



Office of Children and Family Services

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Guidance for Counties and Residential Programs for Youth Licensed by NYS Office of Children and Family Services Division of Child Welfare and Community Services

Youth and Family Visitation

Dear Providers:

This guidance is intended to build on and refine the guidance provided on March 20, 2020 regarding visitation with parents and siblings. Previous OCFS guidance provided Foster Care and Preventive Staff direction related to youth and family visitation during the COVID-19 public health emergency. That guidance, while not restricting nor relaxing any of the relevant regulatory/statutory requirements related to youth and family visitations, provided for alternate means of such visitation including virtual platforms. This guidance was aimed to safeguard and maintain the health and wellbeing of youth, families, and staff while containing the spread of COVID-19 during the State's initial phase of the pandemic. After the successful efforts by New Yorkers to flatten the curve and reduce virus transmission, OCFS recognizes the need for youth and families to begin resuming other types of contact with one another in a planful manner, as safely as possible. Below are some considerations when planning for contacts and visits with family who will be physically present with the child in care.

While this guidance has a focus on planning for a return to normalcy, it cannot be overstated how appreciative OCFS is to you for continuing to care and provide services for our most vulnerable residents, 24-hours a day, 7-days a week, during this unprecedented national crisis. With that said, the considerations below include components you may have already been applying; however, from this point forward, all programs should proceed with planning for and actualizing visitation using these considerations

1. Planning: The health and safety of all those involved is paramount

- A.** Each county and agency must consider the current level of COVID-19 infections at the program, in their immediate area, the area where the family members reside, and the area in which the visitation is planned to take place.
- B.** Each child and family situation must be considered for an individual determination regarding visitation. Granting physically present visitation should be the goal. However, the teams must be mindful of the physical health and safety of those involved and make choices that support health and safety first.
- C.** All visitations should be scheduled with enough time for the team to consider the health and safety factors related to COVID-19.

2. Visitation:

Detention facilities must develop a visitation protocol that applies to any family visitor, contractor, youth attorney, vendor, OCFS staff and service providers. Outside service providers must have approval for their business function per the reopening guidelines set by the State of New York to be permitted entry to a facility.

The visitation protocol must provide for in-person visits conducted in a manner that adheres to all current COVID-19 related guidelines, and should include the following:

A. Physical Space:

- Each county and agency should identify appropriate visiting spaces.
- While ideal for the entire family to have regular and consistent familial contact, agencies must enforce reasonable limits on the number of participants allowed in each visitation during this re-opening period.
- When appropriate, outdoor visiting spaces should safely allow for social distancing during visitation (at least six (6) feet of distance between visiting groups).
- Visiting rooms, if indoors, must be sufficiently large to safely allow for social distancing during visitation (at least six (6) feet of distance between visiting groups)
- Any indoor space must be assessed for adequate ventilation and, when possible, windows and exterior doors should be left open and take other steps to improve ventilation in the building such as running ventilation systems as high as possible or using high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) fans or filtration devices, etc.
- Rooms for visits that require confidentiality should be identified if necessary, for your youth or families.
- Each facility must plan for appropriate disinfection between visits.

B. Prescreening:

- Physical visitations should be conducted in a manner that adheres to all current COVID-19 related guidelines. <https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/home>
- The agency arranging the visitation must discuss, in advance, the need to strictly adhere to protocols that will be in place throughout the duration of the visit and that failure to comply will necessitate the need to end the visit.
- The county/agency must ask all participants in the visitation the current COVID-19 related screening questions prior to commencement of the visit.
 1. Screening questions should be developed in accordance with guidelines from the New York State Department of Health (<https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/home>) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>)
 2. Screening should include any known COVID-19 exposure, current quarantine status due to exposure for COVID-19 or isolation for a positive COVID-19 test, COVID-19 symptoms during the prior 14 days, or temperature over 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit, and any other question in accordance with the guidelines above.

3. Potential visitors whose self-screening reveals any of the above must be instructed not to visit.
- The county/agency must ensure that visitation participants (including staff supervising the visit if applicable) have taken their temperatures one hour prior to the start of the visit. This can be done through attestation by visitation participants or offering temperature screening at the program site.
 - If any participant has any COVID-19 exposure or symptoms during the prior 14 days, or has a temperature over 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit, that person cannot take part in an in-person visit.

C. In-Person Visits:

- Face coverings must be used by all persons over age 2 during the visit in accordance with current DOH guidance and agency policy. Counties/Agencies should be prepared to provide face masks for those who are visiting, but persons should be encouraged to bring their own masks through the notification process discussed below.
- All visitors must wash or sanitize hands at the beginning and end of each visit and should be encouraged to wash or sanitize hands during each visit.
- Although it is understood that youth and families likely want to engage in signs of physical affection (hugging/kissing, sitting on laps, etc.), there should be discussions with the families that for everyone's continued safety they should avoid/limit prolonged and close physical contact.

3. Notice:

The County or Agency must develop a protocol whereby families, youth, and any other visitors are notified of the requirements for visitation prior to arrival for in-person visiting.

For further information related to COVID-19 guidance, please visit the New York State Department of Health, OCFS, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID-19 websites through the links below:

<https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/home>
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/>
<https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/news/COVID-19/>

Sincerely,



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Child Welfare and Community Services