



COPING WITH VISITS DURING COVID-19

BY AND FOR PARENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

'I Hope This Doesn't Break Our Bond'

Parent-to-parent support for handling separation during the pandemic

DEAR PARENTS,

We know that if you're visiting your children in foster care only by video or phone because of the pandemic, you are suffering.

One parent in our support group told us:

"I cannot hold, kiss or hug my baby and that is super hard for me. My 18-month-old daughter is too small to understand. To her, it's like Mommy's not here. I can imagine her feelings. I hope this doesn't break our bond."

"We did get to play peek-a-boo. I'd run away from the screen and come back like, "You found me!" I had to be creative so I tried to show her anything around me. I even got some fruit and made them dance and sing to her. That made her smile. But after 20 minutes, I could see her losing attention. She is so young that she can't stay in front of the phone for too long."

Another parent shared:

"With my 8-year-old son, we started with me explaining why we can't see each other in person. My son said, "I know it's not your fault, Mom" and that made me feel better. We talked about how school is going on the computer. He said, "I want to go to school. This is harder." I kept saying I loved him as I helped him with some classwork."

It's emotionally draining visiting like this. I only see my son once a week and now it's through video. I don't think anyone understands this kind of pain unless you are going through it."



With many courts closed, it can be hard to challenge visiting restrictions or advance your case. We hope this tip sheet on coping with virtual visits, self-advocating and taking care of yourself can help you stay strong during this tough time. You will make it. You can get through this and get your children home.

-WITH LOVE FROM THE RISE TEAM

TIP Routines help children feel safe. Try to create a routine for how you say hello and goodbye, like singing a song. Give a 5-minute warning and don't let goodbyes go on and on. As parents we have to be the strong ones for our little loves.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Choose a good time of day to visit, if possible.
- Ask for an adjusted schedule. Many short video or phone check-ins keep a connection better than one long visit.
- Do not expect a young child to stay on video. Let your kids run around the room normally the way they would if you were with them.

TIP Keep a log of your visits and share it with your attorney, especially if phone or video visits are not supervised. Keep track of your visiting time and what you do with your child. Ask for help with any challenges. Also track any requests—for visit changes or technology—and the agency response.

Your Rights to Visits Despite the Pandemic

Despite the coronavirus, parent-child visiting should continue. There is no legal reason why your visits should be suspended.

In-person visits: In hard-hit states, few families are getting in-person visits right now, but if everyone is healthy and no one is at high risk, visits should continue in-person. This is especially true for unsupervised and overnight visits, or as states begin to re-open.

Video or Phone Visits: If you have to visit by video and phone, the agency and foster parent should work with you to schedule frequent, short visits that can work better for children, such as 15-20 minutes daily. The foster parent should help children engage.

You may need a phone, minutes on your phone, or other support to visit by phone or video. The foster care agency should cover these costs. In NYC, that's required. Your

caseworker should make arrangements to meet your tech needs.

Self-Advocacy: Keep advocating for the least restrictive visits possible:

- Contact your attorney to talk through options as your situation or feelings change
- Speak to your caseworker or supervisor
- In NYC, contact the ACS Office of Advocacy: (212) 676-9421 about tech needs

How You Can Help Your Child Cope

Adapted from the Brain Architects Podcast with Jack Shonkoff, Harvard Center on the Developing Child

Adults are really struggling with the pressures and tensions of this time. When we're feeling significant stress, anxiety, unease and even depression about what's going on, you don't have as much energy to be on your best game at all times.

For everyone, feeling some sense of safety and control brings your stress system back down. And none of us are capable of feeling safe and secure all by ourselves, all of the time. So parents supporting each other, and interactions with extended family, with your community—all of these are necessary. We all need relationships to help us deal with stress.

Coping with stress can also start as simply as taking deep breaths. It's not just a mindset thing, it actually helps to bring your blood pressure and your heart rate down. So take a deep breath and a slow exhale.

For children, two very important things



make stress tolerable. One is to provide a sense of safety in the children—a sense that they are being taken care of in spite of what is going on around them. You can do this during visits with your child by reassuring your child that you're safe, and just spending time together.

Second is helping a child develop a sense of being able to cope. For that, play is probably the most important thing, because play is how the brain builds strong circuits for resilience. So create opportunities to play with your child and be comfortable with following your child's lead. That will be tremendously protective for your child.

Making the Most of Virtual Visits

- Have a plan—you and your child will feel calmer and more in control if you are prepared
- Reassure your child that you are safe and healthy
- Start with a check-in question, like *Roses & Thorns*: Two good things and one challenge about your day or week
- Think of it like a car trip and play I Spy, Peek-a-Boo, "Would You Rather," or 20 Questions
- Play music, sing and dance, or tell stories together
- Read favorite books, have a puppet show, watch movies, or do show-and-tell
- Go with the flow and watch what your kids are doing rather than trying to gain their focus
- Use Marco Polo, TikTok, photo apps, online games or videogames

Rise
TIPS



TIPS is brought to you by the parents at Rise, which advocates for child welfare reform.

For further advocacy and ideas, go to: www.risemagazine.org/2020/05/visiting-resources/

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