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Governor Tony Evers  
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Division of Safety and Permanence

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## DCF Order #8 – Foster Family Letter

Thursday, March 19, 2020

Dear Foster Parent,

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) is committed to supporting the children and families in our communities while continuing to ensure their ongoing health and safety. The Child Welfare system is an essential community service for some of our most vulnerable residents and families who are struggling to safely care for their children. Your role in our system cannot be understated.

The circumstances of COVID-19 are constantly evolving and recommendations will change in the coming days and weeks. DCF has launched a [COVID-19 website](#) that includes extensive information which is updated regularly. The following Q&A is based on the information we have available at this time, and we hope you will find it useful.

### **What is COVID-19?**

The following information can be found on the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) [COVID-19 website](#). COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a novel (new) virus that has been spreading worldwide. The DHS is in the process of monitoring COVID-19, providing guidance on testing with local and federal partners, and providing guidance and resources to prevent, detect and respond to the occurrence of COVID-19 cases in Wisconsin.

The main way COVID-19 is spread to others is when an infected person coughs or sneezes. This is similar to how influenza is spread. The virus can also spread when someone touches an object with the virus on it. If that person touches their mouth, face, or eyes the virus can make them sick.

People who have confirmed COVID-19 infections have a range of symptoms. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) believes that symptoms of COVID-19 may appear in as few as two days or as long as 14 days after contact with someone who has COVID-19. Symptoms can include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath

### **Who should be most cautious?**

Those considered “high-risk” include people who are older adults, and anyone with underlying health conditions or a weakened immune system. We recognize that some of you may fall into a high-risk category and will need to exercise additional caution to reduce exposure to others, including visitors in your home or regularly scheduled appointments for your foster child(ren). You can learn more about what precautionary steps you can take if you are in a high risk category on the [CDC's website](#) regarding high risk groups.

## How does COVID-19 impact children?

Based on available evidence, children do not appear to be at higher risk for COVID-19 than adults. While some children and infants have been sick with COVID-19, adults make up most of the known cases to date. Additional information on COVID-19 and children can be found on the [CDC's FAQ regarding children](#).

## What should I do if I think my foster child or someone in my household is sick and I am worried it may be COVID-19?

Contact your healthcare provider immediately to discuss symptoms and next steps. DHS and the CDC have established conditions when screening for possible COVID-19 diagnoses:

- Sick with fever (higher than 100.3°F) or newly developed respiratory illness such as cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat;
- Recent international travel (i.e. within the past 14 days) from [COVID-19 affected geographic areas](#); and/or
- Close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days.

*If you or someone in your family is exhibiting these symptoms, please contact your personal healthcare provider **immediately**. They will provide you with further guidance, including information about getting tested as necessary.*

As a reminder, Ch. DCF 56.06 Admin. Code requires foster parents to *immediately* report all serious incidents to the supervising and licensing agencies. This includes serious illnesses or injuries that require services of a licensed medical professional under [Ch. DCF 56.06\(1\)\(b\) Admin. Code](#). Following receipt of this information from a foster parent, the licensing agency is required by [Ch. DCF 56.16\(1\)\(k\) Admin. Code](#) to notify the placing agency of any serious incident.

In general, when someone in your household is sick, you can take these precautionary measures in addition to talking with your healthcare provider:

- Keep the sick person in a separate, well-ventilated room and apart from other people and pets as much as possible;
- If a separate space is not available, keeping a distance of at least six feet from people who are well;
- A sick person who is coughing or sneezing should wear a mask when around other people, if the sick person cannot wear a mask, the caregiver should wear a mask;
- Clean the bathroom at least every day using a household disinfectant according to the directions on the label - wear gloves while cleaning;
- Provide the sick person with a separate bathroom if available and a trash bag within reach;
- Limit activities outside the home until the sick person is feeling well for at least one day;
- Limit outside visitors.

## How does COVID-19 impact my ability to make Reasonable and Prudent Parenting decisions?

As a foster parent, you will continue to make decisions for children placed in your home using the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard (RPPS), even if you, or child(ren) in your home, are quarantined as a result of COVID-19. This standard allows foster parents to make reasonable and prudent parenting decisions, which encourage normalcy for children in their home. Under RPPS, a foster parent would carefully come to a decision about the best interests of the child, taking into consideration the level of maturity of the child, as well as the child's cognitive, emotional, physical, and behavioral capacities. It will also be important to consider any executive orders from the Governor in making parenting decisions. Remember, decisions made using RPPS *cannot* violate existing court orders and decisions related to visitation, therapy, or other related schedules for the child. While family interaction may be impacted due to COVID-19 related concerns, you should seek guidance from your licensing

agencies regarding ways to maintain connection with parents and siblings. During this public health emergency, families are encouraged to connect via technology when in person contact is not possible. More frequent contact with families and siblings may be helpful to help children through this uncertain time. In addition, decisions made using RPPS may not undermine any existing laws applicable to other areas, such as the law relating to medical or educational decision-making. The child's parent and/or guardian generally retains the right to make medical and educational decisions for their child, unless a court has ordered otherwise, or the parent or guardian has delegated his or her powers to another person.

Due to COVID-19 concerns, regular well-child physicals and dental exams can be delayed in order to ensure your continued health and safety, and to prioritize the emergent needs of individuals impacted by the COVID-19 public health emergency. These exams should be re-scheduled as soon as it is safe to do so. In addition, while the child's parent and/or guardian generally retains the right to make medical decisions for their child, foster parents are permitted to seek emergency care for a child placed in their home, including in instances where a child may have been medically impacted by COVID-19. If you have other questions about the Reasonable and Prudent Parent Standard, you should talk with your licensing agency.

**What do I do if I cannot locate childcare for a child placed in my home while schools are closed?**

If you are unable to locate child care for a child placed in your home, you should work with your licensing agency or the agency that placed the child in your home to help you locate childcare or seek an exception to the childcare requirements under Ch. DCF 56 Administrative Code, which are the foster home licensing requirements. If you need financial support for any childcare arrangement, please contact your licensing agency or the agency that placed the child in your home.

**What should I do if I have other questions about my foster child?**

We recommend reaching out to your child's caseworker, your licensing worker, and/or their supervisor(s) if you have questions specific to the care of the child in your home.

**What should I do to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19?**

Limit and screen visitors to your home and exercise caution when taking children to regularly scheduled appointments:

- As a foster parent, you will likely have caseworkers and other service providers coming to your home and appointments scheduled in the community for your foster children. To reduce the likelihood of spreading COVID-19, we recommend limiting the number of visitors to your home and using alternative communication methods for appointments, like FaceTime or Skype, whenever possible. We are encouraging staff to utilize these communication methods when appropriate, as well. You may want to offer visits outdoors as a preventative measure, where appropriate, to limit the people in your home, understanding that there are times when a caseworker will still need to enter your home.

**How is DCF supporting local agencies as they continue to provide child welfare services during the COVID-19 public health emergency?**

DCF is providing guidance to agencies regarding state statutes, rules and standards, specific to how those requirements should be prioritized during the pandemic. These guidance documents can be found on the DCF [COVID-19 website](#) and will be regularly updated as the pandemic continues.

**Additional reminders and recommendations for you to consider:**

Be sure to practice universal precautions and good daily hygiene:

- Wash your hands often and with soap and water for at least 20 second, especially:
  - After using the bathroom;
  - Before eating;
  - After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; and
  - Upon entering and exiting your home.
- If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Cover a cough or sneeze with a tissue, and immediately dispose of the tissue.
- Don't touch your eyes, nose, or mouth without first carefully washing your hands.
- Properly clean all frequently touched surfaces on a regular basis using everyday cleaning products.
- Avoid sharing dishes, drinking glasses, eating utensils, and towels.
- Wash dirty dishes in a dishwasher or, if by hand, with warm water and soap.
- Laundry can be washed in a standard washing machine with warm water.
- In order to avoid germs, do not shake dirty laundry or "hug" dirty laundry to your chest to carry it.

Avoid unnecessary out-of-state or international travel and avoid large gatherings or crowds.

- Limit out-of-state travel and international travel.
- Do not host or attend gatherings, avoid crowds and observe social distancing (keeping a minimum distance of 6 feet between yourself and others).

Develop an Emergency Preparedness Plan for your household:

- Keep an adequate supply of water, food, and pet food in your home. If you or your family members take prescription drugs, contact your healthcare provider, pharmacist, or insurance provider about keeping an emergency supply at home. If you need assistance in obtaining medication for your foster child, contact your child's caseworker or supervisor. They may be able to assist.
- Develop backup plans in the event that all primary caregivers in your home become ill. Talk to your licensing worker if you are concerned about childcare.
- Review and update your emergency contact list of family members, friends, neighbors, healthcare providers, teachers, employers, and others.
- Keep a working thermometer and analgesics (ibuprofen, acetaminophen) on hand.
- Learn about the preparedness plans for your children's childcare facilities.
- Ask about your employers' preparedness plans, including sick-leave policies and remote work options.

We understand that this can be an uncertain and often scary time both for children in your home and for you as caregivers. There are many resources available to talk with children about COVID-19 and the impacts of the pandemic on their everyday life. A few of those resources are:

- PBS Wisconsin – [How to Talk to Your Kids about Coronavirus](#)
- The Autism Educator – [Coronavirus Social Story](#)
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network – [Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with the Coronavirus Disease in 2019](#)

It is also important to ensure that children in your care continue to have access to and connection with individuals that are important to them. Individuals that may be important would include the child's parents, their siblings, extended relatives, and/or friends from the community. While this contact may not be able to occur face-to-face due to concerns with the child and family's health and safety, contact via letters, phone calls, FaceTime/Skype and other interactive mediums are an appropriate alternative for maintaining these important connections.

As we continue through the COVID-19 public health emergency together, remember to keep in touch with your licensing caseworker and any caseworkers for children placed in your home. DCF will regularly update the guidance and recommendations located on the [COVID-19 website](#) as new information is received. If you have any questions or concerns regarding DCF's response to this public health emergency, feel free to send them to the DCF COVID-19 mailbox: [DCFMBCOVID19@wisconsin.gov](mailto:DCFMBCOVID19@wisconsin.gov).