



IASW

Irish Association of Social Workers
Cumann na hÉireann um Oibríthe Sóisialta

Mr. Gerard Brophy
Chief Social Worker
Tusla – Child & Family Agency
Brunel Building,
Heuston South Quarter,
Dublin 8

2 June 2020

Re. Family contact and access during the Covid-19 Emergency

Dear Gerard,

The IASW is asking for clarity around family contact and access for children in foster and residential care. We commend Tusla for the huge efforts made in March giving guidance to social workers around the initial stages of access planning, and to coordinate and collaborate with families to ensure that technical options were safe and respected the privacy and protection of the children in their care, and to help families understand that where in person visits are not possible, online alternatives are available.

We are aware that Tusla have launched a plan for easing up restrictions and gradually moving towards less restrictive access arrangements. As the restrictions are gradually lifted the IASW is asking Tusla to expand on the existing guidance and focus on children's individual experience and holistic psycho-social needs, as well as obvious risk assessment regarding Covid-19 for all participants in access.

It is the perspective of the IASW that the purpose of family visits and contact is for children to have a positive relationship with their birth family. Given the changes in how children are having contact with their family, the IASW is concerned how this has been understood and experienced by children. It is largely accepted that using screens to communicate is difficult for younger children, and so the question arises as to whether this is meeting the needs of children in their relationships with their families.

The IASW is aware of cases where this form of contact has been difficult and even stressful for children. Individual social workers have taken innovative approaches to address this, however, there does not appear to be a system in Tusla to share these experiences agency-wide or collaborate to offer a suite of options for social workers to consider. Given busy caseloads and staffing difficulties, some social workers are not able to give the time and consideration they feel they need to this, and so the consideration, evaluation and communication of the various modes of contact that can be considered would be very valuable to them and the children they work with.

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The IASW is suggesting that the following would be helpful in relation to access for all children in their care:

- An evaluation for each child outlining the purpose of family contact for them and considering whether the current arrangements are meeting this for the individual child.
- Outlining how contact and the impact on children can be assessed in these circumstances, particularly if the social worker or access worker are not present on the call.
- Offering a suite of options outside of video calls; video messages, photos, letters, drawings, letter/scrapbooks from foster carers, etc.
- Seeking collaboration and input from social workers around the country on the various approaches they have used and evaluating how these worked and why.

In addition, the IASW is concerned about the quality of sibling contact at this time, again given the limitations of screens in terms of children's ability to communicate. As above, an evaluation of how each child's needs can be met and a suite of play based/ child friendly options to facilitate this would be helpful such as games, quizzes, gifts, letters, and photo exchanges.

Covid-19 provides Tusla with a unique opportunity to take stock, gather case experience and try out new methods to support children, parents, siblings, foster carers, social workers, and access workers in making access a positive experience. The data gathered would provide very useful information to guide access practice going forward. This information is also useful for other areas of social work where people live away from their family, and have restricted contact with parents and siblings, and could potentially be adapted for use in other services.

Should you require any further information regarding these matters, please do not hesitate to contact me on 086 2932164.

Yours sincerely,

Aine McGuirk,
Chair
SW004099

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