

Preparing Parents and Caregivers Emotionally for Virtual Family Time

A Job Aid for the Supportive Virtual Family Time Program

During virtual family time, parents and caregivers may experience sadness, worry, or frustration as they observe each other. Children may seek out their caregiver for comfort in front of parents. Caregivers may observe children crying and telling their parents they want to come home. They may tell their parents they don't like it in their foster home, in front of the caregiver.

During your individual meetings with parents and caregivers, you can help parents and caregivers anticipate and prepare for the above scenarios. You can also help them think through other situations that might be challenging for them.

You can help parents and caregivers understand that they each play an important role in the growth and development of both their children and the children they are caring for. Understanding that children have great capacity to attach to multiple caregivers and that this is healthy for their continued growth and development will be important for parents and caregivers.

Children's early relationships affect how they are growing and developing and their capacity to form safe, secure relationships later in life. Caregivers who are consistently responsive help children learn about their own emotions and how to regulate their behavior and emotional states. When children experience responsive and sensitive caregiving, they also develop social competencies, empathy and emotional intelligence, and learn how to relate to other people and understand what to expect from them.¹

Parents need to understand that it is important for their children's continued growth and development, while they are living apart from them, to have a safe and healthy relationship with their caregiver. It is equally important for caregivers to understand that children's connections with their biological parents is critically important for their well-being.

Ways to support if challenges come up for families

When preparing parents for virtual family time, you can share the following with them, then listen and respond with empathy:

- **Normalize** potential challenges by acknowledging that it is both developmentally appropriate and healthy for their young children to seek physical comfort from their caregiver in emotionally challenging situations, such as virtual family time. This does not mean that they love or care about their parent any less.
- **Ask** if seeing their child seek comfort from the caregiver will be hard for them or if they can think of other things that might be difficult to see or hear.
- **Reflect** what you hear them say and the feeling you think they are experiencing.

¹ Bowlby, J. (1969) Attachment and loss: Volume 1, Attachment; Volume 2, Separation; Volume 3, Loss, sadness and depression; all New York: Basic Books.

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- **Offer support** by helping the parent prepare and think through how they will respond.

Example 1

Family Time Supervisor: *“It will be really hard and sad for you to see [child's name] upset and hug their caregiver instead of you. I know you really want to be there to comfort your child. What can I do to help you prepare for this?”*

Next, you can think through ways the parent can also offer soothing and comfort by singing the child's favorite song with them or engaging in a game or activity their child really likes.

(Note: You can also help parents and caregivers prepare for potential challenges by anticipating them. You can recall challenges that have happened in other virtual family time sessions that you have supervised. This conversation could happen with the parent, the caregiver, or the parent and caregiver together.)

Example 2

The child tells the parent they don't like their caregiver.

Family Time Supervisor: *“I want to help us prepare for seeing and hearing things from [child's name] that might be hard. In the past, while supervising family time, I have heard children say to parents during family time that they don't like their caregiver and want to come home. These kinds of things are really hard to hear and they can make us feel worried or frustrated. If this comes up during one of our virtual family times, let's focus on the child's feelings and validate them. We can acknowledge that they feel really sad and miss having in-person family time. Then we want to be prepared with activities to engage and distract them.”*

You can offer to talk further with the parent and/or caregiver about their concerns after virtual family time. If the concerns are serious, you can help the parent reach out to talk with the child's caseworker.

Making a plan

Next, you can make a plan with the parent and/or caregiver about how they will manage their own emotions so they can continue to help their children in these virtual visits by being positively emotionally contagious, as we have discussed in *A Guide to Supportive Virtual Family Time*.

Plans could include:

1. Debriefing virtual family time with the family time supervisor
2. Having a support person identified and available following family time
3. Using Handout 1: Resources for Reducing Stress