



## **Preparing Babies, Toddlers, and Preschoolers for In-Person Visitation**



As the Maryland Department of Human Services Social Services Administration (DHS/SSA) begins the process of resuming in-person contact effective March 15, 2021, one of our highest priorities is to ensure that children and parents are supported in re-establishing their connection during in-person visits. This includes reducing stress, minimizing the impact of the visit procedures established to protect the health and safety of visit participants, and focusing on ways to support positive parent-child relationships.

With these considerations in mind, DHS/SSA has put together some tips for parents, resource parents, and staff supervising visits to assist in preparing young children as they participate in in-person family visits.

### **Preparing Young Children**

Young children are likely to have varied reactions to seeing their parent(s) wearing a face covering (as required during in-person visitation). Some may not recognize their parent(s) and others may express confusion or fear. This is understandable and expected, but it's also stressful for young children and their parents. Parents should always follow their child's cues as they build a sense of trust and reconnection with their parent who is wearing a face covering. Remember that young children are impressionable and will pick up the cues on the emotions that adults feel and express about situations - if you are calm and happy it will aid your child to understand that the face covering is nothing to be concerned about.

Parents and resource parents should work together to prepare young children through video conferencing visits before the in-person visits resume. During these video visits, parents can show their children what they look like with and without their face covering. At the same time resource parents and/or staff supervising visits can remind the child, "That's mommy!" or "That's daddy!" It may be helpful to take the face covering on and off multiple times during the video visit. Remember that young children gain control through mastery!

For older toddlers and preschoolers who are better able to comprehend the situation, explain to them that there are some "bad germs" out in the world right now and it's important to protect ourselves and each other by wearing a face covering. Just like with younger children, the parent can show them what they look like with and without wearing a face covering, including showing them how to put it on and take it off. This will also serve to encourage children over the age of 2 to use their own face covering.





### **Emphasizing Connection**

Connecting with a child takes patience and diligence. It is important for parents, resource parents, and visit staff to understand a child's developmental responses to separations and reunions. The child may appear nervous and unfamiliar with the parent, may not want to separate from the resource parent or staff supervising the visit, and may be fussy or withdrawn. Parents, resource parents, and other visit participants should work together to understand what the child might be communicating through their behavior, particularly because they may not have the words to express their feelings.

Keep in mind that one size does not fit all when it comes to feelings and emotions. Each child is different and may have a different reaction. What seems to work best for one child may not work for other children. Each family situation is unique, and parents and resource parents should consider what they can do to ensure the visit is successful. The child will experience less confusion and disruption when the adults work together to meet his or her needs.

### **Resource Parents**

Remember that resource parents play a critical role in supporting healthy connections between children and their parents. This is particularly true for very young children who do not yet have the words to communicate their needs. Whenever possible, resource parents should be involved in visits, as well as remain in communication with parents between visits to minimize the impact of the separation and transition back to in-person family visits. Resource parents can offer parents updates about their child, guidance on interacting with the child, and emotional support. Remember that the child will benefit from any information or insight you can offer to the parents. The more the parents understand how to best comfort and support their child, the better the child's experience in the visit is likely to be.

### **Important Questions to Consider**

- How has the child responded to telephone and/or video visits?
- What support might you or the child need to prepare for the visit?
- What can the adults do to minimize the impact of health and safety-related protocols on children?
- Would it be helpful to have a discussion with the caseworker regarding expectations and the plan for the visits?

**Remember that the local department staff are available to offer assistance and support to prepare for in- person family visits.**

