



Cork YMCA PAKT- Youth and Family Work Highlights from 2020

PAKT(Parents and Kids Together) is a community-based family support programme. It involves children (aged 6-16 approx.) and their families in a range of developmental and support activities through its children and youth work programme as well as our parent support programme.

PAKT works with the whole family to support young people to gain the assets they need to be resilient in the face of life's challenges.

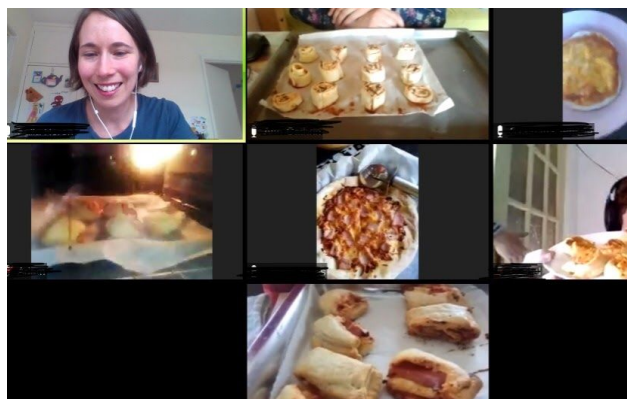
As Ireland entered into the first lockdown in March 2020, our PAKT programme in Cork had to quickly adapt to the new reality. Like everyone, we didn't know what to expect but we wholeheartedly agreed with the YMCA's pledge:

"No matter what comes in the days and weeks ahead, we will work to support young people, their families and communities"

As a team we decided to attempt to keep running our weekly youth and children's groups online including our six PAKT clubs, two Bridge groups and a Teen group. This was a steep learning curve negotiating a new online forum, new areas of online consent, assisting families to participate remotely and trying to plan ideas and activities that can work in the online groups!

The following are some of the ways YMCA have tried to respond positively and effectively throughout this challenging year:

- During the two lockdown periods in 2020 youth workers have prepared and facilitated 124 online groups. The online clubs started during the last week in March, and we were amazed at how well the children and young people adapted to the change, and how they were often more comfortable using the online platform than we were! It was encouraging to realize how much we could do online, from interactive games to cooking and baking, talent shows,



exercising together and many 'show and tell' sessions with pets, favourite toys and favourite places to chill out. Our international volunteer Ann-Cathrin had to return home to Germany at the start of the lockdown, but was able to join in the online clubs from home, which the children were delighted about.

- Throughout the two lockdown periods in 2020 youth workers have prepared and delivered over 180 parcels and packages for families at three separate times in the year



with activity materials to accompany the online sessions as well as books, treats and special messages to parents and children inside. The youth workers then had the privilege of delivering the packages to families and feeling a little bit like Santa! The package deliveries were such a lovely way to connect with parents and children while social distancing, at a time that was stressful and challenging for everyone.

Here are some quotes from parents especially in relation to lockdown work:

"I am so grateful for the Bridge group for my son as he loves the group and it suits him so well! It was the only thing he had going on during lockdown so he was determined to log on as it was very important to him! He loves the activities in the Bridge. I appreciate the work so much for him and I'm so impressed with the work of the YMCA during Covid-19!"

"The online groups made a big difference as my daughter does not have brothers or sisters, so the connection was great. The variety and ideas kept them thinking."

"A huge thank you from my husband and myself, because the online groups did make a huge difference to our daughter, and you were so kind to drop out the art pack at the very start of Covid 19. Every week was something different and exciting, thank you for everything you have done"

"It was lovely to break up the day during the lockdown. He was in great form after all the online groups"

'My daughter had high levels of stress about secondary school but she said that after the session (with the first year mentor) with the Bridge she felt less afraid and calmer in herself! The zoom calls with the Bridge have been really important to her. The Bridge has meant a lot to us as a family and we are very thankful for the help.'

Quotes from the children:

“I loved the online groups as I got to see my friends”

“The online groups made a difference during lockdown because it made Wednesdays fun and I had something to look forward to”

“If we didn’t have online sessions we wouldn’t have been able to keep in touch and see each other. I really really liked this”

- Youth workers sent out weekly text messages inviting children to sessions, outlining activities and providing technical support to parents.
- It felt particularly important to keep the Bridge group (designed for 6th class students preparing and moving to secondary school) going through the lockdown, as the already challenging transition from primary to secondary school was made even more difficult by the unusual circumstances. The participants missed out on important preparation time they would have had in school and many of the usual end of year celebrations. In our Bridge online groups we had fun playing games, baking and chatting, and also talked about topics such as the importance of a good daily routine during lockdown, and identified what helps each individual cope during stressful times. A highlight for The Bridge in June was a visit to our online club from a mentor for first year students in a local secondary school. She gave valuable advice and reassurance, and answered lots of questions about starting in first year in September.
- We were thankful for the opportunity to bring the older participants in our groups on a trip to Zip-It park in Farran Woods this summer as this was an important opportunity for us to all actually meet outdoors in a safe and fun environment!
- We have been able to carry out direct/face to face youth and family work in the periods from January to March, and September to the end of October. In the period from September to October we were able to adjust our groups into pods and use all the recommended safety procedures to continue doing face to face work including using a new contact tracing and booking in procedure for families.



- We began a weekly newsletter for families during lockdown periods to help stay in touch and continue building community through sharing news and photos from the online youth groups, organising challenges and sharing resources that were directly useful and relevant to families during this time.

- Our family workers got in touch with all the families directly by phone alongside a weekly text, to see how they were and often we found that there was great openness over the phone. This was a great link to encourage the children to take part in the online work and also to support and signpost parents who needed to talk or seek advice.

- One of our most exciting innovations throughout this time was when we identified the potential for an interactive online parenting support course so we developed a six session course for parents focusing on the theme of resilience. It was called 'Coping in Challenging Times: helping children to grow and thrive'.(Copy of the advert attached) We decided to advertise this widely and were surprised to find that over 200 people signed up! The course ran May-June 2020 while children were home during lockdown and over 70 people attended regularly. It was a great experience for all involved and so successful that we decided to do a re-run in November 2020 where we have over 75 attendees once again! Here are some of the many quotes from the parents evaluation...

"Thank you so much...this course is amazing...why couldn't I have done it 10 years ago for my first child!"

"I feel much more confident as a parent...the sessions made me realise I am not alone and I felt a real connection to all the other parents that were sharing experiences...."

"Thank you, it was a fantastic course with great content, amazing work by all. Thank you for the opportunity to be able to do it at a time when it was crucial in everyone's lives during Covid-19"

"Fantastic course. Doing the online course allows you privacy and comfort in your own home and also eliminates the need for childcare or only one parent attending. The content and the advice wasn't over-whelming and it was made simple by the facilitators. I think this should continue to roll out and should be encouraged for all parents. Thanks so much"

- The family workers have continued to support Meitheal processes during lockdown via phone calls, conference calls, video calls and some one to one meetings.
- The demand for one to one parent support work as well as participation in children's groups has grown during this time. Referrals are now coming in through schools, local community services, social workers and CFSN networks. This is in part due to the ground work begun last year in Ballincollig, Blarney and continued in Cobh and the raised awareness of our service.
- Networks are beginning to strengthen in Ballincollig due to additional staff in place in the local family support centre and the positive linkages through the CFSN. The YMCA is now part of a youth sub group working together with three other organisations to target the identified needs of children and youth in the area. Through this network we have applied to 'The Wheel' funding and been successful in receiving funding for further Parents Plus training for staff.

The last eight months have been challenging. There are natural limitations of remote working but there have been many positives as well and this experience has given us the courage to continue to seek innovative ways of reaching families who need support. It has been encouraging to see how well we've been able to adapt our work in new circumstances, even seeing new opportunities open up and that the connection with many of the children and families we work with has remained strong. Most of all, it has been amazing to witness the

resilience and joy of the children and young people in the middle of many challenges and changes.

Coping in Challenging Times: Helping Children to Grow and Thrive



4 Week Online Parenting Course

Wednesdays from 8:00-9:00pm

18th November -9th December

FREE

To Register: Click on this link to register. Sessions will happen over a secure Zoom link. Once you register, you will be emailed a link to the call. Feel free to have your camera/video on or off!

<https://forms.gle/zHttmcqKs5Gm93sD9>



Introduction

Can we and our children emerge from Covid19 better able to overcome challenges?
The answer is yes!

Over four weeks, we will share with you some of the most important things you can do to help your child develop resilience. No pressure to attend all sessions! Sign up with the link under 'To Register'.

Weekly sessions will cover:

- 1. Building Caring Relationships**
- 2. Accepting Your Child**
- 3. Supporting your child to be Responsible**
- 4. Encouraging Social Skills**

The Instructors:

Joy Cantwell Moore, MSc, brings 20 years of experience in youth and community development. She is currently the parent support worker with YMCA Ireland.

Norma Merrick, BSc, has been working for 19 years with children and their parents in Tallaght. She is currently a family support worker with West Dublin YMCA PAKT programme