



DCF COVID-19 Daily Update Supporting Children, Families and Staff

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THERAPEUTIC FOSTER CARE AGENCIES USING TECH TO CONNECT KIDS AT CRITICAL TIME

During this anxious time when in-person contact increases risks for spreading the COVID-19, we all are using technology for the connections we need now more than ever.

Nowhere is this more important than for the 16 therapeutic foster care agencies that license families to care for children in state care with more complex treatment needs. So, the agencies are employing videoconferencing methods to allow children to visit virtually with parents and even to receive therapy from their clinicians. Initial results have been very positive. At the same time, these news methods of communication must be utilized with caution and an emphasis on confidentiality. Recent warnings have been provided across the country of hackers disrupting videoconferencing and accessing personal information.

“These kids are used to weekly or more frequent visits with parents and siblings,” said Nicole McKelvey-Walsh, Department of Children and Families clinical program director for therapeutic foster care. “For them to see that their parents are ok is vitally important to their emotional security.”

Ms. McKelvey-Walsh said the agencies are being highly creative. One uses Microsoft Teams to convene foster parent support groups. Another rewards youth who participate in “tele-health” virtual counseling with their clinicians by sending them Amazon care packages. Agencies also are using email to send parents videos and photos of their children to ensure them that the kids are doing alright during the pandemic.

The agencies and the Department are now exploring other innovative techniques to connect with the children and connect the youth with each other. Ms. McKelvey-Walsh said discussions are underway about using the social media platforms Instagram and TikTok to engage adolescents. For example, she said these social platforms feature pop culture celebrities that the kids can relate to such as D Nice who is promoting positive educational information.

“The methods we are using have to change,” Ms. McKelvey-Walsh said. “We need to meet these kids where they are at and present them things that are interesting and important to them. It’s our way to ensure these kids have hope and see that they are going to get out of this on the other side.”