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Supporting Child, Caregiver and Family Well-Being in Times of Crisis: Strategies to Promote Effective Virtual and Phone Engagement

Anyone who interacts with children, caregivers and families has an opportunity to reach out and provide encouragement, support and information that can strengthen a family's ability to meet both the challenges of daily life and the added stressors that come in a time of crisis. Families develop and cultivate resilience through adversity, and often they just need some additional resources to thrive.¹ There are many ways that professionals outside of child protective services can act to support children and their caregivers and connect them with appropriate resources that may mitigate any risks for harm.

This document is organized by the five protective factors² that build on family strengths to foster child and youth well-being and development. Each section contains questions that professionals can address with parents/caregivers and with children/youth in the course of their work with families, with an emphasis on content appropriate for virtual visits. It is important to note that children go through many developmental stages as they age, from early childhood to middle childhood then adolescence. Not every question is appropriate for or relevant to every age and developmental stage. The questions below are only examples, and are not intended to be asked in any specific order. They

¹ Where there are concerns about potential child abuse and neglect, it is important to reach out to trained child welfare professionals for help. For more information on reporting child abuse and neglect, visit <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/responding/reporting/how/>

² For more information on protective factors, visit <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/resource-guide/>

can serve as a guide for deeper conversation. Different questions may be appropriate for different families, and careful consideration should be placed on when and if it would be appropriate to engage a parent or child in sensitive questions. During the first visit, your emphasis may be more on building a trusting relationship with the family and it may make more sense to avoid more sensitive questions until the relationship is more firmly established. During your virtual visit with the family you may have a child or parent make disclosures or you may see something that may indicate that child abuse or neglect is occurring. If this occurs, it is important to follow the mandated reporting protocols set forth in your agency.

Preparing for your Virtual Visit:

- Identify goals of the virtual visit, and what goals are most important that you accomplish. These will vary based on the type of program you offer and who the primary intended audience is for your program (Parents? Children? Parents and children together? Others possibly living in the household?) When possible, engage the family in developing the goals for the visit.
- In utilizing the questions below, determine which questions would be most appropriate for your caregiver and child, and outline the order in which they should be asked.
- Consider contacting the person/people you will be meeting with to help them prepare, including discussing the technology to be used, the length of time for the call and any information they may want to have readily available during your conversation.
- If you intend to block your phone number for the call, let the family know in advance as they may not typically answer calls from blocked numbers.
- If possible, consider using videoconferencing technology instead of just an audio line. Share your screen and encourage the family to do the same.
- Ask the parent/caregiver to have a prep conversation with the child/youth before the call to inform them about the purpose of the call/visit, so the child/youth is not caught off guard or confused by who is calling and why.

During Your Visit:

- When possible and age appropriate, talk with child/youth independently. If there are concerns about a child being overheard, offer non-specific and/or non-verbal responses (e.g. “If how you were feeling was the weather report, what is the weather like today? Sunny? Cloudy? Thunderstorms?”), have the child draw a happy/sad face to express how he/she is feeling; or hold up signs with different emotions written or drawn on them and have the child point to the most appropriate one. For families with pre-verbal children, ask the parent to have the child with him/her during the visit so that you may observe their interaction.
- Ensure that everyone participating in a virtual visit knows how to use the technology being used for the visit (e.g. how to turn the volume up/down; check that the video is working and the child/youth can see you; etc.)
- Consider opportunities for online interaction with children that rely on activities rather than conversation. For example, send coloring books to the child(ren) and have them open them on the call. The child can color or walk you through the pictures in the book with you during the call. Another game is to ask the child five questions and have him/her draw the answers (what do you dream about? What color is your mother’s hair? What is your favorite animal? What is your favorite food?). The child then can ask the worker five questions and draw his/her answers too. Children also can play with play dough, introduce a favorite stuffed animal, sing a song or show off some dance moves.
- Depending on the situation and when possible, create opportunities for in-person contact. This could be at home in the yard or on the porch if possible; other settings that have open spaces and activities for the child also can be used, such as park or playground. Ask if the child can demonstrate a new skill such as doing a cartwheel, riding a bike, or show a favorite stuffed animal or toy.

Rapport Building Questions/Conversations:

Rapport refers to the ability to relate to others in a way that builds trust and understanding. Establishing rapport at the beginning of a relationship is a building block to strong, collaborative relationships.

Questions for Parents/Caregivers:

- Explain the reason for your call/virtual visit and what you hope to have happen during your conversation (e.g. “I will check in with you and then check in with the children”).
- Ask the parent/caregiver if they have any tips for best engaging their child(ren) virtually or over the phone, acknowledging that they are the experts on their child(ren).
- Briefly check in with how the previous week has been. “How have things been for your family this week?” “Is there anything specific that you’d like to make sure we cover today?”

Questions for Children/Youth

- “I’ve never talked to you at home before. That makes me wonder, does your family have any pets? What are their names/types, etc.? What kinds of things do you do with your pets?”
- “What are your favorite things to do at home when you aren’t at school?”
- “What do you like to do at home?”
- If you could do one thing this week, what would it be?
- “What is your favorite thing you did this week?”
- Do you have any questions you’d like to ask me?

Parental Resilience:

Parents who can cope with the stresses of everyday life and crisis situations have resilience – the flexibility and inner strength to move forward when things are not going well. Parents with resilience also know how to seek help in times of challenge.

Questions for Parents/Caregivers:

- On a scale of 1 – 10, how do you feel you/ your family/your children are coping this week? This can be followed up differently depending on the response.
- Can you tell me about what has happened this week? What has gone well? What has not gone well? Acknowledge and normalize stress! “A lot of people are struggling right now.” “This would be challenging for anyone.”
- Offer encouragement “you’re doing great!” “I’m really impressed with how you are coping, how you found a resource, figured it out. etc.”

Questions for Children/Youth

Middle Childhood:

- Can you tell me one “yay” and one “nay” for today/this week? How are you feeling today? This week?
- Normalize feelings of stress, anger/ and/ or sadness (“I’d miss my friends too if I couldn’t see them.” “It would make me sad if I couldn’t do my favorite things too.”)
- What does a regular day in your house look like? Who wakes you up? Do you get up at the same time every day? Who helps you take a bath, brush your teeth and get ready for bed? What kinds of things do you do during the day?

Parental Resilience (continued)

Questions for Parents/Caregivers:

- While these are tough times, have there been any good things that have come from the situation? Is there anything that you are looking forward to once this situation is over?”
- What kinds of things do you do to take care of yourself or take a break when you need one? Options can include:
- Take a breath and count to 10; practice breathing exercises or other calming strategies¹
 - Taking a walk outside, if it is safe to do so
 - Listen/dance to music
 - Take a break from your child in another room/place your infant in a crib for a few moments
 - Take a warm bath or shower
 - Play a game or watch a funny tv show
 - Talk or text with a friend
 - Color in an adult coloring book or write in a journal
 - Read a book or a magazine
 - Call a friend, family member, doctor or help-line. Help the parent/caregiver develop a call plan to refer to as needed
- What is something you would like me to take off your plate? What is one challenge you continue to face? What solution have you thought of? “Who usually helps you figure things out?”

Questions for Children/Youth

Adolescence:

- Who can you talk to when you are upset or feeling down?
- What do you do to relax?
- What kinds of things do you do when you are sad or mad? Options can include (as age appropriate):
 - Take a breath and count to 10; practice breathing exercises or other calming strategies²
 - Taking a walk or playing outside if it is safe to do so
 - Listen/dance to music
 - Take a warm bath or shower
 - Play a game or watch a funny tv show
 - Talk or text with a friend
 - Color, draw pictures or write in a journal
 - Read a book or a magazine

¹ Visit a Virtual Calming Zone for more information and activities <https://sites.google.com/madison.k12.wi.us/virtual-calming-zone/home?authuser=0>

² Visit a Virtual Calming Zone for more information and activities <https://sites.google.com/madison.k12.wi.us/virtual-calming-zone/home?authuser=0>

Social Connections:

Families whose basic needs (for food, clothing, housing and transportation) are met have more time to devote to their children's safety and well-being.

Questions for Parents/Caregivers:

- When something good happens, who is the first person that you tell? Who do you have that you can talk to when things are difficult? How does that person usually help you? Are you able to get in touch with that person currently? Is there a way that we can support you in staying connected to that person? When was the last time you could check in with that person? Who is on your team?
- If your family has a problem, do you have someone or a resource within the community you can turn to for help? Who is that person or resource, and how would you reach them?
- Do you know other people who have children the same age as yours? Do you have opportunities to talk with them? Would that be helpful to you?
- How have you been able to be a support to other parents or friends?
- Note: if the parent/caregiver does not have a strong support system, consider helping him/her develop one.

Questions for Children/Youth

Middle Childhood:

- When something good happens, who is the first person you tell?
- Do you have someone that you can talk to when you are sad? Mad? Worried? Who is that person? Are you able to see/talk to that person now? What does that person usually say or do to help you? What are some of your favorite things to do? How often do you get to do these things?
- What is your favorite thing about being at home? What is your least favorite thing about being at home?
- What do you like about school? What do you not like about school?
- Are you able to go to school right now? If not, how are you doing school right now (packets or online?) When you run out of packets, how do you get more? If you are doing school online, can you get on the internet?
- How are things going in school? What are your favorite and least favorite subjects? How are your grades? (If the student says his/her grades are poor, follow up with "are you getting help with your work? What would help you do better? Are you doing your homework?")

Adolescence:

- Are you able to engage in study groups with your friends or reach out to them to work on assignments together?
- Are you in touch with your friends?
- Are you able to participate in any extracurricular activities now?
- Do you have a job and are you able to keep working?
- Do you have ways to stay connected with people, like a phone, internet, reliable transportation, etc.?

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development:

Parents and caregivers who understand stages of child development are more likely to be able to provide their children with respectful communication, consistent rules and expectations, developmentally appropriate limits, and opportunities that promote independence.

Questions for Parents/Caregivers:

- When your child is upset, what kinds of activities help you understand what they need?
- What is your child's normal routine on a weekday? A weekend? What time does your child go to bed? Wake up?
- How would you describe your parenting style? What are important standards of behavior for your child? If you have a partner, do you and your partner agree about discipline and expectations for behavior?
- What family traditions or rituals do you have in your family? (e.g. eating meals together, birthdays etc.)? How often are you able to do them?
- Does your family work on life skills together, like cooking and budgeting?
- What expectations do you have of your children? Did you have some input into these expectations?
- How do you manage your kids' BIG emotions? What coping skills do you use when your kids do not meet the agreements and expectations?
- Was there a time this last week that one of the kids broke a rule? What happened and how did you respond?
- What sorts of things do you and your child(ren) do together? Help the parent brainstorm activities they can do with their child(ren):
 - Color or arts and crafts
 - Talk about a favorite subject
 - Sing and dance
 - Make a meal together
 - Play a game or complete a puzzle
 - Read books or tell stories

Questions for Children/Youth

Infants/Toddlers:

- What is the child's current mood/temperament (asleep; quiet and calm; agitated/crying; happy/interactive)? Does the caregiver respond to the child and if so, how (Soothing? Rocking? Making eye contact?)
- If the child is upset/crying, can the caregiver identify the reason (Wet/dirty diaper? Hungry? Tired? Hot/cold?)? Is the caregiver able to respond to soothe the child?
- Does the parent have age appropriate expectations for the child's behavior (e.g. doesn't expect an infant to stop crying on its own; understands that a toddler may not be toilet-trained)?
- Can the parent identify and provide comforting objects for the child (e.g. a favorite toy or blanket? A pacifier? Swaddling?)

Middle Childhood/Adolescence:

- What kinds of things do you like to do with your parents/caregivers? Help the child brainstorm activities they can do with their parent/caregiver:
 - Color or arts and crafts
 - Talk about a favorite subject
 - Sing and dance
 - Make a meal together
 - Play a game or complete a puzzle
 - Read books or tell stories
- What is a regular day like in your house? What time do you wake up and who wakes you up? What time do you go to sleep? How are weekends different from weekdays?
- What are some of the rules in your house? Are the rules different for you than for your brothers and sisters?
- What happens if you break a rule?
- Tell me about a time when you broke a rule. What happened?

Concrete Support in Times of Needs:

Families whose basic needs (for food, clothing, housing and transportation) are met have more time to devote to their children's safety and well-being.

Questions for Parents/Caregivers:

- What are the top 3 things your family needs NOW? What are the top 3 things you need NOW? Are you aware of resources that will support you?
- How are you feeling physically? Have you been sick? Do you feel like you need medical attention that you haven't gotten? Do you know where to access medical information and treatment for your family?
- Normalize the need to ask for help – it's a strength to be able to ask for help when you need it. Ask, "do you know about community agencies you can turn to for help?" "Are you currently getting help from any community agencies?" "How comfortable are you asking for help when you need it?" If possible, offer community-based resources to help meet the family's needs.
- As about the family's concrete needs. "Is your family experiencing any financial stress?" If yes, "can you tell me what your current needs are?"
- For families with infants/toddlers: Where is the baby currently sleeping? When you go out, does the baby have a car seat? A stroller?
- Do you have games/toys/activities that your children enjoy?
- Are you currently working at a job or in school? Who watches your children when you are at work/school? If possible, provide referrals to child care that is available for essential workers. If parents are not working, ask about unemployment and/or other resources and provide information about how to access them.

Questions for Children/Youth

Infants/Toddlers:

- Does the child appear to be healthy and well nourished? If the child is hungry during the visit, does the parent have what is needed to feed the child?
- Is the child wearing age appropriate clothing (e.g. warm clothes in cold weather)?
- Is the child wearing a clean diaper?

Middle Childhood/Adolescence:

- Do you take any medicine every day? If so, are you still taking them?
- What are some of our favorite foods? Have you had them lately?
- What did you eat for (most recent meal)?
- Who cooks food for you? Do you get to help?
- Does your parent/caregiver go to work or school? What do you do while they are at work or school?
- Do your parents ever have to leave you at home alone? If yes, is it for a short time or a long time? What do you do while they are away from the home? (Note: some children may worry that answering this question will get a parent "in trouble." An alternative to the direct question is to ask the child a less specific question but listen for this in their response).
- Can you make your own food?
- Do you have clean clothes?
- Have you been able to talk to or see a doctor? If you need to see a mental health professional, are you able to start/continue seeing one?

Social-emotional Competence of Children:

Children's emerging ability to form bonds and interact positively with others, self-regulate their emotions and behavior, communicate their problems and solve problems effectively has a positive impact on their relationships with their family, other adults and peers. Parents and caregivers grow more responsive to children's needs – and less likely to feel stressed or frustrated – as children learn to tell parents what they need and how parental actions make them feel, rather than “acting out” difficult feelings.

Questions for Parents/Caregivers:

- What do you do to remain calm when your child is upset?
- What activities do you do to increase your child's good behavior?
- What kinds of activities do you do with your child (e.g. reading, playing counting games, etc.)? Help the parent/caregiver make a list of 20 things the child can do.
- What kind of conversations do you have with your child?
- What does your child do well? Tell me about a time when you praised your child. Encourage the parent/caregiver to provide the child with positive feedback throughout the day.
- Do you think your child can tell when you are upset/worried? How do you know? How do you respond when your child seems worried or upset? Encourage the parent/caregiver to normalize, rather than minimize, their child's worries (e.g. “that's a silly thing to worry about.”)
- In times of stress, children may act out more. How are your children feeling right now and how do they communicate those feelings?
- What parenting tips or techniques would you share with a new father/mother?

Questions for Children/Youth

Infants/Toddlers:

- Does the parent appear to engage with the child (e.g. respond to the baby's cries; makes eye contact with the child; interacts with the child)?
- Is the parent knowledgeable about the child's likes and dislikes? Routine? Favorite toys?

Middle Childhood/Adolescence:

- How have you been feeling? Any tummy aches; headaches?
- Have you had any problems eating or sleeping?
- Do you ever worry about anything? What things do you worry about? Normalize worry and do not minimize worry (e.g. “that's a silly thing to worry about.”)
- What do you do to help yourself feel better when you are feeling mad/sad or worried? Is there anyone that helps you? (Note: some children may worry that answering this question will get a parent “in trouble.” An alternative to the direct question is to ask the child a less specific question but listen for this in their response).
- Sometimes adults can get angry/sad/mad too. What happens when your mom or dad get angry/sad/mad?
- Is there ever a time that you feel scared at home? What is happening when you are feeling scared, and who is around?
- What kinds of things do you like to do at home for fun? Help the child make a list of 20 things he/she can do to avoid boredom.

Learning Through Observation – in addition to asking questions, non-verbal cues can offer valuable insight into how children and families are doing. Some things to watch for include:

- Changes in child and/or adult behaviors during the call, such as becoming quieter when someone new enters the room or there is a change of subject.
- Background noise such as repeated/aggressive shouting; children crying for a long period of time; hearing hitting or things being broken.
- Safety hazards such as unsecured weapons; medications/drugs within children's reach; unsanitary conditions.
- Children looking dirty or in ill-fitting clothes
- Caregiver appears intoxicated, injured, confused and/or otherwise unable to provide care.
- Children appear withdrawn or depressed; child looks and/or acts very differently from what is expected based on prior interactions.
- Child has bruises, welts, burns, bite marks, and/or other injuries that are unexplained or appear suspicious. If possible, ask how the child how he/she became injured.

Additional Resources:

Several organizations have developed resources for parents based on a protective factors approach:

- One Tough Job offers information on virtual parenting support groups and playgroups during COVID-19 - <https://onetoughjob.org/blog/2020/03/massachusetts-virtual-parenting-support-groups-and-playgroups-during-covid-19>
- All Babies Cry has made their resources available to all during the COVID-19 pandemic - <https://www.allbabiescry.com/>
- The Wisconsin Prevention Board offers Top 10 Tips for Parents during the COVID crisis - <https://preventionboard.wi.gov/Documents/tpi-top-tips-covid19-letter-us-en.pdf>
- The World Health Organization (WHO) offers tips for positive parenting during the COVID crisis in multiple languages - <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/healthy-parenting>
- Help and Hope provides resources and support for parents during the COVID crisis - <http://www.helpandhope.org/>

Multiple states have created publications to support professionals working with children and families:

- New Hampshire - <http://apps.das.nh.gov/EmployeePortal/documents/covid-19/Family-Well-Being-Guide-COVID-19.pdf> and <https://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dcyf/documents/covid-resource-guide.pdf>
- North Dakota - <http://www.nd.gov/dhs/info/COVID-19/docs/brochure-signs-child-abuse-neglect-covid.pdf>
- Ohio - <http://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Student-Supports/Coronavirus/Student-Safety-During-Coronavirus-Related-Ordered/Questions-to-Help-Assess-Needs-and-Safety-Within-the-Home.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>
- Oregon - <https://www.oregon.gov/DHS/CHILDREN/Documents/FamilyWellbeingAssessment.pdf>

- Vermont - <https://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/CVD19/COVID19-VT-Guidance-For-Teachers.pdf>
- Washington - <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/news/continue-report-child-abuse-and-neglect> and <https://dcyf.wa.gov/safety/what-is-abuse>

New Hampshire has developed Strengthening Families Across New Hampshire, a coloring book for children: https://48eb1361-1c4e-4223-93cd-64536510e.filesusr.com/ugd/38c037_663fe3d9cac04c0e9f4dcd16f76f2ebd.pdf and <https://protect2.fireeye.com/url?k=ec4226e0-b0172ff3-ec4217df-0cc47adb5650-4833eafbb1b0ef8b&u=https://www.nhchildrenstrust.org/nh-gives-color>

Many agencies offer resources on early childhood development and learning:

- The Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) provides a wealth of information on the needs of young children and their families, including *Supporting Families in Uncertain Times* (<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-support-well-being/article/supporting-families-uncertain-times-social-media-messages>) and *Understanding Trauma in an Early Childhood Context* (<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/understanding-trauma-early-childhood-context>)
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) focuses on raising the standard of care and improving access to services for traumatized children, their families and their communities - <https://www.nctsn.org/>
- The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) provides *Measuring the Quality of Caregiver-Child Interactions for Infants and Toddlers* tool at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/measuring_the_quality_of_caregiver_child_interactions_for_infants_and.pdf

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