

Tips for Supervising Family Services Staff Who Are Working Remotely



Supervisors can use these tips to support family services staff and other direct service professionals who are teleworking¹ with families. They can be applied during public health emergencies, natural disasters, and other crisis situations.

As a supervisor, you may use these tips and strategies to:

- Support and update program plans for family partnerships
- Guide your work with staff to address any immediate concerns about or changes to families' situations in line with program policies and the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS)

For more information, see **Tips for Family Services Staff Working Remotely with Families and Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement** on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

What supervisory responsibilities are most important during telework situations?

Supervisors of family services staff have a wide range of roles and responsibilities, which differ across settings. Supervisory activities are based on staff and family needs, organizational resources, geography, community contexts, and agency priorities.

Certain supervisory responsibilities may be especially important during public health emergencies, natural disasters, and other situations that require telework.

Leadership

- Set the vision for crisis responsiveness.
- Provide feedback loops for family services staff, including opportunities to identify and address service provision resources and barriers.

Staff Development

- Share information about Head Start services, child and adult development, family support resources, and strategies for staff working with families.
- Offer instruction on transitions from in-person to virtual service provision.
- Provide resources for Head Start families and staff who are sick or are taking care of someone who is sick.

Support and Advocacy

- Ensure, as much as possible, that staff feel cared about and supported in their work.
- Consider and anticipate staff needs, including access to proper equipment and resources so they can appropriately meet the needs of the families they serve.

Services Accountability

- Maintain program integrity by making sure staff can deliver and document high-quality family engagement services using virtual approaches.
- Determine appropriate caseloads in consultation with staff.

¹According to the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, "the term 'telework' or 'teleworking' refers to a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee's position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work." See: <https://www.opm.gov/faqs/topic/pandemic/index.aspx>

Tip 1. Communicate frequently and regularly.

During a time of crisis, it is important for you to communicate consistently with family services staff.

What do staff need to have or know to accomplish their jobs for the day or week?

- Check in with staff to address any concerns they may have about equipment and resources (e.g., phones, computers, tablets, chargers, batteries, internet access, Wi-Fi hotspots, printers, faxes, scanners). Make sure staff know how to use the equipment and who to contact for training or issues.
- Schedule regular opportunities for individual and group meetings with staff. Use phone calls or videoconferencing platforms (e.g., Adobe Connect, Google Meet, Skype, WebEx, Zoom). When possible, allow staff to use platforms that are most accessible or comfortable for them.
- Offer office hours. Invite staff to call you with questions and for support. Schedule these conversations in addition to regular supervision times and staff meetings. You also might consider having more frequent supervision meetings to ensure you are staying on top of the day-to-day issues staff are facing.
- Set realistic expectations for what staff can accomplish when working remotely during a crisis situation.
- Create communication templates for staff to use with families and partners. Templates can be made for email messages, memos, and meeting notes. Staff can use them to communicate clear and consistent messages to families and partners. They can also tailor templates to families' unique needs and interests.

Tip 2. Help staff set up and maintain a consistent routine.

Schedules can provide a sense of stability for staff working remotely. Having a daily schedule can help staff complete their work, set boundaries, and create a balance between work and their personal lives.

How can you help staff establish routines that are predictable, productive, and consistent for themselves and for families?

- Work with staff to create schedules that allow flexibility to address families' and staff needs. Staff can block off times during the day to complete specific tasks, like case management, family outreach, and community engagement.
- Encourage staff to use an online calendar or daily planner to keep track of day-to-day activities. You and staff can review this tool together.
- Help staff adapt their working hours to fit other responsibilities they may now have. Examples include caregiving for children or family members, addressing health needs, and homeschooling their children. Staff may need to work unconventional hours, if possible.
- Encourage staff to leave unstructured time in their schedules to attend to emergency situations or plan for future work.

Tip 3. Prioritize conversations around families' basic needs and biggest stressors.

Staff can partner with families to address their basic needs to help decrease parental stress. This is a critical support for many families during crisis situations.

How can you support staff to decrease family stress?

- Ask staff to regularly check in with families about how they are doing. Help staff determine ways to provide support to address a family's most immediate stressors and concerns. Work with all staff on using strengths-based attitudes and relationship-based practices to strengthen and build relationships with families through remote connections.
- Ensure staff have the information they need to help families protect themselves and their children during the crisis. Make sure staff know how to help a family member who is experiencing symptoms related to a public health emergency. Staff should also be prepared to help families plan alternatives for child care.
- Work with staff to develop family plans that include referrals for trained health or mental health professionals in the event families need more support than staff can provide.
- Support staff to lead virtual parenting curriculum groups, parent cafés, or parent meetings to help parents stay connected to other families and staff. Ensure direct service staff have contact information for other staff, including coaches or mental health consultants.

Explore **Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices**. It's part of the **Building Partnerships with Families Series** on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

- Ensure staff have the information they need to help families access food, parenting support, healthcare, and mental health services. Share information, tip sheets, and checklists in families' home languages. Consider assigning one staff person the task of finding information about local resources, including 24-hour hotlines and emergency shelters.
- Plan for a consistent response that would be appropriate for any family in the event of concerns related to substance misuse, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, or other safety-related issues. Ensure staff and families have access to a program point person or service facilitator and know program protocols.

Tip 4. Use case conferencing to help staff anticipate and address family needs and strengths.

Case conferencing can bring staff and partners together to collaborate around families' needs and strengths.

How can you help staff use case conferences to partner with families now and in the future?

- Train and encourage staff to use case conferences to review family strengths, needs assessments, and partnership plans.
- Help staff prioritize families who may have very immediate health, safety, or well-being needs. Make plans with staff to address any immediate concerns about child abuse or neglect or domestic violence in line with program policies and the HSPPS.
- Identify community partnerships or agencies that can help address ongoing or newly emerging family needs. These may be related to job supports, unemployment, housing assistance, legal assistance, grief counseling, or mental health supports.
- Ensure staff follow program protocols for using and storing confidential data and maintaining confidentiality. Consider ways to transfer records using scanning, secure portals, password-protected emails, or secure document-sharing applications like DocuSign. Ensure staff have access to the information and tools needed to help families access resources. Ensure families can securely review and sign necessary records and documents.

Tip 5. Focus on staff mental health and encourage self-care.

Family services staff may be dealing with stress and feelings related to the crisis, as well as their own personal and family responsibilities and challenges. They need your support.

How can you support staff wellness?

- Begin each meeting or conversation by asking about staff wellness. Acknowledge that the emergency or crisis situation is challenging for everyone, although sometimes in different ways. The effects may be short- or long-term. Individuals will have different challenges and responses.
- Ask staff how they are feeling and doing. Ask about their physical and emotional health. Ask how things are going for their families. Listen and offer empathic care and reflection.
- Ask staff about strategies they are using to manage their stress. Ask about their social network and who they can talk to for support. Keep in mind that social (physical) distancing does not mean social isolation.
- Reflect on how staff's cultural perspectives may affect how they cope. Think about your relationships and what you know already about the staff with whom you work.
- Encourage staff to take time to focus on self-care. Communicate the message that staff should set reasonable expectations and be kind to themselves.
- Find out how staff prefer to be contacted. Consider using phone calls, text messages, or videoconferences, when possible. Consider sending group messages with voice and video recordings. Using technology that allows you to see each other may be helpful for providing a frame of reference for how staff are coping.
- Talk with staff about meeting with the mental health consultant or other professionals in the community about any mental health concerns.

Disclaimer: The information in this guide should not be considered an endorsement of any particular tool or the use of such tools in general.



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