

Family Time Health Considerations and FAQs for Caregivers

Parent-child and sibling family time is more important than ever to reassure children that their parents and/or siblings are safe, and to maintain and strengthen family bonds and relationships during an otherwise uncertain time. To ensure that children and families continue to have meaningful contact during the COVID-19 pandemic, caregivers should maintain children's relationships through a variety of creative strategies.

Birth and foster parents must partner to ensure that children experience continuity of relationships and can maintain contact with the people they love. Parents' ability to problem-solve together and be a united team will make all the difference in how children in foster care fare during this crisis. While many resource families have been working to successfully communicate and partner with birth parents before this crisis, other families may be new to co-parenting. Developing a plan that protects relationships, the health and safety of the child, as well as the health and safety of the resource family and birth family is possible if families commit to communicating and making a plan that works for all households.

Decisions about in person visitation should be made by families on a case by case basis considering risk factors that may make families or children higher risk for contracting COVID-19 or becoming severely ill. Medical professionals are still working to understand the virus, but believe some people are at higher risk of getting very sick from this illness, and suggest they take extra precautions to reduce their risk of getting ill. Families should consult their own doctors with specific questions about staying healthy and safe. If all families involved decide continuing in-person visitation is safe, they can agree to follow standards to ensure healthy and safety and develop a plan for visits that incorporates social distancing, cleaning and other precautions. Through a good co-parenting relationship, families can agree on social distancing measures both households will follow to keep children and adults safe. Communication is key and we are all responsible for taking care of each other!

Promoting Safe, Healthy In-Person Family Time

If families agree in-person visits are safe, below are examples of considerations for discussion between families. Note: these Questions relate both to the caregiving family and the birth family. Birth families may feel motivated to see their children and be concerned about the repercussions of refusing an in person visit, however they may also be members of a high risk group.

1. Symptoms and Exposure: Make an agreement in advance that if the answers to any of the questions are "yes", virtual family time will be best.

Questions should include the following:

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- Have you or has anyone in your household come into contact (within 6 feet for 10 minutes or more) with any person known to be under investigation for exposure to COVID-19 or anyone with COVID-19?
 - Do you or any members of your household have any symptoms consistent with COVID-19 infection (cough, fever, shortness of breath)?
 - Have you or any member of your household tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 14 days?
2. Staying Healthy: Discuss together how families and children can take actions to stay healthy. In preparation for the visit, review ways that everyone can do their part to limit the spread of the virus. Discussion should include the following:
- Are families aware of the signs and symptoms of the virus and risk factors?
 - Importance of limiting and screening visitors and avoiding group or crowded settings whenever possible. If families are living in group settings, extra precautions that may be needed.
 - Social distancing and keeping a distance of approximately six feet from others when possible
 - Limiting the number of individuals involved in visits and especially avoiding large groups of people (10+ people).
 - Wearing cloth masks to protect children and adults (excluding children under the age of 2 or those who may experience breathing constriction where harm outweighs benefits).
 - Avoiding handshakes.
 - Adults and children thoroughly washing hands before, during and after visits and washing any objects that move between households. Supporting young children in remembering to regularly wash hands.
 - Avoiding touching one's face, mouth and eyes.
 - Covering one's mouth/young children's mouth with a tissue when sneezing and/or coughing (or using elbow).
 - Visiting outdoors in a non-crowded space whenever possible. If visiting indoors, ensuring the visiting space is thoroughly cleaned and sanitized before and after visits.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Are there any proactive steps we can take, as caregivers, prior to an in-person visit between one of the children in our care and his/her family?

Remember, over-communicate and don't make any assumptions about other households or exposure. It is appropriate to have conversations about the above topics before deciding if an in person visit is best. If concerns are identified, it may be appropriate to delay the in-

person visit until consultation with a medical professional can be arranged. Discussing safety precautions and sanitation guidelines with children and their families is another proactive way to promote safe visits. Resources such as this coloring book can help children understand the virus and needed precautions in a developmentally appropriate manner. Remember, it is also your obligation to protect the birth family from exposure through you or others you may have had contact with.

2. We know that relationship building with birth parents is essential for the health and wellness of the child in our care, but we are fearful for our whole family. What can we do to bridge this fear?

Caregivers may have very good reasons to have fears due to their own health status. These are real concerns. All families should consult with their own physicians and keep up to date with the with the latest public health guidance and information related to COVID-19. Caregivers should remember that birth families are also fearful and may not have accurate information regarding the virus and safety precautions. Communicate with family members of children/youth to share your commitment to maintaining their relationship with their child and making a plan for meaningful family time/contact, any concerns you have, and information about the measures you are taking to protect children/youth and your whole family from COVID-19. Ask if they would be willing to make a joint plan as families who both care for the child to make sure everyone stays safe and healthy. Sharing your fears and listening to the other families' fears can be a starting place for joint problem solving and a good relationship. Birth families may be particularly concerned about the health status of their own children at this time. Caregivers should reassure them that they will be consistently informed of any changes in health status.

3. One of the children in our care has unsupervised visits with his parents once a week. He is with them for about 2-3 hours each visit.

- Is it safe to continue visits given COVID-19?

While the answer to this question requires individual considerations, Public Health guidance states these kind of visits can be safe when families and children are healthy, do not have risk factors, and adhere to hygiene, sanitation and social distancing safety measures. If visits can be safely held, in person family time is important to children's well-being.

- What can we do to prevent the risk of COVID-19?

Continue to practice hygiene, sanitation and social distancing measures in accordance with Public Health guidance and encourage children and their families to do the same. Remember, people who look healthy still can be infected and can

spread the virus. Adults should wear a mask and practice social distancing (the mask does not need to be surgical, a cloth mask will suffice) during visits.

Cloth face coverings should:

- *fit snugly but comfortably against the side of the face*
 - *be secured with ties or ear loops*
 - *include multiple layers of fabric*
 - *allow for breathing without restriction*
 - *be able to be laundered and machine dried without damage or change to shape*
- *What steps should we take when the child returns to our home?*

It is recommended the child wash their hands thoroughly. Any objects that move between households should be washed/disinfected by each household. You should disinfect any surfaces touched by the child prior to handwashing. Regular household disinfectant should be sufficient.

4. *Can we request a test for COVID-19 for a child in our care each time he/she returns from a visit?*

The current testing process for COVID-19 can be uncomfortable and stressful for children. Further, it is not clear whether this test will be accurate at the time the child returns to the home. Therefore, this is not a recommended practice

5. *Should we quarantine a child in our home while these visits are ongoing?*

No, quarantine is for children or adults who are known to have been exposed to COVID-19. However, good practice for all who have contact outside the home may involve similar steps that to those taken during cold/flu season:

- *Avoiding sharing personal household items – dishes, eating utensils, towels, bedding*
- *Cleaning all high touch surfaces with household cleaner at least once per day—counters, tabletops, doorknobs, phones, bathroom fixtures*

6. *Will we know if a birth parent or other relative is diagnosed with COVID -19?*

When a person is diagnosed positive for COVID-19, they are asked who they have been in contact with for 48-72 hours so that those people can be contacted by a public health professional.

7. What are some safe activities for face to face visits for a child in our care and his/her parent outside of our home?

Be creative! Avoid crowds and look for activities that allow safe social distancing. Ideas are endless:

- *A walk in the park, on the beach, on a trail, or in a neighborhood*
- *A picnic outside*
- *Bike/scooter/skateboard riding*
- *Throwing a baseball/softball*
- *Riding bikes together*
- *Painting nature together*
- *Gardening*
- *One on one sports*
- *Walking a family dog*
- *Washing a car together (with lots of bubbles!)*
- *Stargazing or watching the sunrise or sunset*
- *Freeze dance in the park*
- *Picking flowers, leaves, rocks for a collection*