings, we will continue project as at present or manageable scale as partnership between Treoir and DCM.

DCM volunteers would continue to refine and maintain service delivery and volunteer development on the assumption that financing can be secured for DCM operational management and resources to maintain service delivery. We will also develop LWIO training and learning resources to support parenting skills learning programme; and carry out impact evaluation on parents and children.

Phase 2 would also include a wider impact evaluation on parents, children and wider family support services, as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of the service model, subject to funding being achieved.

Detailed scoping of a potential Phase 2, as outlined in the project strategy developed with Rethink consultants, is currently underway as is work with their consultants to generate the necessary funding for the continuation and scaling of the project.

Let's Work It Out Management Team

DCM volunteers: Evelyn Power, Caroline Mc Namara, Eileen Beechinor, Lyndsey Reynolds, Pat Lynch, John Mulligan. Julie Kilroy (LWIO administrator).



Service Offerings

★ De-escalating conflict

We help parents individually or jointly to devise ways of reducing high intensity conflict interactions which may be getting in the way of shared parenting. The most important goal here is to help parents learn and use a variety of skills that are known to help take the heat out of interpersonal arguments and conflict so more constructive interactions around parenting can take place. It does not require direct communication between you to begin with but the goal is to make this possible in time as better parental communication leads to better outcomes for children.

★ Conflict Management / Communication Coaching (one to one)

We provide coaching support for parents who wish to learn how to deal with a dispute or resolve a conflict but are unsure how to do so. We help you find solutions for healthy communication which is not dependent on the other person with whom you are in conflict. We help you address what you find difficult about communicating with them and what you can do about it. You may wish to resolve a specific dispute or to learn new skills for resolving disputes and disagreement.

★ Telephone Mediation

A swift resolution to some parenting problems can relieve stress, prevent further escalation and meet children's needs when direct communication is not possible. Telephone mediation offers a time limited (90 mins) mediation process to resolve a single issue when direct communication between parents is not possible. The mediator will get agreement from both parents to engage in the process, will hear what the needs and preferred solutions of both parents are, and will propose a solution for consideration by both parents. The mediator will refine the solution based on the responses of each parent and parents will decide whether to agree to the refined solution or not. Parents will not negotiate with each other but only parents will decide if solutions proposed are acceptable or not. Written consent to any agreement is required. The mediator will decide whether settlement can be achieved or not if the time taken is exceeded. Multiple or complex issues are not suitable for this type of mediation but a shuttle mediation, which is less time constrained, may help.

★ Shuttle Mediation

We provide a problem-solving and negotiation service for those who for various reasons are not in a position to or ready to communicate directly with each other or engage in face-to-face mediation. Our mediators consult privately and confidentially with each parent and propose a settlement based on the needs of each parent and their children for parents to consider. The proposal is then refined until a mutually acceptable interim parenting



agreement is reached or not. Negotiation takes place through the mediator but both parents only decide whether proposed solutions are acceptable or not. Settlement agreements achieved in this way will be interim agreements for specified periods of time and reviewed or refined at an agreed date or through shuttle mediation or by remote face to face mediation by both parties if mutually agreed. Written consent to agreements negotiated will be required.

★ Facilitation Support for Difficult Conversations

We provide assistance for individuals, couples or families who are speaking to one another on a regular basis but need assistance to raise and conduct discuss contentious issues but who may be reluctant or fearful of doing so without support. The key task here is to learn what it is that helps or hinders constructive conversations and how to make the undiscussable discussable. The mediator will facilitate a conversation that helps parents learn about each other's values, preferences, communication and decision making styles. The primary purpose here is to enhance mutual understanding, and explore hopes and expectations for their shared parenting rather than to settle disagreements, which is the focus in mediation. It may result in better communication and of how parents shared parenting roles and relationship might better function. For example, conversations might explore hot topics such as introducing a new partner, proposed change of schools, blended families, and the impact of adverse health or employment events on shared parenting. The conversation will usually have a specific focus to discuss an agreed topic. The purpose is raise mutual awareness, understanding and explore creative options while introducing a variety of strategies tools and skills. The mediator as always will remain impartial

★ Conflict Management / Communication Coaching (Joint)

We provide coaching for those who have agreed to work together within and between joint sessions to address communication and shared parenting relationship problems. This may include repairing trust and communication breakdown, taking the heat out of conflict, managing conflicting values, re-negotiating roles and expectations or rebalancing power in shared parenting relationships. This may build on what has been learned in individual coaching or difficult conversations. Joint coaching provides both parents with an opportunity to work together to improve their communication, decision-making and collaborative skills. Parents must be committed to actively practice and test out the skills and strategies learned in the context of their shared parenting.

★ Preparing for Mediation

If you have decided you want to try mediation to resolve issues with your co-parent and are not familiar with how mediation works or how to make the most of the opportunity, we can help you understand the process. We will help you clarify your needs and what is important to you and your child and discuss the kinds of behaviour that helps and hinders the mediation process. We will also help you consider your negotiation skills and strategies for



achieving agreement with your child's other parent. This preparation can be provided for both parents. Preparing for mediation in this way both ensures parents are ready to negotiate and increases the likelihood of reaching mutually acceptable arrangements that serve the needs of their children.

★ Building a Shared Parenting Agreement

We support parents of children who may not have had or have ended their personal relationships but wish to build or maintain a shared parenting relationship in the interests of their child or children. We help parents create shared parenting plans or adapt existing parenting agreements to better serve the needs of your child/children in a way which takes account of your circumstances and resources. We offer both shuttle mediation (communication through the mediator) and face-to-face negotiated options for building initial parenting agreements as needed through Zoom or in person, when possible, at our offices. Shared Parenting agreements may cover some or all shared-parenting issues and may be interim agreements or longer term as fits the needs of parents and children. Court ordered parenting arrangements cannot be changed without the agreement of the court. However we can help parents negotiate adjustments or changes to be jointly presented to the court to request adjustment of orders where both parents agree.

★ Resolving Implementation Problems With Parenting Agreements

We provide support for those who may have already negotiated parenting agreements through mediation or those who may have court directed agreements in place but may need further assistance to implement and or refine their agreements. While any adjustments to court agreements will need to be sanctioned by the court, we help parents to deal with the challenges of implementing their parenting agreements or agreeing changes they might want to request the court to sanction. This will include negotiating agreements, creating innovative solutions to implementation problems that arise and make the necessary adjustments to ensure your child's care and wellbeing is prioritised. Getting to a place where your parenting agreement works really well for you, your co-parent and children can take time. We can help refine your parenting plan so that it suits you both, and keeps your children's best interest at the very centre of it.

★ Dispute Resolution Involving Extended Family Members and/or Others With Childcare Roles

We also provide multiparty mediation to resolve tensions and disagreements between parents, grandparents and others involved in the child's care as needed. This may be on requests from parents, grandparents, or others seeking assistance in resolving specific disputes relevant to the care of the child. As always all have to agree to engage in the mediation process before mediation can commence. While it is best if a joint application to enter mediation is agreed in advance between those involved, we can also offer some assistance to engage with those who may not yet be committed to mediation.





Voice of the Child

For parents who may not agree on what the best interests of the children are and wish to incorporate the views and interests of the children as expressed by the children themselves. We will interview the children independently (as age appropriate and with consent of both parents) to ascertain their views and contribute to shared parenting agreements. NOTE: This service is not currently being offered online as we are only providing services remotely via Zoom during Covid 19 restrictions) However, we will continue to raise awareness of and balance the potential differences between each parent's view as to what is important for their child and what the child themselves may view as important from their perspective.

