

Family Time in the Community

Effective December 9, 2020

The Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) believes strongly in the importance of children and families having time to be together in person and makes every effort to ensure in-person visits continue safely as the weather becomes colder and as COVID-19 cases increase in Rhode Island.

Family Time is a cornerstone of child welfare practice and critical to ensuring children and youth are on the path to reunify with their families. Not only does it support meaningful connection and relationships during their time apart, but it also provides us critical information about reunification readiness. While *Family Time* is not considered a social gathering, it is a time when more than one household may be coming together and every precaution should be taken to ensure safety for all those involved.

To balance public health with the needs of children, youth, families, and resource families during this pandemic, we continue to closely review the guidance from the Department of Health and adjust our policies as needed.

General Guidelines

- In line with public health guidance, DCYF strongly encourages *Family Time* to take place outside. If an outdoor location is not possible, an appropriate indoor location will be utilized for *Family Time* in the community. The space should be cleaned and disinfected, following [CDC guidance](#). In addition, an indoor location should be large enough to allow all participants to consistently maintain six feet of physical distance.
- DCYF and our partners collaborated to increase the availability of locations for *Family Time*. If you require assistance in finding a location that adheres to these guidelines, please reach out to the DCYF Case Manager. Each designated location will require coordination and approval for no more than three visits per day between 8:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. If evenings are available, this increases to no more than five visits per day. Visits will be scheduled with 1.5 hours between each visit to allow for appropriate cleaning (e.g., disinfecting common surfaces and common objects to reduce fomite transmission). All visits will be supervised by DCYF staff and/or an approved designee. All parties will agree to only use identified areas within each location. Personal Protective Equipment (e.g., masks) will be provided for the family and designated supervisor.
- In alignment with the current RI PAUSE restrictions, DCYF is placing additional restrictions on locations. Restaurants, malls, and other public places must be avoided at this time. Please review the RI PAUSE guidance carefully and use these frameworks to make decision about locations where *Family Time* should take place.
- All previous Court orders for visitation remain in full force and effect. DCYF intends to provide *Family Time* for all children and their parents, in compliance with all existing Court orders, unless DCYF can demonstrate good cause not to do so. In the event DCYF determines there is good cause to limit or modify a pre-existing Court order for *Family Time*, DCYF will file an emergency motion in Family Court.

- Unless there is a Court order to the contrary, DCYF maintains discretion to determine the level of supervision required for *Family Time*. DCYF will exercise its discretion on a case-by-case basis to authorize unsupervised *Family Time*, so long as DCYF determines it is safe for the children/youth.
- DCYF will continue to utilize *Virtual Family Time* to increase and enhance contact between families and children/youth. *Virtual Family Time* will not be used as a substitute for *Face to Face Family Time* unless a visit cannot happen due to health considerations detailed below. Under these circumstances, it is our expectation that **Virtual Family Time will be increased**.
- The DCYF Case Management Team will check in weekly with resource families and biological families to review how *Family Time* is going. *Family Time* will continue based on the frequency approved by DCYF.

Guidelines to Follow Before, During, and After *Family Time* for Children in Foster Care

Health Screening Procedure

A health screening process is critical to mitigating possible spread of COVID-19. Please ensure the completion of health screens is clearly documented in the record and available for review upon request.

- Pre-Screening: The day before *Family Time* is scheduled, the DCYF Case Manager and/or a service provider facilitating the visit will contact each adult intending to participate in the visit, as well as the resource home and the youth that will be present. They will complete a verbal screen using the screening criteria established by RIDOH and document that in the progress notes.
 - If the answer to any of the screening questions is **YES, Family Time must be postponed until the screening criteria can be met or there is acceptable medical clearance or documentation**. Additionally, if a youth, family member or resource family is placed on quarantine or isolation due to being considered a “close contact” or as a result of receiving a COVID positive test, *Family Time* will be postponed.
- Day of Visit Screening: On the day of *Family Time*, the individual facilitating the visit will review the same screening questions with the resource family and each adult and child present for the visit to ensure no individual has any symptoms or associated risk of transmitting COVID-19.
 - If the answer to any of the screening questions is YES, *Family Time* should be postponed until the screening criteria can be met or there is acceptable medical clearance or documentation.
- Health Vulnerabilities of Children and Youth: For children and youth in DCYF care with health vulnerabilities, the DCYF Case Manager will assess, with the family and resource family, whether it is in the best interest of the child or youth to schedule *Family Time* so the child and youth’s safety is assured. Before this assessment, the DCYF Case Manager will consult with the child’s or youth’s primary care provider to determine if *Family Time* is advisable.
- Health Vulnerabilities of Adults: If there are any health concerns on the part of any adults involved, they are encouraged to reach out to the DCYF Case Manager before *Family Time* is scheduled. The DCYF Case Manager and their supervisor will review these situations with their DCYF administrator and the Department’s legal counsel.

Physical Space and Occupancy Limits

All visit participants must follow the general guidance from RIDOH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regarding gathering sizes and physical distancing.

Adhere to Gathering Size Restrictions

- Please follow the gathering size guidance for each phase, as described on the [Reopening RI website](#).
- As mentioned earlier, *Family Time* is a critical part of ensuring strong relationships and as an indicator of parental/family capacity to safely care for their children. As such, it does not fall under the social gathering regarding size.
- With that said, we encourage limiting the number of individuals involved to only those permitted, such as visiting only with the parent and siblings and no other household members, extended family members, friends, etc.
- If there are concerns regarding the number of individuals coming together for *Family Time*, please contact the DCYF Case Manager. The Case Manager and their supervisor will review these situations with their DCYF administrator and the Department's legal counsel, as to whether a different *Family Time* plan should be considered. During these unprecedented times, it is critical we work together to creatively problem solve and ensure children and youth maintain connection with their families.

Apply Physical Distancing Measures

- CDC has published the following [social distancing guidance](#).
- Whenever possible, everyone should remain at least six feet apart.
- Due to the transmission of COVID-19 through bodily fluids, parents are permitted to hold and hug their children, but are discouraged from kissing children.

Utilization of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)

- All adults must wear a face mask or a cloth face covering their nose and mouth during *Face to Face Family Time*. The CDC has more information on [cloth face coverings](#). It is expected participants in the *Face to Face Family Time* will bring a face mask or cloth face covering. However, if necessary, DCYF will provide face masks to parents and individuals who facilitate and/or supervise the *Face to Face Family Time*.
 - Limited exceptions to wearing a face mask may be made for anyone for whom the use of such face mask would be damaging to his or her health or anyone who is developmentally unable to use such face covering.
- Parents can briefly pull down their face covering to remind the child or youth of who they are. Masks with plastic lining that shows the mouth are also encouraged as it will be easier for the child to see their parent's expression
- Participants may pull down their face coverings for eating and drinking. Ideally, one adult will be responsible for serving food to others rather than having food laid out that participants can select from.
- Any child older than age two should wear a face mask or cloth face covering. If a child takes a face mask off during the visit, the visit can continue. All adults should role model good mask wearing habits and encourage children to keep their masks on.

Enhanced Cleaning and/or Disinfecting Procedures

- Everyone must wash and/or sanitize their hands before putting on PPE and after they take it off.
- Everyone must wash and/or sanitize their hands right before *Family Time* begins, regularly throughout the visit, and immediately after the visit is done.
- Everyone must clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, such as car doors, steering wheels, doorknobs, phones, and pens.
- Resource families may want to bring toys that can be easily cleaned and disinfected and are familiar to the child. If the parent is going to play with these toys, they will need to be disinfected at the beginning and the end of the *Family Time*.

Guidelines Related to Travel

When transporting a client in a vehicle, everyone must follow the [transportation guidance](#). This includes:

- Physical distancing: To maintain a proper distance, **passengers must refrain from sitting in the front of the vehicle.**
- Vehicle ridership: Drivers should limit occupancy to no more than two passengers per vehicle; passengers must be of the same ride party. If all parties live in the same household and the vehicle can accommodate all riders in the back seat(s), more than one rider is allowed.
 - DCYF vehicle ridership: Children and youth, including siblings or other family members, who reside in different households, **can** be transported in the same vehicle to their visitation time, if necessary. **To whatever extent, DCYF is encouraging maintaining one household per vehicle when possible, particularly during RI Pause.**
 - In order to prevent further risk of spread, children and youth being transported need to form a “cohort.” Cohorting means that siblings, or other family members who are being transported for visits, should be transported with the **same** family members each time. For example, if three children need to be transported for visitations, and three of those children are being transported in one sedan, each week the **same** three children should be transported together. This way, if one child becomes infectious, it limits the number of people who might be exposed and need to quarantine.
 - Prior to entering any vehicle, each child/youth should be carefully screened using the approved COVID-19 screening questions.
- Cleaning procedures: Drivers must wipe down vehicle surfaces with an EPA-approved disinfectant after each ride. This includes, but is not limited to, high-touch surfaces such as door handles, seat belts, and armrests. Drivers must wear gloves when cleaning the vehicle.
- Face Coverings: All persons older than age two (drivers and passengers) are required to wear face coverings when providing or using any car or van transportation services in accordance with RIDOH regulations and [Executive Order 20-30](#).
- Sanitizing: Drivers should wash or sanitize hands on a routine basis. At a minimum, this should be done after each ride.
- Ventilation: Drivers should avoid recirculating air through the car’s ventilation system during passenger transport. Drivers are strongly encouraged to open windows or allow passengers to lower the vehicle windows, according to [CDC guidelines](#).