

# COVID-19 Practice Guidance for CW Virtual Engagement, Information Gathering & Assessment



The COVID-19 pandemic is presenting new challenges for how child welfare professionals are serving children, youth and families. With social distancing recommendations, child welfare professionals have to adapt as they continue the essential work of partnering with families and communities to ensure child safety. An unprecedented amount of child welfare work is happening via video or phone conferencing, including engagement, information gathering, and assessment – all of which are critical components to serving families. DCF is committed to supporting the children, youth and families in our communities, and to keeping our child welfare workforce safe and healthy. In general, there is no substitute for face-to-face contact and local CPS agencies are encouraged to see children, youth, and families in person, but given the current COVID-19 pandemic it may be necessary and prudent to conduct some contacts virtually under certain circumstances, as discussed in the Case Practice: Face-to-Face Caseworker Contacts [Case Practice: Face-to-Face Caseworker Contacts](#). The purpose of this desk guide is to assist child welfare professionals with conducting these virtual contacts. The information in the desk guide pertains to general contacts and assessment during the Initial Assessment and provision of Ongoing Services. **Child welfare professionals are expected to continue making initial face-to-face contacts during the Initial Assessment and in-person contact whenever an active Present or Impending Danger Threat is identified; see [Case Practice: Face-to-Face Caseworker Contacts](#) for additional information.**

## Considerations for Initial Face-to-Face & Other In-Person Contacts

The following is intended to support child welfare professionals in being efficient during initial and other in-person contacts in order to gather sufficient information so that future contacts, information gathering, and assessment may occur virtually when possible.



### Working Smart during Initial & Other In-Person Contacts

- **Be efficient.**
  - Narrow the focus of the face-to-face contact and consider how to safely gather the information you need.
  - What questions will you need to ask and assess?
  - Given those questions, can the contact occur outdoors with appropriate physical distancing? Can it occur via phone or video conferencing?
- **Prioritize information gathering.**
  - Gather relevant information in order to make decisions about Present Danger, then prioritize and start to gather information you need to assess for Impending Danger.
  - Thorough information about Impending Danger can only be identified through the collection and assessment of information about the children and family.
  - It is possible to begin gathering information about Impending Danger during the first contact with the family.
- **Plan for how to gather information.**
  - Consider what information needs to be gathered in the home or in close proximity with the family (i.e. the condition of the home, observing the child(ren) or youth, etc.); gather all other information via video or phone, if possible.

### Initial Assessment In-Person Contacts

- See the home environment.
- See the household composition and verify the members of the family (regular and intermittent); use this information for future virtual contacts.
- Begin identifying the dangerous behaviors or conditions, and for whom. Start to understand when the danger is active and when it needs to be controlled.
- Gather information from the family regarding who can help control danger and support a plan, if necessary.
- Be able to describe the identified danger to the family, providers, supervisors, etc.



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## Virtual Engagement

### Key Participants for Child Welfare Engagement



#### Families

- Mothers
- Fathers
- Other Adult Caregivers
- Children & Youth



#### Placement Providers

- Relatives & Like-Kin
- Foster Parents
- Provider Agencies



#### Tribes

- Tribal Children & Families
- Tribal Caregivers
- Tribal Child Welfare Agencies
- Tribal Courts



#### External Experts

- Service Providers
- School Personnel
- Medical Professionals
- Law Enforcement
- Clergy
- Courts



### Virtual Engagement Tips

- **Extend respect**
  - Show respect for a family's time
  - Honor your commitment to the family by being on time and prepared
- **Speaking pace**
  - Count to 10 (silently) after asking a question to allow the person time to think and respond
- **Be in view**
  - Be close to the camera, but not so close that the other person cannot see your hands
- **Try not to interrupt the person speaking**
  - Allow the person to finish their thought before asking additional questions
- **Make eye contact**
  - Making eye contact by looking at the camera, instead of images on the screen, is better for interactive communication
- **Choose a quiet location**
  - Try to avoid interruptions or being distracted by environmental factors, as possible

## Virtual Contacts



### Working Smart to Prepare for Virtual Contact

- If you've been in the home before and you have identified areas of concern, then continue to assess those areas during virtual contacts.
- If you know household composition, then you can verify who is residing in the home and know who you need to have virtual contact with.
  - Be sure to ask the children/youth, parents/caregivers, and/or providers about other, new people who may be in or out of the home.
- Continue to assess for dangerous behaviors or conditions that have been identified and continue to assess for any indicators of NEW dangerous behaviors or conditions and for whom.
- Complete a new safety analysis to determine when dangers are active and when they need to be controlled, then make a plan to control them.
- Gather information from the family and providers regarding changes, if danger threat(s) need to be controlled differently, and how to modify an existing plan or develop a new one.
- At the start of virtual contact confirm the current location and address of the parent/caregiver and/or child/youth. In the event that Present Danger is identified during the virtual contact and you are unable to respond in-person, immediately contact law enforcement and provide the family's address.



## Virtual Information Gathering

### Virtual Information Gathering Requirements

*It is critical to continue to gather information from children, youth, families, providers, and other experts in order to inform your assessment and case planning. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, you may need to change how you gather information.*

- The information gathering requirements outlined in the [CPS Access & Initial Assessment Standards](#), the [Ongoing Services Standards](#), and the [Safety Intervention Standards](#) apply. See the respective standard for more information on specific information gathering requirements.
- You may need to gather new information about how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the family and the parent's/caregiver's ability to care for or keep the child(ren)/youth safe.
- When gathering information via video or phone, be sure to ask to **see** and/or **speak** to **all of the children** and **youth** (as age and developmentally appropriate) and **adults** residing in the home (regularly or intermittently).
- At the start of virtual contact confirm the current location and address of the parent/caregiver and/or child/youth. In the event that Present Danger is identified during the virtual contact and you are unable to respond in-person, immediately contact law enforcement and provide the family's address.
- If you are unable to see or talk to every household member, you should make a plan with the parent/caregiver to arrange for video or phone contact with the other household members as soon as possible.
- Where child welfare professionals would normally use visuals to assess safety and well-being (i.e. seeing that there is food in the home, that the home environment appears safe, interactions between a parent and child, etc.), you should make attempts to gather the same information via video.

### Information Gathering Tips

- Work with what you already know in order to determine what critical information you need to gather
- Be prepared – have a plan for what you need to say and what information needs to be gathered before starting the conversation
  - Make and share an agenda for the conversation
- When starting the conversation, state your intended purpose and goals, including how much time you have
- Ask adults and children/youth if they have questions or topics they'd like to discuss
- Try to keep questions short and the allow the other person to do most of the talking
- Use open-ended questions as much as possible
- Ask follow-up or clarifying questions and pause between questions counting to 10 (silently) to allow time response to be thought about and fully provided
- When ending the conversation, summarize the content, follow-up items and next steps
- Set a time for a follow-up conversation or meeting
- Break up conversations into multiple contacts – don't feel like you need to be on the phone or video for the same time you'd be at a home visit

### Gathering Information from Children & Youth

- A child's/youth's age and development may impact if or how they interact via video or phone. Special considerations may be needed for young children or children/youth with disabilities or other special needs in order to minimize frustrations and manage expectations.
- Make it a social, interactive experience – consider using aids to engage with children or youth (i.e. showing pictures, playing music, using scaling questions, etc.).
- Manage your own expectations for how you will interact with the child/youth via video or phone and what information you'll be able to gather. Be patient and go slowly.
  - Think about creative ways to interact with children/youth via video. Children as young as 8-months-old can respond very well to interactions with people via video chat technologies.
  - A child or youth's attention span will vary and impact how long they are able to interact via video or phone.
- Consider the time of day that you are interacting with the child or youth; try to avoid times in the day where the child or youth may be more distracted, such as during mealtimes.

### Gathering Information from Adults

- Collaborate with parents and caregivers in order to coordinate information gathering. Inquire about the best times and length of time for a phone or video conversation.
- Inquire about concerns parents or caregivers may have about privacy or other worries they may have when speaking to you via phone or video.
- Recognize that parents or caregivers may have unavoidable distractions as they are talking with you – be patient.



## Virtual Information Gathering

### Information Gathering Preparation

Child welfare professionals should consider the following questions to prepare for gathering relevant information. Gathering a lot of information that does not have a purpose for your assessment is time consuming. Gathering relevant information ensures you have gathered factual and purposeful information that you can use for your assessment. Your information gathering process should have structure and purpose.

- What questions need to be answered?
- What decisions need to be made?
- What information do I need? What is the purpose of seeking the “need to know” information?
  - Assessing or reassessing for safety?
  - Evaluating safety?
  - Evaluating treatment progress and the impact on safety assessment?
  - Evaluating sufficiency of control services of the Safety Plan?
  - Evaluating case plans and goals?
- How much information do I need? When will I know that I have enough information?
- Who do I need to gather information from?
  - Household members (regular and intermittent)?
  - Collaterals?
  - Providers?
- How do I need to gather the information?
  - Via technology (phone, video)?
- How will I prioritize my limited time in order to gather the information I need?

*Families may be experiencing different circumstances during COVID-19 pandemic. In order to support the family, you may need to understand how current circumstances are impacting them.*

### Questions for Parents and Caregivers

- **Is everyone in your family able to get what they need (food, clothing, housing, medical care)? Have there been any problems?**
  - Are you able to access what you need to care for your family? What would help?
  - Who can help you? Do you have supportive family, friends, or neighbors to help you and your children?
- **How is everyone in the family getting along with each other? Is anyone having a particularly hard time?**
  - How is everyone passing the time? Do you have activities you do together? Do you need ideas?
  - Are you worried about anyone? Why?
- **What’s it like parenting right now? How is it different? What’s going well? What are some of the challenges?**
  - What changes have you noticed in your child’s behavior? Are you concerned?
  - Who were your children/youth connected to outside of the home? How are they staying in touch to their friends?
  - How are you trying to take care of yourself during this time? How are you trying to take care of your family?
- **How are you and your family holding up?**
  - How are you dealing with social isolation? How are you managed thus far?
  - How is everyone coping with stress? Are you finding it difficult to bounce back or manage?
  - Is anyone having a particularly hard time? What seems to be bothering you the most? What makes it better/worse?
  - Have people in your family had to face crises before? What did they do?

### Questions for Children and Youth

- **Tell me about how things are going at home. How are things going for you?**
  - Are you feeling okay?
  - Are you worried about anything?
- **Who is taking care of you? What are they doing?**
  - Who makes sure you have everything you need? What do they do?
  - Where do you sleep at night? Does anyone else sleep with you? Do you sleep well?
  - Who wakes you up in the morning?
  - What takes care of you when you get hurt? What do they do?
  - Who goes out and gets food for you? What do you like to eat? Who makes your meals? Who do you eat with?
- **How is everyone getting along with each other? Is anyone having a particularly hard time?**
  - Who lives and stays in your home (including pets)? Who visits?
  - Are you worried about anyone? Why?
  - How can you tell when someone in your home is having a particularly hard time? What do they do? What makes them feel better?
- **Tell me about what you do all day.**
  - What things do you like to do at home? What do you like to do?
  - Do you have responsibilities at home? What are they?
  - What is everyone doing all day? Do you have activities you do together?
- **What do you like most about staying at home? What do you like least? Why?**
  - What are the rules in your house? What happens when someone (sibling, pet, parent) breaks a rule?
  - What are some of the best things about being at home?
  - What are you doing for fun?
  - What do you miss the most about school? Why?





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## Virtual Assessment

### Considerations for General Assessments

#### Assessing Household Members

- Have parents/caregivers been able to meet with providers outside of the home during this crisis? If not, what's the plan?
- If the family has medical concerns or diagnoses, have they been able to access necessary care?
- If any household member has a mental health diagnosis or substance abuse disorder, have they been able to check in with their provider or have medications refilled?
- If any services have been impacted, how has the family been coping, and has it affected anyone or the dynamics in the household?

#### Assessing the Environment

- Are there any red flags in the physical environment? Are there exposed wires? Are the utilities, like heat and water, functioning? Is there sufficient food?

#### Assessing Current Plans

- Are parents/caregiver still in agreement with existing plans?
- What progress are the parents/caregivers and/or child(ren)/ youth making on existing plans?
- Are parents/caregivers and/or child(ren)/youth able to fulfill court-ordered services?
- Are the parents/caregivers trying anything new? How's it going?
- Is anything needed from the agency to continue making progress?

### Considerations for Safety Assessments



**Who?** *People who are involved in the assessment of safety and planning with the family.*

#### Parents/Caregivers

- Whose behavior(s) are you concerned about or considering?
- Is there a parent or caregiver that can identify, without prompting or help, the concerning behavior that you have identified?
- Can the protective parent or caregiver intervene and protect the child(ren) or youth?

#### Children and Youth

- Who are the children/youth in the home? *Do not forget to identify children or youth who are in the home intermittently.* Pay attention to all children/youth, but remember to pay specific attention to:
  - Children who are ages 0-6
  - Children/youth who have special needs
- Children/youth that parents or caregivers identified as having particularly challenging behaviors, make sure to also consider the lack of visibility or oversight of the child/youth due to physical distancing as a "vulnerability" at this time.

#### Key Partners

- Who are your key partners?
- Who can you get information from?
- Who has the family been in touch with by phone or video conference?
- Which collateral contacts can I engage with during the assessment and planning process?
- Are there cousins, grandparents, or friends of the family who they are talking with via phone, video, or social media?
- Are there therapists, teachers, or other adults the children are talking with regularly?



**What?** *What is happening in the family that is impacting child safety.*

- What is the parent's or caregiver's behavior(s) that contributes to your concern, or your continued concern, for the child(ren) or youth **now**, in next **few days** and/or next **few weeks**?
- What identified and demonstrated protective capacity do they have that directly relates to the danger you identified?
- What are the circumstances in which the danger is likely to play out?
- What are the triggers affecting safety in the home?
- Are there patterns of new or existing controlling behaviors occurring in the home? In a situation like a quarantine, perpetrators of domestic violence may take advantage of the reduced options their partners have to leave or seek help.
- Is substance use occurring and impacting the safety of the child(ren) or youth? Parents/caregivers who struggle with substance disorders may cope by using substances to "numb out" pain, fear, and grief during this time.
- Are household members getting what they need and what steps are they taking for self-care? Parents/caregivers who struggle with mental health disorders may find symptoms exacerbated by social isolation and/or may be struggling to maintain proper treatment or medication.



**When?** *Specific times when the danger is active and impacting child safety, and when intervention is necessary.*

- When (what time) is the danger playing out in the family?
- When is the danger threat provoked by alcohol or drugs? Parental stress? Or child specific?
- When is the danger threat likely to be heightened?



## Virtual Assessment

### Considerations for Safety Monitoring

#### Assessing Parents/Caregivers

- Do they understand the Impending Danger Threat(s)?
- Do they understand your CPS role?
- Do they understand their role in the Safety Plan?
- Do they understand how the plan will be communicated and managed?

#### Assessing Feasibility of the Current Safety Plan

- Are they concerned about providers coming to their home?
- Are they concerned about the current amount of time the family is together?
- Have there been changes (for better or worse) that require a new safety assessment?
  - Change in circumstances?
  - Change in household composition?
  - Change in available resources?
  - Change in natural supports?
  - Change in family routine that controlled safety (i.e. loss of daycare, no school, no protective parent availability)?
- Are they willing to continue with the Safety Plan being implemented as written?
- Are they willing for necessary changes to be put in plan in order for the Safety Plan to sufficiently control for the identified threat(s) to the child(ren)/youth?
- If child has access to a cell phone, can they provide updates directly as to how the plan is going?

#### Assessing Modifications to a Safety Plan that are NOT Feasible

- Does the plan need to be modified to increase overall visibility of the children? Can someone in the family's support network connect with the child every day, either by phone or virtually?
- Who from the extended family and informal network can help?
- How can you find out more about the extended family and informal network?
- Which options would work best?
- Consider creative ways to engage or develop plans with network members when they cannot come to the home (phone, video conferencing, meeting outside while following physical distance expectations, etc.).

#### Assessing Current Provider Perspectives and Information

- How do they view the danger threat(s) in the family?
- How do they feel about CPS involvement?
- Do they remain committed to their role in the Safety Plan?
- Do they continue to understand and support the CPS assessment of child safety?
- Are the providers still available at the times the child(ren)/youth needs protection?
- Do they have concerns about the Safety Plan or their role?
- Are you confident they will follow through with their assigned role?
- If necessary, can they be assertive with the parent/caregiver in fulfilling their assigned role?

#### Assessment Before Finalizing the Safety Plan

- Does everyone understand their role?
- Is the schedule of planned control sufficient given current circumstances (i.e. no school, daycare not available)?
- Does the schedule need to be modified?
- Does everyone understand the schedule?
- Does everyone understand the signs of trouble (danger is active)?
- Does everyone know what to do if problems arise? If part of the Safety Plan breaks down, what will happen?
- Does the child/youth know what to expect?
- Does the child/youth know when and why to expect providers to be in the home?
- Does the provider know when it is okay to leave the home and when they need to have contact with CPS prior to leaving the home?

