














'Hear me today, for my happier tomorrow'

Children and Young Persons' (CYP)
Family Meeting

What is it?

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Introduction

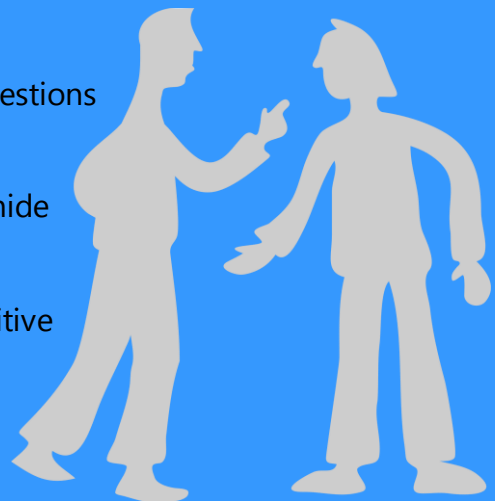
The emotional impact of parents' separation on children is well documented. Conflict between parents causes stress and anxiety, putting unnecessary psychological burdens onto young shoulders.

In an ideal world, living and contact arrangements should be worked out between the parents, with the children's best interests at heart. There is a lot of evidence to show that parental collaboration is associated with better child adjustment. However, for some separating couples they are unable to reach a mutual agreement by themselves or through mediation. So, litigation or court proceedings begin and the children become involved in stressful hearings where they see their parents battling things out. The court system is by its very nature, adversarial, and encourages parents to pitch themselves against each other. Currently in the UK, around 10% of separating parents go through court proceedings.

High Conflict Families

Often in high conflict families, where court is the only option, the children are more likely to suffer. Often damage has already been inflicted whilst the parents were still together and court only serves to exacerbate an already difficult situation for children:

- Asking children to carry hostile messages to the other parent
- Arguing openly in front of the children
- Asking children intrusive or accusatory questions about the other parent
- Creating a need in the children to hide information
- Creating a need for the children to hide positive feelings for the other parent
- Putting down the other parent in the presence of the children
- Children who blame themselves for their parents' fighting have also been found to be at greater risk of poor social and emotional adjustment following their parents' separation.



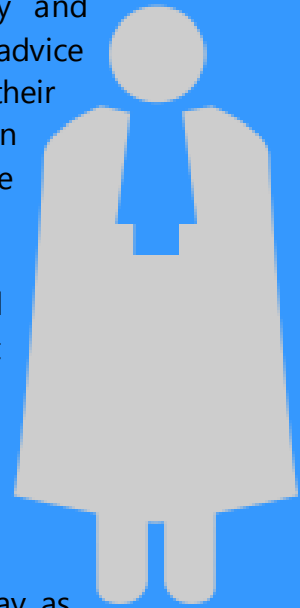
Lengthy Court Process

Little Voice is providing an alternative or complementary service to court proceedings. Whilst at all stages of the court process, separated parents are encouraged to arrive at a mutual agreement regarding arrangements for the children based on the child(ren)'s wishes and feelings, the reality often

falls short.

The court process is lengthy, costly, and we believe it sets up families to fail. If you pursue court proceedings, this is the process:

- Firstly you will have to attend a MIAM (Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting) to determine whether mediation can provide a resolution to the dispute of child arrangements.
- If mediation fails or is not appropriate, court proceedings can be started by applying for a court order.
- Aside from where the children should spend their time the court can also deal with specific issues such as which school a child will attend or prevent one parent taking the children abroad for example.
- CAFCASS, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service for England and Wales will provide advice to the courts about the wellbeing of children and their families. They will usually talk to each of the parents on the phone before the first court appointment and write a letter to the court.
- At the first court hearing, the judge or magistrate will read what Cafcass has written and may listen to what the parents have to say and then make a decision. A report by Cafcass will usually only be ordered if the court is concerned that there are issues that concern a child's welfare.
- If a report is ordered there will be considerable delay as CAFCASS will want to see both the parents and the children and possibly the school and anyone else involved in the child's care. Possibly **3 to 6 months** later a hearing date will be arranged, at all stages you will be encouraged to settle out of court. A judge may delay hearing dates several times to encourage resolution.



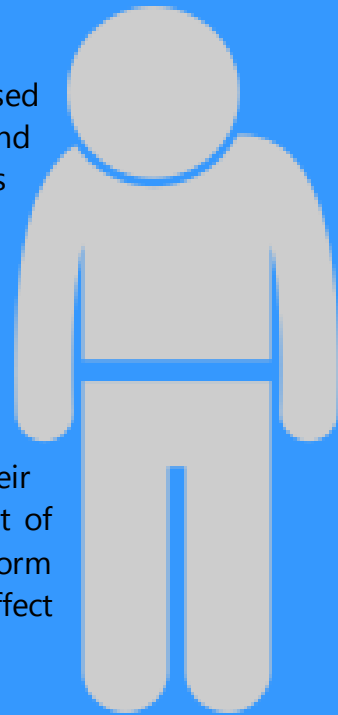
The whole process can be extremely lengthy and very stressful for all involved. This can be particularly hard for the children, whose very limited understanding of what is going on, coupled with stressed or angry parents, making them feel very confused.

**Parental
Conflict Damages
Children's
Mental Health**

In March 2016, the EIF (Early Intervention Foundation) were commissioned by the Department of Work and Pensions to carry out a review of 'What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children'. EIF collaborated with Professor Gordon Harold, a world expert in child development and the role of the family in children's psychological development, and his team at the University of Sussex to produce the report.

The key findings of the [report](#) included:

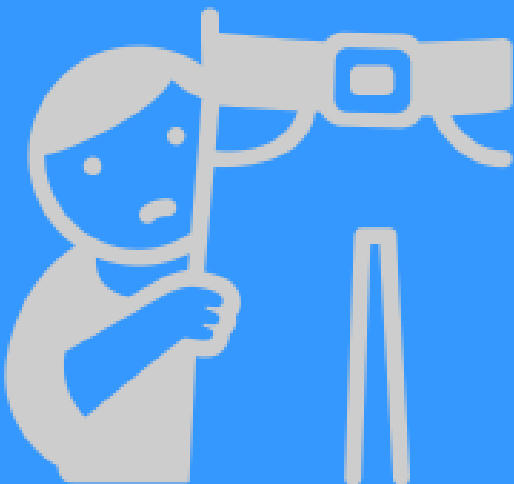
- Parents embroiled in hostile and distressed relationships are typically more hostile and aggressive toward their children and are less responsive to their children's needs.
- Children who witness severe, ongoing and unresolved inter-parental conflict can be aggressive, hostile and violent. Others can develop low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and, in extreme cases, be suicidal. It also reduces their academic performance and limits the development of their social and emotional skills and ability to form positive relationships themselves, all of which will affect the long-term life chances of children.



- Inter-parental conflict can adversely affect both the mother-child and father-child relationships, with evidence suggesting that the association between inter-parental conflict and negative parenting practices may be stronger for the father-child relationship compared to the mother-child relationship.
- Interventions which seek to improve parenting skills in the presence of frequent, severe and unresolved inter-parental conflict – without addressing that conflict – are unlikely to be successful in improving child outcomes.

There has been much research recently into the outcomes for children exposed to destructive relationships/conflict. In this report, a summary which includes the findings of research carried out by several independent bodies is very telling:

- A common outcome of destructive conflict between parents is the development of emotional or behavioural difficulties for children (Grych et al., 2003; Cummings et al., 2006).
- Children's own social relationships can also be affected, with children prone to developing poor interpersonal skills (Finger et al., 2010). As a result, children and young people in high conflict homes may have difficulties getting on with others, such as parents (Benson et al., 2008), siblings (Stocker and Youngblade, 1999), teachers, peers (Parke et al., 2001) and, in the longer term, romantic partners (Cui and Fincham, 2010).
- Children are also at risk of a range of health difficulties (Troxel and Matthews, 2004; El-Sheikh et al., 2008), including: digestive problems, fatigue (El-Sheikh et al., 2001), reduced physical growth (Montgomery et al., 1997), and headaches and abdominal pains (Stiles, 2002).



- They may also suffer with problems sleeping (Mannering et al., 2011). Difficulties can extend into school, with children less able to settle, more likely to have trouble getting on with peers, and less likely to achieve academically because of the impact of conflict between parents on children's cognitive abilities and attention (Harold et al., 2007).

What have we learnt?

Fundamental changes are needed in the family courts, in order to prioritise mental health in children and parents, with lawyers urging more focus on alternative dispute resolution.

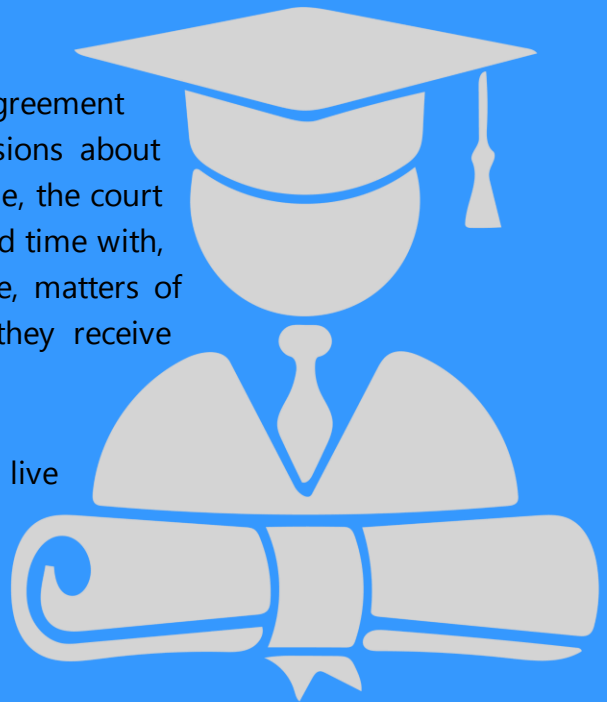
Since the introduction of the Child Arrangement Programme (CAP) as well as public funding cuts, there has been a sharp rise in the amount of litigants-in-person: during the 2017/18 financial year only 36% of parties in private law cases were recorded as having legal representation, whereas in the 2012/13 financial year the number was at 58%. Legal experts say this has further increased the pressures on the courts, the professionals, the parties and the children involved.

The former CEO of Cafcass, Anthony Douglas, said that “court has become the default option for too many unhappy separators”, suggesting that other means of dispute resolution are not being considered.

These pressures are recognised at the very top with The Rt Hon. Sir Andrew McFarlane, President of the Family Division, who urged those working in the family courts to focus on ‘wellbeing.’

Furthermore, when parents cannot reach an agreement the court is asked to make ‘fundamental’ decisions about the children’s identity and self-worth. For example, the court can decide on where a child lives, who they spend time with, where they go to school, what name they have, matters of upbringing and religion and whether or not they receive medical treatment.

This ‘revolving door’ process forces families to live with the day-to-day implementation of ‘court orders,’ often leading to repeated litigation, resulting in children suffering from long-term behavioural problems and mental health issues.



In accordance to the Children’s Act 1989 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), it is a legal requirement for the child to be heard and their wishes and feelings to be taken in to consideration when making a decision about their wellbeing,

especially during the court process. This process, quite often, sets the child/ren or young person up to fail, as in many cases and case studies show, either the child:

- becomes a good 'Actor' or a 'People Pleaser' and does not 'truthfully' engage with the professional;
- is too scared to express their wishes and feelings;
- feels guilty about the parents separating and blame themselves;
- cannot process or understand the conflict and or the separation.



This list is not exhaustive, as each child has his/her own experience which is personal to them. But unfortunately, due to the over subscription of services within the court process, quality work offering the flexibility with time and number of sessions is not an option.



Children are asked about their wishes and feelings whilst going through the court process, through their Cafcass provision. This can often be very daunting for the individuals involved, rendering a skewed version of the truth. As with any process, children or young people will just say what they think will 'please' the parents to try and divert any conflict during the separation, as stated above. Please see our Case Studies for more examples.

Little Voice - The next step

We at Little Voice are a cast of stellar professionals who have identified a gap in provision for children and families. We are gravely concerned by the correlation between the court process and the mental health impact on children or young teens. After much training research and experience of working with families, children and young people, within children's social care, educational and community settings, stuck in the '**revolving door**' culture, we came up with a solution to fill the gap in effective, child focused services.

Little Voice Children's and Young Persons' (CYP) Family Meeting was created as a service that connects the dots and paves the way for open and honest dialogue with a '**restorative approach**' so that the true voice of children and young people can be heard. In addition, it ensures not only that they are heard safely, but also creates a forum within the family, for their wishes and feelings to be acted on, without the delays of the court system.



The essence of Little Voice is to empower children and young people to have emotional resilience and the power to show up and be heard in a safe, managed space. It is intended to promote and strengthen family ties, and to foster an ancient traditional approach of families getting together for a 'Pow Wow,' to solve their own problems, without intervention from external agencies.

Little Voice revives the concept of the traditional family meeting, empowering families to manage their own conflicts and to respect the wishes and feelings of their children in a safe and managed way



Our process connects with children and young people by using many tried and tested [resources](#) which identifies and clearly plots their emotional journey from the outset.

Little Voice - The 5 W's

We have carefully put together 'The 4 W's' to demonstrate the experience, process and ethos of the **Little Voice Children and Young Persons' (CYP) Family Meeting**



Geeta Pendaer – Founder. A seasoned professional in Family Group Conference (Senior Practitioner) and Mediation, worked in many local authorities, giving her a broad demographic experience of families throughout the UK. In addition, Geeta is trained in NLP (Dr Richard Bandler), Hypnotherapy Masters, Mindfulness, Dancing Mindfulness (Dr Jamie Marich) and Mindful Self Compassion (MSC). Her training and practice lends itself to facilitate professional conferences, meetings and therapy, combined in a unique way with successful resolutions, embracing the whole-child ethos.

Geeta was a Looked After Child (LAC) and a Ward of Court in the mid 1970's. Her experience of being in the care system is a vital component in the founding of Little Voice, as she has experienced and identified the gaps 'first-hand.'

In addition, the birth of Little Voice came about when Geeta was approached by someone who was struggling to keep her children happy after leaving her husband, a covert narcissist, who was now 'controlling' the children and pushing her boundaries by using and manipulating the children with gifts, activities and much more. This behaviour

"Please can you help,
my children are crying
out for help, they
cannot take the
conflict anymore"

impacted negatively on the children and young teens to the point that one of them broke down with distress and yelled out 'I can't stand the conflict.'

Olga Jeanette Preston – Teacher and Tutoring Business Owner, brings her education experience to the forefront. Having worked with the children and young people, both in school settings and Alternative Education Provisions, Olga also identified with the complex issues children and young persons' are faced with within their families, particularly when they feel that no one understands them and feel that they are 'unheard.'



The Little Voice Children and Young Persons' (CYP) Family Meeting is all about bringing the old fashioned way of resolving issues in the family, by the family. The focus is on the children and young people within the family. It is about empowering children to have their voice heard, identifying support and resolving the issues with the support of the extended family, in a managed and safe way. It is intended to manage conflict through family breakdown without the need for constant external intervention.

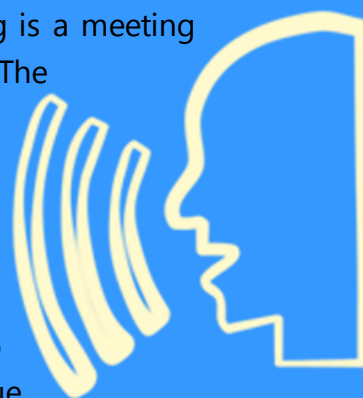
Over the years within the fast-moving world that we live in today, communication has broken down, families have become dysfunctional, and communities disparate. This has resulted in a complete shutdown of any traditional form of resolution within the family or community unit, resorting to the intervention of external agencies.

These agencies are driven by systems and processes to try and fix broken families and communities. In some cases, intervention is required, but in many cases, a traditional family 'pow wow' is usually all that is needed.



The Family Group Conference Model was designed to adopt traditional ways of dealing with family issues to keep the children within the family and prevent placement into social care.. It was introduced to keep the children who were at risk of going into care within their own culture by empowering family and friends to create a safe plan. These key people within the family would be empowered to address the concerns of the local authority or agencies to put a healthy care plan together for the child/ren or young person, with a member within the family to be accountable to.

Little Voice – Children Young Persons' (CYP) Family Meeting is a meeting facilitated by trained professionals, called '**Speakers.**' The professionals are addressed as 'Speakers' as that is exactly what they do. They meet with each child and or young person after gaining their trust, by following the Family Group Conference model combining the Mediation process enveloped with a holistic element, strengthening the individuals and empowering them to be able to communicate their wishes and feelings with a sense of value for themselves.





The Little Voice Children and Young Persons' (CYP) Family Meeting is child-centred and child-led, with all its focus on managing their wishes and feelings in a safe and holistic way. It will include all family members and friends that are able to provide a safe network to support the children and young people within the family. This is done by way of an agreement, managed by a nominated member (selected by the child or young person) within the family. This person will be accountable for the management of the wishes and feelings of the child or young person that has selected them.

The process is started by a referral being made at any time and will take from 6-8 weeks from the referral onset. Furthermore, this is a **'Voluntary Self-Referral'** process that is offered to and can be made by:

- Children and Young People (CYP)
- Parents, friends and relatives
- Social Workers
- Schools/Colleges
- GP Surgeries
- Any Professionals working with children and young people



The 'Referrer' is signposted to a helpline and advice via the website, that guides them through to start the voluntary self-referral process. The information is processed carefully by Professional Information Handlers, who will appropriately allocate the 'Referrer' to the right 'Speaker.' Please see the **Process on page 15 below.**



Many families within social care and outside of it fall through the cracks of the rigid legal system in place today.



Why

The current provision of services within the social care system, although intended to support families to become safer and healthier, often practice with a lack of empathy and understanding of the individuals involved. Many Children and Young People slip through the net as they present as OK. They become people-pleasers but struggle on the inside, trying to make sense of their feelings and emotions, leaving them emotionally exhausted, angry and anxious.

Case studies:

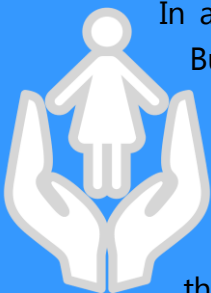
- People-pleasers
- Duchenne Smile
- All that glitters is not gold - [Narcissistic Parents and the impact on their CYP](#)



One size does not fit all.

Social services for children and young people are quite often limited with the appropriate and bespoke support that they can provide. In some cases, lack of understanding and training is an issue, but more often the 'tick box' culture adopted in the processes have limited the ability to explore 'outside the box.'

Each family and their experience is unique to them, as is the trauma surrounded by that experience. Therefore, a six-week session with the 'already' over-subscribed agency, CAMHS, is not always the solution for the child or young person. Referrals for the service has, of recent times had a 200 day response time.



In addition, CAFCASS offers support to families, children and young people. But research shows that families, children and young people feel like they have been set up to fail, when the case goes into the court arena, regardless of their submitted report. This leaves the children and young people feeling let down by the very system that is in place to protect them and listen to them in accordance to the Rights of The Child and the Children's Act 1989.

This causes the CYP to feel they cannot speak or trust any professional that approaches to help them in the future, hence them shutting down and disengaging. This causes the CYP to internalise all their feelings and emotions, which then manifests in behavioural issues, acute mental health problems and sadly, in some cases, suicide.



With all this in mind, it has been identified that a need for a more tailored and bespoke approach is evident, to empower the family with emotionally resilient and emotionally intelligent children and young persons for healthier adults tomorrow.

This can only be achieved by really 'listening' to the individuals, supporting them through their concerns, and bringing them to a place of safety, through a restorative process and practice. This process is a combination of mediation models and therapy.



This restorative process will benefit the CYP, promoting and empowering them with emotional resilience today for a stronger, healthier, happier tomorrow.



Meetings are organised by the 'Speaker' after each child/ren and or young person, family members and friends have been met with, as per the process. The 'Speaker' invites all the family members as per the request of the children and young persons.

An appropriate venue is selected, and details are sent out to all family and friends within the network, including the children and young persons

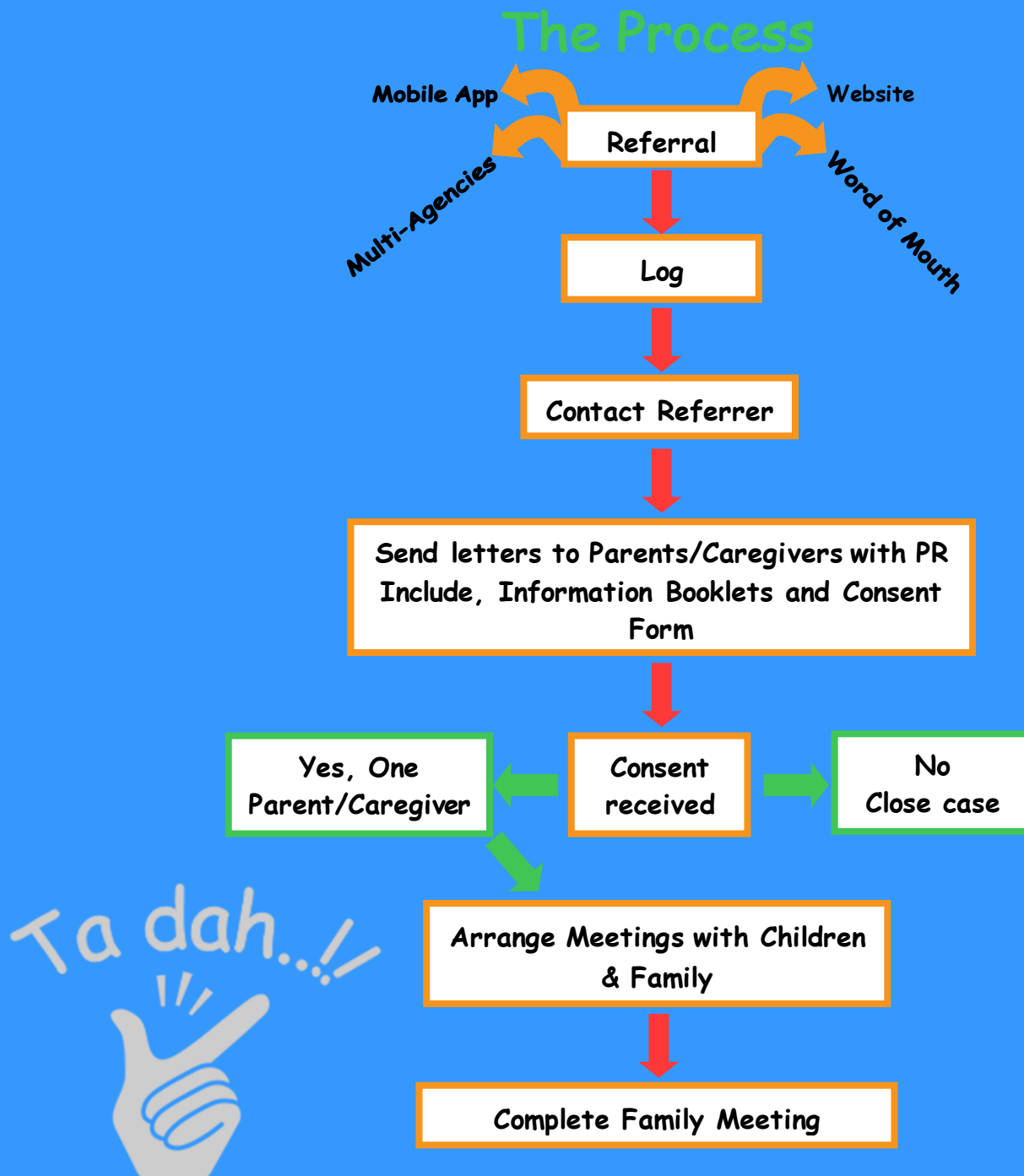
Due to COVID-19 guidelines, all meetings will be conducted via Zoom.



All meetings offer an Advocate for the child/ren or young persons, should they need one. This will be a nominated family member or friend (Adult)

Little Voice - The Process

This is a voluntary, self-referral process which is carried out by professionals who are trained in our 3 Step Model, which consists of a family meeting using mediation, family group conferencing and holistic coaching/counselling modalities. Once trained, they are known as 'Speakers' who are carefully allocated to meet with the children and or young peoples' needs, including cultural competences. The Little Voice Children and Young Self-Process is as follows:



Little Voice - The Benefits

The Little Voice Children and Young Persons' (CYP) Family Meeting process has proved to have many benefits, which includes the following:

- Empowering children and young people with the confidence to speak out truthfully and having their voices heard in a safe forum.
- Promoting children and young people with self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Promotes awareness and understanding of 'showing up' for parents and caregivers



- Promotes stronger, healthier relationships between families
- Children and young persons' have a sense of the 4 S's (The Power of Showing Up, Dr Daniel J Siegel and Dr Tina Bryson) through the process, which include:

- feeling **safe**
- being **seen**
- feeling **soothed**
- feeling **secure**

- Happier children today, for emotionally resilient adults tomorrow
- Promotes good mental health
- Reduces stress and anxieties in children and young people
- Promotes positive resolution practice within families
- Reduces expensive court expenses
- Reduces stressful court processes



This is a broad list of benefits and is not exhaustive. As each family is unique, they, within their own family will experience their own personal benefits in accordance to the process.

Information

We at Little Voice, understand and appreciate the pressures that families are under, particularly when there is a breakdown due to divorce, separation, bereavement and much more. Therefore, we have explored ways to help families reach satisfactory resolutions with a provision of [information](#), advice, support and [training](#), including the following courses:

[Wake Up & Show Up: Training for Parents](#) - This training is for parents who wish to learn how to 'show up' for their children and or young teens. It is intended to support parents with the knowledge of how to identify the individual needs of their children and manage their wishes and feelings.

[Wake Up & Show Up: Train the Trainer Course](#) - This training is for professionals who wish to become a trainer to train parents to learn how to 'show up' for their children and or young teens. It is intended to support parents with the knowledge of how to identify the individual needs of their children and manage their wishes and feelings.

[How to Show Up as Adults](#) - This training is for parents, caregivers and professionals working with families, children and young people. The course covers how we as individuals learn to show up, be conscious and aware of their being, in the 'present' and can identify with the gratification of valuing the experience. This course will help you to understand how 'showing up' for yourself helps you to 'show up' for your children and or young teens.

[How to read between the lines: Reading your child's emotions](#) - This course helps you as a parent or caregiver to identify your child/ren or young teens emotions, and behaviour around issues that they cannot cope with or make sense of. It gives you tools to read, manage and resolve any negative emotions. Preparing them with the tools and coping strategies that can support their emotional development.

[Discovering YOU](#) - We as parents and caregivers go through many life experiences that impact on the decisions we make in adulthood. This includes our relationships, how we interact with people, fitting in to the 'societal norms' and also how we parent our children. This course helps you to identify your childhood experiences which manifest into shadows that govern our decisions. The interactive exercises provide clarity of our behaviours

The Team



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