



TIP SHEET FOR “FAMILY TIME IN THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE”

In our work, we know that language is important. Use of the term “family time” is a strengths-based and non-stigmatizing alternative for the commonly used phrase of “supervised visits.” This is an important distinction to make to support the parent-child relationship, and we are working to make a shift towards shared use of this language.

These are very scary and trying times, and we are all learning as we go, doing the best we can with the resources and information we have access to. This includes both us as individuals and the systems that we work in. A comforting phrase often referenced in the world of recovery is “progress not perfection,” which is a good reminder to both ourselves as staff, and our clients.

When making decisions regarding family time, consider the following:

- Children who have been removed are survivors of trauma.
- Parents who have had children removed are survivors of trauma.
- COVID-19 represents a traumatic loss for all of us. For trauma survivors, it is EXPECTED to have some responses of fight/flight/freeze. These may include
 - Being more avoidant of calls or contact than baseline (flight)
 - Sounding more agitated or distressed in conversations (fight)
 - Not engaging in services as quickly or easily as before (freeze)

We can remind people that it is normal to feel this way and gently help them get in touch with their coping strategies.

- Consider options for how and when to meet. Is it possible to have outdoor visits, or loosened restrictions with supervision, including allowing for informal or family supports to supervise the family time? Can extended visits or other alterations to the usual schedule happen, to minimize transitions?
- If in person visits are not possible, which mode of contact will work best? Phone call, video conference, interactive app, online games, text messages, emails, and mail are all options. Which option will work best for the child’s developmental level, and for others who will be engaged in the visit such as foster families, first families or siblings?
- What resources may be needed, such as securing free or low-cost internet access or data for mobile phones?

Preparing for Family Time

- Foster families are sharing their home in a virtual visit; help them think about privacy and boundaries.
- Birth parents are also sharing information about their surroundings in a way that may feel very different from a visit in a DCF office. We want to help them feel safe and contained, too.
- We want to create a visit “space” that is emotionally containing, private, and helps the child be engaged in the visit.
- For most parents, being able to see each other before, during, and after visits is a BIG change. We can talk with adults about how hard and complicated this feels.
- We can gently remind each other that children need to get their needs met and that the adults in their lives are working together to do that. Children will turn to different adults to get different needs met, and we can remind all the parents involved that the focus is on helping children get their needs met and on working together to help that go as smoothly as possible.
- Consider finding a comfortable and containing seat for the child to be in during a video chat (younger children may use a Boppy, Bumbo or highchair seat).
- Limit screen time prior to family time if it is dysregulating or distracting for child, as it may decrease their ability to attend and engage in family time.
- Find sensory toys or activities for the child to keep their hands busy and to help regulate and entertain the child. Aim to have this be a planned shared activity between parent and child if possible. Keep in mind “the younger the child, the more sensory input they need.” For example playing with playdough or blocks while meeting.
- Have a plan for hello and goodbye, a routine or ritual that’s familiar and comforting to the child.
- Plan how you might answer questions about virtual family time with simple reassuring answers. Think about how you may want to answer questions specific to COVID-19 as well, consider how foster/ kinship families are talking to other kids or siblings.
- The **more sensory** the visit can be, the better: Add video if possible; add a photo next to a call; hear mom’s voice reading a book or a letter the child can also hold. Add sensory fun like clapping and blowing raspberries!
- Consider **shorter** but more **frequent** visits. Research tells us that children do better with more family time even outside of the current pandemic, and that it is critical to successful reunifications.

- It is harder to process more than one person's input at a time. If you're setting up a video visit, you can hide the self view, so the child is only looking at the other person's face on the screen. Sibling visits should be 1:1 for younger children, too.
- As always, we know kids do better when they are fed and well-rested.
- **Regression** is normal and expected – plan activities younger than you might otherwise think of.
- Remember that the **wiggles** are a normal part of regression and of big feelings. Build in tools for kids to move, dance, clap, jump, squeeze, and push/pull, so that they are more able to stay engaged.
- Plan ahead so parents can have sensory tools alongside their child: if the child has a book, mom has a book; if the child has water play, mom has water play. Remember, our **neurons** are relational!
- New kinds of connections may create opportunities for connecting siblings with each other. Can older siblings also engage in reading stories, showing their younger siblings their home, sharing about their daily routines, or creating things to send or email? Sibling time should be in addition to time with parent(s).
- Foster parents can be helped to recognize the meaning in birth parent connection. They can use recordings of mom's voice, write stories about each child's day to share, and have children show and share their favorite things, all helping to build connection.



During Family Time

- We borrow from our colleagues at [The Fussy Baby Network™](#) who remind us of the value of Mindful Self Regulation to feel calm before we start difficult tasks. We encourage everyone involved to practice this: breathe in a good smell, place a beautiful picture in front of you, and offer yourself gentle compassion!
- Aim to incorporate playful activities for middle aged kids: board games, joke telling, art projects or sensory activities, storytelling, interactive guessing games (ex: charades, I spy, 20 questions).
- Aim to incorporate playful activities for younger kids: peek-a-boo, singing songs, reading a book, show and tell of toys or other items at home.
- Good news: Neurons are still growing and connecting! We can make the most of this by having parents and young children physically do the same things at the same time: building towers, doing finger play so that their connection is cemented in the child's brain.
- During this time, the child is likely to need more containment, both physical and emotional. Unlike at an office visit, the foster/kin parent is going to need to remain available to meet a young child's need for touch and eye gaze during a visit. Prepare everyone for the hard feelings that may come up when a child turns to a foster parent for physical comfort/reassurance/help.
- Consider if there are certain smells, sounds, or other things which are a known comfort and connection between parent and child. During the visit, share a letter or drawing with a familiar lotion or perfume on it. Similarly, sending a letter or story and calling to read it. Or, recording a letter or story read in the parent's voice.
- Narrate the child's actions, to help build language and connection, by explaining with your words that you recognize and notice what the child is doing.
- You can use the acronym PRIDE, ([see resource from Boston University here](#))

P	Praise behaviors you want to see more of
R	Reflect appropriate talk
I	Imitate play that you want to see more of
D	Describe what the child is doing
E	Enthusiasm , show that you're excited to play

Processing and Supporting Family Time

- Keep in mind that some aspects of virtual visits may be uncomfortable and there will undoubtedly be differences in boundaries, contact and privacy between first and foster/kinship placements with virtual visits. This is ok. It may be helpful to have open dialogue between families or with support workers about these differences.
- Aim to maintain contact between family time with potentially shorter but more frequent phone, video, or text contacts.
- If more frequent contacts is not possible, ask for more regular updates from foster/ kinship placement caregivers.
- Take time to plan the next family time, make a list of activities or things the child likes, that you could incorporate into virtual time together.
- Reassure and empower parents to utilize their community and family supports during this time-sponsors, groups, and video connecting with friends and family.
- Try to set aside some time for self-care after these virtual connections, as they may be emotional for both parent and child.

Over time, supporting these shared connections again and again, we are supporting relationships. Consistency builds relationships, and relationships are how children learn! Even though this is a challenging time, there ARE opportunities to offer repeated family connections and creative shared experiences!

Additional Resources:

Virtual Parent Time, University of Toronto Social Work Faculty

https://www.academia.edu/9484896/Virtual_Parent_Time_Handout

Successful Video Visits with Young Children, National Council on Crime & Delinquency

<https://www.nccglobal.org/blog/successful-video-visits-young-children>

Family Time and Sibling and Relative Visits Interim Policy State of Washington, Department of Youth & Families

<https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/FamilyTimeInterimPolicy.pdf>

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www.mass.gov/first-steps-together

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