



STRATEGY BRIEF

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

What are child protection agencies learning about supporting virtual engagement with children and families as well as staff?

The COVID-19 pandemic required child protection agencies to [pivot quickly](#), identify new ways of working with children and families, and seize on opportunities for innovation that previously seemed impossible. Agency leaders leveraged opportunities for virtual engagement to maintain connection and support the well-being of children and families, and to attend to the needs of their staff so they could deliver services effectively during such a difficult stretch of time. A desire exists among families, agency staff, and other stakeholders to carry forward many of the strategies that supported effective virtual engagement during the pandemic. This brief shares lessons learned and key considerations offered by parents, caseworkers, supervisors, administrators, and resource caregivers, including both foster and relative caregivers, for incorporating virtual engagement into practice in ways that best support children and families.¹



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Engaging families

Supplementing in-person family time

In the first few months of the pandemic, parents and their children in out-of-home care who were used to having regular in-person visits experienced loss and disruption of that special time. Some agencies were able to safely maintain in-person family time, and then build on what they were learning about virtual engagement to supplement it with virtual family time, thereby enhancing the amount of family connection within a given month.

Faced with an urgency to do things differently,

Wisconsin's Division of Safety and Permanency

quickly learned how to overcome some of the challenges with virtual visits, particularly around privacy and security. Leadership found that engaging children and families about their needs and preferences should guide decision-making about the best ways for each family to experience [meaningful and frequent contact](#), with virtual visits used to supplement — not replace — in-person visits whenever possible.

By planning with families, caseworkers were able to address barriers to both in-person and virtual contact, and develop an approach to family time that supported enhanced connection and timely reunification. For example, older youth expressed that touching base with their parents through texting and video phone calls felt natural; on the other hand, younger children had difficulty bonding and meaningfully interacting with parents through virtual platforms. Further, some youth

with special needs also had challenges when asked to visit virtually.

In some instances, adding virtual contact between siblings, outside of family time, was helpful in maintaining relationships when siblings could not live together. Resource caregivers also were engaged in supporting virtual family time, as their flexibility and assistance are key to the success of virtual visits. Caseworkers helped resource caregivers who did not typically facilitate family time prior to the pandemic to understand the importance of frequent contact between children and their parents, both virtual and in-person.

Supplementing caseworker visits

The logistical benefits of virtual caseworker visits are evident. Since travel isn't required, virtual visits allow caseworkers to cover a much larger geographic area and be more flexible on meeting times. These benefits also translate into additional opportunities for supportive connection with families. For example, Casey Family Programs, which offers direct services to children and families through our community-based offices in five states, provided more families with coaching, post-permanency supports, and caregiver support groups virtually than when providing these services in-person. In **Marathon County, Wis.**, caseworker visits were increased from one in-person visit per month prior to COVID to three to four virtual visits per month during the pandemic, to better engage and support families.

Certainly we had always believed before (the pandemic) that in-person was just the gold standard and there was nothing else. Now we're learning that virtual can be successful and we're looking at how we continue to include virtual visits as a supplement moving forward.

— MARY HAVICK,

DEPUTY DIVISION DIRECTOR OF CHILD WELFARE, GEORGIA DIVISION OF FAMILY & CHILDREN SERVICES

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Of course, in-person engagement is recommended, whenever possible, to set the stage for strong relationships between children, families, and caseworkers. Agency guidance can help caseworkers understand how best to use the initial in-person contact so that future contacts, information gathering, and assessments may occur virtually when appropriate.² It is also important to use initial visits to assess the parent or child's comfort with virtual technology and, if needed, provide training and support if virtual contact is going to be added on a monthly basis.³ Not all families have adequate technology or are comfortable using it for virtual contacts. This [digital divide](#) can be addressed through partnerships and financial support of community providers that can provide resources that families need to connect, such as laptops, cell phones, and Internet access.

In addition to caseworker visits, opportunities for other forms of [virtual interaction](#) may also benefit families. A parent in **Idaho** expressed her belief that reunification with her son was expedited as a result of the virtual coaching sessions she received from the child's resource caregiver. Direct services staff from **Casey Family Programs** reported positive experiences with virtual family group conferences, especially when engaging parents or relatives living in other states and countries, since everyone was participating in an equal setting, as opposed to situations where some are meeting in person but others are participating via

PARENTS AND CASEWORKERS ENGAGED WITH CHILDREN ON VIRTUAL PLATFORMS IN A NUMBER OF WAYS, INCLUDING:

- Playing games
- Singing
- Dancing
- Reading books
- Coloring pictures
- Touring child's room and house
- Meeting pets
- Using puppets and stuffed animals to communicate
- Using virtual backgrounds and filters as conversation starters

phone. While some children and parents may find it challenging to fully engage in a virtual meeting, for others, the ability to engage from their own space can be invaluable.

Some of the benefits of using virtual technology with families may include:

[One benefit for families is] being able to log on from the comfort of their own couch or rocking chair, or from their kitchen with their coffee. For many people, their home provides a sense of safety, well-being, and comfort. This is a huge value-add to family members' participation in family group conferences and other family meetings because they're on their own turf and not walking into a big intimidating office building where they've never been before.

— LAUREL SHURLOW,
SOCIAL WORKER, CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS

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- Allowing for increased frequency of contact.
- Decreasing the burden on resource caregivers when hosting caseworkers in their homes.
- Increasing access to service providers and community supports that are farther away.
- Building comfort with technology that can be transferred to other situations (school, work, connections with other family members, and engaging with community groups).
- Helping parents who are incarcerated have more meaningful interaction with children and caseworkers through virtual platforms rather than simply relying on telephone contact.

Decisions about what contacts should be virtual or in-person must be made using clinical judgment and in collaboration with the family. Although reducing the number of in-person contacts may ease caseworker workload, it is important to assess virtual casework practice based on what is best for families. For example, perhaps a better option might be to limit travel for other aspects of casework (such as going to court), so that caseworkers can focus on maximizing their time for in-person contacts with families. Ultimately, leadership in **Dane County, Wis.**, recommended a hybrid model going forward, where weekly virtual coaching or caregiver check-ins are supplemented by monthly in-person contacts.

Expediting reunification

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, most courts shut down completely or were open only for emergency filings, which did not include permanency hearings. This meant that progress toward permanency stalled for many families. In **New York City**, reunifications dropped by 47% from February 2020 to April 2020.

The New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) sought to figure out how to achieve timely reunifications within this new restrictive environment. ACS attorneys worked with provider agencies to identify cases where they could agree on the next steps, put together a stipulated agreement,

and submit it for court approval without the need for a hearing. ACS looked at the data and focused on: families where children already were having unsupervised visits with their parents and were ready to move to a trial discharge; and families that already were on a trial discharge and could move to final discharge. For this to work, caseworkers had to change their approach to permanency planning. In the new model, teams connected virtually and made decisions in real time. By utilizing stipulated agreements, the number of reunifications each month increased by more than 58% by July 2020, and had more than doubled one year after the beginning of the pandemic. Going forward, attorneys and caseworkers agree that they want to continue with proactive case reviews to achieve permanency as quickly as possible outside of court hearings.

In **Dane County, Wis.**, leadership used electronic records to look at cases that were close to reunification to see whether they required a specified number of home visits before finalizing reunification. Leadership relied on their staff's professional judgment and the relationships they had built with the parents, virtually and in-person, to recommend reunification. As these reunifications appear to be stable, county leadership is looking at ways to continue this process after the pandemic. As one leader stated, "Just because you think a certain number of visits is needed before reunifying, or the court orders it, doesn't make it true."

Addressing resource inequities

Addressing historical and institutional racism is an imperative for all child protection agencies, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic intensified disparities for many communities.⁴ For child protection agencies, it was particularly important to identify and address whether innovations were implemented equitably. Leadership in **Dane County, Wis.**, recognized that communities had unequal access to virtual resources. The county provided Wi-Fi hot spots so that parents could access telehealth appointments, as well as phone cards so they would not need to use their personal resources to connect with service providers. Some employment sectors were hit harder than others, so the agency

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used COVID-relief funds to support families that had lost jobs, including paying for items such as cell phones and laptops so that families could stay engaged with services.

Equipping caseworkers and other agency staff

Finding efficiencies through telework

Prior to the pandemic, social workers in **Dane County, Wis.**, had all the equipment they needed to telework (such as laptops and Wi-Fi hot spots), while other agency staff did not. The agency was able to advocate for a budget approval to upgrade everyone's technology to ensure equitable tools for the entire workforce. The **Wisconsin Division of Safety and Permanency** also found benefits to leveraging virtual technology for training staff and licensing new foster parents, especially in rural counties. Similarly, in **New York City**, ACS attorneys provided virtual trainings for caseworkers, which allowed them to reach up to 600 staff members at a time and share information directly with caseworkers, rather than through managers and supervisors.

Post-pandemic, effective teleworking models include flexible schedules for staff and mutual agreements between caseworkers and supervisors.⁵ Moving forward, agency leaders recommended providing a hybrid working environment that includes technological efficiencies such as the ability to electronically file documents with community partners. Agency social workers expressed that the time they save by not commuting to the office for meetings has allowed for more time to engage children and families. Telework also supports the well-being of the workforce. As one caseworker stated, "It helps my personal health and well-being to do a 7 p.m. visit and then be able to eat dinner with my own family afterward, rather than getting home at 10 p.m., having not seen my kids or eaten dinner. I never thought this would be possible and now I see that it is."

BUILDING A CULTURE OF CONNECTEDNESS IN MARATHON COUNTY, WIS.

Agency leadership in Marathon County, Wis., believe that listening to employees is key to building a culture of connectedness, which they believe supports retention and staff well-being, which can then support improved service to families. Every year, the county director meets with each employee individually, and managers and supervisors also meet with their staff members regularly to discuss individual and team wellness.

In addition, an annual survey helps leadership understand what contributes to a positive organizational culture and identify areas of improvement. In the August 2020 survey, 88% of staff said that they were working from home at the level that they wanted to, indicating a preference for a hybrid schedule of working from home and at the office. Many employees also felt that their team's strong culture of connectedness was weakened during the pandemic, contributing to the particular stressors that many child protection staff experienced. Staff recommendations for building connectedness included virtual coffee breaks, adding connection time to meetings, and adding on team building meetings.

Strengthening teams and staff wellness

In addition to efficiencies, working in a virtual environment requires teams to be more intentional about connecting. In **Wisconsin**, the state provided county staff with a virtual learning community where they could exchange ideas, and many supervisors created additional opportunities for caseworkers to brainstorm with one another and provide support. **New York City ACS** focused on worker wellness throughout the pandemic, offering staff services such as mental health support groups and workshops on working with people who have COVID-19, addressing grief and loss, and using a vision board. Stephanie Wilson, ACS

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executive director of the Office of Permanency Practice Consultation, said this attention to staff wellness “makes you want to work. It makes you want to give your full effort when you know that the agency you work for cares for you and what you’re going through, as well as the families.”

The same was true in **Oregon**, where helping leaders and supervisors understand the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue and burnout, particularly in a virtual environment, was essential. Virtual critical incident stress debriefings were instituted to give staff an opportunity to connect. Aprille Flint-Gerner, child welfare deputy director of Equity, Training, and Workforce Development, said: “The number of virtual debriefings has gone through the roof. People are looking for opportunities to slow down and reflect.”

Expanding internal communications and community collaboration

Within the child protection agency, regular and transparent communication is imperative to ensuring that staff understand and can act on the latest information. Communication strategies that were adopted during the crisis can also be effective beyond the pandemic. **Franklin County, Ohio**, began hosting virtual town halls to communicate with all staff. Leadership in **New York City** relied on

frequent, structured communication to help staff feel connected with the agency, even while working remotely. Communication strategies developed during the pandemic included a daily “moment of inspiration” at 9 a.m. and opportunities for peer-to-peer connections, including “Race, Diversity, and Inclusion Reflective Practice” sessions. ACS also increased internal communication with staff through emails and videos, many from the commissioner, and held virtual events to show appreciation for staff. In addition, the process of working together with provider agencies on the stipulated agreements helped to build stronger relationships between ACS and its partners, along with a common understanding of what information is needed to move a case forward. ACS legal staff used webinars to train provider agency caseworkers and supervisors on how to prepare for virtual court hearings, and additional efficiencies were developed that included electronically signing and filing documents. In New York City and elsewhere, courts are considering continuing [virtual hearings](#) for some families in order to increase engagement and accessibility.

Maintaining and building connections with community partners during the pandemic required agency leadership to find new ways to come together. In **Wisconsin**, rather than full-day in-person regional meetings once every other month, the state now hosts monthly two-hour virtual discussions. While the ability



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to network with colleagues is impacted, the virtual meetings have allowed for increased engagement and representation from tribal nations and rural partners. In **Marathon County**, school staff reached out to social workers to ask how they could partner together to support students' well-being through the challenges of online schooling. These connections were integral for identifying and providing virtual supports to students.

Looking ahead

A recent U.S. Government Accountability Office [study](#) found that many child welfare agencies hope to continue providing virtual services and strengthening stakeholder partnerships. Going forward, ongoing conversations with families, staff,

and community stakeholders will be needed to determine what is working and how to build on innovations implemented during the pandemic to better serve children and families. Questions for exploration may include:

- What did we learn — and what surprised us — about virtual engagement during the pandemic?
- What data can help us understand the impacts of virtual engagement on outcomes for children and families, especially impacts on disparities in the system?
- How do we continue to foster innovation and have the courage to try new things that may not look like what we always have done?

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 Information in this brief was gathered through communication with the following sources: Wendy Henderson, Administrator, Wisconsin Division of Safety and Permanence, on Oct. 2, 2020; Martha Stacker, Division Administrator, Dane County (Wis.) Division of Children, Youth, and Families, on Dec. 7, 2020; Vicki Tylka, Director, and Craig Sankey, Supervisor, Marathon County (Wis.) Department of Social Services, on Jan. 12, 2021; Ina Mendez, Associate Commissioner, Office of Strategic Program and Support, Division of Family Permanency Services, Nancy Thomson, Associate Commissioner, Division of Family Court Legal Services, Stephanie Wilson, Executive Director, Office of Permanency Practice Consultation, New York City Administration for Children's Services, on Feb. 24, 2021; Michelle Bass, Casey Family Programs Family Developer, Kelly Jimenez, Parent, and Renee Cummings, Resource Caregiver, on March 19, 2021; Jessica Cardenas, Resource Caregiver, on March 22, 2021; and Saeed Hasemi, Social Worker, Kim Gleim, Family Engagement Liaison, Maria Nuno, Family Engagement Liaison, Laurel Shurlow, Social Worker, Michelle Bass, Family Developer, Lorena Abenojar, Social Worker, Robin Strominger, Social Worker, Nikia Johnson, Family Engagement Liaison, Terri Aguilera-Flemming, Social Worker, Casey Family Programs, on March 23, 2021.
- 2 Example of COVID-19 practice guidance from Wisconsin: <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/press/2020/covid/practice-guidance-virtual-assessment.pdf>
- 3 Additional considerations and evidence-informed practices to support child welfare workers in using technology with families: <https://ncwwi.org/index.php/supporting-the-virtual-workforce-session-6>
- 4 More information on disparities associated with COVID-19: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/index.html
- 5 Explore research on telework at the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development website: www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/telework

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