

# Family Visits Are an Essential Service for Youth in Foster Care

March 19, 2020 Marty Beyer and S. Auguste Elliott

**In these challenging times** when social distancing is required for public safety, how can we make it safe for children in foster care to have critical time with their birth families?

**Family time** is an important way to meet children's needs. Fortunately, foster parents and kin are providing children with loving reassurance, routines and opportunities to learn. But children in care have been traumatized by separation from their families as well as prenatal and early stressors. The disruption from school closure, not seeing their friends or having a normal activity schedule is more difficult for traumatized children. Without these everyday supports, their behaviors may become more challenging.

Handling their own confusing emotions is even harder than usual because those around them are reacting to the stress. Foster parents and kin are extremely stretched by school and daycare closures. The anxieties of others make children worry about their parents' and other family members' well-being. Young children cannot articulate their feelings and verbal children are likely to act them out. When they see their families every week, their need for reassurance can be met in a different way than what their foster parent or kin can provide.

How can reassuring family time be provided now? Since contact with their families is an essential, offering it requires creativity. Following are some ideas:

- **Virtual Family Time.** FaceTime and Zoom are the obvious ways for children to see their families. Making these visits possible may require a tablet or iPhone and internet access. Agencies and donors are scrambling to make these available locally. For agencies that have virtual meeting capacity, coaches can potentially provide additional support and follow-up for foster parents and kin, as well as anonymity. Preparation with their caregiver could allow the child to share aspects of their daily life in care that will reassure the parent and possibly decrease the loyalty conflict children so often experience.
- **Visits by phone.** Older children benefit from talking with their parents, sharing details of their day and asking questions. For young children, hearing their parent's voice can be reassuring, perhaps with a picture available to ease confusion. Lullabies and familiar stories can be very important. Supportive preparation of foster parents and kin is critical in order to plan for the most beneficial phone visits.
- **Transitional Objects.** Recordings of parents telling a story, singing lullabies and reassuring messages can support children in between family times. Pictures of parents can be bedside. Stories like *Invisible Strings* and *The Kissing Hand* can be helpful.
- **Visits outdoors.** Visits in a park would be optimal for most children, but have to be managed to avoid germ transmission.

Arrangements for these approaches to family time. All children and families are stressed by changing everything in daily life. This applies to arranging new ways to visit. If foster parents or kin, parents and agency staff can agree on the following, safe family time can be arranged:

- Their child needs to hear their parent's loving words (and, if on a screen, loving face).
- Their child needs to hear (or see) familiar songs or conversation with their parent.

- Their child needs to talk about him or herself. This means the adult asking about details at the child's level ("Tell me about something funny that happened to you today.")

The child needs to not worry. This means adults not asking about or sharing things that would worry the child (about health or the future). This requires great self-control. Adults have to push their worries out of the way in order to respond directly to their child's needs. Children who ask worried questions need to have their feelings confirmed and reassurance provided ("It sounds like you're worried. You are going to be fine. Let's think of something happy so we don't worry so much.")

Excellent resources are available from the [CDC](#), [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#), and [Zero to 3](#) about how to talk about the current situation with children of different ages. Such resources should be shared with parents, foster parents and kin.

Virtual and phone visits should be limited to what a child can manage. Depending on the child, this may be a few minutes. Most children (and families) benefit from a shared timer that will alert them both to the near end and end of their time together. The time limit must be present in a firm and loving way by all the adults to reduce a child's reaction that ending is unfair.

Before this national crisis, there was growing recognition around the country that reducing the percentage of families whose visits were supervised makes sense. Safety surveillance during visits is unnecessary for most families. Supporting families to meet their children's needs in familiar ways has been demonstrated to be a more beneficial approach, one that [our organizations champion](#) every day.

Foster parents and kin can make the arrangements for screen or phone visits and support children in adjusting to these new visit arrangements. For most children the risks posed by screen or phone visits is likely to be minimal, and supervision is not necessary. Especially for parents soon after their children's removal, the support of a visit coach or other staff from a separate location on a screen visit would be optimal but may not be available.

*Marty Beyer developed the [Visit Coaching model](#) to help support parents experiencing visitation. S. Auguste Elliott is the senior director of clinical, training and evaluation services for Easterseals Vermont.*