

# The impact of COVID-19 on Family Dispute Resolution clients in Victoria in 2020-21

## Research summary

During the onset of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, we surveyed clients of our Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) service about the impact of the emerging pandemic, and their needs for and experiences of FDR.

The aim was to understand how COVID-19 was affecting our clients, and their service delivery needs and experiences. This included understanding the impacts of our predominantly face-to-face FDR service pivoting to remote delivery via telephone or video technology (telepractice).

Survey responses varied widely, but demonstrated that the pandemic was significantly impacting families, relationships and the separation process. Clients' responses included reflections on the impact of COVID-19 on their immediate needs, and concerns related to separation and shared parenting.

The survey also measured clients' perceptions of FDR service delivery methods and how well these methods suited their immediate needs and concerns.

### What we did

Between March 2020 and March 2021, all our FDR clients who had consented to be contacted for research were invited by email to participate in a qualitative and quantitative online survey about their service experience. Questions related to clients' needs for FDR and safety concerns, and whether the pandemic altered these.

We also asked clients about the accessibility of FDR during government restrictions and their satisfaction with the remote delivery of the service. The survey was completed by 469 respondents.

### Why we did it

Throughout 2020 and 2021, Victorians experienced protracted lockdowns. Despite the restrictions, RAV continued to assist separating couples to resolve parenting and property disputes, by rapidly shifting to remote FDR service delivery.

In addition to undertaking routine service evaluations, we recognised the importance of understanding our clients' experiences of the pandemic and its impacts, as well as their service delivery needs and experiences as we shifted to utilising telepractice.

#### Method

- 469 FDR clients surveyed
- Qualitative & quantitative routine online survey

#### Survey outcomes 2020-21

**7.2** Overall average impact of COVID-19 on clients on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely significant)

#### Service modality

**40.1%**



preferred telepractice.

**38.4%**



preferred face-to-face.

**78%**



said that telepractice met their needs.

#### Service satisfaction

**83.3%**



agreed that mediators listened to them & understood their issues.

**67.9%**



agreed that the service strongly focused on their child's needs.

#### Telepractice benefits

For convenience & accessibility & in high tension relationships.

#### Telepractice challenges

Presence of children, limited body language, & the pace of service.

#### Considerations and learnings

Clients' preferences for future service delivery vary, so it is important to support clients to choose modalities that meet their needs.

#### Published work / related research

- Family Court Review: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/fcre.12639>
- Our additional research into remote FDR service delivery: [www.rav.org.au/news/remote-fdr-during-covid-19-230215/](http://www.rav.org.au/news/remote-fdr-during-covid-19-230215/)

For more details, email [evaluation@rav.org.au](mailto:evaluation@rav.org.au)

## What we found

### Overall impact of COVID-19

The survey demonstrated that COVID-19 significantly affected the financial, mental, and emotional wellbeing of many clients. Clients rated the impact of the pandemic on their lives on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely significant), with average ratings of 6.5 for positive impacts and 7.9 for negative impacts. These results align with broader research on Australians' and Victorians' experiences during COVID-19.

For our FDR clients specifically, the pandemic also significantly impacted families and relationships. For some, it exacerbated challenges related or leading to separation, including living arrangements, access to children, co-parenting and accessing FDR because of extended waiting lists.

Conversely, positive family dynamics mitigated the stressors of COVID-19 for some separated clients. For example, some respondents valued the opportunity to spend more time with children and re-evaluate their priorities.

### Most common themes of COVID-19's impact on family or household relationships

1. Reduced/lost employment or financial hardship

**'More financial stress and pressure on me with continuous solo care, with little or no additional support from other parent.'**

2. Impacts of COVID-19, lockdowns or restrictions
3. Remote learning and working from home
4. Positive impacts (time together, wellbeing etc.)

**'It has slowed us both down which was actually positive for all family members despite work disappearing.'**

5. Prevented from seeing children or grandchildren

**'My ex-partner prevented me from seeing/accessing my children.'**

6. Family and relationship tension
7. Isolation and loneliness
8. Relationship breakdown/separation

**'It has created [an] irretrievable breakdown of our marriage.'**

9. Co-parenting, parenting arrangements and changeovers
10. Mental and emotional impacts

### Method of service delivery

Most respondents (78%) were satisfied that telepractice met their needs, especially given the COVID-19 circumstances. There were 6.6 positive responses for every negative one. The proportion of respondents who in future would prefer telepractice (40.1%) and those who would prefer face-to-face FDR (38.4%) were similar.

Clients who preferred telepractice did so as:

- it was convenient and accessible
- in high-tension situations, it provided increased feelings of safety and agency due to not requiring both parties to be in the same physical location.

**'[It] meant I felt more able to communicate my thoughts and feelings as I was not on the same premises as my ex-husband.'**

Only 12% of respondents indicated that they did not like any form of telepractice as a service delivery modality, due to factors such as the presence of children, a lack of body language, and a perception of the process as slow and time-consuming.

### Overall client satisfaction

- Despite face-to-face FDR sometimes being unavailable during COVID-19, there was high client satisfaction with our FDR service.
- 83.3% of respondents agreed that: 'The mediator listened to me and understood my issues.'
- 67.8% of respondents agreed that: 'I am satisfied with the service I have received.'
- 67.9% of respondents agreed that: 'The service had a strong focus on the needs of our children.'

### Considerations and learnings

- For many participants, the pandemic exacerbated negative family dynamics and vulnerabilities. However, some participants found that despite being separated, positive dynamics in their family mitigated the stressors of the pandemic.
- Clients were overwhelmingly satisfied with the use of telepractice, especially given the COVID-19 circumstances and related restrictions.
- Clients' preferences for modalities in the future varied, with some preferring face-to-face and some preferring remote services. This highlights the importance of supporting clients to choose the modality that best meets their individual needs and circumstances.

The results of this study led to further research into remote service delivery for FDR and the publication of an article in the Family Court Review.