

Maintaining Family Connections Virtually: Tips and Resources

I. Planning

Family input is the key to creating a virtual visitation plan. When creating a plan with the family, a caseworker should first seek to engage the caregiver to determine what resources are available to the family. The caseworker should consider the new technological resources currently available to staff outlined in the [How to Work Remotely at DFPS](#) document. The caseworker should seek to plan around the family's choices and preferences to the extent possible. It is important to clearly communicate the plans and expectations regarding the new plan.

The plan should include expectations regarding supervision of any virtual contact, written communication, and telephone calls during this time. Establishing increased opportunities for unsupervised communication between the parent and child utilizing email, text, phone calls and virtual connection may alleviate frustrations and anxiety of the child and parent.

When creating the virtual visitation plan include activities and creative ways to keep the parent and child engaged. Utilizing some of the creative questions and parallel activities explained in this document may help with the initial anxiety of moving to virtual contact.

Tips for Communicating About Visitation

I. Caregivers

Caregivers are likely facing many challenges as they adjust to changing demands, restrictions, and concerns from employers, DFPS, child placing agencies, schools, and medical professionals. As a representative of CPS, it is critical that we provide guidance and are as responsive as possible. When discussing virtual visitation, explore the following:

- Is the caregiver willing to supervise phone or video visitation between the child and parent? If unsure, explore the reasons and reassure the caregiver that the plan can always be reevaluated if there are concerns about the child's physical, emotional, or psychological safety. If the caregiver is not comfortable managing any virtual contact without DFPS present, DFPS has added multiple new technology formats for staff to utilize.
- Encourage caregivers to share email addresses, social media, and phone numbers with parents so that a collaborative plan can be made for contact. Using Skype, Facetime, email, text, phone calls, are all options for a caregiver and parent to utilize without DFPS present. Remember, supervision of the contact may look different in a virtual plan as many of the safety concerns are diminished since there is no physical contact.

- Encourage caregivers to join with us in being creative – children need to know that their parents and siblings are ok and if they cannot see them face to face, we must come up with ways for them to communicate.
- Encourage caregivers to be empathic in their response to parents; parents are likely extremely worried about their children and missing them deeply.
- Encourage caregivers to speak with the child about changes in the visitation and contact plan in a developmentally appropriate way. Encourage them to reassure the child that the parents/siblings are thinking about them and want to see them as soon as it is safe.
- If caregivers have concerns about providing their contact information to parents, explore the reasons for their worries, and encourage them to be creative.
 - Caregivers can create an email address specifically for communicating with the parents, and carbon copy the caseworker on the communication.
 - Caregivers can create a google voice number for phone communication with parents, to keep their phone numbers private.
 - Physical mail from parents to children can go through the caseworker first. Caregivers can send mail without including their address.

Specific considerations when working with a General Residential Operations (GRO) or facility

Due to the number of children residing in a GRO, communication with the facility is critical. DFPS should consider the many competing visits that could be occurring at the facility and its impact on the facilities staff and technological resources.

In cases where the parent child visit can occur through virtual and other technology, the caseworker should contact the person at the GRO with whom you normally schedule your parent child visits to discuss a temporary virtual visitation plan. Due to the nature of virtual communication in lieu of face to face visits, consideration should be given to the scheduling and frequency should be modified. Children could benefit from more frequent communication with their parent during this time due to missing the face to face connection.

II. Parents

In addition to the stress of being involved in a child welfare case, parents are experiencing stress related to the COVID-19 crisis and not being able to have contact with their children. They may be worried, sad, distressed, angry, and fearful. As a representative of CPS, it is critical that we provide thoughtful and engaged guidance and are as responsive as possible.

- Be clear and direct about what is and is not within your control as a caseworker.
- Be empathic and lead with compassion. Consider how you would feel if in the same position.
- Identify expectations for the parent(s) during contact. Examples of behaviors that are expected of the parents for successful contact are:
 - Specifying verbal boundaries
 - Exchanging of information
 - Confirming that they will be available for contact, or notifying the caregiver or caseworker of a need to reschedule or miss a scheduled communication
 - Refraining from including other persons in the communication without advance agency approval
- Respond to questions and needs as quickly as possible, even if just to let them know you have received their message and will get back with them quickly.
- Provide reassurance that CPS is still monitoring and ensuring safety for children.
- Encourage parents to work with caregivers; even if there have been issues in the past, children benefit when adults work together.

III. Activities

Virtual visitation could lead to exciting opportunities to reinforce connections between children and parents. The activities listed below are suggestions for the caregiver and parent to participate in. With the use of technology, there are a variety of ways that staff can help caregivers, children and parents share their daily lives with one another which can diminish unnecessary fears on behalf of the child and parent during this time.

- **Story telling prompts:** www.kitchencounterchronicle.com/storytelling-prompts-for-kids
Storytelling is a wonderful activity for children. Whether it is retelling something that they experienced or imagining an entirely new story. Telling stories is how generations of people have carried their heritage over centuries. This link provides a collection of simple storytelling prompts for children that parents can use with their children to share or create their own stories. Can be used with sibling groups.
- **Print monthly calendars** for children and parents to each have a copy of at home. Children and parents can keep track of activities, plan, and talk about their experiences. Through

this, parents and children will have specific activities that they ask about and or ask/offer to see photos of.

- **Share photos** of the child and parent with each other via email. Print photos and let the children choose where and how to display them. Help the child pick out photos of themselves to send to parents electronically or provide to the caseworker to print and send to the parent.

- **Check-in activities between the child, siblings and parent:**
 - High Low Silly Slow: take turns sharing the best moment of the day, the most difficult moment of the day, something funny that happened, and something that made you slow down and think.
 - Share new things you learned.

- **Creative Questions (interactive, encourages bonding):**

Provide these to parents and children as an activity for them to ask each other during phone calls or video visits. These can be used for sibling visits as well. Communicating only through technology may be difficult for parents and children so use this time to create new opportunities for the children to explore information about their siblings, parents and family. Questions can be modified to explore a variety of relationships.

45 Funny & Silly Questions

1. What is something I always say to you?
2. How old am I (adult)?
3. What do I do for a job?
4. What do you enjoy doing with me?
5. If our pet could talk, what would it say?
6. How does Mommy/Daddy laugh?
7. What's your favorite food?
8. What your favorite Restaurant?
9. What is your favorite Nursery Rhyme?
10. What is your favorite Color?
11. What did you eat for lunch yesterday?
12. Where do you want to go?
13. Which is the best animal?
14. What does a (duck, cow, chicken say)?
15. What does Mommy do?
16. What does Daddy do?
17. What makes me (adult) sad?

18. What makes me (adult) happy?
19. What did you do today?
20. How old are you?
21. How old is Mom?
22. How old is Dad?
23. How old is Sister/Brother?
24. What do you want to get your brother/sister? (See them pick out something they would like to get for their sibling, so they could get it from them later)
25. Tell me something that is gross?
26. What's your dad's first name?
27. What's Mom's first name?
28. How strong is your Dad?
29. What is Dad's favorite food?
30. What is Mom's favorite food?
31. What time does your Mom wake up in the morning?
32. How tall is your Mom?
33. How much time does it take me to make dinner?
34. What's the funniest word you know?
35. What's your favorite song?
36. Who's your friend?
37. If you built a house when you grow up what would it look like?
38. How many kids do you want when you get older?
39. What is your favorite animal?
40. How is the weather today?
41. Do you like Grocery Shopping? (Why/Why Not)
42. How are you doing today?
43. What do you like to do the most?
44. How old is Grandma/Grandpa?
45. What car are you going to drive when you grow older?

- **Parallel Activities (interactive, sensory-rich):**

These are activities that the parent and child can do in their respective homes while on a call or independently, and then discuss the activity or share photos of the activity during their contact. This is most appropriate for ages 3 and up, or when children are talking.

- Reading the same pages of a book, newspaper, or magazine: this can be done during the contact or separately and then discussed during their communication time
- Trying a recipe together and then sharing photos of how it turned out

- Working on a craft or simple project that they can give the other when they are able to see each other in person again.
- Taking a nature walk virtually or take pictures on your walk and share the fun things you saw with the child or parent when they next communicate.
- Learn and use a new word; each week introduce a new word and make a plan to use it in your next conversation.
- Use the same coloring book and color together while you talk or send colored pictures through the mail.
- Help the child create a playlist of songs that remind them of mom, dad, or siblings and send the list.
- Have both the child and parent go outside of their homes and talk about how the weather feels, how the sky looks, and other things they can see, feel, hear, and smell.

- **Voice and Sound Communication:**

These activities can be done over phone calls or virtually, or by providing a recording. All children benefit from hearing the voices of people they love. For babies, this may be even more key during times of separation. Babies can hear and distinguish the sound of parent voices even before they are born:

- Reading favorite bedtime stories - the caregiver can play the stories during bedtime or schedule a call at bedtime.
- Singing lullabies or playing music for their child for bedtime or to help them soothe.
- Ask the child to sing a song for their parent or video the child playing so that it can be shared with the parent.

- **Sharing Physical Closeness through Smell:**

- Encourage parents to send lotions or scented items that they use regularly in their homes or know their child enjoys.
- Parents can send sweaters, blankets, stuffed animals, and other comfort items for the child to enjoy.