



Tuesday, May 19, 2020

## Family Interaction During the Covid-19 Pandemic

### Background

In March of 2020, many agencies moved to virtual visitation between parents and their children in out-of-home care based on the spread of COVID-19 as well as guidance from state and local public health, state emergency and executive orders, and guidance offered by the Department of Children and Families (DCF). DCF is aware that some agencies have restarted, and most are preparing to resume face-to-face family interaction. DCF has been asked to provide updated guidance on face-to-face family interaction, rebalancing the guidance towards how we as a field can accomplish face-to-face interaction in most circumstances while maintaining local flexibility to handle exceptional cases and/or localized outbreaks of the virus.

### Guidance

It has become apparent that total elimination of the risks of infection with this disease will not happen soon and mitigation actions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are needed. Children in out-of-home care have two homes, much like children with shared custody agreements. Face-to-face contact between parents and children in out-of-home care is essential to the welfare of both children and their parents and contributes to timely and positive permanency outcomes for children. The total cessation of in-person family interaction is not possible for months on end; parents and children need time together and face-to-face family interaction should resume whenever possible, using best-practice safety measures. Child welfare agencies need to prepare to facilitate and support family interaction as community reintegration progresses.

Local agencies are encouraged to consider all information available to them including individual circumstances, any county or local orders that may be in effect, community public health advisories, and CDC recommendations, in determining the best course of action, with preference toward in-person interaction when it can be achieved with minimal risk to the parties involved.

### Minimizing Risk

Multiple protection strategies are necessary when resuming face-to-face family interactions to minimize risk to children, parents, out-of-home caregivers, child welfare professionals, and to others in our homes and our community. Re-instituting and maintaining face-to-face family interactions should be pursued in a planful manner and will require additional precautions. Foster families are important in the coordination of these visits. The department has created [a set of recommendations](#) to help providers work through this process.

Local child welfare agencies should refer to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) for additional guidance and resources (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>) as procedures for decision-making are established by each agency.

**Increased precautions may include:**

- Providing face coverings for parents and children over the age of two or asking them to bring their own.
- Requiring hand washing/sanitizing before and after visits (and during the visit if contact is occurring).
- Ensuring proper cleaning and sanitation of any indoor visit locations.
- Cleaning visitation rooms between visits and limiting/rotating toys that are easy to clean.
- Disinfecting transportation vehicles (steering wheel, door handles) between transports.
- Screening participants for COVID symptoms or exposure.
- For visits with physical contact and with small children, changing clothes before or immediately upon returning home and washing clothes or blankets used during the visit; bathing a small child after a visit.

**Additional considerations may include:**

- Meeting outside where social distancing is easier.
- Providing activities that engage young children but do not require contact, such as bubbles or kicking balls back and forth.
- Requesting that foster families provide transport to minimize close contact between multiple people should agency staff or volunteers be relied upon for transporting family members.
- Utilizing other safe household members or individuals who are providing support to the household, such as relatives, to perform transportation or provide supervision.
- Continuing frequent discussions regarding implementing trial reunification with an in-home safety plan when appropriate and safe to do so.

**Continued Virtual Contact**

There will continue to be circumstances unique to individuals and communities which may necessitate continued virtual contact. Limiting or restricting face-to-face family interaction and continuing virtual interactions may be warranted to ensure the health and safety of children, parents, out-of-home care providers in certain circumstances. Local communities may experience spikes in community spread or other unique circumstances which may need to be further considered. In these situations, virtual interactions must be maintained and increased, when possible, until face-to-face family interactions can take place. In individual children's cases, there may be court orders relating to visitation. Local child welfare agencies should consult with their agency legal representative with questions about court orders relating to visitation.

**Congregate Care Settings**

The Department is working with DHS to establish updated resources to guide visitation decisions in congregate care settings.