

Effective Date June 3, 2020

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

As British Columbia moves into a phased restart process, maintaining connections and facilitating access between children, youth and their families remains a key and critical priority.

On March 26, 2020 a decision to suspend in-person connections for children and youth in care was made with the provision for exceptions. As we move toward scaling up in-person connections that were in place prior to the decision, it will be necessary to consider each situation individually including the views and circumstances of the child/youth, the parent(s) and the caregivers.

The following principles will guide the practice regarding in-person connections between children/ youth in care and their families:

- Legislation, including the *Child, Family and Community Service Act (CFCSA)* and *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis children, youth and families* (the Federal Act), requires directors to promote a child/youth's attachment and emotional ties to family members if consistent with the child/youth's best interests.
- 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.
- Collaborating with the 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 in proactively planning for in-person connections for a child/youth in care and their family.
- Family members or other individuals a child or youth knows and/or has a relationship with will be considered, where possible, for in-person connections that need or require support or supervision.
- A child/youth's connection to their family will be enhanced by maintaining the virtual connections that were/ have been established as we move to re-establish in-person connections.

The Provincial Health Officer (PHO) provided foundational principles that assist in guiding how we plan for in-person connections for children and youth in care and their families. Based on the current epidemiology of COVID-19 in B.C. and the fact that children are at a much lower risk of developing or transmitting COVID-19, in-person connections can occur while considering the health and safety of children/youth and adults.

Social workers in MCFD and DAAs will consider the principles set out by the PHO. These principles include:

- Staying informed, being prepared and following public health advice.
- Staying home when sick; i.e. do not attend a visit if you have symptoms of COVID-19.
- Practising good hygiene – hand hygiene, avoid touching your face and respiratory etiquette.
- No handshaking or hugs outside of your family (siblings, parents, extended family, person of significance to the child/youth), or those you live with (foster parents, caregivers).
- Maintaining physical distancing (e.g. small numbers of contacts and keeping a safe distance) outside your family (siblings, parents, extended family, person of significance to the child/youth) or those you live with (foster parents, caregivers).
- Increasing cleaning of frequently touched surfaces at home and work.

Following public health principles, working collaboratively with the child/youth's care team (including contracted service providers where necessary) and considering the views of the child/youth, the parent(s) and the caregivers will result in four scenarios for the provision of in-person connection for children/youth in care.

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Effective June 3, 2020, efforts to increase and/or maintain connections while keeping the risk of spreading COVID-19 relatively low, include four scenarios:

1. In-person connections that have been occurring through an exception since March 26, 2020 can continue through regular case planning rather than through exception and may increase, depending on the unique circumstances of the child/youth, family or caregiver.
2. In-person connections for children and youth in care with their families that were occurring prior to Covid-19 can resume provided public health principles to reduce spread of COVID-19 can be followed.
3. When there are circumstances impacting the ability to facilitate in-person connections for children and youth in care with their families (including COVID 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 the issues are related to the availability of contracted services, please ensure that you connect with the contract manager to explore options/alternatives.
4. When there are exceptional circumstances, where in-person connections are not possible for children and youth with their family because of COVID-19 related health and safety concerns; and there are no available mitigation strategies, these circumstances will need further review by MCFD Director of Operations (DOO) or DAA Manager.

The MCFD Team Leader will need to speak with their DOO who will consult with their designated director. If the designated director confirms the exceptional circumstance they will forward the completed template to the Provincial Director of Practice, Michelle Wywrot with a cc to the Executive Director of Practice, Joanne White.

The DAA Team Leaders will need to speak with their manager and/or Executive Director who will forward the completed template to Samantha Cocker, the Designated Director for DAAs in Aboriginal Services Branch to confirm the exceptional circumstance.

Mitigation strategies could include (*not an exhaustive list*):

- Visiting outdoors at home on decks or in backyards.
- Going hiking/walking.
- Picnic outings with use of personal picnic blankets to promote physical distancing.
- Arranging an alternate person for drop off or 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.

WHERE TO FIND MORE INFORMATION

For more information for staff regarding exposure control planning please see: https://intranet.gov.bc.ca/assets/download/3E54EF902EE243BAA062495D7E213047&filename=covid-19_exposure_control_plan_mcfcd_staff_-_mar_24_2020.pdf

For further information regarding PHO principles, guidance and recommendations please see: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/current-health-topics/covid-19-novel-coronavirus>

Town Halls and accompanying slide deck with Dr Daniele Behn Smith, Deputy Provincial Health Officer: <https://www.blog.gov.bc.ca/mcfcd/news/mcfcd-pho-information-sessions-with-dr-behn-smith-video/>

If you have further questions, please contact your Director of Practice and for DAAs your Practice Analysts.