

To: All Child Welfare Certified Foster Parents and Relative Caregivers

Message from Child Welfare Director Rebecca Jones Gaston

Dear Foster Parents and Relative Caregivers,

Thank you for all you are doing to help us serve Oregon's children and families as we navigate this ever-evolving pandemic together. Please follow this link to view my most updated message. <https://youtu.be/5k6Qsiqfh5I>

In an effort to provide a safe environment for our families, our staff, and foster families, we have changed visitation expectations for the next two weeks. As of 3/24/20, we are suspending face-to-face visitation for all parents and children/young adults of all ages in DHS offices. After the two-week mark, we will reassess and provide an update. We know, and understand, that visitation between children/young people and their families is incredibly important, and that the Foster Youth Bill of Rights provides protections specific to visits. These are unprecedented times. Our families and children who are separated from each other may need extra support and assurances that everyone is OK. Hearing each other's voices and/or seeing each other virtually will help maintain and build engagement. We will continue to assess the situation and keep you updated on additional guidance regarding visitation.

Visitation guidelines:

Guidance regarding visits for children and young adults in the care of DHS including cases that share concurrent jurisdiction with Oregon's Nine Tribes or U.S. Federally Recognized Tribes as of 3/24/20. We are suspending face-to-face visitation for all parents and children/young adults of all ages in DHS offices. After the two-week mark, we will reassess and provide an update

For all visitation and family contact: Please modify plans to allow daily phone and virtual contact between families of origin and children; as well as siblings that are not together. Children of all ages (even babies) can absolutely benefit from seeing their parents via videoconferencing and/or hearing their voices by phone. Parents will also greatly benefit from this contact. We know that parents are more motivated to stay engaged in their case plan and children do better when they are having frequent contact.

Visits for parents and children/young adults may continue to be held in the outside of the DHS offices with the following considerations and precautions:

- Foster parents, parents, the Tribe, and caseworkers agree there are no health-related concerns around visits and there is enough room to practice social distancing.
- If there are questions about the visits occurring, Program Managers, and the Tribe when applicable, would review visits on a case-by-case basis and make the final decision whether the visit should occur.

- **When suspending face-to-face visits for a tribal child, please update and consult with the tribe as soon as possible. It is important to maintain collaboration with tribal partners on methods to maintain contact outside of face to face contact, i.e. Skype, phone calls, etc. If the tribal representative is not available or unable to provide tribal perspective, reach out to Active Efforts Specialists or Tribal Affairs Unit for guidance.**
- Prior to visits, work with foster families to ensure that children and visiting family are not experiencing illness, nor have they been in contact with anyone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19. Consider on a case-by-case basis if anyone in the foster family or family's household has underlying health vulnerabilities and have staff consult with their supervisor should any health concerns exist (e.g. Child with symptoms visiting a parent who lives with an elderly grandparent). Program Managers will make the decision if visits should occur.

Please adhere to policies that mirror CDC social distancing recommendations that are outlined here:

<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/DISEASESCONDITIONS/DISEASESAZ/Pages/emerging-respiratory-infections.aspx>

Benefits of visits

We all can agree:

- ✓ Children need to hear their parent's loving words (and, if on a screen, loving face).
- ✓ Children need to hear (or see) familiar songs or conversation with their parent.
- ✓ Children need to talk about themselves. This means the adult asking about details at the child's level ("Tell me about something funny that happened to you today").
- ✓ Children need to know their parents are OK and parents need to know their children are OK.



Visitation is essential for a parent's and child's well-being:

The primary purpose of visitation is to maintain the parent-child attachment, reduce a child's sense of loss, preserve their sense of belonging as part of a family and community, and reassure parents and support them to continue to engage in case progress. A child needs to see and have regular contact with their parent(s) and siblings, as these relationships are the foundation of child development and well-being. The same is true for parents.

Children in foster care who visit frequently exhibit significantly fewer behavioral issues than children who visit infrequently, or not at all. Overall, children who have frequent contact with

their parent(s) show less anxiety and depression than children whose parents' visits were either infrequent or nonexistent. (Cantos & Gries, 1997)

Parents who are offered, encouraged to participate in, and have frequent visits are more engaged in their case plan, more motivated to move toward change, have a more positive view of their own strengths and achieve reunification at a higher rate.

Visitation is fundamental to permanency

Visitation facilitates permanency planning, promotes timely reunification, and helps in the decision-making process to establish alternative permanency plans. Visitation maintains and supports the parent-child relationship necessary for successful reunification. Visitation is considered the heart of reunification, even when reunification is not likely, parents, siblings and extended family continue to be important in a child's life.



Visitation is vital to a child maintaining family relationships and cultural connections

Maintaining family connections has life-long significance for a child. Regular visitation maintains their relationships with siblings and others who have a significant role in a child's life. When a child loses family connections, they also lose family history, medical history and cultural information.

Benefits of parent-child visitation:

- ✓ Supports parent-child attachment
- ✓ Eases the pain of separation for all
- ✓ Maintains and strengthens family relationships
- ✓ Reassures a child that their parents/primary caregiver are alright and helps the child to not blame themselves for placement
- ✓ Supports the family in dealing with changing relationships
- ✓ Motivates parent to make positive changes in their life by providing reassurance that the parent-child relationship is important for a child's well-being
- ✓ Provides opportunities for parent(s) to learn and try new skills
- ✓ Supports a child's adjustment to the foster home
- ✓ Enables the parent(s) to be active and stay current with their child's development, educational and medical needs, church and community activities

- ✓ Provides opportunities for parent(s) to assess how their child is doing, and share information about how to meet their child's needs
- ✓ Assists in the assessment and decision-making process regarding parenting capacities and permanency goals
- ✓ Reduces the time in out-of-home care
- ✓ Increases the likelihood of reunification.

Activities for virtual visitation:

****It is very helpful when workers/SSAs connect with providers and parents prior to the visits to be able to help coach them through if the conversation dries up or is off to a rough start. Caseworkers/SSAs can talk with the provider about what the children have been doing and sharing that with the parent prior to the visit so the parent can ask about certain things, i.e.: "I heard you baked a cake this week!" Also helping parents come up with ideas prior to the visit to support quality connections.**



Read children a story or write a story together

Help with homework

Show off a new hairdo/outfit/dance move or anything else that is of current interest

Have a dance party

Sing together

For babies/toddlers: sing, smell stinky toes through the screen (have the child hold their feet up to the screen and the parent can "sniff" their toes), play peek-a-boo

Color pictures and show each other

Play hide and seek

For older youth: Play Coke v. Pepsi (questions that they can ask each other to start conversation – found online), talk about their friends/activities/what books they are reading or want to read, what shows are they watching, if they had a million dollars what would they spend it on