

While Your Child is in Our Care During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic: A Guide for Parents

Overview

During this unprecedented time of the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), DFPS remains committed as ever to child safety and keeping children protected and connected. DFPS continues to fulfill its critical mission to “promote safe and healthy families and protect children and vulnerable adults from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.”

DFPS staff, the courts, advocates, service providers, and community partners have altered how we do our work to ensure public health. The following frequently asked questions will help you to understand how things are changing and how we can best support you during the pandemic.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does DFPS still have to go to court and get a court order for a child to come into foster care?

DFPS must still get a court order and prove to a judge that it’s necessary to remove a child from your home and place the child in foster care. In most cases, we will go to court before removing a child, but in the most urgent situations, we may remove a child to make the child safe right away and then obtain a court order. Due to shelter-in-place or similar restrictions across the state, many courts have switched to video conference or other teleconference services instead of in-person court hearings.

How can I participate in court if the courthouse is physically shut down?

You should always participate in your court hearings and your caseworker or the court will still send you a legal notice or call you about any upcoming court hearings. Even though a court may not be holding in-person hearings, court is still in session and most, if not all, courts will allow you to participate by video conference. Talk to your caseworker or attorney, if you have one, about alternate ways that the court will allow you to attend your court hearings.

What kind of contact should I expect from my caseworker?

While it may not be safe for you and your caseworker to have face-to-face visits right now, your caseworker is available by phone, text, and email. Caseworkers have phones with FaceTime and other communication apps that will allow you to video chat and there may be other options as well. At a minimum, you will discuss your case with your caseworker once a month. In some cases, your caseworker may still need to visit your home, but this may not always mean physically coming into the home. Every situation is unique and a communication plan will be developed based on your unique circumstances and available communication resources.

What do I do about completing services during the pandemic?

DFPS understands the extraordinary difficulty COVID-19 places on parents who are working towards completion of services and making positive changes in behaviors that will keep children safe. We understand that service providers may have reduced their hours of operation or even closed. In some cases, a provider may have telehealth services, which will allow you to continue to work with a provider through electronic means. Also, we recognize that public transportation may not be available or a safe option for you. In an effort to continue to overcome the challenges that COVID-19 has presented, your caseworker will work with you to come up with solutions together. This may include bringing together any of your family and friends who create your support network to help with problem solving and thinking about alternatives. It is important during this time to stay in close contact with your caseworker and let them know of any challenges you are experiencing so that they can assist you.

How do COVID-19 precautions change visitation with my child?

To ensure the safety of public health, in-person visitations may be limited or changed to other methods of visiting with your child. DFPS will follow any court orders as it relates to visitation. DFPS recognizes that visitation is critical to timely reunification and wants to ensure you still have opportunities to show your love for your child and share experiences. Visitation also allows you to demonstrate your parenting skills. Talk to your caseworker about other ways of connecting with your child. This might mean having video conferences with your child through FaceTime or Skype, or telephone calls more often. You can also write letters or send cards through your caseworkers.

Many courts have issued special orders regarding visitation and many of these have been posted to the Children's Commission webpage at

<http://texaschildrenscommission.gov/reports-and-resources/covid-19-resources-related-to-cps-cases/>

What happens to my court case if I can't complete a service because the service provider is unavailable or closed because of COVID-19?

Judges also understand how difficult it can be to complete services when COVID-19 poses a threat to public health. Be sure to continue to make attempts wherever and however possible to complete services and communicate any challenges you are experiencing with your caseworker.

Many Judges are making or modifying court orders and service plan requirements to account for any issues related to COVID-19 that would make it impossible or impractical to access services. Talk to your attorney and caseworker about any modifications that can be made to your plan.

What if I am experiencing economic hardship because of the COVID-19 pandemic?

DFPS understands that the entire nation is experiencing economic and other hardships right now. We know that housing and income may be affected. We encourage you to reach out to your community and family supports. Talk to your caseworker about your worries. They are well versed in community resources and will be able to help direct you to available resources in your area.

I have a relative that I want my child placed with. Can DFPS still place my child with a relative?

DFPS remains committed to placing children with relatives and fictive kin (close family friends) whenever it is safe to do so. We can still explore options for relative placement with you. Provide contact information to your caseworker for any relatives or fictive kin who are interested in placement. A home study can still be completed, though it may take longer than usual.

I want to have a Family Group Conference. Is this still possible?

Yes. However, this will not be an in-person meeting. Family Group Conferences can be held by teleconference, and, in some cases, they can be held by video conference (such as Zoom or FaceTime). If you want to have a Family Group Conference, request one from your caseworker who will work to get it set up with you and your family.

How do I sign my Family Plan of Service if we can't meet in person?

DFPS can allow different methods of signing documents during the pandemic that don't require you to have the original copy of your Family Plan at the meeting in which it is developed. There are multiple options available such as email or post service-delivered mail. Contact your caseworker to explore options that are available to you. A copy with all the signatures can still be mailed to you after everyone has signed it.

How is my child being educated if schools are closed?

Even though children are not attending school in-person, most are still receiving some level of instruction from their teachers. For example, some schools can do classroom instruction by video conference and some are sending packets of educational materials to the students. Check with your caseworker to see how your child is being educated during this time.

What is my child doing during the shelter-in-place order?

Foster parents and other placements have been provided with many resources they can access to help provide children with activities and entertainment while they are sheltering-in-place at their foster homes. These range from the educational type to support learning, to arts & crafts.

Who can I contact if I am not able to get in touch with my caseworker?

Because we are all facing challenges from COVID-19, your caseworker may become ill or have to take leave to care for a loved one unexpectedly. If this occurs, rest assured, another caseworker will be assigned to work with you. If you are ever unable to make contact with your caseworker after a few attempts, reach out to their supervisor for assistance.

What other supports or resources are available to me?

A Parent's Guide to Foster Care

Some of the FAQ responses in this COVID-19 FAQ were adapted from *A Parent's Guide to Foster Care*, that is available to everyone on the DFPS website:

https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Foster_Care/Parents_Guide.asp.

Be aware that COVID-19 has changed many aspects of standard practice, but the information in *A Parent's Guide to Foster Care* is an excellent starting point for learning about foster care.

The Family Helpline

The Texas Legal Services Center runs the Family Helpline to help parents with DFPS legal issues. Lawyers give callers live, one-on-one support.

These lawyers have DFPS case experience. They give callers legal information and teach them about legal topics. They explain the DFPS process to callers in language that is concrete and easy to understand. They give parents referrals to local resources that help children, families, and the community.

However, the lawyers on the Family Helpline cannot give legal advice. They are not your lawyer and do not represent you.

The Family Helpline is normally available Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Its phone number is 844-888-6565. Due to COVID-19, this availability may change.

Go to [TexasLawHelp.org](https://www.texaslawhelp.org) for more information about the Family Helpline.

The Parent Resource Guide

The Texas Children's Commission has developed a document called the *Parent Resource Guide*. It helps parents understand:

- The Texas child welfare system.
- Parents' roles and responsibilities in a DFPS case.
- The roles and responsibilities of others.

The *Parent Resource Guide* is available in print and online, in English and Spanish. Go to the *Parent Resource Guide* page of the Texas Children's Commission website (<http://parentresourceguide.texaschildrenscommission.gov/>) to view the guide online or download a print-friendly version.