

Maintaining Family Connections

The impact of COVID-19 on visitation between a child in conservatorship and their parent creates challenges and we must consider how we can best support families in maintaining connections to each other. The below Q&A provides guidance on this subject. Remember, our goal is to ensure that families have access to high quality, least-restrictive visitation that supports their meaningful relationships.

Parents and caregivers must work together during this time to ensure that children are able to maintain contact through a variety of electronic platforms. Not all parents or caregivers will have access to all the various types of electronic platforms, so an individualized plan must be developed.

1. If the face to face visitation is court ordered between the child and the parent, can I move to virtual visits?

No. Many courts are entering local orders suspending in person visitation at this time. You may only move to virtual visits for parents and children if the court has entered an order suspending any court-ordered in person visitation.

2. How do I create a new visitation plan using technology and virtual visits?

The first step to creating a new visitation plan is to reach out to the caregiver to discuss what options are available at the caregiver's residence to facilitate a virtual visit. You will need to explore if they have a computer, internet services, and if they know how to use virtual communication platforms. There are also tools that will allow the caseworker to arrange, facilitate and supervise the virtual visit.

Once you know what forms of communication the caregiver is comfortable with, you will then discuss with the parent their options for virtual visits and any other creative ways to maintain contact with their child until it safe for them to visit in person.

3. Are virtual visits between parents and children supervised by caseworker or Department designee?

The purpose of supervised visitation is to ensure that a child remains safe when a parent is present. Unless there is a reason to monitor the conversation between a child and a parent, virtual visits can be unsupervised and or monitored by the caregiver if they are comfortable with the arrangement.

Work with your supervisor to determine any restrictions that should be in place regarding the contact. Many electronic platforms allow for multiple parties to be present.

4. What do I do if the caregiver/parent does not have access to technology for a virtual visit and the court has suspended in person visits?

Discuss all viable options with your supervisor to help the parent stay in some type of contact with their child. Email, phone calls, and even letters could be additional ways to support the parent child connection.

5. Should I encourage telephone calls be used to connect parents with their children?

Yes. Provide clear expectations for the communication and the timeframes for when the calls should occur. The telephone speaker option can be used to allow caregiver to supervise the conversation between child and parent if required by the caseworker.

Children could benefit from more frequent communication with their parent during this time due to missing the face to face connection.

6. What if the caregiver does not want to facilitate a virtual visit?

If there are any barriers to facilitating virtual visitation, seek guidance from your supervisor. You may need to involve the legal parties, case managers or administrator for the child placing agency to be creative.

7. How do I coordinate a virtual visit?

Determine what the caregiver and parent have access to in the way of communication. Encourage caregivers to share email addresses, social media, and phone numbers with parents so that a collaboration plan can be made for the virtual contact.

8. How do I coordinate a virtual visit if my child is place in a 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.

The following things should be considered when discussing the virtual visitation plan:

- Forms of technology available to the facility and times that it is available
- Creative ways to maintain contact and additional contact times
- Expectations for supervision and monitoring of the virtual visitation
- What contact information will be shared directly with the parent versus monitored through the caseworker? For example, there may be a special email address that is created just for the parent to contact the child or unique phone number on communication apps.

9. Do I need to communicate with the legal parties concerning the virtual communication visitation plan?

Yes, you should share the agreed upon communication plan with the legal parties.

10. Do I need to advise the court of modifications for visitation?

This depends, you must check with your supervisor or regional attorney to determine if there are any special court instructions for your county.

11. How do I document in IMPACT?

Virtual contacts should be documented as a face-to-face contact. The drop down box selection regarding where the visit took place should be documented as the location of the child. In the narrative text field document that the contact was a virtual contact.

Emails and telephone calls can be documented as such.

Other documentation requirements remain the same.

12. Can I use virtual visitation for sibling visits?

Yes, follow the above guidance concerning sibling visitation.