

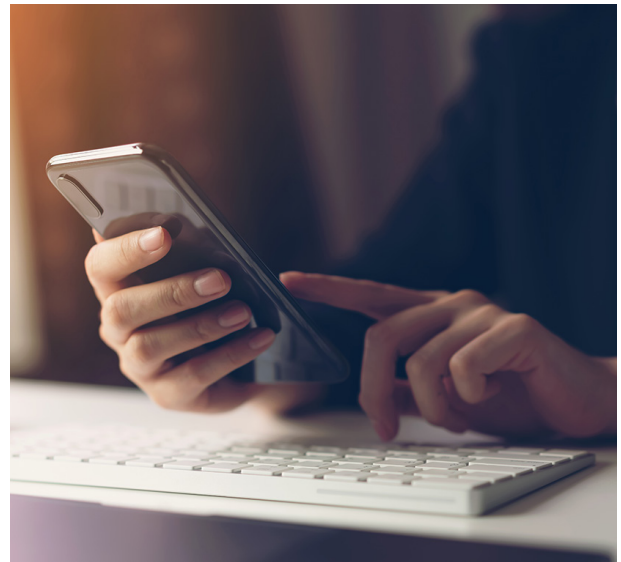
Child Welfare Safety Assessment and Planning During COVID-19 and Physical Distancing

In the current, unprecedented circumstances, child welfare practitioners continue the essential work of partnering with families and communities to ensure child safety.

This document describes ideas from the NCCD Children's Research Center (CRC) for how to conduct safety assessment and planning under current conditions. It should not take the place of local guidance or policy for how to respond to this public health crisis. Instead, we hope it sparks ideas and thoughts for you and your own practice.

Step 1: Prepare to Meet

- Be clear about policy: Know your local, state, county, or agency policy and guidance for contact during this time. Many jurisdictions have followed the [federal guidelines](#) allowing states to suspend in-person visits for ongoing work but are continuing to require in-person investigations.
- Use COVID-19 health screening questions: Many states have developed COVID-19 [screening questions](#). Make sure you follow your locally prescribed steps before making in-person contact.
- Narrow the focus and consider how to safely gather the information you need: Define the key purpose of your meeting. What questions will you need to ask and assess? Given those questions, can the meeting occur outdoors with appropriate physical distancing? Can it occur through phone or video conferencing?



- Consider creative uses of technology: For example, if an assessment of the physical conditions of a home is needed, could that be done by passing a phone or tablet into the home and having family members walk around and show you the home virtually, then cleaning the device on return? Can a conference call with a family network suffice to bring that network together for a family meeting?

Step 2: Connect With the Family

Orient the Family, Especially Children

- Before going out, make sure the family and the children understand the purpose of your visit and that you will, if possible, talk outside with appropriate physical distancing.

- If you will be wearing personal protective equipment, like a mask or face shield, explain why you have this safety gear on to help calm children's fears.

Provide COVID-19 Resources

Come to your visits with printed [CDC updates](#), [resources for caregivers](#), [resources for children](#), and information on [managing life at home during social isolation](#).

Discuss Coping During Social Isolation

With Caregivers

Use solution-focused questions to help families recognize the steps they have already taken and to think through other ways of caring for themselves and others. For example:

- Maintaining this isolation and dealing with having everyone home is not easy. How have you managed thus far?
- What have you most appreciated about yourself during this time? What have your children most appreciated about you?
- People in a crisis often look to examples in their family and culture for how others have dealt with a crisis. Have people in your family had to face crises before? What did they do?
- What's one thing you have done with your children, and one thing your children have done, since this crisis started that you are proud of?
- If you could pick one thing that you have started to make things a little better, but perhaps not done as much or as often as you'd like, what would it be? What kind of difference would it make to do more of it?

With Children

- Make sure you see children, either virtually or directly, as your jurisdiction has decided. If you are doing video conferencing, consider [best practices in working with children remotely](#).



- Ask children what they understand about the current situation and what questions they have. Ask caregivers if you can share resources with the children. Examples can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- Consider aids for engaging children like the [Three Houses](#) or [Safety House](#). Both of these are wonderful tools for engaging children and can be done remotely if needed.
- Perhaps most importantly, increase the overall visibility of the children. Find someone in the family's safety or support network who can connect with the child every day, either by phone or virtually. Until you find someone, make sure you are in contact with the family and child daily if you have concerns.

Step 3: Use the Safety Assessment to Guide Critical Thinking

As you establish or re-establish connection during this time, you can proceed to more critical thinking and assessment activities. If this is an investigation and your agency uses the Structured Decision Making® (SDM) safety assessment, use that to help structure your activities. Even if your state or agency does not use SDM® assessments, the questions below are likely to be relevant in your investigation.

During Your Interview

1. Consider the “Child Vulnerabilities” section of the safety assessment. Make sure you are also considering the lack of visibility or oversight of the child due to physical distancing as a “vulnerability” at this time. Any child with significant vulnerabilities could be in greater danger, so pay particular attention to these families.
2. Ensure you know the safety threats or danger indicators most important to ask about to triage your questions. Use that section of the assessment to develop your questions in advance.
3. If you are unable for any reason to see the inside of the household, make sure to ask questions about it, e.g., are there any exposed wires in the home? Are utilities like heat and water functioning? Is there sufficient food?
4. Learn about how the family is responding to any identified threats or dangers by asking about protective actions and capacities. Suggested questions include the following.



5. Has a threat or danger like this ever happened before? How did the family cope then? What did they do to keep the child safe?
6. What steps are adults in the home already taking to keep children safe and protected?
7. Are there adults not involved in the allegation who live in the home? Make time to meet with them either in person or remotely to get their perspective and engage them in enhancing safety in the home.

Domestic Violence, Substance Abuse, and Mental Health

In a situation like a quarantine, perpetrators of domestic violence may take advantage of the reduced control their partners have to leave or seek help. Meet with family members separately and ask about patterns of controlling behavior if you suspect or know of abuse. Visit [Safe and Together](#) for more information.

Caregivers who struggle with substance disorders may cope by using substances to “numb out” pain, fear, and grief during this time. Ask about [substance use](#) and its impact on children. Let caregivers know that many 12-step programs are [now online](#).

Similarly, caregivers who struggle with mental health disorders may find symptoms exacerbated by social isolation and/or may be struggling to maintain proper treatment or medication. Ask if they are getting what they need and what steps they are taking for [self-care](#).

Step 4: Collaborative Planning and Networks

If you identify a threat or a danger on an SDM safety assessment, you will need to develop a safety plan or initiate legal action. Even if there is no active threat, you may want to develop and document some action steps to keep the children safe if a threat were to come up in the future.

Identify network members and/or collateral contacts.

- Ask the family who in their life they have been in touch with by phone or videoconference. Every safety plan needs additional participants, particularly adults not involved in the allegation (“no network, no plan”).
- Are there cousins, grandparents, or friends of the family who they are talking with via phone, video, or social media? Similarly, are there therapists, teachers, or other adults the children are talking with regularly?
- Develop a list of network members and collateral contacts to engage during the assessment and planning process. Reach out via phone or video.

Create the safety plan.

- Remember, a safety plan is a set of action steps, not services. For each action step, be sure to ask and document:
 1. Who in the family
 2. Will do what new behavior
 3. And by when?
 4. How will everyone in the plan know it is occurring?
- Consider creative ways to engage or develop plans with network members when they cannot come to the home (phone, video conferencing, meeting outside while following social distance expectations, etc.).
- If child has access to a cell phone, can they participate themselves? Could they report out daily on how the plan is going?
- Ask “what if” questions: If this part of the plan breaks down, what will happen then?
- Document the plan in a way everyone participating can see and understand it. Mail, email, or text the plan.



If you have identified a threat and are unable to plan around it, follow your current agency, county, or state guidance on next steps for removing children safely from their current home and initiating court proceedings.

Step 5: After the Meeting

- Make sure everyone who cares about the child and is participating in the plan gets a copy of the plan and your notes.
- Regularly contact the child and caregivers. Make sure they know how to contact you.
- Update your supervisor and case management system promptly with contact information of the people you have talked with, current status, next meeting, etc.

We face an unprecedented situation, yet social workers regularly rise to meet challenges in difficult circumstances on behalf of the children and families we serve. CRC is here to support you in this important work—thank you!