

# Tips for Family Services Staff Working Remotely with Families



Find tips for family services staff and other direct service professionals who are teleworking<sup>1</sup> with Head Start and Early Head Start families. These tips can be applied during public health emergencies, natural disasters, and other crisis situations. Staff should consult with their supervisors to address concerns about families' situations.

For more information, see **Suggested Resources for Virtual Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Service Provision** on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

## Tip 1. Remember to take care of yourself.

- Take breaks to care for your body and mind. Eat healthy snacks and meals and drink plenty of water. Participate in activities that soothe you. These might be deep breathing, exercise, meditation, drawing, or other activities.
- Set up a workspace that is comfortable and helps you to be productive. Talk with your supervisor about what you may need to work effectively from home, such as a computer, office supplies, or training on how to work with families virtually.
- Set a regular work schedule and, as possible, set and stick to a routine. Routines help create a sense of normalcy during uncertain times. Include time to address personal tasks to maintain balance between work and personal life.
- Stay in contact with your supervisors, mentors, and other program staff for a sense of team and support. Maintain connections by participating in team meetings and other group conversations.

## Tip 2. Continue building relationships with families.

- Use strengths-based attitudes and relationship-based practices in your virtual work to strengthen your relationships with families. Building relationships is the first goal of any connection with families.
- Think about what you know already about the families with whom you work. Focus on their strengths. Emphasize their resilience. Remind them of times they have overcome challenges in the past.
- Let parents know you are thinking about their family. Find out how they are feeling and doing. What do they think is going well for them and their child? What is not going so well?
- Ask about new routines or strategies families are using to manage their stress. Ask who they can reach out to for support. Keep in mind that social (physical) distancing does not mean social isolation.
- Talk with families about how their cultural perspectives and values may affect how they are coping. What is important to families (e.g., strong family ties)?
- Reflect on your work and conversations with families. Write in a journal or record notes on your phone. Meet virtually with your supervisor for reflective supervision meetings.

Explore **Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices**. It's part of the **Building Partnerships with Families Series** on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

**Talk with a supervisor if you have any concerns about a family related to substance abuse, domestic violence, or child abuse and neglect during your remote work.**

<sup>1</sup>According to the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, "the term 'telework' or 'teleworking' refers to a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee's position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work." See: <https://www.opm.gov/faqs/topic/pandemic/index.aspx>

### Tip 3. Reach out to families in a variety of ways.

- Find out how each family prefers to stay in touch. Make phone or video calls, send texts or emails, or mail a card or note. Consider sending group messages with voice and video recordings.
- Use social media messages to connect with families. Be sure to follow your program's protocols. Keep in mind that some families may not have access to the internet.
- Reassure families that you are following your program's confidentiality policies, even when communicating online. Follow your program policy and guidance for using and storing personal data.
- Check that families have privacy before talking about sensitive subjects, such as safety concerns or personal parent challenges. Be mindful of who might be near parents as they speak with you. Start by asking if they are in a place where they can comfortably speak about private or sensitive matters.
- Help parents connect to other families in the program or to local or national parent networks. Explore ways to lead your program's parenting curricula, parent cafés, or parenting groups online.
- Schedule regular, ongoing meeting times with families as much as possible. During times of crisis, it is important to provide structure and routine.
- Make sure families have what they need to stay in touch with you and others. Staying connected is important as families deal with more financial stress, possible health or safety concerns, and other challenges. Programs may explore options to lend families pre-paid, short-term cell phones, tablets, laptop computers, or hot spots for Wi-Fi access.

Explore **Supporting Families in Uncertain Times: Social Media Messages** on the ECLKC website.

You may have to reach out to families several times before you connect. You may also need to try more than one way to contact them. Keep in mind that some families may feel overwhelmed by communications. Consider working with other staff to streamline communication from your program.

### Tip 4. Offer supports to families to address their urgent needs and biggest stressors.

- Check in with families about their basic needs, like infant formula, diapers, or food. Brainstorm together ideas for how to meet their needs if your program cannot address them.
- Make referrals to local community programs and agencies that provide food assistance, unemployment assistance, health assessments, and other supports. Check hours, availability, and any requirements before making referrals.
- Get the names of specific contacts at community programs or agencies, where possible. Make plans with families to access services and follow up on the referrals you make. Arrange virtual appointments, if possible, for families to speak with program contacts. Encourage families to set up a daily reminder or calendar alert for appointments on their phone.
- Make a warm referral, if possible. That is, offer to organize a call with the family member and the program. Try using three-way calling, web conferences, video chats, or other ways to have a group conversation. Follow up with parents and the contact person after the referral.

### Tip 5. Reassess family strengths and needs using online case management meetings.

- Participate in regular team meetings to discuss each family's situation with other key staff, like teachers or nurses. Consider conducting a virtual assessment and case management meeting with them.
- As a team, discuss questions like: Has anyone touched base with this family? What are these families' interests and needs? How can we coordinate and support each other to address those needs?
- Make a plan with other key staff to address family interests and needs. Follow your program protocols for documentation.
- Make determinations with your supervisor about appropriate caseload sizes and how to prioritize family assessments and case management services.

## Tip 6. Review and modify service plans, as needed.

- Review family strengths and needs assessments as well as family partnership plans.
- Identify services to be delivered in line with the Head Start Program Performance Standards and if there are any areas for flexibility. Use program protocols to document services that are delivered.
- Develop and document alternative plans for future service needs (e.g., speech, occupational, or physical therapy), when appropriate.
- Coordinate services and additional supports for families with children who are receiving services through Individual Family Service Plans (IFSPs) or Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Identify alternative options for children who have a disability and cannot receive their usual supports and services due to an emergency or crisis situation. For example, could a speech therapy session happen over a video call? Could a family member work on fine motor skills with the child in their home? If alternative options are not possible, you may need to reschedule for a later date. Keep detailed records to track the number, type, and length of the sessions that work for the family and the service provider.

## Tip 7. Continue to support community partnerships.

- Look for information about local, state, and national resources that may be useful for families in your community. Let families know how they can access resources for unemployment, housing, utilities, or other assistance programs covered under federal or state legislation or policy.
- Exchange information with other program staff, community partners, and service provider networks. Encourage sharing and networking among community partners. Build on existing efforts and join new partnerships and community-wide initiatives, when possible.
- Stay in regular communication with community partners using webinars, group calls, or other tools. Share your knowledge about local-level community resources.

Disclaimer: The information in this guide should not be considered an endorsement of any particular tool or the use of such tools in general.



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NATIONAL CENTER ON  
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