

MCFD Tele-conference on Information on services & supports for children and youth with special needs & their families during the COVID19 pandemic

April 3, 2020 from 12:45pm to 1:45pm

On the Call

Ministry of Children and Family Development Representatives:

Danielle Smith, Executive Director of Inclusion Policy
Allison Bond, Deputy Minister

Ministry of Education Representative:

Cloe Nicholls

Ministry of Health Representative:

Christy Hayes, Senior Director at BC Children's Hospital

PLEASE NOTE THAT THESE ARE NOTES SHOULD BE CONSIDERED UNOFFICIAL AS THEY ARE BASED ON WHAT ACT-AUTISM COMMUNITY TRAINING CAPTURED DURING A CALL IN WHICH THE QUALITY OF THE LINE WAS POOR AND THE PRESENTERS SPOKE VERY QUICKLY. WE HOPE THAT MCFD WILL MAKE A RECORDING AVAILABLE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

Introduction:

Danielle Smith (MCFD):

Thank you to all joining us from all over the province and to those who have provided questions in advance by yesterday's deadline. We have received many questions and we will be working through to respond to some of those today. We have a series of updates that our Deputy Minister Allison Bond will provide.

Update from MCFD Deputy Minister:

Allison Bond (MCFD):

A special thank you to families, not only for being on the call today, but for your patience as the MCFD try to sort through the many questions we have received in the last few weeks. We have heard from you the extraordinary challenging times you are dealing with. I will take a minute to explain what we have been doing to maintain continuity of service for you. We appreciate that your lives have been upended by the pandemic, and the social, economic and educational implications associated.

It is important that you understand we are looking carefully and working everyday at how we need to adapt. First, we needed to ensure our services could continue. We had to make sure our staffing compliment was sufficient, our contractors could provide continuity of service, that our offices were open and providing services. Maintaining social services amid the anxiety around challenges associated with the pandemic was critical. We and our partners continue to have our offices/phonelines open to provide services, in the context of safety measures directed by the provincial health officer. We have been working closely with the health office to understand what it is we need to do to maintain safety for staff, families and services providers, especially those who are immunocompromised.

The situation has been evolving everyday and requires us to be constantly adapting. We have had to adapt quite a few of our services to accommodate physical distancing, but our professionals continue to provide services to the children and families that need them. The ministry has been fielding many calls from you, from your advocates, with concerns about the need for adjustment to our services because of the unique challenges of the pandemic. We understand the challenges all families face are exponentially more complex for families with children with special needs. We understand that the closure of some services and classes has made the situation more acute for you. We have heard from you, and we have been working really hard on how to adapt in order to accommodate that reality.

Minister Conroy has asked us to act fast to address challenges and that has been our significant focus over the last couple of weeks. I know that those few weeks have seemed too long for those waiting who are anxious about services and supports for your family members. I am going to give you an overview of some of the changes the ministry is working towards. We understand it is not fast enough and we are doing our best to ensure all of our staff and service providers understand what it is we are doing and how we are proceeding. There will be formal announcement sometime in the future, but we are hoping that giving early information will help you understand what we are working on and how we are trying to accommodate your needs.

Firstly, we will be creating some temporary additional flexibility in parameters of programming so parents can access services that may not otherwise be available to them. This is in recognition of the fact that the challenges before us today are historic, of urgency and we have less certainty before us about what you may need to accommodate challenges for your family.

1. For respite funding: those of receiving it will be able to use it during school hours, for respite for siblings, to purchasing home services like cleaning and meal prep. What we heard from parents is that this flexibility will better allow you to adapt to changes in the school system. Contact your CYSN worker and we will work with you to find ways for families to utilize their funding in a manner that meets your needs. We will keep ensuring that communication lines are open.
2. We are seeking approval to temporarily suspend payments on all maintenance agreements for special needs agreements. We understand that families are struggling financially, and we want to alleviate some of that burden.
3. We know many of those working in the health and social service sector are simply not available right now despite our best efforts to keep our partners operating. We are relaxing some of the rules associated with requiring a therapist's signature to authorize payments for equipment and materials to support an intervention plan.
4. We have also been advised that nursing assessors who perform at-home program assessments may be redeployed and that is creating delays in the reassessments for the At-Home Medical programs affecting eligibility and access. We are temporarily suspending that requirement ensuring that children can maintain their status with At-Home medical benefits. We are going to create a short temporary admittance process while these nurses are not available.

Some of these changes will be implemented starting today. I urge you to talk with your CYSN worker so that we can provide you with what you need and continue to adapt with the impact of the pandemic to

your families. Thank you for your patience while we work to adapt these programs and to the advocacy groups that have urged us to have this call. Minister will be very keen to announce some of those changes in the future and move as quickly as possible to enact changes. We are not done reviewing questions and concerns you have submitted, but we continue to invite feedback and keep the lines of communication open. We invite you to continue to check our COVID-19 webpage for updated information and more answers for the questions that are submitted. It will be the best source of information on how COVID-19 will affect our services.

Q & As from MCFD:

Danielle Smith (MCFD):

Q1: How is the MCFD helping families and children & youth with special needs?

It is important to know and families need to understand that MCFD's supported resources such as CYSN workers, our staffing support to specialized provincial services such as the Autism Funding Program, Medical Benefits, the repairs from our CMEDS program, all continue to be fully functional and available to work with families. MCFD has ensured provisional funding arrangements with our contracted service providers will be in place to support and sustain provisions where possible. and continue to offer services. Many service providers are establishing alternative way to assist families through virtual connections. We are also proactively working to respond to families through creating flexibility in our policies.

Q2: What flexibility do families have with the respite funds during the COVID-19 pandemic?

If during this time period families are unable to hire a respite caregiver to give them the break they need, it is encouraged that families connect with their CYSN worker. There are flexible options for families to use respite funding during this time. For example, purchasing services and programs for children youth such as online programs, workshops, homemaker services for cooking and cleaning support, paying a responsible person living in the home other than parents, hiring alternative care for other children in the home in order to allow caregivers to focus and be able to have a break from their caregiving demands.

Q3: What will happen when respite agreements are set to expire during this period? How will they continue?

Families whose basic respite agreements are expiring will not need to provide a record of respite expense forms to verify how they used the funds they received this past year. Monthly payments will continue without families needed to sign a new agreement.

Q4: What if parents or caregiver of children with extra support needs become sick and need to quarantine themselves?

The MCFD will work with families to develop alternative ways to use respite funding and other supports services to best meet their needs. The federal and provincial financial COVID support benefit can also help relieve pressures from families who become ill or need to quarantine.

Q5: Is there any relief for families paying maintenance for their children's care on special needs agreements or voluntary care agreements?

Maintenance payments on all special needs agreements and voluntary care agreements will be suspended until June 24th without the need of repayment. If the family's financial circumstances have changed following the temporary procession period, the agreement can be reviewed with their guardianship worker to determine if a change to maintenance agreement is needed.

Q6: Are there changes to autism funding during the COVID pandemic and what resources are available to help families?

Yes, there are some changes. CYSN workers continue to be available. Families can continue to contact AIS BC and the Autism Funding Programs to learn about the resources and supports available in their community. Autism funding period extensions are not approved at this time and families are encouraged to connect with their service provider teams and plan alternative services and equipment purchases at this time.

Q7: What if I need new equipment and cannot get a therapist signature?

Typically, families are required to have a therapist sign off on Justification for Equipment forms to authorize payment for equipment and materials to support children and youth intervention plans. For the interim COVID period, the autism funding program will accept detailed justifications for equipment requests linked to your child's behavioural plan of intervention, submitted and signed by the agreement signatory, with therapist supported consultation by email where possible. Agreement signatories will be advised to look at the items or pieces of equipment that would enhance the existing behavioural plan of intervention and continue to be consistent with [Autism Funding Branch] policy.

Q8: Will there be an interruption in payment to service providers?

We are processing incoming documents at full staffing capacity and anticipate at this time no service interruptions. The service provider portal or emailing the Autism Funding Unit is the quickest method for ingoing submissions.

Q9: If a service provider with a signed autism funding agreement must reduce or suspend services and families have signed off on funding, can they continue to bill these services without providing them?

Service providers can only bill for authorized services rendered. At this time, cancellation/missed appointment fees and services not provided are not eligible for coverage from the Autism Funding Program.

Q10: Can autism funding be used to provide virtual care or tele-rehab?

In general, follow-up appointments are considered appropriate for virtual care or tele-rehab, where general guidance or advice can be offered by a therapist. Service providers can provide parent coaching and deliver services through electronic means in compliance with their regulatory colleges and the provincial privacy regulations. We will soon have more guidelines to offer about how the utilization of virtual care is possible.

Q11: Children and families are experiencing a high level of anxiety and children may struggle to self regulate. What mental health resources are available to children and family to manage stress and anxiety associated with isolation and COVID-19 pandemic?

Please know that our ministry's roughly 500 CYMH practitioners that are continuing to provide mental health support to children and youth. The only difference is these sessions are now being done over the phone or virtually whenever possible. Most community-based counsellors, psychologists, community organization and school counsellors continue to offer services virtually. Darling Minds is a free and proven Vancouver-based digital cognitive behavioural theory platform that helps with mental health supports and has been updated to address COVID concerns. If you need access to a CYMH clinician, our intake can be done over the phone by calling your local office. We urge you to explore virtual and phone support options. Families can connect with their CYSN worker and/or AIS BC for helpful resources that may assist your families.

Please note that ACT has not been able to prepare the transcript from the Ministries of Education or the Ministry of Health representatives, as yet. We hope to have them finished by early next week.

