Association of
Native Child and
Family Services
Agencies of
Ontario

ANCFSAO

ANCFSAO COVID-19 Response

Virtual Visitation

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Introduction

Strong relationships are built on the opportunity to have meaningful interactions through communication, face-to-face contact and activities which encompass interactions. For infants, children and youth who have been able to maintain relationships through access despite being under the care of alternative caregivers, maintaining those connections are critical, particularly during times of high stress and separation. We are faced with a global pandemic, which places strict guidelines on the necessity of social distancing and prevention of widespread contamination. To follow these recommendations to stay home and eliminate any unnecessary travel or contact with others outside the main household have been strongly encouraged. Unfortunately, for the disrupted families, the guidelines for maintaining and/or not maintaining face-to-face access have additional challenges to the wholistic well being of all.

Many Children's Aid Societies and Indigenous Child Well Being Agencies have had to make decisions on a case-by-case basis on how to protect the health and well being of families, communities, children and youth and the alternative care giving families. Some of those decisions have included and/or may include moving to virtual visits. Although the transition from face-to-face visitation to virtual visitation is not ideal, there may be many reasons this transition is necessary. It is our endeavour, through this guide, to provide some helpful information to support the transition for both workers and families through the presentation of suggestion and thought.

Families face challenges as they are geographically dispersed, however, the objective of visitation is to maintain connection between children, their families, their community and culture; a true connection to who they are in a way that they may draw upon that connection in times of need throughout their lives. This is also what we must draw our attention to when supporting children and families in their transition to virtual visitation.

This document will explore the concept of family relationships, belonging, and attachment. It will also focus on the realm of feelings associated with transitioning to a virtual platform for visitation. Virtual visits have become more and more normalized through divorce, separation and relocation, however, it is not the recommendation that virtual visits replace in-person visits. There are, however, extenuating circumstances in which virtual visits are the only form of visitation that is accessible to a family. This guide will provide some tangible suggestions to support that platform.

Concept of Family

Our concept of family centers around this interconnectedness that we feel and allows us to truly enliven our age-old social structures of communal existence. Family is about connection, belonging and support. As Indigenous people we understand how important the continuous fostering of belonging and supporting meaningful connections to our families. We also understand family construct to be very different and encompass aspects that non-Indigenous people generally may not understand or consider.

It is important to include our own concept of family and of building and sustaining healthy relationships when implementing virtual visits. Our concept of family is not only the physical people but also to conceptual traditional knowledge that enable us to build relationships

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with our culture and our community. This is an important part of conceptual family relationships that can also be incorporated into virtual visits. Those aspects of how we exist in the world that we would generally teach our children through certain activities can still be achieved, however we may need to put an incremental plan in place that will land us in the same spot but from a different path. This is the mindset we need to help our families achieve when supporting the successful implementation of virtual visitation.
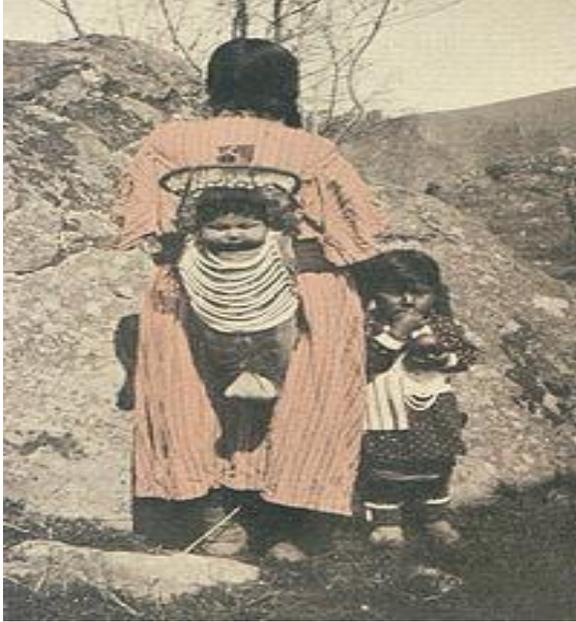

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Attachment

Parent/family visitation, or the scheduled, face-to-face contacts between parents and their children in out-of-home placements, are the primary intervention for maintaining and supporting the development of parent/child relationships necessary for reunification. Fostering that invisible string from parent to child, and acknowledging, respecting and strengthening that bond between family and child is of great importance. That strength in that bond is what children will come back to in times of challenge throughout their lives.

In these challenging times we must be creative about how we foster that connection. Some of that very important work has made a shift to online platforms (FaceTime, Zoom), telephone conversations, and written forms (email, letters, cards). It is in that shift that we must reconceptualize how we support the building of attachment in out-of-home placements for children and families.

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The vital aspect of attachment that continues to be a challenge to foster even without the shift to virtual and other alternative platforms, is the emotional interaction and connection. When reconceptualizing the support necessary to foster emotional attachment for parent - child relationships it is important to keep in mind Indigenous ways of relating (story telling, hands-on crafts, food) and encompass those routes as much as possible. Open mindedness and the support of cultural knowledge keepers and elders also play a vital in successfully implementing this shift.

Supporting Everyone through the Change

The struggle to shift how we connect with our most precious gifts is essential, however, it may not be a smooth transition for some individuals. Supporting families to transition into virtual, telephone, and written avenues of connection may require more support. One of the most important things to children in a long-distance parenting relationship is consistent and regular contact. Engagement time for virtual visitation may be drastically reduced in comparison to a face-to-face visit, however the virtual visit may also allow for more frequent visits.

Although virtual visitation has been the primary focus as it allows the child and parent to see each other, using other means of connectivity are also a good idea to support that connection, like emails, letters, mail packages – things that also foster emotional attachment. There are a variety of options, and it is encouraged to be creative in the fostering and supporting of connection.

Creating a Natural Environment

It is important to ensure that this visitation platform is as natural as possible. If the parent and child have not been in a routine of just sitting and talking, then a change in platform should also not carry that expectation. It is still possible to do things interactively: draw a picture together, take a virtual walk, read/tell a story ensuring a natural environment. In this shift things will feel different. It is important for each party to understand that this is a shift and it is okay to feel those feelings of difference, but it is equally important to identify and understand what is necessary to support this change.

Setting the Space and Ensuring Quality Internet Connectivity

Space and infrastructure are important aspects of ensuring successful virtual visitation. It is challenging to focus on emotional connection if there are distractions for either person in the conversation. Having a conversation with all parties involved in the visit

around the importance of ensuring there is little distraction (people coming in and out of the space or walking through the space) in the physical space is important. The other aspect of infrastructure is the support of internet connectivity if that is the platform of choice. It is important when choosing that form of visitation that the internet is capable of holding a consistent connection for the allotted timeframe.

Supporting the Parent

Open communication is critical prior to initiating a virtual visit platform. It is important to discuss with the parents opening about why this decision is being contemplated, and to listen to their concerns. For those parents whose access has been disrupted already, or not exercised as an option, it would be especially important to determine what they would need to feel supported in this process.

This shift may feel different and may at first feel challenging to truly engage and connect. Communicate with the parent that this process is much different than an in-person visit and it may be discouraging if the child appears disengaged in this new platform. The child is also adjusting to this new form of interaction, so consistency is essential to this adjustment. It may be a little more challenging to think of constant conversation and age appropriate conversation and activities.

Age appropriate time intervals will be necessary. For example, an infant/toddler may only hold attention long enough to hear a lullaby or hear a story book being read. The toddler may also experience distress due to not being able to physically touch their parent, and short but frequent intervals will help.

Families may initially require the support of a worker to process the virtual engagement and to pick age appropriate activities for the engagement. It is important for the parent to understand that the uncomfortableness that each is feeling is normal and is not a sign of disconnection but more of transition. Helping the parent to understand those factors of change management will alleviate the potential of disengagement on the parents' part. This is an opportunity for parents to bridge estrangements and enhance their understanding of their child's reactions to situations.

Supporting the Child

Depending on the age of the child, the shift from in-person visits to utilizing virtual methods will take some adjustment if they have never exercised this method in the past. To support engagement for the older child/youth, it is important to continue to encourage the child/youth to engage with the parent. If the allotted time is too long, support shorter intervals, but encourage consistency. For younger children, they will likely look forward to interacting virtually, but will feel anxious if the duration of virtual visits exceeds what was explained. All children/youth will require age appropriate support for this process. This support will look different for each child, however it is vital to understand that the support is in place to help the child maintain a sense of belonging within their family system and to encourage and maintain parent/family attachment to the child.

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Supporting the Caregiver

Caregivers will also need support to facilitate the virtual access where no additional support worker has been assigned. Caregivers who are elderly will experience challenges if they have not already been introduced to technology. It will be necessary to show or demonstrate through live interaction, or pre-tape a segment to help them get started. If this process is too frustrating, you may need to consider an access facilitator community support worker to set up the visits, including setting the devices being used.

The caregivers will also need to be a part of the conversation on planning duration, frequency and collaborating with the parent/worker on what the visits will look like and how to debrief and support the child/youth following a visit. It is important for the worker to touch base with the caregiver following the initial sessions to trouble shoot and improve everyone's experience.

What to Expect

Processing the change is a very important element to consider when going through the transition. It is important that a support person check in with parents and/or family concluding the visit to allow space to process the change. Parents may be angry with the transition due to the fact that it feels less personal, less physical, especially when physicality has been their association to emotional attachment or comfort. The emotional attachment that develops from the physical interaction will be lacking in the virtual platform, however that does not mean that an emotional attachment is not attainable through the virtual platform. Depending on the age of the child this will determine how that attachment is actually formed.

Children/youth will also have different experiences with their emotions. It is equally important for the worker and/or alternative caregiver to offer support for this child/youth.

Virtual Visitation Ideas

Virtual visitation, internet visitation or computer visitation is using technology to supplement interactions between parents/families and children who are separated by distance. Most of the focus in terms of technology has been on webcams, web chats, and video conferencing. These tools allow parents and children to have virtual face time with each other. It is important to also include promoting attachment and emotional ties to each family member when the child is not placed with family. Things like allowing the child to also have virtual visitation with multiple family members so connection is maintained.

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A virtual visitation session's length is generally reduced to a developmentally appropriate length for the child's age (i.e., around 30-45 minutes). The session has the potential to specifically teach parents how to follow their child's lead in play, including how to observe what their child is interested in and how to positively reinforce the child's curiosity through narration, parent play skills, and interaction guidance.

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Virtual Visitation Ideas

- Age appropriate visitation:
  - Teenagers
    - Cooking sessions
    - Language classes together
    - Crafts
    - Virtual walks outside that can incorporate indigenous knowledge
    - Support with emails or letters (this is also a way to develop an understanding of each other and how each is interpreting life)
    - Talking through homework together
    - Playing a board game, charades, karaoke

  - School age
    - Drawing pictures together and telling each other about the picture
    - Virtual walks outside that can incorporate Indigenous knowledge
    - Reading a book to each other
    - Helping with homework
    - Crafts together
    - Support with emails or letters (this is also a way to develop an understanding of each other and how each is interpreting life)
    - Making things fun by utilizing various filters and screen shots of each other

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- Make games or puppets to play with while doing a virtual visit ie. I Spy, or dancing to Baby Shark together

- o Infancy and toddler
  - Singing to the child
  - Read a story
  - Traditional songs
  - The most important thing to remember in this stage is that although the child may not be able to feel your touch, emotional attachment can form through the consistency of hearing your voice. Do things in the visit that are soothing for the child, like gentle singing or softly reading a book.
  - Recording a song or video for the little ones to watch over and over if the wish.

Website Support

https://thepyjamafoundation.com/virtual-visits-fun-facetime-games/

https://www.fosteringconnectionsforfamilies.com/post/supporting-virtual-family-time-visits-an-opportunity-for-kindness

Program Possibilities

As we have outlined in this guide, there are many things to consider in the transition from in-person visitation to virtual visitation, including that it is a great opportunity to support children and families in this process. This transition may be more challenging for some families than it is for others. There is room for program development around virtual visitation from a building parenting capacity perspective. This type of programming model is very similar to a therapeutic access model of access/visitation. The objective is to support the development of healthy parent/child relationships, enhance parenting capacity skills and support the parent's evolution and growth as a parent and individual through consistent conversation. These conversations would include the development of parent capacity building plans, visitation activity plans and support in processing the visit.

The therapy model that some models of virtual visitation are based on is the Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy. It is an attachment-focused therapy developed by Drs. Daniel Hughes and Arthur Becker-Weidman originally developed as an intervention for children who have experienced emotional trauma as a result of chronic early maltreatment within the caregiving relationship. The primary goal of DDP is to support these children in developing the ability to maintain attachment-based relationships with parents and caregivers. This type of program supports virtual visitation through the incorporation of a parent coaching framework. This is done through parent coaching intervention delivered through video teleconferencing technology.

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