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# FINANCIAL TIMES

Opinion [Parenting and families](#)



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## Navigating the lockdown causes stepfamilies further stress

**While the coronavirus crisis has been clarifying for some, it also poses problems**



Some children who normally shuttle between homes in different cities or countries may find themselves confined to just one © Cultura RM/Alamy

[Emma Jacobs](#) APRIL 21 2020

As coronavirus lockdown rules came into force, one friend confessed to a quandary. She could not decide whether to include her father in the new family WhatsApp group, created to cheer up relatives scattered across different countries and keep them up to date on each other's health. The dilemma was not due to animosity. Just the opposite; she spoke to her dad regularly. Rather, it was because her mother's new partner was on the group. The men had never met. In the end she decided against adding him.

Social isolation and the spectre of death spurs us to meditate on the value of friends and family. In some cases, overcoming past irritations and rekindling old

connections, making new ones by checking on a neighbour. Or, as with my friend, mapping out the complex web of modern families.

For separated parents, the crisis poses opportunities and problems. Coronavirus has been [clarifying for some](#), sweeping away pointless arguments, uniting them on what matters: their children's wellbeing. After all, who cares if one parent is lax about sweets or screen time when matters of life and death are at stake?

In this great lockdown, there are unexpected perks for kids who can move between parents' homes, as the UK government allows. It can provide new walls to bounce off. Parents able to palm off their children to their ex-partner might revel in the quiet time, focus on work, free from simultaneously entertaining and home schooling their offspring.

But some kids who normally shuttle between homes in different cities or countries may find themselves confined to just one. One friend, who makes fortnightly journeys on Eurostar between London and Paris, is missing his child as the familiar routine is put on hold for God knows how long. His two children, separated by the English Channel, communicate via FaceTime instead of face-to-face. While the half-siblings' world may be in disarray, the rivalry continues. The normalcy of bickering is some solace for a father who used to find the behaviour maddening.

[Parents, too, are fractious. As the Financial Times reported, there has been an uptick in requests to reduce divorce settlements by people who have experienced financial losses due to the pandemic.](#) Camilla Baldwin, a UK divorce lawyer, expects her caseload to rise after the lockdown lifts, just as it has [in China](#). Many of her wealthy clients who work long days can no longer escape their marriages and are confronted with reality. One family lawyer told me his workload was heavier due to separated parents using the excuse of quarantine and made-up symptoms to keep their child away from each other.

Others are forensically investigating their ex's living conditions. As **Sarah Williams**, legal director in the family department of Payne Hicks Beach, a law firm, puts it, coronavirus has instigated a new level of scrutiny and anxiety. "It's nervousness about how you are going about your day, how are you doing your shopping, who are you living with? They are all legitimate questions."

Another friend admits coronavirus has made her face up to her ex's childcare shortcomings though she also concedes, "There's a good chance I am being unfair",

frazzled by paranoia. In some cases, an investigation into the child's second home has revealed a new partner. One woman is horrified to have discovered her ex-husband has one hotel suite for his children and an adjacent one for parties.

Susan Golombok, professor of family research at Cambridge university, says: "For families where parents are less co-operative, or children have more difficult relationships with step-parents, the current situation is likely to be stressful. The rise in [domestic abuse](#) in recent weeks is alarming." She adds that lockdown "may be a particular problem for children with step-parents who they don't get on with."

Extraordinary times produce extraordinary arrangements. In some cases divorced parents have agreed to shack up together for the sake of their children's health and sanity. As my friend's WhatsApp quandary shows, being a child of divorced parents can create difficulties, even for adults. She has no regrets about her choice as it means she doesn't have to dance around her divorced parents' feelings. Unfortunately, she now receives twice as many lockdown memes.

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