

Family Interactions

Suspending Interactions

New Iowa Code Language:

Section 232.102A, subsection 2, Code 2025

“Family interactions shall continue regardless of a parent’s failure to comply with the requirements of a court order or the department unless a court finds that substantial evidence exists that the family interactions, whether supervised or unsupervised, would pose a serious risk of physical or emotional harm to the child.”

There are occasions when a child’s physical and emotional safety cannot be ensured through professionally supervised interactions. At these times, it may be necessary to suspend interactions while individual work occurs with the parent and/or child to address behaviors and experiences that have resulted in the child not being physically and/or emotionally safe during supervised interactions. When this occurs, HHS will need to seek a court order to suspend interactions with a finding that reasonable efforts continue to be made toward reunification. Interactions must continue until a court order is obtained.

Reasonable efforts

The new Code language is part of the reasonable efforts section of Chapter 232. In the affidavit, request that the court make a finding that HHS continues to make reasonable efforts in the case. Ensure the court is aware of any steps taken to prevent the need for suspension of interactions and explain the reasons that these steps were not successful.

When requesting a suspension of interactions

When making a recommendation to the court that interactions be suspended, the HHS worker will need to include at least one of the following:

- 1) Description of any behaviors of the parent which have placed the child at serious risk of physical or emotional harm;
- 2) A letter from a medical provider or therapist describing how the parent’s behaviors cause harm to the child;
- 3) Medical records indicating past harm and/or the parent’s history of failure to meet the child’s serious medical needs;
- 4) Mental health records indicating past emotional harm to the child, and/or
- 5) Testimony or an affidavit from the SWCM, provider, or others with specific descriptions of observed events, conduct, behaviors, etc.

In the affidavit, include specific information about parental behaviors that have been observed and how this presents a serious risk of harm or actual harm to the child. Be as specific as possible with descriptions.

- Example 1: A parent with a mental health condition resulting in delusional thinking, with a history of past violence/aggression during visits and escalating behavior despite supervision results in a serious risk that the parent may assault or lunge at the child during visits and staff may be unable to prevent physical harm.

If alleging serious risk of emotional harm, some courts *may* want a diagnosis for the child to rule that serious risk has occurred. Provide evidence of specific harm wherever possible.

- Example 2: During supervised interactions a parent berates the child, engages in emotional manipulation, blames the child for things that are not the child's fault, and/or interrogates the child, resulting in the child being visibly distressed before and/or after visits, having nightmares, experiencing anxiety attacks, bed wetting, and/or engaging in violence toward siblings.
 - It is important to point to specific, clinical indicators of harm. It is not enough to simply state that interactions will be upsetting or traumatizing for the child without providing specific behavioral examples.

As often as possible, obtain documentation from a mental health or medical professional of specific behaviors, regressions, mental health or medical symptoms, and/or diagnosis in a child that can be *linked* to the parent's ongoing behavior during interactions.

Be sure to include specific information about the expected behavioral change a parent must make for interactions to resume. If the HHS worker has met with the provider and/or family and developed a specific plan, include the plan in the request to the court as additional evidence of reasonable efforts.