



*The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Department of Children and Families
600 Washington Street, 6th Floor
Boston, MA 02111*

Tel.: 617-748-2000 Fax: 617-261-7435

www.mass.gov/dcf

CHARLES D. BAKER
Governor

KARYN E. POLITO
Lieutenant Governor

MARYLOU SUDDERS
Secretary

LINDA S. SPEARS
Commissioner

March 17th, 2020

Dear Foster Parent,

Over the past several days, we have seen our state and federal government take unprecedented measures to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The Department of Children and Families is a child protection agency and we remain committed to the safety of our children, families and foster/kin caregivers as we all learn to manage the challenges of this new virus. As a foster parent and valued partner in our work, we deeply care about the health and well-being of you and your family. We will ensure you have as much up-to-date information as possible about the Commonwealth's response and how it impacts your role as foster parent.

The Executive Branch and every secretariat in the Commonwealth is actively working to mitigate the spread of COVID 19 and to address the evolving public health concerns. We are fortunate to have DCF Medical Director Dr. Linda Sagor and her team consulting with staff as questions arise.

We are also coordinating efforts with our sister agencies whose operations overlap with ours to ensure consistency of protocols we are following all guidance provided by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) relative to COVID-19.

The circumstances of COVID-19 are evolving and recommendations will change in the coming days and weeks. DPH has launched a website that includes extensive information and is a "source of truth" at [mass.gov/covid19](https://www.mass.gov/covid19), which is updated daily. The following Q&A is based on the information we have available to us at this time and I hope you will find it useful.

Background

What is Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and how does it spread?

- COVID-19 is a respiratory virus. Current symptoms have included mild to severe respiratory illness with fever cough, and difficulty breathing.
- According to CDC, the virus is spread mainly from person-to-person, between people who are in close contact with each other (within about 6 feet).
- Spread is from respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

Who should be most cautious?

Those considered "high risk" include people who are older adults, and anyone with underlying health conditions or a weakened immune system. We recognize that some of you may fall into a high risk category and that we will need to exercise additional caution to reduce exposure to others, including visitors in your home or regularly scheduled appointments for your foster child(ren). You can learn more about what precautionary steps you can take if you are in a high risk category on the CDC's website [here](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/).

How does COVID-19 impact children?

Based on available evidence, children do not appear to be at higher risk for COVID-19 than adults. While some children and infants have been sick with COVID-19, adults make up most of the known cases to date. Additional information on COVID-19 and Children can be found [here](#).

What should I do if I think my foster child or someone in my household is sick and I am worried it may be COVID-19?

Contact your healthcare provider immediately to discuss symptoms and next steps. The Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control have established the conditions when screening for the possibility of COVID-19.

- Sick with fever (Higher than 100.3 °F) or newly developed respiratory illness such as cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat
- Recent international travel (i.e., within the past 14 days) from [COVID-19-affected geographic areas](#)
- Close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days

If you or someone in your family is exhibiting these symptoms, please contact your or your foster child's personal healthcare provider immediately. They will provide you with further guidance including getting tested. If you do not have access to a healthcare provider contact, you can call 2-1-1, a 24-hour state-supported telephone hotline.

As a general rule of thumb, when someone in your household is sick, you can take these precautionary measures in addition to talking with your healthcare provider:

- Keeping the sick person in a separate, well-ventilated room and apart from other people and pets as much as possible.
- If a separate space is not available, keeping a distance of at least six feet from people who are well.
- A sick person who is coughing or sneezing should wear a mask when around other people. If the sick person cannot wear a mask, the caregiver should wear a mask. The bathroom should be cleaned every day using a household disinfectant according to the directions on the label. Wear gloves while cleaning.
- Providing the sick person with a separate bathroom if available and a trash bag within reach.
- Limiting activities outside the home until the sick person is feeling well for at least one day.
- Limiting outside visitors.

What should I do if I have questions about my foster child, including questions about visitation or childcare?

We recommend reaching out to your child's social worker, your family resource social worker or their supervisors if you have questions about visits or child care. If you are not able to reach them, you can also speak with their manager. During business hours, you can call the main area office number and ask to speak with any of these individuals.

The Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Child (MSPCC) offers an after-hours telephone Helpline that provides assistance to foster, kinship and pre-adoptive families when DCF offices are closed. **For the next three weeks the Helpline will be operating 24-hours a day in order to provide additional, immediate support to foster families. The number is (800) 486-3730.** The Helpline is staffed by social workers experienced in foster care issues. They can provide telephone support to help resolve non-emergency situations and provide information and resources.

What should Foster/Kin Caregivers be doing to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19?

Limit and screen visitors to your home and exercise caution when taking children to regularly scheduled appointments:

As a foster parent, you likely have social workers and service providers coming to your home and appointments scheduled in the community for your foster children. To reduce the likelihood of spreading COVID-19, we recommend limiting the number of visitors to your home and using alternative communication methods for appointments, like FaceTime or WebEx whenever possible. We are encouraging our staff to utilize these communication methods as well in their work with children and families.

We have also directed our staff to call in advance of home visits to screen household members for any of the conditions below and encourage you to do the same with any visitors to your home, whether they are your family, friends, or a provider for your foster child(ren).

- Are you or anyone in your household sick with fever (Higher than 100.3 °F) or newly developed respiratory illness such as cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat?
- Have you traveled internationally (i.e., within the past 14 days) to a [COVID-19-affected geographic area?](#)
- Have you had close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days?

What is the Department of Children and Families doing to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19?

DCF is following all directives put in place by Governor Baker and adopting the following precautionary measures for the foreseeable future:

- Discontinuing foreign and out of state work-related travel for our employees. We are encouraging foster/kin caregivers to do the same.
- Postponing all statewide events and meetings and encouraging smaller meetings to occur by conference call or WebEx. As a foster parent, this means foster parent support groups, foster care reviews and other meetings will likely occur by phone or WebEx.
- Employees feeling sick with fever or flu symptoms are being told not come into work.
- Ensuring our offices, including visitation rooms, are cleaned frequently including high touch-point areas.
- Utilizing technology like WebEx and FaceTime in place of in person home visits when possible.
- Implementing screening questions employees should ask before making home visits. We encourage foster parents to do same before having visitors (including us) come to your home.

Practice universal precautions and good daily hygiene

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially:
 - After going to the bathroom;
 - Before eating;
 - After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; and
 - Upon entering and exiting your home.
- If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Cover a cough or sneeze with a tissue and dispose of tissue.
- Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth without first carefully washing your hands.
- Properly clean all frequently touched surfaces on a regular basis using everyday cleaning products.
- Avoid sharing dishes, drinking glasses, eating utensils, or towels.
- Wash dirty dishes in a dishwasher or, if by hand, with warm water and soap.
- Laundry can be washed in a standard washing machine with warm water.
- In order to avoid germs, do not shake dirty laundry or "hug" dirty laundry to your chest to carry it.

Avoid unnecessary out of state or international travel and avoid large gatherings or crowds.

- Limit out of state travel and international travel.

- Do not host or attend gatherings, avoid crowds and observe social distancing i.e., keep a minimum distance of 6 feet from others.

Develop an Emergency Preparedness Plan for your household

- Keep an adequate supply of water, food, and pet food in your home. If you or your family members take prescription drugs, contact your health care provider, pharmacist, or insurance provider about keeping an emergency supply at home. If you need assistance in obtaining medication for your foster child contact your child's ongoing social worker or supervisor. They will be able to connect you with the DCF Medical Team, who can provide further assistance.
- Talk to caregivers about backup plans in the event a primary caregiver becomes ill or schools or childcare close. Talk to your family resource worker if you are concerned about childcare.
- Create an emergency contact list of family members, friends, neighbors, health care providers, teachers, employers, and others.
- Keep a working thermometer and analgesics (ibuprofen, acetaminophen) on hand.
- Learn about the preparedness plans of your children's childcare facilities, schools, and/or colleges.
- Plan for childcare should schools temporarily close.
- Ask about your employers' preparedness plans, including sick-leave policies and telework options.

Are there resources to assist me in talking to my foster child(ren) about COVID-19?

When children and youth watch news on TV about an infectious disease outbreak, read about it in the news, or overhear others discussing it, they can feel scared, confused, or anxious—as much as adults. As adults, we may be more capable of managing these feelings, yet our children may be less equipped. Even though you may be concerned yourself about this coronavirus, it is important to model calmness. Children are keenly aware of their parents' behaviors and often mirror them. Here are two helpful resources on talking to children about COVID-19:

[Talking with Children About Coronavirus Disease: Messages for parents, school staff and others working with children](#)

[Talking with Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)