

I had to dig deep

Isolation experiences of mothers living apart
from their children during the 2020 pandemic

Mothers Apart - Common Threads Collective

Illustrated by Candice Purwin





Holding Hearts



I think I am going to write
a poem for you

It will be a little
project for me

Thank you

Introduction

Welcome to *I had to dig deep*, an edited collection of creative work carried out by mothers living apart from their children, and launched under social isolation restrictions and national lockdown in the UK.

Working from my spare room it has been a delight to be part of this project, reacquainting myself with old friends of the project and making new connections. The moment in history we all shared in 2020 intensified the lives of everyone, exposing and increasing inequalities, not least for the women I work with. Yet their voices were rarely heard in the clamour of news and social media.

As a collective, we invited women to let us know how lockdown was for them in whatever way they wished. Material was gathered between September and December 2020 with the Mothers Living Apart from their Children Project at WomenCentre. Contributions arrived in the form of sketches, paintings, poetry, stories and reflections, and professional artist Candice Purwin painted her responses in December and January ready for the launch of this special edition of Women Centred Working in March 2021.

All 19 contributors live apart from some or all of their children and have had social service or family court involvement with their families, for which they face stigma and judgement. Their children live with adoptive and foster families, in residential care and with ex-partners and extended family members. Arrangements for seeing children (contact), social work visits and family court proceedings became mostly remote, often making difficult processes even harder.

As the first point of contact for this project I witnessed the warmth with which it was received. Women told us it was a chance to be part of something meaningful, from which people could take comfort, be challenged and learn. Receiving all the material was a treat. I was moved to tears, impressed, enraged and made to laugh out loud. Thank you to my colleagues in the collective and to all those whose contributions have been welcome companions to my own lockdown.

***Siobhan Beckwith - WomenCentre Lead Facilitator
Mothers Apart - Common Threads Collective***

Foreword by the Mothers Apart - Common Threads Collective

I had to dig deep was inspired by the early weeks and months of lockdown. As a small collective we gathered together online, shared stories, photographs and words of wisdom. We worried about women from the wider mothers apart community, still in the throes of family courts and contact centres, mothers whose children were removed during lockdown, as well as us whose long-term separation from children has never felt more real.

Were their children ok? What about their carers? How would contact happen? Would mothers even find out if their child got ill or worse? Life didn't stop, covid-19 added another pressure, on top of many, to manage. We invite you to look at the pictures in our book and see what is being felt, read the words and digest their power.

Jenny, Louise, Lynne, Sarah and Siobhan
Mothers Apart - Common Threads Collective

Children going without food
Old people apart from family in homes
Vital services struggling to do work
Individuals struggling on low pay
Derelict shops forced to close

I am still their mum



I'm fighting to see my son
My little man
It's affecting my
mental health now
All through lockdown
I've resisted
socially distanced contact
or virtual contact
He's got autism and special
needs and would
find it upsetting
He's back at school
now though
hugging teachers and staff
They are looking at a special
room with direct access
in and out
They'd have to sanitise in
between
I need a cuddle
and so does he
after all these months

*I haven't seen my
son since January.
Even at periods when
we could have met
I was not allowed by
extended family.
Nearly a year now
I am in touch by phone
but it's not the same.
The frequency of the
calls is monitored.
It's a very weird situation.*

Life through the eyes of my daughter who has much growing up to do...

I was a happy-go-lucky toddler, I like sweets and am quite bright, I like school and my friends but not so keen on school work. My mum's mentally unwell which is why I can't live with her.

I'm impatient, restless, so when I get super bored I want to run off and do something else. I would die if I couldn't jump from one thing to another. Some people bully me and I bully defenceless others. My social skills are terrible, I can't handle my emotions well and release anger in unacceptable ways. My physical image is everything, all I need to get by.

I feel her frustration and the anger she portrays cos her eyes are my eyes and vice versa.



Don't
judge
a mum

by her
cover

An honest outlook of what I think? That's what you want from me. I think the system fails many families. I am angry with social services (head in hands emoji), not all of us are bad parents, we just made bad choices, we struggle, we are human, we are not perfect. Some have DV, some have drugs, sexual assault, childhood traumas. Instead of making us feel more shit about what we have done, stop judging us and start supporting us. 6 months isn't long enough for a parent to implement full structural change. Why do kids in care get surrounded by support but the kids at home with parents screaming for help get ignored? Sometimes mum or dad just needs help, not being met with contempt.

In reality I have been in lockdown
for six years
I have felt violated, trapped
and imprisoned
It's our human right to move
around
Six years ago I left my parents' house
I was on my own out there
I got abuse from everyone
neighbours
called a rapist and a kiddie
fiddler
I have been spat at
I had to isolate then
Couldn't go on buses
Felt everyone was staring at me
Society as a whole judging me
Very harsh

*Here are just some words
about how I feel
Dark Scared Guilt Darkness
Uncertainty Self-harm
Self-Criticising
Self-Hate*

*Then add Covid into the mix
and you can add
on top of them
Helplessness
Fear of loss
Loss of control
and then even more
Uncertainty*



Keeping minds busy

The news was blaring with all this information, disease, isolation, pandemic. The only thing that went through my mind – will I be able to see my children?

**Lockdown doesn't help with my Asperger's
I isolate myself anyway when I shouldn't
and it's not good
I have been trying to communicate
better with people
I am on Facebook, skype, zoom
WhatsApp and messenger
I'd probably feel lost without it all
in lockdown**

*2020 what a year
My life is so hard without you here
Having to see you through windows and doors
I don't know if I can take this pain much more
You are the best thing that's happened to me
I hope one day through this time apart you will see
Mummy is sorry for the mess she made
I wish I could turn back time
then you could have stayed
You were so young to understand why
yet all I could do was sit here and cry
This horrible virus has kept us apart
yet we're so close, you're forever in my heart*

**I don't like being on my own
for long periods of time
I had to face that
There were days I was
ok with that
And days that I wasn't
Usually I can't do that
for more than
a couple of days
It's too much**

When my daughter was here
there was stress and tension
all of us being in the flat
together
It's easier now
There is less arguing
We still have our ups and
downs at home
It helps me doing my colouring
It takes my mind off stuff

I don't want to look back,
I have for too long
But it hurts me too much and
I want to be strong



**No, I'm not out of line
To go and eat that tuna fish in brine
His number is gonna get a decline
From my telephone landline
He can see his daughter
When she's at least ninety-nine**

I have had to tell him to go
It's just not ok
The last straw was when he
locked me in
during the day
He has been in the
spare room ever since
Until he gets paid and
then he is off
I know the signs now
I want him to be ok though
I want him to have
somewhere to go
It just can't be here

**There are still bags in my wardrobe
Things I need to go through
I have been more able
to do some of it
I feel like I am now stronger**

The lockdown affected me by making my depression worse. It made me feel lonely, sad and also made my anxiety hit the roof. Not being able to see my children for nearly 8 months. I'm not sure what I might have done which is very scary. I recognised the signs. Instead of me going through this on my own I decided to come and stay with my mum.

There
for me



I have been working in a care home – 42 hours a week.
I love it. I get knackered though.
There is a lady there who I chat with.
She's really sad because she can't
see her children because of lockdown.
We understand each other,
both of us missing our kids.
She can't have any visitors.
I think I am going to take some of my writing in
to show her what I did when I first couldn't see my son.
I'd really like to help her.

**With the virus
no-one could come and see me really
I tried to keep myself busy
watching Netflix
I cooked and I cleaned
I talked to my wellbeing worker
every week
I have realised who my good friends are
I have had one-way relationships
Good friendships mean I am not just
giving everything
We do stuff for each other**

My friend has just sent me this:

During lockdown I found it so hard to not be able to see our grandchildren in a normal, natural way. As I struggled with this, I thought of you and could remember when James and Billy went to their Dad in Liverpool. I would try to comfort you with assurances that you will always be their mum and that the boys would come back in the future, when older. Now, it seems a bit ridiculous to me that I was asking you to think and look long term, when the acute loss and pain was so consuming. As a side note though...I am so happy I was right and those boys and their girlfriends turn their hearts to you!!

A chance
to step
back



**Loneliness is dangerous, it's addicting.
Once you see how peaceful it is,
you don't want to deal with people.**

Everything has stopped
It feels like the end
Should I be sad?
Do I have to pretend?

I'm happy to sit
I'm happy to walk
No pressure to do
No pressure to talk

I'm grasping this life
And all that I see
I've found in this time
New ways to be free

I want to rise up
Fly high in the air
Cause this life can be cruel
This life isn't fair

New ways to find hope
New places to be
I've still lost my children
But it won't define me.

**For those of us whose Christmases
are never big, we don't have to
feel bad about ourselves.
Not having to do the big shop.
Instead, reaching out
in different ways.
Not the hurried
'Hiya, how are you, yeah, I'm fine'
But a real 'Are you alright?'.
Maybe we will all get a better
perspective on what is important**

***Maybe this time
offers a space to
reconsider the
relationships
we put our energy into
Shed, let a few go
without feeling guilty
A chance to step back
They take work
We can only do so much***

*I am slowly healing
crying stuff out
Feeling the human
emotions I have
Faith and prayer really helped
It has been hell on one side
I had to dig deep
There was this
huge mental block
It's taken lockdown
to do all this
I am focused
and I feel good
empowered in a way
I wouldn't if I hadn't
gone through it
My creativity is verbal,
speaking it out.
I talk to myself a lot
I can't stop chuntering
I have had to learn patience
Taking everyday
to see what it brings*



A mother
in my position

It was awful with my ex not agreeing on things despite me putting forward many reasonable options. It was emotionally draining on top of everything else that was going on.

*I have got half parental
responsibility and it
means nothing
They say my boy needs consistency
but they keep changing his workers
Nine social workers in three years
If I moved house that many times
my youngest
would be taken off me
I have declined offers
of food parcels
when I needed them
because I think
they will hold it against me*

**Social bubbles
another weapon
Manipulated to exclude
never include
For the common good
yet again he takes control
An opportunity
gifted to him
Another weapon
for his vast arsenal**

Dealing with having my little girl, but being told access and contact is restricted with my boys, has been the hardest pill to swallow. How can I be fit enough to keep my daughter, but not be good enough to have unsupervised access or regular weekly contact instead of six times per year? I don't understand the system.

***I spent the first lockdown really worried,
worried about my son and his family.
I heard they were ok early in the first lockdown
but now we are going into another one
and I don't know whether
I can ask about him again.
Would they let me know if anything had changed?***

Contact arrangements have fallen apart. No physical contact for months on end, facetimes not taking place when promised, phone calls cut short – nobody has anything new or exciting to share after months of being in lockdown.

I can't
change
the past,
that
time
has now
gone



I have
to look
forwards,
it's time
to move
on



I stopped explaining myself when I realised people only understand from their level of perception

I am blessed that they are with my parents
I dropped gifts off while the kids were at school
They looked tired and older
but they were genuinely pleased to see me
I have made bad decisions
wrong decisions
They have been through an ordeal
I want to make it better and them proud of me
They were happy to see me though

This lockdown has taught
me a lot about personal
issues that arise around you
and family and other people.
I know that a lot of people
may feel the same as I have
and just to say you're not on
your own and that there is
support out there if you ask
for it. So please ask for it, so
please don't suffer.

**As mums we always want to
protect our children and
make sure they feel safe.
We are still in uncertain
times and who knows what
the next weeks, months and
years will bring.
All I know is yes I am apart
from my children and
lockdown is difficult but it
also brought me closer to
my kids**

**Yes life is hard, but time is valuable and love is the key
to get us through the days ahead.**

End Note

Lockdown made everything more intense. Many of us already knew isolation. We had retreated before and we had emerged before. We tended to grieve our losses even more during lockdown, with time to go over past trauma and enduring loss, as well as the space to step back and reflect.

While there are common threads of experience amongst all involved, the voices within this book are many and varied, rich in wisdom and informed by personal struggle, loss and strength.

Our common thread is our historic link to WomenCentre's Mothers Living Apart from their Children Service in Kirklees, as group members and allies of our work. As a collective we are passionate about issues affecting our community and believe women and families deserve better access to support, and for all our voices to be heard. Many mothers apart have experiences of relationship abuse, mental distress, addiction or have learning difficulties. We offer thoughtful and engaging workshops within social work teaching, adoption preparation and safeguarding. Our aim is to be part of, and actively shape, local and national dialogue about the issues affecting mothers apart.

Thank You

Special thanks go to the contributors from the Mothers Living Apart from their Children and Making Sense group members in Kirklees for their generosity, enthusiasm and wisdom. You have reminded us yet again that wonderful things can happen when women get together. Woven into the common threads of isolation every woman brought a unique perspective and creative edge to the project.

Thanks to Candice for listening in so carefully and bringing our experiences to life in this beautiful set of images. To Nicky Bashall for her gentle knowing and guidance with our stories. To all our colleagues and champions of our work at WomenCentre as group members, peers, volunteers and staff, in particular to Karen and Romany. Reaching out along the way has helped all of us feel a little less alone.

Our friends at the University of Huddersfield for always supporting our work and hosting our project launch.

The funders:

The Government's Coronavirus Community Support Fund,
distributed by The National Lottery Community Fund.



This book ***I had to dig deep*** is a Special Edition of Women Centred Working, with contributions from mothers living apart from their children in Kirklees during the Covid-19 lockdown. Women Centred Working is an initiative to encourage the design and delivery of more effective services for women who are facing multiple disadvantages and has been set up to share good practice, change thinking and promote effective, women centred approaches on a wider national basis.

Women Centred Working was initially a WomenCentre project funded by the Lankelly Chase Foundation's Promoting Change Programme. There have been four previous booklets in our Women Centred Working series:

First: Defining An Approach

Second: Showcasing Women Centred Solutions

Third: Taking Forward Women Centred Solutions

Fourth: Applying Women-Centred Principles:

Special Edition: Women-Centred Working with Women Migrants

WomenCentre

15 Lord Street, Huddersfield HD1 1QB

23 Silver Street, Halifax HX1 1JN

Company Registration no. 6084795

Registered charity no. 1118366

All contributions are from mothers living apart from their children in Kirklees linked to WomenCentre.

Illustration and design by Candice Purwin

March 2021

www.womencentre.org.uk/mothers-apart-common-threads-collective/

Mothers living apart from their children often find themselves isolated and their stories sidelined. ***I had to dig deep*** places their stories right at its core, where they can be seen and heard on their own terms.

Over lockdown, many of us had more time to reflect, not always for the better. Having to mask mounting feelings of loneliness and seclusion, we learned a lot. Stepping back from normal life brought new insights, strengths and an opportunity to better prioritise what helps us.

This book explores humanity through individual experiences during a global pandemic. It is about now and it is about always. Lockdown has brought the world closer to our orbit. As people across the world have experienced separation from loved ones perhaps this is a moment to show and act upon a collective empathy for those who already know about isolation and separation.

This book could have been a hundred pages. We share here a snapshot of the words and ideas shared with us. We were locked down. We used what we could – text, Whatsapp, phone-calls, Zoom, email, Teams, paper, envelopes and stamps. We reached out, we connected and we learned.

©Copyright of the Illustrations/Design belongs to Candice Purwin. ©Copyright of the words belongs to WomenCentre 2021.

No illustrations from this book may be produced in any form without permission from Candice Purwin. No words from this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from WomenCentre except for the quotation of brief passages. Individual contributors have the rights to their own work and can be contacted via WomenCentre