

## DCF Practice Tips for Videoconferencing with Children and Families

Videoconferencing with children and families may be a new and challenging skill to learn and these practice tips can help guide your videoconference visits. These practice tips are intended to support [DCF's Guidance on Case Contact and Visits](#). For guidance on how to document your videoconference visit in iFamilyNet, click [here](#).

### Plan Your Visit

It's important to plan out your videoconference visit before contacting your family. The first question should always be: "How are you doing?" Now more than ever, we need to be using what we know about engagement to support families. However, your visit can't just be about feelings. Your videoconference visit should mirror your in-person home visit. Your goal is to gain information about the family's daily functioning, progress towards Action Plan goals, and ongoing needs in order to accurately assess safety and danger/risk in the home.

Research shows that domestic violence and child abuse/neglect can increase in times of stress. When preparing for your videoconference visit, think about how the current crisis may affect family functioning and safety and danger/risk in the home. Safety planning is particularly important right now with families all at home together. Discuss safety planning at each videoconference visit to address the family's unique history, needs, and reason(s) for Department involvement. When planning the content of your videoconference visit, keep in mind and make sure to address the following risk factors:

- Young parents
- Parents who were child consumers
- Children under age 5 living at home
- Domestic violence, substance use, and/or behavioral/mental health conditions
- Families who may be disconnected from their usual supports

**As always, if you are worried about a family or worried about the safety of children in a home, contact your supervisor and/or manager immediately.**

### Assessing Parents

During your videoconference, you should ask parents questions related to their Action Plan that you would normally ask during an in-person visit. Make sure to check who is living in the home; there might be new or returned family members living in the home due to the current crisis.

Encourage parents to talk with their children, even very young children, about what's going on and why everyone is at home right now. The parent needs to be able to offer reassurance to their children. Encourage families to limit children's exposure to the news. Encourage families to plan something to look forward to, activities they can do as a family like a picnic in the living room or in the yard, a movie night, a game night, a make your own pizza or taco night.

Ask if families have a plan in place should they get sick to ensure a caregiver for their children. Ask if families have a plan in place to access needed medical treatment should they or their children get sick.

For parents who are particularly struggling with feelings of isolation or feeling overwhelmed, help them think about the risk and benefit of having visitors. Although we are encouraging every family to stay at home and not have family or friends visit, we also need to weigh the impact of isolation on parents and children. If the risk to the children is higher with social isolation, help families identify one of two people to use as support. Some families may need someone who can come into their home to support them or someone who can take their children for a few hours. This person can be a service provider or a family or community member.

Some questions to ask (as based on the five protective factors) may include:

1. Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
  - What does your daily routine look like for you and your children? Do your children have schoolwork? Are you able to take your children outside?
  - How are you explaining the current situation to your children? How much exposure do your children have to the news?
2. Building Social and Emotional Competence of Children
  - Have you noticed changes in your children's behavior? Are they demanding more attention or engaging in behavior to attract your attention? Are they having new difficulties with sleeping, eating, and/or toileting? Are they irritable, anxious, fearful, or depressed?
  - How can you help your children adjust to the disruption in their routine? How can you help them manage any big feelings they are having in response to the crisis? How can you address any behavioral issues?
  - Do you understand how your own feelings of stress and anxiety might have an impact on your children's behavior?
3. Parental Resilience
  - How are you coping during this time? What strategies are you using to manage your own emotions like stress, fear, and anxiety? What are you doing to take care of yourself?
  - Are you still seeing service providers either in person or remotely? How often? How is it going?
  - Discuss stress relief suggestions like exercise/getting outside, mindfulness/deep breathing, limiting exposure to the news, keeping in contact with friends and family, watching a funny movie or TV show, reading a book, journaling, and/or coloring.
4. Social Connections
  - How are you keeping in touch with friends and family?
  - How are you practicing social distancing? Are you limiting visitors to your home? Are you limiting where your children go?
5. Concrete Supports in Times of Need

- Do you have adequate food and enough money to buy food? Are you able to access food through the schools or community?
- Do you have necessary supplies like formula, diapers, and toilet paper?
- If you are still working, how are you handling childcare?
- If you have lost your job, have you filed for unemployment? How are you paying your expenses like rent and utilities? Is your landlord threatening eviction? Do you have access to phone or internet service?
- How are you meeting your and your children's ongoing medical and behavioral/mental health needs? How are you accessing necessary medications and/or medical treatments?

### Assessing Children

We want to be talking to children whenever we can. Children can often give us a good window into what's happening in the household. We want to understand what the child is doing during the day – what their routine is like and how their needs are being met. Reassure children that it's normal to be worried or afraid right now. By staying home, everyone is keeping themselves and each other safe.

Some questions to ask may include:

- What are you doing during the day? What time do you get up? What do you do after that and then after that? What do you eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner? Who makes your meals?
- How are you keeping in touch with friends and family? Has anyone been coming over to visit or have you been going to visit them?
- Do you know why everyone is at home right now?
- Do you have any schoolwork to do? Who's helping you to get that done?
- Is there anything that you're worried about?
- Discuss stress relief suggestions with older children/youth like exercise/getting outside, mindfulness/deep breathing, limiting exposure to the news, keeping in contact with friends and family, watching a funny movie or TV show, reading a book, journaling, and/or coloring.

### Observations

Observing the condition of family members and of the home is a huge part of home visits. This can and should be done during videoconferences as well. Ask to see and speak to each member of the family during your visit. Ask to see sleeping arrangements, kitchens, or other areas of the home if you have concerns. Listen to background noise and ask about any voices you hear that you don't recognize.

### Collateral Contacts

Collateral Contacts continue to be one of our best sources of information in assessing children and families. As always, family visits should inform the content of collateral contacts, and collateral contacts should inform the content of family visits.

Gather clear information from both families and collaterals about frequency and method of contact. Contact collaterals regularly and if possible, arrange for different collaterals to be on a call together. Individual concerns can feel somewhat insignificant, but when people come together and share concerns, a pattern can become clear that indicates higher risk or danger for the family.

When speaking with collaterals, clearly state the Department's worries and concerns. Community partners do not necessarily look at a family through a "protective lens". Asking them if they have "protective concerns" will not necessarily get you the information that you're looking for. Be specific so that collaterals know our concerns and can add their specific observations to our assessment of safety and danger/risk.