

Enhanced Visitation Model: Foster Care

A safe, compassionate and engaging visitation model during COVID-19

AFS has been creating safe and permanent connections
for foster youth and families since

1978



ALTERNATIVE
FAMILY SERVICES

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PROBLEM STATEMENT

One of the strongest predictors of successful reunification between a biological parent and their child in foster care is their frequency of visitation sessions. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations charged with facilitating family visitations initially cancelled or severely restricted services due to risk factors and fears including:

- **Foster parents** fear that their foster children and other family members in their household could be exposed to COVID-19 due to family visitation.
- **Foster children** not having the impulse control to maintain adequate physical distancing and safe hygiene practices during traditional visitation sessions.
- **Biological parents** not having the social or emotional skills needed to adhere to safe physical distancing.
- **Visitation staff** fear they will be unable to create a safe, contagion free visitation experience.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Biological families involved in the foster care system are often distrustful of how resources are allocated, and rules are applied. COVID has drastically interfered with the visitation process creating an environment of fear and added restrictions. Even as government and private agencies have begun to reinstitute face-to-face visitation, it is clear that as the pandemic ebbs and flows, some families need to practice social distancing or utilize virtual technology during visitation in order to minimize contagion exposure and reduce staff, foster parent and bio-parent fears.

When restrictions are placed upon parents' right to visit their child, it is imperative that the process be transparent and equitable. It is important to minimize the potential for re-traumatization of clients and families by avoiding unrealistic or arbitrary restrictions, procedures, and rules. The visitation experience must be positive encourage healthy interactions while providing a safe environment for all parties. It is the service provider's challenge to develop safe, creative visitation environments that address the obstacles posed by COVID while meeting the needs of all participants involved in the visitation process.

SOLUTION: ENHANCED VISITATION

AFS' Enhanced Visitation Model (EVM) is our attempt to create a comprehensive framework that addresses the obstacles posed by COVID while encouraging healthy, active visits for all families in need of visitation services. Our Enhanced Visitation Model includes the following four elements:

1. **Health Risk Assessment**
2. **Visit Service Plan**
3. **Enhanced Visitation Venues**
4. **Inspiration**

1. **Health Risk Assessment Tool: Wellness Questionnaire** (Appendix A: The Wellness Questionnaire)

The "Wellness Questionnaire" is a simple, rapid, non-threatening assessment tool that busy staff can administer to clients and families with confidence. The Wellness Questionnaire determines the levels of COVID-19 risk factors each visit participant has been exposed to within the 14 days prior to the visit. AFS staff can easily administer and evaluate the twelve-question assessment tool to all visit participants (clients, staff, foster and biological parents) before each in-person family session.

2. **Visitation Service Plan** (Appendix B: The Visitation Service Plan)

The "Visitation Service Plan" is a simple, flexible, and predominately check-box/circle based, tool that seamlessly incorporates the risk factors identified in the "Wellness Questionnaire" assigning families to one of three visitation service levels according to COVID risk level:

- **Community-based (Low Risk):** local government, community mandated precautions only (masks, handwashing, appropriate hygiene precautions)

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- **Social Distance Enhanced (Moderate Risk):** physical distanced “Enhanced Visitation Venues” required
- **Virtual Visitation (High Risk):** virtual visitation only

The Visitation Service Plan allows staff to apply the same criteria for all families thus creating an understandable, transparent, and equitable process for bio-parents, clients, and foster families. Examples of risk factors that determine the level of service plan include:

- high levels of community contagion
- identified exposure
- immune compromised members within the bio and foster environment

3. Enhanced Visitation Venues

AFS staff have created easy-to-create visitation venues that are fun, affordable, replicable, and portable. These interactive stations have protocols in place so parents and their children can interact in a safe manner. This includes a virtual venue for when remote visitation is necessary. While many parents can safely visit their children at the **Community-based** level of visitation, some biological and foster families may be assessed to be at higher risk and therefore assigned to either a **Social Distance Enhanced** or **Virtual Visitation** venues. While a few of the “Enhanced Visitation Venues” listed below involve more costly technology, most of them can be easily constructed with inexpensive supplies that can be purchased online or at a local hardware store. Enhanced Visitation Venues are designed to allow families to visit in a stimulating, entertaining and collaborative venue where physical distancing requirements are less evident and naturally easy to adhere to.

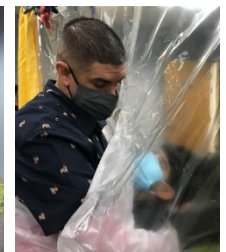
a. Enhanced Visitation Venues: Indoors

- **Activity Table:** A plexiglass divider sits on a table with parents on one side and child(ren) on the other. Participants can paint outlines of each other, play Tic-Tac-Toe, or jointly create drawings with dry-erase markers.



- **Interactive Puppet Theater:** Kids and parents make easy-to-construct sock puppets to safely “perform” in the Interactive Puppet Theater that is designed with a table, clamps, and plexiglass with precut holes modified with rubber shields. AFS organized one-hour sock puppet workshops for staff so they can teach clients how to construct their own puppets for this playful encounter.

- **Hugging Station:** Parents and children put on arm length disposable gloves before reaching through sleeves attached to a transparent plastic curtain to safely hug during the pandemic. The hugging station can easily be decontaminated after each use. The Hugging Station is profoundly impactful and often results in parents shedding tears of joy from the opportunity to embrace their child.



- **Large screen TVs and gaming systems** allow parents and children to play video games while naturally sitting or standing together at a safe distance from each other allowing social distancing requirements to recede as visitation supervision issues.

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The Visitation Room: We have found that when these first three stations plus the large screen video gaming are used together to create an Enhanced, Socially Distanced Visitation Room, parents and children are not only excited, but appreciative. They enter the visitation room and break into large, inquisitive smiles and are excited by the colorful staging and want to try out each of the venues. The issue of social distancing recedes into the background as participants experience these playful, interactive venues reducing staff need to intervene around social distancing. Families can easily spend one to two hours utilizing these venues.



b. Enhanced Visitation Venues: Outdoors

Evidence has demonstrated that outdoor activities are inherently safer than being indoors in reducing virus transmission. Walks in a park or frolicking on a play structure are great opportunities but are not always safe or accessible for families. To control the environment to mitigate virus exposure, AFS staff created multiple Enhanced Visitation Venues outdoors that involve activities where physical distancing is a natural or necessary part of the activity including:

- **Commercial Grade Bounce Houses** (one for older children, one for younger children): Bounce houses allow children to play while parents watch thru the structure's windows during visits. Bounce houses can be set-up in a cordoned off area of a parking lot, grassy area or even indoors. Children jump one at a time and the house is sterilized after each use. Organizations should confirm with their insurance companies that bounce houses are covered for use.
- **Gymnastic Mats or Artificial Grass:** Large mats or artificial grass pads (8'x8'x or larger) provide a soft surface for young children to crawl, play or tumble on while their parents watch, laugh, and talk from chairs around the perimeter. Surfaces are sterilized between uses. AFS uses the Clorox 360 Electrostatic Sprayers to disinfect surfaces. These devices are effective and easy to use however, they are expensive. Using an approved disinfectant may be a more viable option for some organizations.
- **Large Outdoor Games and Toys:** The only limitation here is imagination. There are almost an infinite number of games and toys that kids and parents of all ages can play and build together during visits while maintaining the appropriate social distance. AFS has purchased bicycles, tricycles, basketball hoops, and large Jenga Blocks all of which allow collaborative interaction. Riding bikes, shooting basketball, playing HORSE, or building large scale wooden block structures are examples of engaging activities in this outdoor venue.

Virtual Visitation

Families operating under quarantine restrictions even for short periods of time should be encouraged to maintain contact. Telephone and Zoom meetings while accessible to most families are difficult for younger children and frustrating for many others. We have found larger format venues to visit virtually is more accessible and rewarding for many families. Large screen communication opportunities at the

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agency coupled with agency provided laptop and tablet technologies improves the virtual visitation experience as families work through short-term quarantine restrictions.

Large screen conference room communication system: allow clients, staff, and parents to connect remotely on a large screen system.

Galaxy tablets and laptops: give client families and foster families without the technology resources access to remote visitation services.

4. Inspiration

We hope the Enhanced Visitation Model not only inspires families to visit, laugh, and play, but Inspires visitation service providers to create venues that embody a deep respect for families and honor the importance of family visitation even as COVID restrictions remain in place. The COVID pandemic has created a fear driven environment that has led to restrictions surrounding visitation. Once AFS decided to look beyond the fear we found a myriad of ways to easily expand visitation opportunities for our families. The examples in our Enhanced Visitation Model are intended to inspire organizations to not only replicate but expand the opportunities for safe, creative visitation experiences for all families needing such services.

Performance Quality Improvements (PQIs)

Since the beginning of the pandemic, AFS staff felt it was imperative that family visits continue so they can achieve reunification. This has not been easy but overtime we have piloted and adapted our service delivery so families and staff can remain safe while working towards the goal of reunification. AFS continues to:

a. Identify and mitigate risk factors and obstacles associated with the Enhanced Visitation Model.

- Keeping up with and adhering to changing county requirements. This requires regular monitoring of individual county restrictions and making sure AFS is compliant with those regulations.
- Answering questions and quelling individual fears over providing in-person visitation. AFS clients and families know that their safety is our highest priority. COVID-19 has raised new fears and anxieties that staff have had to learn to alleviate. The Wellness Questionnaire and Visitation Service plan are two examples of tools created to help mitigate these fears.

b. Identify and record data and measure outcomes.

- Qualitative Data
 - Family feedback: AFS staff have and continue to incorporate verbal and written feedback from foster and biological families. Thus far, feedback has been overwhelmingly positive regarding the Enhanced Visitation Model.
- Quantitative Data
 - AFS will compare visitation and reunification outcome data from before COVID-19 restrictions to data collected once the Enhanced Visitation Model was implemented. This will allow us to see how COVID-19 has impacted our service numbers and if there are additional measures we can take to improve outcomes.

A video is worth a hundred pictures.

Please [click here](#) to watch a brief video of “Enhanced Visit Venues”