

Guidance for Advocates re COVID-19

Please note that this guidance is in effect until further notice and may be changed or updated as circumstances evolve.

WAYS TO SAFELY STAY IN TOUCH WITH CHILDREN

We want to offer guidance to you as volunteer Advocates for communicating with children in an effective and safe way. Please note, however, this guidance is not meant to take precedent over any applicable state and local authority guidelines or orders. At all times, please follow the CDC guidelines and other local authority regarding symptoms and/or exposure to COVID-19 and self-quarantining. (see links below).

We want you to “visit” with the child as regularly as possible, but ***in person visits are not required.***

If you do feel comfortable conducting an in person visit, first discuss it with your advocate supervisor. If approved, you must take necessary steps to limit physical contact, wear appropriate PPE and respect social distancing guidelines. For example, you may go to the child’s residence and talk through the door or the window in order to physically observe the child. The advocate and the child may talk on the phone while looking at each other through the window. Visits at outdoor locations may also be possible if the caregiver is able to facilitate within applicable guidelines. Also, check with the caregiver before bringing any packages or gifts.

Also, before conducting an in person visit, please consider whether the child will be capable of maintaining distance from you (i.e., not run up to greet you!)

Visits may also be conducted remotely. Below are some alternatives for in person visits and some associated considerations.

ALTERNATIVES TO FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

Texting:

If texting with a child or other party, no confidential information that would disclose specifics about a child’s identity or the case should be discussed. Texting should be limited and during reasonable hours. Text conversations should be documented and summarized in your Optima contact logs. You should be aware that any messaging, texting, emailing may be discoverable by the court. Don’t text anything you wouldn’t want anyone else to read!

Video Conferencing:

Advocates and staff may use video calls or online chat applications (such as Zoom, Messenger Kids, and FaceTime) to communicate with children and foster parents or other caregivers. Here are some best practices for video conferencing:

- Take the call from a private location with no other people around who can listen from your end of the conversation or see your screen.

- Remember that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed when using video chat technology.
- Be aware that others in the household may be within listening range on the other person's end whether you can see them or not; be careful in discussing private information about or with the child or discussing information that you might not want others to hear. Likewise, avoid questions that might put the child(ren) in a difficult or precarious position. For example, if they have been having difficulties with the foster parent who is within earshot, do not ask them how they are getting along with the foster parent. Instead, ask a general question like, "how are you doing?" or "What have you been doing since school let out?"
- Do not record the chat (either audio or visual)
- All calls should be prefaced with a verbal disclosure agreement to verify any desired parameters are met and agreed upon at the beginning of each call. For example, if privacy is required, verify with the child or other party that no one else is listening.
- Similar to being alone with a child in person behind closed doors, be aware whether the child is isolating himself or herself during any conversation.
- Video chatting can be awkward at first. It may be helpful to come up with a list of questions/topics. It may also be helpful to have something to "show" them. For example, if you have a dog or a cat that you have told them about, have the dog or cat on the call with you.

Additionally, you should know that there are state and federal laws regarding the use of video technology with children. For example, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires parental consent before children under the age of 13 use any Internet applications that would collect personal information. **Advocates should not set up any accounts for any children or others.** Microsoft (Skype) and Apple (FaceTime) have complied with COPPA by restricting accounts or use to those over 13. Specifically:

Apple (FaceTime) states that children under 13 cannot create an Apple ID on their own which is required to be able to access the FaceTime application. Parents can set up an Apple ID for children under 13 if using Family Sharing.

Microsoft (Skype) states in their guidelines "Skype's websites and software are not intended for or designed to attract users under the age of 13. We encourage parents to be involved in the online activities of their children to make sure that no information is collected from a child without parental permission."

Within this framework, we recognize that children under 13 still use FaceTime, Skype, and other video chat technologies on someone else's account. Accordingly, please note:

- National CASA/GAL does not have an age restriction for use of video technology with children.
- The federal COPPA sets limits on the use of services like these, along with other Internet sites, by children under the age of 13. Many cell phones allow video calling through the phone app. This video calls would not trigger the same COPPA issues.

In order to comply with COPPA and industry standards, be mindful of the following practices with your families:

- Do not have the children under 13 create user accounts (and do not create user accounts for them) with the video chat providers
- Do not otherwise provide any personal information about the children to the video chat provider (including through a text chat feature)
- Choose technologies that permit use by children under 13 (Zoom, Messenger Kids, and FaceTime permit use, while Skype does not)

Phone Calls:

When talking to a child on the phone, the Advocate should follow many of the same recommendations as with video chat technology, including ensuring you are in a private location with no other people around, that there is no recording taking place, and that no confidential information that would disclose the specifics about a child's identity or the case should be discussed.

CHILDREN IN CONGREGATE CARE

Advocates should take extra precautions when meeting with children in group homes, emergency shelters and other congregate care placements, and observe the guidelines of each facility. Precautions may include alternative to face-to-face meetings like texting, video conferencing and phone calls as well as remaining at a safe distance and following proper hygiene including handwashing for both the child and the volunteer. The advocate may wish to discuss proper handwashing, covering of the mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and other safeguards with the child that may be particularly important in congregate care.

TRANSITIONING YOUTH AND YOUTH WITH CHILDREN

During the COVID-19 crisis, youth in foster care who are in independent living and youth with children are especially vulnerable. These youth will need even more support as a result of virtual learning. Many youth in foster care rely on schools for meals and often do not have access to the internet or technology to support virtual learning. Helping youth and young parents to find community resources for food assistance, health care and helping them to identify ways to access virtual learning will help them through this difficult time. Youth in foster care living independently also often work hourly as a requirement for housing. These youth will need advocacy and support should businesses close and the youth not be able to protect their housing and access to assistance. Youth often also rely on cell phones. Helping them to advocate to keep their phones on should they not be able to pay their phone or other utilities is another way to support foster youth. Finally, ensuring that youth know where to access local health and safety resources will help ensure that our youth have the protection they need to weather this crisis.

COURT HEARINGS AND CHILD WELFARE MEETINGS

Advocates shall follow the precautions and procedures recommended by the court for all court hearings. The same applies to any child welfare meetings, such as staffings, ACRs, etc. However, ***no advocate is required to attend any hearing or meeting in person*** and may participate via conference call or virtually if these options are available. Advocates should consult with their advocate supervisor as to how to attend hearings or meetings.

RESOURCES:

[COVID19 Symptoms](#)

[COVID-19 Fact Sheet](#)

[COVID-19 Sick with virus fact sheet](#)

[Tips for chatting with young children](#)

[Illinois CASA resources](#)