

Effective Date: December 22, 2020

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The accompanying video for the Dec 17, 2020: MCFD Townhall with Dr. Behn Smith: In-person visitation during current PHO orders can be accessed at this link. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/covid-19-information/caregivers#record>. The video time stamps are indicated along side the questions that we submitted for the call.

Q1: We are hearing no gatherings outside of the household from the PHO, but we are also hearing that some guidelines don't apply to social service delivery. What should we be doing with regards to children in care seeing their birth families over the holidays? Should we act like a household or a service? (Video 17:09)

A: Ongoing in-person connections between children and youth in care and their family are considered an extension of the household bubble and not socialization as described in the current Provincial Health Order. Each situation is unique and will need to be looked at on an individual basis as we are trying to limit social interactions to flatten the curve, and to ensure that in-person connections are safe and follow the PHO recommendation of staying away when sick, physical distancing, washing our hands and using proper hygiene etiquette.

Provincial Health Orders are not intended to create harm for children and families that are already vulnerable and need the in-person connection to ensure attachment and wellness when it is safe to do so.

Q2: Foster parents will be expected to not have household gatherings, but will they be at risk of getting COVID 19, if there is an exception made for their foster child to see their family? (Video 21:45)

A: This is correct, we are not to be hosting any social gatherings, we are sticking to our household bubbles for now but not forever. We can individually decrease our risk as much as possible by following the PHO measures that have been put in place.

As we continue to learn more about the spread of the virus, evidence continues to indicate that child to adult transmission is not common and is not a major contributor of community spread; therefore, reunification and overnight visits should proceed following the guidance in Bulletin #4: Scaling Up In-Person Connections and Facilitating Access for Children, Youth and their Families. This is available for you to review on the ministry internet resources and information related to COVID-19 page.

[Bulletin #4: Scaling Up In-Person Connections and Facilitating Access for Children, Youth and their Families \(PB#4\)](#)

Use pre-screening so that people are not coming to the visit ill and even if individuals are showing symptoms they can be assured that while the visits may need to be postponed, it will still happen. It is important to have a back up plan so that alternatives are at the ready for virtual visits, virtual story reading, changing the location of the visit etc.

Q3: We have not seen any of our own extended family members, including adult children and their families to keep the child in care and ourselves safe and as risk free as possible since March. It seems unfair and unreasonable to insist that we visit with a family outside our bubble who themselves cannot/ do not follow health safety guidelines. When is everyone's health and safety going to be respected? (Video 27:25)

A: There is a tension, and these are challenging times where we need to balance the risks and benefits of our own family situation with keeping children and youth in care connected to their families.

Everyone's health and safety is our priority and planning for in-person connections for children and youth in care with their families must be balanced with the health, safety and well-being of the children, youth, families, caregivers and service providers. Having pre-planning discussion with workers, family and the child/youths care team is important. It is important that everyone is following the PHO orders and layering in as many safety measures during the in-person connection time to make the time that families are together as safe as possible.

As indicated in PB #4, if you have concerns please discuss with the child or youth's worker to develop a plan that mitigates health and safety risk for all involved, including the foster family/caregiver's family, and meets the child, youth, family's unique circumstances.

Q4: Can foster parents have more collaboration and input into the in-person visits? (Video 31:08)

A: Social workers should approach in-person visits with children, families and caregivers in a collaborative way, encouraging all to share any concerns they have. We need to work together to navigate these times. Ensuring appropriate pre-planning and coordination for in person contact with other social workers who may have children or youth place in a home is necessary to best support caregivers who may have concerns regarding having contact (direct or indirect) with CYIC families.

Collaborative proactive discussion with a child/youth's care team, inclusive of the child/youth's parent(s), social worker, resource worker, caregiver and any other care team members is essential for planning in-person connections over the holidays for children/youth in care and their family.

Pre- Planning for a safe connection should include, but not be limited to the following:

- Discussion on how the PHO guidelines are being and will be followed
- How the risks for COVID-19 exposure will be reduced during the visit. i.e. encourage outdoor activities
- Discuss the number of individuals who will be at the visit
- Discuss the duration and location of the visit
- Adults should maintain physical distance and wear masks if they are not able to distance with each other
- Plan to have additional sanitation, masks and supplies on hand for the visit
- The completion of the COVID-19 self screening prior to the visit <https://bc.thrive.health/>
- Have an alternative virtual plan if the in-person connection is not able to go forward

The [Safer Celebrations and Ceremonies resource](#) on the BC Center for Disease Control has several ideas to make celebrations safer for everyone.

Q5: I feel very confused and let down. I don't feel that my health and safety concerns are being heard. I've never experienced conflict like this with the children's teams before. Everything seems black and white, but every situation is different, and I don't understand why exceptions cannot be made for certain circumstances, as the practice guidance said it could.

A: We recognize that this has been and continues to be a challenging time for caregivers and you are a critical member of a child/youth's team. We are grateful for your ongoing commitment and the care you have provided through the pandemic.

The social worker will work with the team around the child and youth to discuss safety concerns and develop plans, within Public Health Officer guidance, that address concerns of those involved. We are learning more and more about the transmission of the virus between children and adults and this has not proven to be a common way that transmission of the virus is occurring. As has been happening since June in person connections have been occurring between parents and children and youth and this in-person connection is important to ensuring the best interest.

There is an exceptions process outlined in Practice Bulletin #4, that outlines a process when there are circumstances impacting the ability to facilitate in-person connections for children and youth in care with their families (including COVID-19 related health and safety concerns, contracted service providers capacity to support etc.). Social workers will explore mitigation strategies in collaboration with the child/youth's care team, including the resource worker, parent(s) and caregivers and in consultation with their Team Leader (supported by Consultant/Analyst/Director of Practice as needed) to mitigate any concerns related to COVID-19 so that the in-person connection can occur.

If there isn't any way to mitigate the risk of a child/youth in care having an in person visit with their family, staff will consult with their Manager/Director of Operations/Executive Director of Service/Executive Director according to Practice Bulletin #4.

Q6: Should workers limit the number of people at a visit to parents only? What if extended family are present? How many people are acceptable? (Video 33:13)

A: We want to ensure that we minimize the COVID-19 exposure risks during the in-person connections within the family. Who will be attending the visit, the location and the duration should be discussed and agreed upon in the pre-planning meeting.

Q7: Should we be asking parents and children to wear masks on visits? (Video 31:34)

A: Under the November 24, [Public Safety and Solicitor General order](#), all British Columbians 12 years of age or older are required to wear a face covering that covers the nose and mouth in all indoor public spaces unless they are unable to wear one due to health concerns.

There is no requirement to wear a mask during in person connections between children and their family other than what the PHO has stated for being in public places.

Masks are something that can be worn as an additional layer of protection, but we still need to ensure that individuals have been pre-screened, have good hand hygiene, physical distance and use the proper coughing/sneezing etiquette.

Q8: What are some suggestions for having these conversations with children and youth and their families around visits?

A: Children and youth will need to know as soon as possible what their holiday visits will look like, so they do not shoulder responsibility, blame themselves or have anxiety due to uncertainties. Having an age-appropriate discussion and providing reassurances that they can still enjoy the holidays — can fight fears and anxieties before they start.

There are several suggestions on how to have safe in-person connections

- Visiting outdoors at home on decks or in backyards.
- Plan winter activities that promote physical distancing.
- Arranging an alternate person for drop off and pick up.
- Asking parents to physically distance from other adults during the visit (caregiver, service provider etc.)
- Making sure the child/youth has hand sanitizer and wipes in their backpack and uses them prior to visiting, before entering the vehicle or building and upon returning home.
- The completion of the COVID-19 self screening prior to the visit <https://bc.thrive.health/>

The [Safer Celebrations and Ceremonies resource](#) on the BC Center for Disease Control has several ideas to make celebrations safer for everyone.

Knowing that each situation is unique, who will be sharing the planning and schedule with the child and youth should be decided at the preplanning meeting. This will ensure that the best interest of the child or youth are being met.

Q9: Who will be telling young people and families what is allowed? Is that the social worker or the caregiver?

A: Circumstances for children, youth and their families are all so unique. How communication occurs will vary depending on who is involved in the child's care team/circle. If the family is not involved in planning, it is the social workers responsibility to communicate the plan to the care team, however there may be circumstances where a member of the care team takes on this role to ensure the expectations of the in-person connection with the family or others involved in planning is informed. Social workers, family and caregivers should be jointly discussing the planning as well as who will communicate with the child/youth in care and their family.

Q10: We have sacrificed so much to keep everyone safe. Why aren't plans being made by MCFD with safety in mind?

A: We know that this has been a challenging time for caregivers to support children, youth and families We are in constant consultation with PHO regarding how we can continue to do our work so that we are not increasing the transmission of the virus, including planning for family contact, in a way that follows the guidance and evidence in order to meet the needs of the children, youth, families, caregivers, and service providers that we are involved with.

Q11: Foster parents are hearing a rumor that if they don't do the visits the children could ultimately be moved.

A: Placement stability is a very important consideration in planning for children and youth in care.

Each circumstance is unique. Decision-making regarding in-person connections between children, youth and their families considers each child/youth/family/community and caregiver's unique situation and the Provincial Health Officer (PHO) public health principles, guidance and recommendations. It is always important that a child/youth's best interest is driving placement decisions. In situations where concerns for in-person connections are unable to be mitigated and those connections are determined to be in the child/youth's best interest, Care Teams/Circles may need to consider an alternative placement as a way of meeting that child/youth's needs. Foster parents are caregivers are key to a child/youth's care team so they would be involved in any/all placement discussions.

Q12: Will there be exceptions made? Who will make those exceptions, and will the family or organization providing daily care be included in that decision?

A: Yes, when there are circumstances impacting the ability to facilitate in-person connections for children and youth in care with their families (including COVID-19 related health and safety concerns, contracted service providers capacity to support etc.), social workers will explore time limited mitigation strategies in collaboration with the child/youth's care team, including the resource worker, parent(s) and caregivers and in consultation with their Team Leader (supported by Consultant/Analyst/Director of Practice as needed) to develop a plan to mitigate any concerns related to COVID-19 so that the in-person connection can occur.

If there is no way to mitigate the risk/areas of concern, staff will speak with their Director of Operations/ Manager/Executive Director of Service/Executive Director; the Executive Director of Service or Executive Director will make the final decision regarding whether or not an in person visit will occur. The decision of the Executive Director of Service or Executive Director will be informed through the collaborative discussions that will have occurred with the members of the child/youth's care team (which would include input from the child/youth's foster parent/caregiver).

Q13: What is the process for foster parents if they disagree with the decision?

A: If foster parents disagree with a decision made, they should connect with the team leader in the DAA or MCFD office they are working with to discuss their concerns. If after talking with the Team Leader, resolution is not reached caregivers are encouraged to contact the Practice Manager in the DAA or the Director of Operations in the ministry to have further discussions. In addition, if you have a [complaint](#) about services, actions or decisions provided by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) or a Delegated Aboriginal Agency (DAA) you can call **1-877-387-7027** and ask to speak to a complaints specialist.

Q14: Scenario: Foster parent takes child in care to counselling sessions. Counsellor insists that child in care take off his mask. Foster parent and child in care both say they won't but counsellor insists to see his face. Virtual counselling is not an option. Because counsellor sees many clients without masks, there is no appropriate social distancing at the office, and counsellor is not in their family bubble, foster parent is asking that child in care be moved for the health of her family. (Video 35: 22)

A: Under the [November 24 order](#), all British Columbians 12 years of age or older are required to wear a face covering that covers the nose and mouth in all public spaces unless they are unable to wear one due to health concerns.

Ministry settings are considered public spaces and fall under the public health order. However there may be some circumstances during a therapeutic intervention and if distancing can be maintained that masks may hinder the intervention. These would be in rare circumstances and would take into consideration the comfort of the young person. It is recommended that you connect with the worker and their Team Leader to discuss your concerns.

As noted during the Town Hall, there is information on the WorkSafe BC site related to [in-person](#) counselling protocols and each office has a COVID-19 safety plan that is being followed.

Q15: Why is the planning influenced so much by people's feelings and opinions rather than the facts of the matter - COVID data, public health orders and MCFD practice bulletins? (Video 38:27)

A: PHO orders, restrictions and recommendations are being influenced and guided by the evidence and data we have on how the virus is specifically being transmitted in BC. This enables us to make evidence based decisions in order to protect ourselves and one another. The holiday season is a very special and sensitive time for many. We all need to continue to follow the guidance of the PHO. There are no easy answers as we are still so new to living and working during a pandemic. We also recognize that each child/youth/family/foster family/caregiver/service providers experience is unique. We encourage everyone to continue to keep updated on the government website, speaking with your supports and connecting with the child/youth's workers.

Q16: We can find lots of ways to make virtual or safe distancing visits fun until it's safe for everyone to have full visits again. (Video 42:19)

A: Thank you for this. There are a lot of ways that we can be creative to ensure that we remain connected while at the same time following the PHO orders.

Q17: Will Foster Parents be classified as essential services to receive the COVID-19 vaccine early? (Video 44:26)

A: The COVID-19 immunization program will involve making vaccines available to everyone in the province who the vaccine is recommended for and who would like to be vaccinated. Child Services are deemed essential, however it is still unclear where they fall on the list of provincial population priorities. PHO is working through the higher priority cohorts that have the highest vulnerability and those that are most at risk of spreading the virus. With what we know about the transmission of the virus in children, it is not anticipated that foster parents would be indicated in a high priority cohort (unless there were other health related vulnerabilities).

BC's plan for vaccine distribution can be found here: <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/covid-19-vaccine/bcs-plan-for-vaccine-distribution>.

Q18: We work with clients who have COVID-19 symptoms and are refusing to be tested. Under these circumstances what are the rights of the other children in the home to not be exposed to someone with COVID-19, what about their health and safety? We also work with clients who refuse to follow the COVID-19 safety procedures, and cough, sneeze, spit, do not social distance, and do not follow PHO orders regarding spending time with others, etc. (Video 48:42)

A: We do get this question often and it has been one of the most challenging to deal with. There are youth in care who choose not to follow the PHO orders and guidance in order to minimize the risk of COVID-19 spreading to others.

The service that you are providing the youth is essential, as the youth may have other life style risks that place them at greater risk than the potential of them contracting COVID-19. It is important that every youth in the home understands the PHO orders, recommendations and the steps that they can follow to keep themselves and others safe. There are a lot of things that staff and the other residents can do to provide themselves with additional layers of protection. Staff can increase air circulation by opening windows, other residents can choose to wear a facemask, and both staff and residents can use physical distancing wherever possible. The importance of good hand hygiene cannot be understated.

There are several resources available, and it is recommended that you are following the WorkSafe BC rules and regulation and have a COVID-19 Safety Plan which should include exposure planning for staff and residents. There are several resources available on the BC Center For Disease Control website: [The Interim Guidance to Social Service Providers for the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 in their Facilities](#). This document provides interim guidance to social service providers for the prevention and control of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in their facilities.

If you need additional support you can contact the youth's social worker, your resource social worker or your contract manager.