

remote casework

for child welfare stakeholders in the time of Covid-19



BEST PRACTICES FOR TECHNOLOGY USE

PRIVACY AND SECURITY

Workers are at increased risk of privacy issues when using their own devices and when working remotely. Help reduce risk by sharing ways to maintain privacy in the field. If agencies don't support good decision-making, workers may find the easiest way to get the work done, and it may not be the most secure way.

Those working from home may need training reminders about issues like:

- how to use anonymized phone numbers or text messages to connect with parents
- the best kind of software to use for web conferencing
- best practices for using public networks, such as from the parking lot of a coffee shop
- how to manage privacy when multiple members of the house use their devices
- how to connect to cloud-based storage, emails, or case management systems
- maintaining privacy when talking to or about clients when other people are home
- managing paper or electronic files from home
- best practices for remote supervision and case staffing
- best ways to facilitate exchange of client paperwork, such as releases of information
- laws and licensure obligations, ie HIPAA



Our workforce is under increased stress just like the rest of America; they are worried about health risks, kids at home, and increased risks on caseloads. New learning about tech is tough in these circumstances. Make sure workers have access to IT and other support. Demonstrate care for their safety, and be proactive in providing best options so they don't have to learn new tools alone.

TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Agencies should provide recommendations about what technology may be appropriate for routine casework tasks. Sometimes the most secure options are difficult for families to access, which is why HHS announced relaxed oversight of HIPAA violations during this crisis. Remind people that the phone is always an option.

- **Video meetings:** Google Meet, Zoom, Jitsi, Facetime, and Skype are more user-friendly than more secure tools like Doxy.me and easier to use than agency tools like WebEx and Skype for Business.
- **Casenotes:** Tablets and smartphones are frustrating for long documents. If laptops are not accessible, consider a phone-based medical dictation service like CloudDictation.com or TranscribeMe! where workers can phone in their notes.
- **Phone calls:** Workers who do not have an agency phone can sign up for a free number through Google Voice and have it transferred to their cell or home phone with a unique ringtone.
- **Text messages:** Web and phone apps like Remind, Spruce, and Signal allow registrants to text to regular numbers without sharing theirs.

Consider using funds for tablets for parents/foster families to improve their access to visitation and caseworker contact to improve equity.



SUPPORTING WORKERS

Workers may not have devices, may have limited data plans, or may not have storage space on their phones. They may share devices with other people, including kids who are home-schooled right now. They may have partners who also work from home. They may not want to use their devices due to risk or personal privacy. And they might be uncomfortable with tools like security settings or video calls.

Consider ways to provide multiple kinds of support:

- Are loaner devices available, including internet hotspots? Can they be purchased with emergency funding?
- Are IT services friendly and approachable? Do workers know how to get help when needed?
- Can the agency publish or point to very short documents, videos, or webinars that walk workers through how-to processes?
- Can one resource web page be maintained that provides resources related to the use of tech during COVID-19? (This helps avoid email overload!)
- Check out the [NCWVI webinar series](#) on supporting the virtual workforce.

Because guidelines about best practices and policy are trickling out over time, many are doing the best they can with the tools they have. They may have already done things we would advise against, such as becoming friends on social media with clients or giving out personal contact information in order to ease communication. Are workers clear about what they should do if they've made an accidental tech-related mistake and how to correct it? Normalize conversations about tech concerns during supervision, including those that involve mistakes. We are all likely to make some tech mistakes during these complex times.

BEST PRACTICES FOR TECHNOLOGY USE

FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

Technology is an important tool during times like these, and can support important human relationships. Caseworkers should also normalize that we are all feeling distracted, experiencing losses, and need extra support. Pandemics increase risk of abuse, domestic violence, and substance use. Losses (of visits, routine, etc.) may trigger reminders of previous losses for kids and adults. Check in with families about their stressors, supports, and needs. Use extra empathy and patience. Encourage foster families to attend an online support group like those offered at [Chosen](#). Help parents connect to online [12-step groups](#) if appropriate..



VIDEO VISITS

TIPS FOR MAKING VIDEO VISITS WORK

We were not prepared for this rush into video visits but here are are! Whether you use video to facilitate family visits or to check in with kids and families, here are some tips to improve outcomes.

- Normalize that this is not the best way to connect, and is temporary.
- Use a plain background, and tell clients who is within your earshot. Ensure conversation privacy, especially when working from home.
- If you are not in a very quiet location, use earbuds with a built-in mic. A phone headset is under \$10.
- Remind everyone that the attention span of children is shorter on video visits. Keep tech visits between family members short and frequent. Use video with audio when possible. Encourage stories, books, and games for younger kids during visits.

- Avoid back-lighting. Light sources should be in front of you to avoid looking like a dark shadow on camera.
- Look at the camera, not at yourself on video; this is the best way to make virtual eye contact.
- Ask clients who is in the room with them so you know who might overhear what you say.
- Give informed consent: explain that the devices you are using are not completely secure, and tech disruptions may occur, explain how you'll handle them. Do not record conversations without authorization from your agency and client.
- Get help from IT and your supervisor when you need it.

CELL PHONES & VIDEO CHAT

Emergencies create the need to innovate quickly. We need to be creative with technology, and must also maintain ethical best practice. Although using your own device is convenient, it adds liability. For instance, your phone may be subpoenaed if it contains text messages about clients, and you may be liable if your child accidentally reshares a picture of a client, for instance. Text messages may be shared in court. It is important to stay up-to-date on best practice.

Consider the following tips:

- Instead of giving out your personal cell if you don't have a work phone, sign up for a Google Voice number which can transfer calls to your cell; give that number to clients.
- Check out [Federal guidance from HHS](#) which says 30-day visits can be conducted remotely for now.
- HIPAA oversight is relaxed due to COVID, allowing use of tools like Jitsi, FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, or Google Hangouts (confirm what your agency allows).
- Do not exchange client files on your personal phone or email; use your secure work email.
- Use a free app like Google Voice, Spruce, or Signal for secure text-messaging.
- Be sure your devices are protected with passwords. If anyone else uses your devices, password-protect programs or file folders that store work data, including email. Directions for doing this here: [Android](#) or [iPhone](#); find instructions here to lock folders on your [desktop](#).

WELLNESS WHEN WORKING FROM HOME

TECH TOOLS TO DE-STRESS

Many are stressed or anxious right now. Child welfare workers are essential staff and are fighting on the front lines to ensure families' needs are met. As a result, they often experience burnout and secondary trauma. We need to remember we are as only good to our clients as we are to ourselves.

Consider using tools like these:

- Virtual lunch meetings or happy hours on Zoom or Google Meet
- Prayer and/or Meditation with apps like Insight Timer, Headspace, and Calm.
- Exercise apps like Glo or YouTube videos like Yoga with Adrienne.
- Download the Libby app and enter your library card for free audio books through your library!
- Try out a new online recipe.
- Set a timer for 25 minutes of work and then take a 5 minute break (this is called The Pomodoro Method.)
- Find some Podcasts: whether you love funny, spiritual, news, or fan-fiction, there's one for you!
- Tune in to a free concert. Look up your fave artists online. Many are livestreaming free living room shows on social media.
- If protections are limited at work, find a face mask pattern or hand sanitizer recipe online.
- Consider sharing an Outlook or Google Calendar with a supervisor that says where you are when you are in the field as a back-up security feature. You can also enable free phone tracking apps like Life360 or Find My iPhone.



FOCUS ON HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Technology is an important tool during times like these, but it does not replace the importance of human relationships. We are all feeling distracted, experiencing losses, and need extra supports. Find ways to connect with people you love. Reach out to a friend or family member. If you can't connect on phone or web due to schedules, consider an app like Marco Polo that lets you send a direct or group video message to friends which they can watch any time and send you a response on their own time. It's free and doesn't have time limits. Use it during a walk and share the sunset or views from your neighborhood.



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

We are doing the best we can under difficult circumstances. We made a fast transition to working from home in many cases. Lots of us have additional distractions- kids or a partner at home, difficult access to clients and case files, and worry about people we love. Above all, be kind to yourself.

Here are things we know work at improving the success of your day:

- **Plan your day the night before:** use to-do lists, and do the toughest things first or when you have the best energy
- **Stick to a schedule:** decide beforehand what time you will start and stop as much as possible.
- **Get up, get dressed.** It has psychological power.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

- **Take breaks** to adjust posture, stretch, breathe, refill your water bottle (set a timer if needed).
- **Limit distractions:** inform family member of your availability. Consider a 10 minute break every hour if you have grade-schoolers; they may wait for you if they know when you'll be available.
- **Limit news consumption:** it can become addictive & impact mood.
- **Make a sign** for the door so family members know when you are on private calls.
- **Request virtual** case reviews and supervision.
- **Find an accountability buddy** to help you stick to your plans.

BEST PRACTICES FOR TECHNOLOGY USE

TECHNOLOGY TIME FOR KIDS

The news is full of stories about the risks of technology and social media, and they are designed to scare. The truth is complicated: scary things can happen when young people connect online, but helpful adults can help them navigate the risks. Some kids compare themselves to others, experience bullying, or make risky social connections. And they can also use technology to nurture relationships, explore identity, make friends, and connect with important people in their lives.

Youth often self-soothe with technology (through use of games and music, for instance), and checking in on family members can provide a sense of safety. These benefits are especially important for kids who have experienced relational losses.

Ways you can support healthy technology use include:

- Regular check-in's. Ask kids about their time online. This should just be a conversation. "How are your friends doing? How do you feel about that?" Be curious and helpful.
- Teach kids to listen to their bodies. If they've been at a screen a while, ask them how their head, back, neck, and heart feel. Encourage self-awareness, even from a young age. Use similar check-in's after other activities so they can compare and contrast what gives them the best feelings. Help them notice their moods.
- Keep tech out of bedrooms at night, and shut down tech at least an hour before bed to reduce sleep disruptions.

SUPPORT PROBLEM-SOLVING

How do you support healthy online behavior? Research says one of the most important things you can do is support good problem-solving by teaching youth how to handle negative interactions. Find out how they would respond to things like cyber-bullying, or what they would do if they saw something they didn't like online. Teach them how to block people and what to do if someone asks for personal information. Have open conversations about how they self-regulate when faced with online stressors: should they step away, talk to a friend, or unfriend someone? Do they need you to step in to help? Conversations like these have been found to reduce online harm.



VIDEO VISITS

TIPS FOR MAKING VIDEO VISITS WORK

Families need their visits. Not only are visits a significant predictor of reunification, they help support connection during a difficult time. Here are some tips for improving video visitation.

- Make plans with the parent about your shared hopes for the length and content of the visit. Remind about any guidelines that may apply about contact or content at regular visits. They are worried too: let them know how kids are managing. They may have extra stressors or fears right now as well. Be patient.
- Normalize this as temporary and assure that visits will get back to normal.
- Keep visits short and frequent.

- Reduce distractions and noise. Show kids how to hold the camera still if they are using a phone; ideally prop it up somewhere.
- Consider activities for younger kids such as having parent and child read a book to each other or make up a story together. Have things ready for the child to share.
- Give kids space. These visits are pretty safe. More tips [here](#).
- Check in afterwards: Ask questions like "how are you feeling? Want to talk?" Say, "I hope your mom is well." Empathize about how hard it is to not be able to visit in person. Reflect feelings.
- More tips for supporting kids during COVID-19 are [here](#).



BEST PRACTICES FOR TECHNOLOGY USE

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORTS

There are so many ways that technology is necessary right now, and we also know some people may have trouble with access or services. Here are some tips for accessing and using technology:

- If you don't have wifi access, it is often available in parking lots of Starbucks, McDonalds, and Dennys. Some libraries and colleges are also extending wifi to parking lots. If you need help finding access, ask your caseworker.
- Most health providers are now providing telephone and web-based treatment. This includes health and mental health treatment. These services are covered for people who have state health coverage plans like Medicaid and Medicare. If you don't already have a provider, call the number on your health card.
- Many people have extra stress and anxiety right now. Most states have set up special hotlines so people can have someone to talk to. If you need help finding local resources for support right now, ask your case worker.
- Many 12-step groups are offered online every day. If you want help finding substance abuse treatment, you can [click here](#) or call 1-800-662-HELP.
- The number for the Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-TALK. Or to talk to a crisis counselor by text, even if you are just anxious, text the word HOME to 741741 for 24/7 access.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

How do you support a child when you can't be there? The best thing you can do is take good care of yourself. What would you want them to know about how to take care of themselves? How can you be a good role model for those things? Remember that kids are always watching and learning.

Another thing you can do is be a good advocate for yourself. You may need to talk to lawyers, caseworkers, therapists, and others to be sure you get available services, including court hearings, video or phone visits, unemployment, and your stimulus check. Ask for help getting what you need.



VIDEO VISITS

TIPS FOR MAKING VIDEO VISITS WORK

Families need their visits and your kids need you. Keeping in contact will help everyone through this hard time. Do what you can to stay in touch. Here are some tips for improving video visitation.

- Make plans with the foster parent or visit staff about your shared hopes for the length and content of the visit. Remember that regular visit rules about who can have contact still apply. Keep in mind foster parents are stressed right now too. Do your best to be patient.
- Don't make promises about when you'll be together, but do let kids know your plans to be there when visits can be face to face again.
- It's important for kids to know you are ok during scary times. Be honest and also reassuring whenever you can. Focus on positive news when possible.

- Reduce distractions and noise as much as you can when you are on calls.
- Ask foster parents if you can use an app like [Marco Polo](#) to send videos: you can read stories or say goodnight and kids can watch and return messages later.
- Kids have short attention spans by video. Having planned activities, like a book to read or photos to share to help them focus, but also expect visits to be shorter than in-person ones.
- See if you can arrange for more frequent video or phone visits and short check-ins.
- More tips for supporting kids during COVID-19 are [here](#).



BEST PRACTICES FOR TECHNOLOGY USE

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be a great way to stay connected to friends and family. It can also cause stress and drama. Here are some tips for keeping it good and staying safe.

- Figure out settings- know how to block someone, hide a profile, or unfriend. Turn off location sharing.
- Notice when something you see is making you feel bad or mad. Is it time for a break? Do you need to block that person? Do you need to talk to someone about what's going on? Doing something works better than ignoring how you feel or what's happening.
- Consider ways to make other people feel good online by sharing positive messages.
- Reach out with direct and private messages when you are feeling bad and need someone to talk to- this can help build friendships and support.
- Be a good friend online, but be careful of drama- if you are working so hard to support friends that it is bad for your mental health, take a break. It's ok to say you think an adult or another friend needs to step in.
- Notice what friends online make you feel good, talented, happy, smart, connected, independent, and loved. (And the opposite!) Be wary of friends who tell you how to act or are only friends if you do what they say.



FOCUS ON HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

How do you know you are in a healthy friendship or relationship online? Healthy friends do things like these:

- encourage you to reach your goals
- listen to you as much as you listen to them
- tell you when they think you are making a mistake
- keep your conversations private
- make you feel good about yourself
- make you feel hopeful about the future

Think about your online relationships. Are they healthy? Are you a healthy friend to other people?



TECHNOLOGY DURING COVID-19

Kids in foster care right now are feeling all kinds of ways. Some of them miss school, family visits, friends, activities, and other things. They may be stressed out or worried. The good news is that this is temporary. Here are some ways technology can help you get through this.

- Make a YouTube or Spotify playlist of songs that make you happy. Share it with your friends or other people you care about.
- Learn something new that is not homework. Knitting or sewing or a skateboard flip or making pretty letters for your journal? There's a how-to video for everything!
- Throw a costume party. Get your friends to meet up on video at a certain time dressed in silly outfits.

• Learn a TikTok dance. If you're not on TikTok you can find them on YouTube. Then try to make up your own dance to your favorite song and teach it to a friend.

• Find a good recipe on YouTube or AllRecipes, and learn how to cook something new. Maybe you can even make dinner for the family.

• Join a group: there are great groups for foster kids online who know what you are going through. Check out [Foster Club](#) and [National Foster Youth in Action](#), they are both national advocacy and support groups that have places for kids to talk online.

CHILD WELFARE & TECHNOLOGY

TECHNOLOGY TOOLS & TRAINING NEEDS

INFRASTRUCTURE GAPS

As caseworkers rapidly attempted to transition to working from a distance at the start of the COVID-19 crisis, they quickly learned that their out-of-office technology would not keep up. From out-of-date tablets and flip phones that lack capacity to connect to the internet to no laptop availability, the front line workforce could often not access agency tools to enter case notes or contact clients. Even as federal guidance was released that said workers could use personal devices with reduced HIPAA scrutiny, workers received messaging from their agencies that their devices could be subpoenaed and confiscated during personnel investigations if they transmitted client information on them. These mixed messages left workers with no good choices. When HIPAA oversight is relaxed during emergencies, policies regarding personal liability for workers using their devices for professional purposes should match the federal guidance.

Although HHS informed child welfare agencies they could make 30-day visits remotely, many non-profit agencies found themselves under rules of state agency contracts requiring in-person visits, and were not granted flexibility. Coupled with a complete lack of Personal Protective Device availability across much of the nation, workers made home visits in high-risk locations where state and county workers were not held to similar standards. States should align local and state policies regarding in-home visitation with federal guidance during disasters.

Child welfare technology is moving quickly, and investments in this area are crucial to assure fairness and equity for families. Algorithmic decision making and other tools are quickly changing the landscape of data-informed practice. Policy makers must be ready to evaluate, fund, assess, and make recommendations regarding emerging technology tools, and should not wait until times of crisis to innovate.

TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED TREATMENT

IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY

During the pandemic, many mental health services moved online without service interruptions. A growing body of evidence points to the efficacy of online contacts and treatments, including self-help for youth, alcohol abuse treatment, and even parenting training. As Family First legislation works toward responsive family-centered engagement and prevention services, web-based services may be one way to improve accessibility and reduce barriers such as transportation and evening availability. Additionally, access to national programs may improve cultural fit and treatment preferences. Although technology access is a barrier for some, costs associated with providing equipment to clients may be offset by expenses of foster care and agency involvement for families who are able to complete services more quickly. Mandated programs already employ models for supplying technology to clients, (i.e. breathalizers and ankle tracking). Many useful digital supports became available to families during COVID-19, but access is uneven. It's time for child welfare to get creative about how to best meet family needs with technology. This is an important area for policy, practice, and research exploration.



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TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED VISITATION

Visitation frequency is linked to improved parent motivation, reunification, and relational maintenance. Unfortunately, workforce availability impacts visitation frequency, and under COVID-19, many visits have been restricted. This is not acceptable. Technology-mediated visitation may improve family and sibling contact; however, the child welfare field, including caseworkers and foster parents, have insufficient knowledge about the risks, benefits, and practice skills necessary to facilitate and prepare families for online visits. In some jurisdictions, these kinds of contacts are already used; however, their use is uneven and little is known about outcomes. Research, training, and dissemination of best practices are needed to ensure that families are provided with the most liberal safe policies that facilitate relationships and reunification.



For child welfare supervisors and managers: Check out NCWWI's [webinars](#) on supporting the virtual workforce- join live or find the saved recordings.

For foster parents: The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 legislation says that foster youth have the right to normalcy and that foster parents can make reasonable decisions to support youth access to normal activities. Using social media and technology are normal activities for teens. Check out [this website](#) for some tips on managing social media at home.

For kin caregivers: There may be extra resources available from state agencies right now. Contact your local or state kinship care support group and with your local benefits office to see if you might be eligible for COVID-19 related SNAP benefits.

For foster youth and their advocates: All states should have a Foster Children Bill of Rights that affirms their rights to be in contact with people they love, including by technology. See Oregon's nice example [here](#).

The guidance in these briefs are evidence-informed best practices that prioritize ease of access to technology tools for users. They may not meet standards for an individual agency; local, state and federal regulations; and licensing bodies. Always consult with appropriate authorities and stay up-to-date on protocols and best practices related to the use of technology in child welfare.

Links referenced in other pages of this document appear below:

Resources for children on COVID-19 and staying healthy by Child Trends:
<https://bit.ly/HealthCOVID19>

When their World is Already Upside Down by Dougy Center:
<https://bit.ly/GriefCOVID19>

Successful Video Visits with Young Children from National Council on Crime & Delinquency:
<https://bit.ly/VirtualVisits>

SAMHSA's National Helpline:
<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

FosterClub:
<https://www.fosterclub.com/>

Foster Youth in Action:
<http://www.fosteryouthaction.org/>



iHeartTech

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The mission of the *Institute for Healthy Engagement and Resilience with Technology* (iHeartTech) is to discover and disseminate research and best practices related to healthy engagement and resilience with technology, and the productive use of technology for social good and effective delivery of social services.

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Got comments or suggestions about this document?
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