

## Paths of learning during Covid-19 lockdown

*by Anne McCluskey*

I retired from my job as a school principal in September 2019 and was just beginning the significant adaptation to a different pace of life when the first Covid-19 lockdown happened, in March 2020. I took early retirement for several reasons, not so much to do different things as to be a different person – healthy, relaxed, sociable, energetic, helpful, creative, etc. Perhaps perfection would be within my grasp if I didn't have enormous responsibility and an impossible workload. My family hoped that I could be more patient, kind and a better listener. They told me this in frequent, soul-jolting confrontations. Overall, they too wished I could be a perfect person (just as they are!).

For me, part of the joy of retirement is the opportunity to engage with ongoing learning. This article describes my path of learning over a number of months, both formally, through my participation in facilitator training for Circle of Security Parenting (hereafter COSP), and informally, through the context that is life during the Covid-19 pandemic. In no way does this article attempt to give a comprehensive account of Circle of Security Parenting concepts or training, although I hope, on reading it, many foster carers and caregivers of young children will seek out the opportunity to participate in this wonderful programme. The article is rather a personal reflection of my own experience at an extraordinary time. As for many people, it has been a time for self-reflection and awareness in the midst of much anxiety and fear, especially for elderly and vulnerable family and friends.

I have never been very house proud, and attempts at keeping our home acceptably, if minimally, clean and clutter-free were generally thwarted by two dogs, a very busy working day and my disdain for the 'kills all known germs' sprays. However, in March 2020, I stocked up on toxic cleaning agents in the hope that they would kill the unknowable Coronavirus, stuck big signs on the doors reminding the family to wash their hands, and went into a cleaning frenzy. I quoted Leo Varadkar in my constant instructions to keep all surfaces clean, and hurried around after household members, spotting their germs everywhere.

I was anything but patient and I listened only to Leo and Dr Tony Holohan. All my

kindness was used up during the six o'clock news – my kindness was for them, with their huge responsibilities, for healthcare workers and cleaners and for the families who suffered so horribly at that time from isolation, illness and bereavement. Like many people, I listened to too much radio analysis of the evolving Covid-19 crisis and its trail of misery and fear. Despite being retired and being unable to socialise with friends or visit family outside a 5km radius, I seemed to be very busy and exhausted and indeed wondered if I would be able for the COSP training, which was due to start at the end of April. In addition, my symptomatic son was isolating in his bedroom, an isolation that involved considerable fear, anxiety and many trips up and down the stairs on my part, delivering food and drink. He later tested negative for Covid-19.

The Circle of Security Parenting programme is a relationship-based programme whose goal is to promote secure attachments between infants and their caregivers, parents, foster carers, grandparents – anyone with a significant caregiving role in the child's life. It is not a behaviour management programme. *A Children and Youth Services Review* article elaborates: 'The program is designed to promote attachment security in early parent/child relationships through supporting and strengthening the caregiver's skills in observing and understanding the children's needs: observational and inferential skills; reflective functioning; emotion regulation and empathy for the distress that the caregiver's unregulated emotions cause in their children.' (Powell et al, 2013:2)

The COSP programme has been developed by clinical practitioners Kent Hoffman, Glen Cooper and Bert Powell over the past 20 years. It draws on object relations, attachment theory and family systems theory. Between them, the co-originators have decades of experience of working and developing relationships with families and individuals who have suffered lifetimes of poverty, substance misuse, homelessness and mental health problems.

COS International had planned this round of training to take place in Dublin but, under global turmoil, developed it as an online course. Without a doubt it was a loss not to have had the opportunity to be part of a group while processing this deeply personal learning, but to do the training while confined to home with my adult children during lockdown was revelatory, challenging and a privilege.

I joined more than 70 others in the first group of online trainees. We were required to download the chapter materials and watch two or three video inputs from family

therapist Bert Powell on each of the eight chapters of the COSP programme. The COSP programme is run in a minimum of eight 90-minute sessions with a group of no more than eight parents. Optimally, parents will be taking care of a child aged between four months and six years, but the programme can also benefit parents of older children.

The programme demands time and attention and there were many distractions and interruptions in my house (although, probably fewer than in many homes) but the content was crystal clear and riveting. After every two chapters, explored over two or three days, we participated in a 90-minute Zoom discussion, facilitated by Glen Cooper and Angie Dierdorff. (Apologies to all those not acknowledged here, who clearly assisted with the very impressive and largely smooth-running training project.) It was my first experience of Zoom – like most others – and I found it difficult to fully participate in a discussion with such a large group in an online forum. (COSI are working on improving this as it was new to them also).

As a foster carer and as a teacher for almost 40 years, I have done many parenting and behaviour management programmes including: *New Horizon* training for new and prospective foster carers; *Marte Meo* parenting; *Six steps parenting* and *Understanding trauma and attachment* with psychotherapist Christina Enright (with whom I have collaborated to deliver training to schools on the impact of trauma and attachment difficulties); *Incredible Years*<sup>1</sup>; and *Restorative Practice*<sup>2</sup>. I learned something from all of these, but mostly I have learnt from the hundreds of wonderful and complicated children I have worked with over my lifetime.

Dr Marian O'Flynn, a senior psychologist with the HSE, also my friend and casual mentor, directed me to COSP as a programme that might benefit me in my work delivering training and support to schools working with children who have experienced trauma and loss and, indeed, in my personal journey. The relationship between the caregiver and child is described as a 'Circle' in which the caregiver stays consistently at the centre – as 'The Hands' from which the child moves towards and away from in a natural rhythm. When an adult is observing the child's behaviour in terms of needs, and is available as the 'Bigger, Stronger, Wise and Kind hands' at the centre, the child can explore with confidence and know that he or she can return for comfort, reassurance and joyful affirmation as needed.

Although the concepts were familiar to me, nonetheless I found the training fascinating.

And although I took some comfort from the assurance that it is never too late, I fervently wished I'd had the benefit of this learning when my children were younger, when they first came to live with us aged five and six. We were new to parenting and I certainly feel that had we focused more on our relationships and been more observant and inferential, we might have been less stressed and more positive and confident in our parenting of children who had experienced significant trauma and loss. Or perhaps, had we been less stressed and more confident, we might have been able to be more observant and inferential about their behaviour. It certainly felt like a hamster wheel of a cycle!

Research into the efficacy of the Circle of Security Parenting programme for foster carers was recently published in Australia (Krishnamoorthy et al, 2020). It stated: *'Foster carers who participated in COSP reported reductions in levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties for the children in their care. They also reported reductions in parent-child dysfunctional interactions and parental distress. Finally, program completion appeared to be associated with a reduction in foster carers' perceptions of their foster child as being difficult to take care of, and with lower levels of overall stress related to their role as a foster carer.'*

(Krishnamoorthy et al, 2020:1)

This study outlines the 'elevated caregiving burden' carried by foster carers. The authors claim that there has been little evidence of successful training interventions, or indeed research in this area (ibid, 2020:1). While the study sample of just 54 carers, of whom just 51 returned data, does not provide a significantly representative sample, it is heartening to have confirmation of what we intuitively feel: that lowered stress levels are associated with more positive perceptions of the child's behaviour. Interestingly, the authors point out that, although it is a relationship-based programme, participation in the COSP had no effect on the Parent Child Relationship Index scores. The Parent-Child Relationship Inventory examines the quality of the foster carer-child relationship (PCRI: Gerard, 1994 Western Psychological Services) These scales yield a general impression of the quality of the parent-child relationship while simultaneously providing a quantified depiction of each of the relationships' characteristics e.g. a Likert scale of 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' with statements on parenting such as: *'I get as much satisfaction from having children as other parents do'* and communication: *'my child generally tells me when something is bothering him or her.'* (Krishnamoorthy et al, 2020:3). While caregivers' own stress levels showed a significant change – reduction – after participating in the COSP

programme, children's behaviour showed a small but non-significant improvement. The small and non-significant changes in the emotional symptoms on the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) appears important given the profile of children referred to the ETS service (Evolve Therapeutic Service), who exhibit severe and complex mental health concerns (ibid, 2020:6).

At the outset of our training, we were reminded that if we didn't have a child to 'practice' with, we could observe a pet in understanding how to interpret needs on the circle and our own response. I had two: a squirmy new puppy and a mature, nervous dog.

Given that we could not easily discuss the course content with other trainees, we were encouraged to outline it to those we lived with, always a good way of consolidating learning. Gulp. For me this was to be a somewhat confessional experience. As outlined, in COSP a relationship between caregiver and child is conceptualised as a circle with hands (a secure base) at the centre which a child will move from and return to according to his or her developmental needs. Fearful, internal 'shark music' can interfere with the caregiver's availability to 'be the hands'. Many of us will understand this as 'emotional baggage', 'history', 'background' or 'stuff'. Everybody has shark music to some degree and in my advanced years, albeit with some discomfort, I can identify my shark music and how it has interfered with my being able to respond and meet my children's needs in a 'Bigger, Stronger, Wise and Kind' way. Sometimes. Remember, though: never too late!

I explored this with my family at the dinner table one evening. Now then. They were gloriously, almost vociferously vindicated! It turns out they 'knew that already'. I tried to explore the idea of 'good enough' parenting. That mistakes are inevitable and human frailty is a given. *Never* meeting their needs seems like an awful long time, just as *always* missing their cues seems like it would have prevented just such a family discussion. But, as any of you who are parents know, forgiveness comes dropping slow and teenage and adult children see their parents' faults and failings with dazzling clarity. In fact, it began to seem that the dinner discussions based on my reflections on the days' training and my own parental shortcomings were often more tasty than the food. I was, however, heartened that, as adults, my children could clearly see their own early behaviour as [a form of] communication rather than badness or innate personality traits. This is entirely correct and as it should be. On the other hand, their view of my parenting behaviour

was not so...so...open? Compassionate?

More positively, though sometimes less interesting to them, I remembered vividly the delight we experienced in their play and achievements and, of course, in our relationship with them. Having longed to be parents for years, our holidays and time shared outdoors with these young children were enchanting to us as we huffed and struggled to keep up, noticed the latest treasure and solved the various crises. COSP describes the need of the child for a caregiver to delight in them as they move away to explore or as they come back for comfort. Our children were truly delightful. Still are, in fact, especially when they clean up without being asked. Less successful, perhaps, were the times where they struggled with strong emotions and we drove ourselves, and them, demented with behaviour management strategies such as star charts and rewards. If I had known then what I now know, I wouldn't have wasted my time or energy. Very happily, our young adults have different hindsight and during one of the dinner dissections of my day's immersion in COSP facilitator training, one of our children observed that, *"At least we were easy to manage; we didn't give much trouble."* Right.

I had the opportunity to practice 'Being the Hands' on the Circle of Security with our new puppy. Her training was a project largely taken on by myself and my daughter. We were determined to do it right. While we have always lived with dogs, rescued as young adults, we had never had a puppy. This puppy would be crate trained; she would happily return to her crate on command and see that as her den or safe place. The hours of YouTube clips on crate training indicate that this can be tricky and requires patience and time. Weeks and weeks were spent giving her time and treats in the crate.

My husband's questions pointed towards a more negative concept – *"What is she in the cage for?"* he asked one day. We explained that she was in there because she was tired and we wanted her to associate it with sleeping and comfort. And that it is NOT A CAGE. However, as our older, and much bigger, dog snuggles up to us on the sofa, this didn't seem fair to my husband. The puppy overheard this discussion and agreed. One night, at about 2am when I went down to settle her for about the sixth time, I resorted to banging a rolled-up newspaper against the wall and saying firmly; *"Bed"*.

The following day I learned, to my embarrassment, about being Bigger, Stronger, Wiser and Kind in the next COSP chapter. The loud bang and voice were neither 'Wise' nor 'Kind', and of course, didn't meet her need. Now the puppy sleeps on the sofa beside the

big dog. She happily hops in the crate for dinner time and if we're staying in another house. This may count as successful learning? She has me trained.

Exploring the COSP concepts with my family allowed me the opportunity to really understand the programme while also to humbly reflect on my own parenting style and to 'fess up' to some of the mistakes I made and, yes, yes indeed, continue to make. Krishnamoorthy et al's research (2020), although conducted with a small sample, indicates that participation in the COSP programme led to lowered stress levels in the group of foster carers. Most importantly, lowered stress levels were found to be associated with more positive perceptions of their relationships with the children in their care, although this was not significantly borne out by the data.

As a teacher, with every new learning about attachment, I am always struck by the implications for the relationships between school staff – teachers and SNAs – and children who have experienced trauma and loss. Louise Michelle Bomber (2010) reminds us that children who have experienced developmental trauma do not respond consistently to rewards and sanctions. Positive behaviour management strategies often fail to reduce or eliminate challenging behaviour and teachers can be left feeling frustrated, professionally undermined and stressed when working with these children. There is a significant need to develop training and supports for attachment-aware and trauma-informed policies and practices in school.

Pessimistic advisers say that you're never finished worrying about your children, but, would I really want to be? Now in their early adulthood, our children would never choose to spend the time at home that the pandemic has forced them to. Nor would I want them to, normally. Arguably, the lockdown has been harder on teenagers and young adults than on most age groups and certainly it has been difficult for our young adults when they cannot plan, socialise freely, explore and be youthfully reckless. So, I cannot say I am glad we were/are locked down together but it has certainly given me a wonderful lesson in life and relationships. Relationships are dynamic and although I may concede on perfection, I am up for the ongoing challenge to change – for the better – whilst accepting myself, growing number of warts and all. Training as a COSP facilitator has been a wonderful opportunity for learning and development in all my relationships. As to being locked down with those I love (yes, really), during the pandemic restrictions: enough already.

## About the author

Anne is a foster carer and retired principal of a DEIS primary school. She has more than 15 years' experience in the area of educational disadvantage and has campaigned vigorously for improvements in educational supports for Traveller children. She has developed in-service training for primary and post-primary school teachers, aimed at increasing an understanding of the risks faced by children in care. Her course for teachers on attachment, trauma and learning, has been run in collaboration with child psychotherapist Christina Enright, under the auspices of Dublin West Education Centre.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [www.incredibleyears.com](http://www.incredibleyears.com). The Incredible Years (IY) programme consists of three elements – a small group called Dina, a parent programme and classroom management. Training in IY classroom management is supported by DES through the National Educational Psychological Service. It is being offered to teachers of infant classes in mainstream schools on a rolling basis, with priority given to DEIS schools.

<sup>2</sup> RP is both a philosophy and a set of skills that have the core aim of building strong relationships and transforming relationships in a simple and emotionally healthy manner. [www.cdi.ie](http://www.cdi.ie)

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