



Safe Families *for* Children

Family Friend Handbook

Introduction

Safe Families for Children is a movement of the Church to care for the most vulnerable people group in our society: our children and their families. The Church is commanded to care for orphans and widows, and is best equipped to meet this need. Additionally, the church has the most experience as it has been caring for vulnerable children throughout history (until foster care was created in the 19th century). Safe Families is a vehicle to prevent child abuse and return the church back to the forefront of caring for children.

1. Brief Description

Mission: Safe Families for Children hosts vulnerable children and creates extended family-like supports for desperate families through a community of compassionate volunteers motivated by their faith to keep children safe and ultimately together with their families.

Founded in Chicago in 2003, Safe Families for Children (SFFC) is a multi-site volunteer movement that gives hope and support to families in distress. SFFC reframes how families are supported during a crisis. Parents voluntarily place their children in safe, loving homes where they are cared for while the parents seek to restore stability in their lives. Other families who are not in need of placement, partner with a Family Friend to help get on track. SFFC is dedicated to family support, stabilization and, most importantly, child abuse prevention.

Facts

- Screen and approve host families similar to foster care
- Monitor children in host homes at the same frequency as foster care
- Average stay in host homes 44 days
- 70% 5 years old and below
- Referral Sources: schools, homeless and domestic violence centers, substance abuse, hospitals, child welfare

The cornerstone of Safe Families is hosting children before children are harmed and in need of foster care. That is what sets us apart from all other efforts to help struggling families. Host Families are the

key to a relationship with the placing parent. However, host families and parents (with or without placement of their children) often need additional support. That's where Family Friends come in.

Volunteer Roles in Safe Families

There are a number of key volunteer roles in Safe Families

1. **Host Families:** Screened and approved volunteers who take in children from parents in crisis
2. **Family Friends:** Volunteers who befriend and support placing parents or come alongside Host Families by offering babysitting, meals, etc.
3. **Resource Friends:** Volunteers who donate a variety of items (beds, clothes, etc.) to families.
4. **Family Coach:** A volunteer (occasionally a staff) who visits kids in the Host Family home to make sure they are adjusting well and reaches out to placing parents to ensure they are getting the resources they need to get on their feet. The Family Coach is usually the coordinator of activities/services.
5. **Ministry Lead:** A volunteer who coordinates and supports activities of Safe Families under a Safe Family Church.
6. **Safe Families PLUS Mentors:** Youth aging out of foster care and others struggling with transition to adulthood are connected with mentors and other volunteers willing to support them (PLUS = Providing Lasting Unconditional Support).

What Parents Need

Although parents look for help from Safe Families because of specific reasons such as homelessness, substance abuse, etc., the underlying reason for nearly all placements is social isolation. They lack the necessary support system that many of us naturally have because of family relationships or relationships we build within our church or community. Unfortunately, many parents have no one else to turn to other than strangers when things are not going well.

There are a number of reasons why parents might not have a solid support network:

- The parents may lack the necessary social skills to develop and maintain relationships
- The parent's mental health may stand in the way of developing healthy relationships. Depression, Bipolar, etc. often have accompanying relational difficulties.
- Many relationships develop because there is a natural give and take. Some placing parents have never learned or don't feel they have anything to give (low self-esteem, self-centeredness), so they only take. Those parents who grew up in foster care or learned very early that they have to fight for themselves because their parents were not responsible often continue this pattern into adulthood.
- Many communities that parents come from might not be conducive to mutual social connections.
- Many parents have burned out relationships with family or friends because of past unhealthy behaviors.

Whatever the reason, most parents need caring people who are willing to befriend them. It's these relationships that have a powerful opportunity to prevent child abuse and crises in the future. The core of Safe Families is becoming part of the parent's support network. In the Christian world, we believe we are called to love our neighbors and care for the least of these. This is best done in community. It's an exciting match between the Church's call and a parent's greatest challenge. This is why Safe Families is so important.

2. What is a Family Friend?

There are 2 types of Family Friends within the Safe Family Movement, Family Friends for Host Families and Family Friends for parents.

Family Friends for Host Families

When children are placed with a Host Family, the family often needs additional support to adequately care for them. This support may involve someone dropping off meals to help with the transition, prayer, someone to talk to, occasional breaks (respite) for a few hours or overnight, help with transporting the child to school or other activities, etc. The Family Coach (who works with the Host Family) may determine that the Host needs additional support. The Ministry Lead at the church may also be aware of the need for support for the Host Family. Either the Ministry Lead or the Family Coach may reach out to the Safe Family network of Family Friends to see who might be available to help the Host Family in caring for the child in their home. Church small groups may also serve as Family Friends and surround the Host Family and the child in their care with encouragement, prayer, and tangible support (breaks, meals, transportation, providing the child additional activities). If the Family Friend is going to have regular and unsupervised contact with the child, that volunteer needs to be vetted (complete background checks).

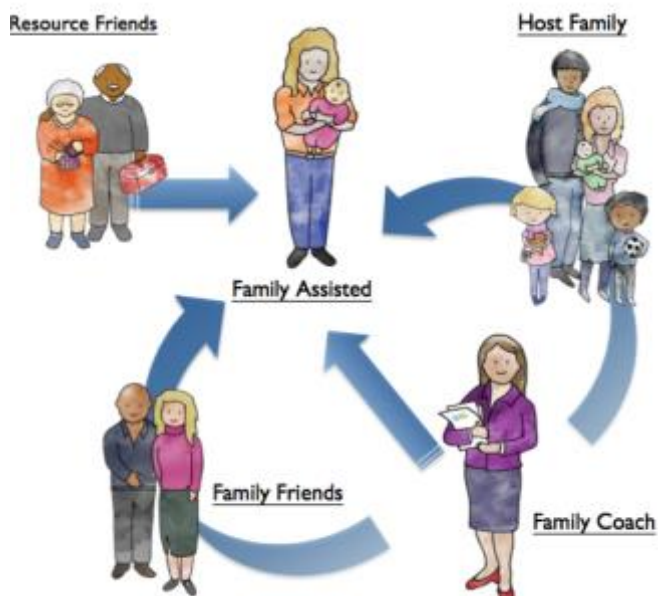
Family Friends for Parents

The Family Friend is a trustworthy and caring individual, willing to befriend a parent who is facing various challenges; supporting and encouraging them both practically and emotionally; helping them to envision and reach towards goals in life. They will come alongside parents in need, supporting them through their crisis by befriending, coaching, mentoring and generally offering consistent moral support and a sympathetic listening ear. Their goal is to journey with the parent until their situation has begun to normalize, helping them to establish good parenting and a safe home environment for their own children. It is important to note that Family Friends can be assigned to parents who have their children staying with a Host Family or who have their children home with them. Placement in a Host Family is not needed for a Family Friend to be assigned.

The remainder of this manual is for those supporting parents.

3. Family Friend role and requirements

- Offering friendship and support to a parent who is struggling
- Meeting them on a regular basis (generally weekly) either in their home or at a mutually convenient location
- Being committed to supporting the parent for the pre-agreed timeframe of the assignment
- Listening to, and talking about the issues that they are facing
- Helping the parent to envision goals that they can work towards, which may simply be small manageable steps in their



journey of overcoming whatever challenges they are facing

- Ensuring that the child or children are a frequent topic of conversation, as a means of informally coaching and mentoring in the area of parenting skills
- Provide regular updates to the SFFC Family Coach regarding how the relationship is going
- Document interactions in the database.

This may look like a long list but please do keep in mind that Safe Families for Children functions as a network of volunteers with everyone offering what they can. You are never alone as a volunteer – you will always have access to advice and support.

Important pre-requisites for the role

- Real life experience as a parent, and perhaps grand parent
- If not a parent then able to demonstrate experience of understanding family life, parenting, and/or children and their needs.
- Friendly, welcoming personality, good listener, sensitive to the parent's ups and downs
- Willing to be connected to the community of a local church that has agreed to support SFFC volunteers
- Willing to 'go the extra mile' and to problem-solve when unforeseen situations arise
- Happy to receive supervision, direction and constructive feedback from your Family Coach
- Be in full agreement with the vision and values of Safe Families for Children, which has a clear ethos of expressing Christian compassion and hospitality towards those in need.

4. Unpacking different aspects of the Family Friend role

Moral support

Many of the parents that SFFC assists lack self-confidence and have feelings of failure or guilt. Asking for help is a big step for them. They need to be encouraged that asking for help when it is needed is a positive rather than negative thing – it is not an admission of failure. Your involvement can help them to see that they can offer a healthy home for their children by addressing certain issues with the right support. Bit by bit, week by week a Family Friend can help them to find purpose, make positive changes, build on their strengths, and not become discouraged by perceived weaknesses.

Mentoring in parenting

Ultimately the Family Friend is helping the parent to improve the outcomes for the child. The parent ought to know that this is the aim, and share it, being encouraged in the vision of providing a healthy home environment for their children. The role will need to be undertaken with great sensitivity and Family Friends must be careful never to be judgmental or patronizing. Care must be taken to help the parent to be the best parent they can be, which is not the same as the kind of parent the Family Friend would be. Focusing on the parent's strengths and what they want for their child as well as helping them find ways to deal with stresses and challenges is key.

It's important to note that if a child is staying with a Host Family, the most important relationship is the Host Family/placing parent relationship. Because the Host Family is caring for the child without reimbursement and is not keeping the child permanently, they often have a unique opportunity to connect with the placing parent. However, in some situations, this connection does not occur easily and/or others might have a better chance at connecting. Many placing parents may benefit from having a number of people they can reach out to for support.

Hope

Many parents come to Safe Families not with one single problem, but with multiple problems. Our job is not to fix their problems. Many of the problems have been longstanding and cannot be completely fixed during their time with Safe Families. Our “job” is to obediently support them, to reach the weak and fatherless. If we step out in obedience into the messiness of their struggles, we allow God to do the work through us, as we care for and love our neighbors. We have an opportunity to communicate hope. 1 Corinthians 13:13 states, “And now these three remain; faith, hope, and love but the greatest of these is love. By giving the parent a moment to breathe and alleviate the immediate crisis (what do I do with my child), we begin the process of giving the parent hope that their situation can be better. Interactions with the parent should be filled with love and hope. If a parent can begin to feel a sense of hope, they can leverage the energy, new relations, and skills necessary to get things on track.

Being Positive

The parent is filled with relationships that are negative. They hear messages from themselves or others that they are a failure: “They can’t provide for their children.” “They can’t keep a job.” There is much truth in the struggles they have. However, they do have the ability to overcome many of their challenges. That is why Family Friends often act like a coach. A coach’s job is to inspire, motivate, instruct, and encourage. However, they have to do much of the work. We must learn how to help be positive in the midst of multiple problems and negativity. We must learn to help a parent break down tasks into doable activities.

Ultimately, we realize that many of their challenges need divine intervention. We must be willing to talk with the parent about their spiritual condition and how to improve it, if they want.

Advocacy

At an informal level a Family Friend can help a parent to voice their opinions on matters that affect them and are important to them, for example to a social worker. Recognizing the difficulty that some parents/caregivers will have in expressing their concerns and views to others and of doing so in an appropriate way, the Family Friend can facilitate this well.

Daytime respite and baby-sitting

There are circumstances when a family being assisted by SFFC does not need full overnight hosting for their child, but does need daytime or evening care. Examples might be when a single parent needs to attend a weekly group, such as AA, or Alpha. The Family Friend may be well placed to offer support in caring for the child, either in their own home or in the child’s home.

Transport

On occasion, issues of transport arise that cause practical difficulties for either the Host Family or the parents. For example, if a child placed with a Host Family continues to attend a school that is a few miles away from the Host Family home. Help in taking the children to or from school may be critical to the stay with a Host Family running smoothly. Transport help may also be required to support contact arrangements for children with their parents during the time of a stay with a Host Family. Parents may also need help with transportation to appointments, etc.

Good Enough Parenting

Our goal is to support the parent to be “good enough for their kids”. We support parents through a crisis or period of time when their support or existing resources are inadequate to safely parent their children or care for themselves. Strengthening and supporting the parent’s protective factors will help them deal

with situations that might be beyond their control. We want the parent to be “good enough.” We have to guard against having too high expectations.

5 Protective Factors

Research has shown that if parents develop 5 protective factors, they can be “good enough” for their children despite having ongoing challenges.

1. **Parental resilience:** Managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma.
2. **Social connections:** Positive relationships with others that provide emotional, informational, and spiritual support.
3. **Knowledge of parenting and child development:** Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support the development of their children.
4. **Concrete support in times of need:** Access to concrete support and services that address a family’s needs and help minimize stress caused by unmet needs.
5. **Social and emotional competence of children:** Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships.

5. Support for you: The Family Coach and the local church

It is very important that in serving the needs of others you do not neglect your own need for support. We want you to have a long and fulfilling involvement with SFFC, and that will mean pacing yourself and making the most of the support that is available to you. In preparation for being a Family Friend, you may wish to tell your wider family, friends and neighbors about your involvement with Safe Families for Children so that they can provide you with any support and encouragement you may need.

6. Your Family Coach

Your primary link to SFFC will be through an assigned Family Coach – a more experienced volunteer with whom you may talk things through and discuss any situations that might arise in the course of an assignment. They are there to offer guidance and will help you work within your strengths and not to become extended beyond your limits.

Beyond supporting you through the befriending assignment, the Family Coach will reflect with you afterwards, asking about how it went, and considering what may happen next. Whether you continue to have a supporting relationship with that family in need, prepare to support another parent or need to have a break for a while, the Family Coach will be alongside you in this process as much as is helpful to you. Please note that your Family Coach may change when you take on a new assignment with a new family.

Responding to your needs

The Family Coach is your advocate. You can feel free to contact them whenever you need help or direction. If things are not going well, it is important for you to let your Family Coach know. The Family Coach is also the first person you should try to contact if you have any concerns regarding children in the family that you cannot discuss directly with the parent you are helping.

7. Support from your Local Church

It is likely that your church will recognize the ministry of Safe Families for Children. If you are unsure then please call the SFFC office and ask to speak to one of the staff. They will be able to confirm whether or not there has been correspondence/contact with the church. If not, SFFC will be happy to call the

minister/pastor for a chat. If you do not attend a Safe Family Church, you will be assigned to one so you can get the support that you need through other volunteers.

8. Building in Rest Time

As a Family Friend assignment comes to an end, you will experience a variety of emotions. Please make sure that you build in the time you need to work through these. De-briefing with your Family Coach following an assignment will help with this, but may only be the start of a process for you. Each person's processing will be different and you must take the time you need before accepting another assignment.

9. Accessing Further Information and Training

In your role as a Family Friend it is important that you feel confident in handling the potential ups and downs of involvement with parents who may have difficult lives. It should also be expected that you will learn from experience too, as you complete your first, second and third assignments, and so on. The debriefing sessions you have with your Family Coach will help to accelerate your learning curve.

10. Beginning a Family Friend relationship

How will I be informed of a potential assignment?

Once a new befriending-related referral has been accepted, the Family Coach, Ministry Lead, or Intake Specialist will begin a search for the best possible Family Friend match. If you are found to be a good match (in terms of geography, availability preferences etc.), then you will be contacted by email or telephone. If chosen, you will be given biographical details about the family, a fuller description of the problem that they are facing, and a general sense of what we hope to achieve through the help given.

Generally a swift yes or no response will be needed. Saying yes to the assignment does not mean that you will be introduced to the family later that day!

- At the time of accepting the assignment, or shortly afterwards, you will be given details of which Family Coach has supervisory responsibility.
- Family Coach will call you to clarify expectations around time commitments, any transport issues, and also address any questions or concerns you might have.

Being Introduced to the Family

You will normally be introduced to the parent that you will be befriending by either the Family Coach, Host Family, or Intake Specialist. If the assignment is judged to be very straightforward and low risk then you may be asked to see them on your own.

- In a straightforward assignment, you will email or call the referred family to introduce yourself and set up a time to meet at an agreed location, which may be the home of the referred family, or a neutral venue such as a local cafe.
- A member of staff from the SFFC office may get involved in helping with coordinating arrangements.
- If the Family Coach is at the meeting, they can help to kick-start the conversation between yourself and the referred parent, sharing some of their own story and then asking you both to do the same.
- By the time the introductory meeting is over everyone should be clear about the expectations of the Family Friend involvement.

The Adults in the Family

The family that you are befriending may have any number of combinations of adult caregivers, and you will have been given information specific to the family that you will be helping prior to accepting the assignment. Generally, a Family Friend has a focus on helping one parent in particular, and most commonly, the mother. However, in the course of your getting to know the particular parent that you are befriending you may also meet their partner, and other family members too, such as their mother, father, sister, etc. Ideally, in order to be able to talk together freely you will need some one-to-one time with the parent that you are supporting.

You may be asked to help the parent in all sorts of practical ways, but the most important aspect of the time you spend with them will be the quality of the conversations that you have together. Below are some guidelines:

Do's and Don't's

Do:	Don't:
Respect the parent as a unique individual	Be dogmatic about your own religious or political opinions
Be prepared to listen and let the person talk	Rush in with judgments and advice
Focus on their aspirations as a parent	Take sides in family disputes
Sensitively approach known challenges that the parent wants help with	Press the parent to talk about things that they are not yet ready to address
Keep to set days and times for meetings	Administer medication for them
Give adequate notice and explanation if you have to cancel a visit	Lift or move heavy objects in their home
Inform the Family Coach of any concerns or incidents such as harmful behaviors or deteriorating health	Exchange any money with the parent – either giving to, or taking from

The Children in the Family

As part of your befriending assignment, there may or may not be an opportunity to spend time with the children. You will either:

- See the parent on their own without the kids (i.e. when they are at school, or in bed)
- See the parent when the kids are around (pre-schoolers, or at weekends)
- See the kids as your primary focus, to enable the parent to do something important (such as attend a course or clinic)

It is important that you remember that you are offering support to a parent in order that they might be better able to care for their child. There may be specific elements of support that the parent needs, such as how to deal with some element of the child's behavior. You do not have to be an 'expert' for them but should be open about the lessons you have learnt as a parent/caregiver, and the way you managed to overcome parenting challenges you faced. This will be valuable to them and will enhance the bond between you.

When caring for children

- Consider their needs according to their age, development stage, etc. What activities will you do? Will you need to prepare any food – if so what can/can't they eat? Do you have all the equipment

you need? For example, a tiny toddler will require a high chair and a changing mat. Do you have appropriate toys available for the child?

- If you are having the children in your own home for the day make sure you have completed a SFFC Home Safety checklist with a staff member.
- If you are lacking anything please ask. SFFC is a community network of support including resource friends who offer a wide range of additional practical items.

11. Managing expectations and boundaries

It is important to find the right balance in the relational support you give, so that you keep within the limits of your Family Friend role responsibility. The following are some guidelines for appropriate boundaries in the role:

- Do not raise unrealistic expectations; only offer what you really can do. Agree to the purpose of your involvement and tailor your support accordingly. In some circumstances, very firm boundaries need to be in place.
- Whether or not you share your address and personal phone number with the parent will be something that varies case by case and according to how the relationship develops. The recommendation is that you discuss this question with the Family Coach early on.
- Please do not give the parent money directly. If they do need specific financial help, there may be possibilities available to help with this and the Family Coach is the best person to coordinate how such support may be given. It is also appropriate to keep in discussion with the Family Coach regarding other resource-support the family needs and how best to help. We need to remember that it is important not to disempower parents by taking responsibility away from them.
- Please refrain from being judgmental or critical. Since many of us will probably not have experienced the multiple difficulties the parents are under, it is difficult for us to understand the challenges and behavior that often arise.

12. Goal-setting and Journaling

As a Family Friend, you may be involved in a variety of ways of supporting struggling families, some very simple and straightforward and others much more challenging and involved. One unifying theme in all befriending support is that the befriender and the adult receiving the support need to be clear about what support is being given, what the goal of providing the support is, and over what timescale the support will be monitored for effectiveness.

For example:

Support to be given	SFFC Family Friend will visit struggling single mother who has a 3-year-old, a 2-year-old, and a 3-month-old.
Frequency of support	Weekly, on Wednesday mornings at 10 am
Duration of support	6 months then review
Goals of support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage relationships and bonding in the family unit • Encourage healthy feeding and hygiene routines • Help mom get out to the park with the kids • Help mom plan for 3 year old starting local school childcare half days from September

Using journaling to record progress being made

SFFC has a section within its database for recording notes about the families we are helping. A brief journal note following a meeting, even if it has been pretty uneventful, is important for continuity purposes and to track dates of contact. These notes will also help the SFFC Family Coach and Supervisor build up a picture over time of the impact the support is having. They have access to all the notes created by everyone involved in the family and are able to recognize patterns developing.

It will be your job to keep your notes up to date and accurately and fully record your interactions with the Host Family, child, or the placing parent. When you log in, your assignment will be under **My Activity -> Assigned Families**. Be sure to mark the note with the date you called/visited, not necessarily the date you write the note. Notes should be entered within 24 hours, or as soon as possible.

Accessing the Database to Make Notes

- Log on to the SFFC Database to create notes: <http://sfcms.net/index.php/auth/login>
- You will need to use the Google Chrome browser. See the Database User guide for more detailed instructions.
- After logging in, you will find any family you are assigned to under **My Activity -> Assigned Families**.
- If accessing the database online continues to be problematic, do talk to your Family Coach about the possibility of arranging an alternative way of recording your notes.

Journaling Notes

Points of Contact that need to be documented in the database are the following:

- Any phone calls, texts, or emails in which the assignment is discussed and pertinent information is exchanged.
- Community and ministry referrals that you make.
- Make a note if the child shares concerning information or if the parent or child exhibits inappropriate behavior or behavior that could put the child at risk.
- Be sure to note any efforts made to call, text, or email - even if unsuccessful.

General Guidelines

- Share what you see with your eyes and hear with your ears: avoid opinion or personal judgment.
- Keep it simple.
- Keep in mind who will be reading these notes: Intake staff, Family Coach, or Supervisor.
- Please share weekly or at least monthly how many hours you have spent volunteering. Include time spent with parent directly, time researching resources for family, time spent in supervision with your Family Coach or Family Coach Supervisor, etc.

13. Ending Involvement Well

How you draw a befriending arrangement to a conclusion will very much depend on the nature, the intensity and the length of the involvement you have had with the parent.

As ending approaches, give consideration to the following:

- The extent to which the original goals of the involvement have been achieved
- Ways in which the family has gained fresh confidence and stability, practically and emotionally, and how this will be maintained when the support is withdrawn
- Be realistic about the future, for example how much ongoing contact is likely.

Note: it is possible that your relationship with a family does not completely end but rather *transitions* so that you continue to be friends with a natural two-way relationship. Your Family Coach is available to help you all think through these steps in plenty of time. The Family Coach will also debrief with you once the assignment is over.

14. Frequently Asked Questions

Q1 What type of situations will families be experiencing?

The families we help will be experiencing a crisis of one sort or another. This may be a time-specific period of need such as a hospital admission, a period of counseling or rehabilitation, or just a break. However, it may be that abuse by a spouse or partner, deterioration in health, or concerns such as finances, employment or housing need to be resolved.

Q2 How do you find out about families that need help?

Any government or non-profit agency can refer as well as parents referring themselves. In practice, this means that referrals may come from Social Workers, Home Visitors, Schools, Physicians, Hospitals, Drug or Alcohol Support Agencies, Homeless Centers or Housing Support, Prisons, Police, Probation, Children's Services, and Voluntary Agencies.

Q3 How long will the assignment last?

If the assignment is a 'classic' befriending, i.e. getting alongside a parent to help them to get through a crisis and get back on their feet, then it is likely that it will last 6 months. Many may last as long as the hosting arrangement lasts. We hope your relationship with the parent will continue even if the formal Family Friend assignment ends.

Q4 What if the parent and I have a disagreement?

Different points of view are natural. It is important for Family Friends to strive to understand the parents/caregivers and not to react against ideas that may not be communicated in the best way. Remember: this is a family in crisis and a parent may feel threatened or troubled.

Unless it is clearly against our policies or values, every effort should be made to accommodate the parent/caregiver's preferences. In the case of ongoing conflict or failure to reach resolution, please contact your Family Coach.

Q5 To what extent can I share my faith with the parent?

Your faith is probably a very important aspect of your life, and has likely been a driver in your becoming a volunteer. Our advice regarding sharing faith is drawn from 1 Peter 3:15:

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

It is clear therefore that if a parent you are working with asks questions about your faith then you should feel comfortable to reply or you may broach the topic with the parent. The important thing is that they are free to change the subject whenever they like.

If a parent asks about your church and shows an interest in coming along with you on a Sunday, it is absolutely fine and appropriate.

Volunteers often also ask whether they may pray for/with a parent that they are helping. Again, very similar principles apply – use your best judgment given how well you know the parent, their degree of openness to spirituality, and to the appropriateness of the context. Feel free to offer.