

# LESSONS LEARNED DURING COVID-19: WELL-BEING *as a* PATHWAY to SAFETY *in* CHILD PROTECTION

---

Engagement with children and families dramatically changed under necessary COVID-19 related constraints. Practice demands shifted from “*When* am I going to be able to see children and families” to “*How* am I going to see children and families?” With that came an avalanche of secondary questions and new challenges, including, and perhaps most importantly – **how do we assess and ensure safety and well-being in the context of a global pandemic?**

This tip sheet provides some valuable lessons learned about addressing safety and well-being during the height of the pandemic. These lessons illuminate ways for the field to continue to promote trauma-informed strategies centered on helping families, and to support psychological first aid practices when serving families in crisis or during traumatic events. Utilizing such strategies while working collaboratively with families can help children and caregivers experience not only a sense of support, but also reinforced agency, perspective-taking, planning, and prioritization.

While all children and families have had to endure the health, social, and economic impacts of the

global COVID outbreak, there are families who experience more burden and hardship than others. Such added stressors, on top of the disproportionate burdens and adversities that some families were already facing pre-COVID, can negatively impact the family environment as well as the well-being of children and their caregivers.

**For these children and families, redeployment of child welfare resources and a re-imagining of child protection practice, services, and community partnerships can lead to more pathways to safety and well-being during times of heightened constraints, increased burden, and daily struggle.** Offering more intentional prevention services and supports is an essential strategy that can boost emotional health, reduce harmful coping, and decrease conflict in the home. This guide offers the following prevention strategies to be used where domestic violence is of concern:

- Assess stress and burden and work to reduce it
- Reduce distress and strengthen connections
- Promote skills for short- and long-term coping

## LESSONS LEARNED DURING COVID-19: WELL-BEING *as* a PATHWAY to SAFETY in CHILD PROTECTION

---

### ASSESS STRESS AND BURDEN AND WORK TO REDUCE IT

Whenever possible, identify those families at the highest risk for trauma exposure. Check-in regularly to **assess their stress levels and inquire about their needs**. Aim to problem-solve with families and build their confidence and competence in navigating the stressors that burden them.

#### 1. *Ask about their well-being FIRST.*

How are you holding up? What do you need? Is anyone symptomatic? Can we help you plan for what to do if someone gets sick?

#### 2. *Collaborate around caregivers' employment vulnerabilities.*

Are you able to work? What are your work options? Do you need child care?

#### 3. *Problem-solve basic needs.*

Identify and help the family access resources based on the identified needs (e.g., food vouchers, information about free food banks in the area); explore whether they have been able to pay their utility bills, rent, etc.; offer to troubleshoot or help with navigating school requirements.

4. *Foster confidence and agency by normalizing children and families' feelings or worries and encourage their help-seeking* – Remind children and their families that we are all having a hard time right now. Let them know everyone experiences sadness, loneliness, irritability, worry, etc. Use this as a springboard to identify what services they have, need, and how the services they have in place have shifted. Offer help navigating and troubleshooting barriers to consistent and meaningful use of services.

Aim to avoid engaging these conversations as check-ins. Instead, design them to be collaborative problem-solving sessions and treat them as ways to connect, i.e., show children and families they are not on their own or forgotten. Always leave them with important telehealth service numbers (e.g., virtual AA/NA meetings, 24/7 crisis hotline numbers, suicide risk, parenting crisis numbers, Domestic Violence crisis lines, etc.).

## LESSONS LEARNED DURING COVID-19: WELL-BEING *as* a PATHWAY to SAFETY in CHILD PROTECTION

---

5. *After you ask about children and families' well-being, normalize their feelings, and encourage their help-seeking – explore their strengths and point out or build their resilience.* How are you able to cope with all of this stress and burden? What keeps you strong, patient, and optimistic? What do you find helpful to build your resilience, patience, and inner strength? Do you need help managing use of alcohol? Are you finding yourself short on patience? Brainstorm coping strategies that work for them: Play a video game together, take a break, call a friend, etc. Take a harm reduction approach and avoid shaming and blaming.

6. *Treat disclosures as a request for non-judgmental help and understanding.* Resist the inclination to see disclosures **solely** as signs of risk or danger. Praise caregivers' help-seeking and outreach efforts and recognize their steps to problem-solving!

### REDUCE DISTRESS AND STRENGTHEN CONNECTIONS

Children and families involved with child welfare often face chronic adversity like racism and severe hardships like poverty, food insecurity, and inadequate housing. Stay-in-place

requirements have caused even more problems (e.g., job loss, minimal access to social and community supports, mounting bills or debt, etc.) — challenges which will likely impact many families long-term. These problems can increase feelings of isolation, rejection, shame, and other types of pain, and can lead to maladaptive coping, like excessive alcohol or drug use and abusive or violent behaviors.

1. Create a sense of safety by emphasizing help versus monitoring (for examples, see “Assess stress and burden and work to reduce it” above).
2. Show and build trust and reinforce self-efficacy by giving caregivers a choice in modifying or re-prioritizing action and service plans. Also, aim to decrease the burden and stress families experience when modifying or re-prioritizing action or service plans.
3. Make social connections to family, friends, spiritual communities, and service providers easier by advocating for or providing resources for stronger internet bandwidth, increased data usage, etc.<sup>1</sup>
4. Promote hope through reassurance, flexibility, collaborative problem solving, and stress relief (see “Promote skills for short- and long-term coping” below).

## LESSONS LEARNED DURING COVID-19: WELL-BEING *as* a PATHWAY to SAFETY in CHILD PROTECTION

---

### PROMOTE SKILLS FOR SHORT- AND LONG-TERM COPING<sup>2</sup>

1. During virtual or in-person check-ins, strengthen problem-solving skills by helping adults and children with perspective taking, planning, and shifting priorities; and help adults and children grow and learn from mistakes.
  - Coach parents and children to think about each other’s experiences and points of view.
  - Ask parents and children to explain the reasoning behind their views, statements, and decisions. Encourage them to share their needs and expectations with each other.
  - Problem-solve with parents and children so they can shift gears, plans, or ideas when things are not working or unfolding as they want or planned.
  - Help parents and children divide goals, demands from others, or tasks into smaller steps and make checklists to get through them one at a time.
  - Reassure parents and children when things go wrong. Create time to

work with them to learn and discover what went wrong and think together about how to do better or where to get more help and support.

2. Brainstorm positive activities. For example:
  - Write stories, draw, read, or listen to music and dance together
  - Play card games
  - Tell each other jokes or sing karaoke
  - Look for bargains at a thrift stop
  - Have a movie marathon with popcorn
  - Go for a walk, jump rope, or race; play tag or hide and seek
  - Have dessert before dinner
3. Help caregivers and children manage negative feelings and daily stress by:
  - Validating the family’s hardships.
  - Pointing out their efforts and hard work.

## LESSONS LEARNED DURING COVID-19: WELL-BEING *as* a PATHWAY to SAFETY in CHILD PROTECTION

---

4. Help parents and caregivers learn how to identify and strengthen their own resilience and explain that this can have positive impacts on
  - how we think, feel, act, and learn,
  - how we get along with others, and
  - our health.
  
5. Share with parents and youth strategies they can practice to reduce the negative impacts of stress and trauma exposure on themselves (e.g., self-doubt) or with each other (e.g., disagreements, disappointments, fighting). For example:
  - Take space
  - Do a body scan
  - Practice patience
  - Remember their love for one another in the heat of a moment – call forward their best self
  
6. Encourage positive thinking.
  
7. Offer crisis help to all: Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a Crisis Counselor.

---

1. Many companies are opening up their WiFi hotspots to everyone for free.

- Comcast is making all Xfinity hotspots available for free. To see if there's an Xfinity WiFi hotspot near you, visit [here](#).
- Cox wireless hotspots are free to the public. Find your nearest one [here](#).
- Spectrum is also making all their wifi hotspots available for free. To find one, visit [here](#).

You may qualify for two months of free Internet:

- Comcast: [Internet Essentials Program](#)

- Cox: [Connect2Compete](#)

- Spectrum: [Remote Education Credit](#)

If you live in California, are enrolled in school (middle school, high school, or college), and are a current or former foster youth, iFoster may be able to help you with a smartphone, hotspot, or computer to access your classes. Register [here](#) for free to get help. If you live outside of California, they may be able to help too.

2. Children eight and up can also practice these skills.




---

Advancing an Adult & Child Survivor-Centered Approach

Funded through the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Grant #90CA1850-01. The content of this document does not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the US Department of Health and Human Services.