

Successful Video Visits with Young Children

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How many times have you tried to carry on a video chat with a young child when they abruptly got up and wandered away? Or they didn't answer your question but stared at you like you're a character on TV? Or even hung up? Rest assured: This doesn't mean they aren't interested in interacting! Video visits with young children pose special challenges due to their developmental needs. This tip sheet offers some ideas for parents, caregivers, and child welfare workers.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, an unprecedented amount of business typically done in person is now happening in the realm of video conferencing, including child welfare work and in the justice system. Visits might include child welfare workers making contacts with children in care, children in care visiting with a parent, adults trying to help children talking with their siblings, children talking with incarcerated parents, etc.

When connecting with young children over video, three obstacles might stand in the way of meaningful interactions.

Video Deficit

Research has shown that young children up to about age 3 have what researchers call a "video deficit." It means they have a hard time learning from something on a screen.¹ Think about how most young children interact with screens. The people on the screen are often not interactive, and children passively listen to them. It may be news to them that a person on a screen can actually hear them and answer back!

Some research has shown that back-and-forth conversations with a known person is key to helping kids interact and learn from video. For example, in one study toddlers who were connected with their parent on FaceTime were able to learn a new word for an object they had never seen before, but only if the parent could interact in a back-and-forth manner (for example, waving in real time). If the parent did a taped demonstration, the child didn't learn.² Have you ever noticed that the highly popular children's TV character [Dora the Explorer](#) waits to hear a response? That's because of expert consultation with researchers who study how children best learn from video!³

Language Barrier

This refers not to different spoken languages, but differences in how adults and children communicate. For young children, play is their native language. Asking questions about how they're doing may get a response or two, but games and play are a better bet for more sustained interaction.

Distress

Visiting with someone whom a child is missing can bring up difficult feelings, such as loss or abandonment. In children, this distress often shows itself in behaviors such as silliness, clinging, whining, and acting out.⁴ Research with children of incarcerated parents, who routinely use video visits, tells us that young children are able to interact meaningfully with parents via video visits. Research also indicates that caregivers are key in helping children prepare for visits, stay regulated during the visit, and emotionally regulate afterward.⁵ It is not news to most caregivers that visits with parents can cause distress, even if visits are important for maintaining connection. Given the general anxiety and stress that everyone is feeling in a pandemic, adults need to pay special attention to [managing their own feelings](#) so they can help children manage as well. Expect behaviors and be prepared.

General Tips for Good Video Visits

1. Prepare everyone. Talk about what will happen, how long the visit will be, and how you will say goodbye. Answer children's questions in simple, developmentally appropriate ways. Make sure everyone is on the same page. For young children, hellos and goodbyes are especially important to provide context and closure. Sesame Street has developed good materials, available in English and Spanish, to help with language to use with young children in [foster care](#) or [experiencing the incarceration of a parent](#). The parental incarceration toolkit includes some information about how to talk to children about visits, which may be adapted.
2. Come up with some playful activities that can be done over video beforehand. Some FaceTime apps have silly games and filters. Classics like telling [jokes or riddles](#), singing songs, [finger plays](#), peek-a-boo, and puppet shows are fun with all ages. With the caregiver's help, the child can gather things to show their parent or worker, such as art projects or favorite stuffed animals. Children and adults can "share" a snack over video. [Storytelling](#) is a powerful way to engage children. These do not need to be elaborate, pre-planned stories but can be as simple as an imaginary trip to the park. See our "Resources" section below for links to useful websites. For older children (approximately 5 years and up): Verbal games for verbal children can help avoid stale questions. Examples are, [Would You Rather](#), 20 Questions, Two Truths and a Lie, I Spy, and charades. [Pencil and paper games](#) such as Pictionary, tic-tac-toe, or Bingo are also fun for older children.
3. Follow the child's lead. If the child loses attention while listening to a book, switch to something more interactive. If you're using something mobile, like a phone or tablet, try a change of scenery by moving into another room or even outside.

In this challenging time, people all over the world have been relying on video technology to stay in touch. Video is a wonderful resource, but special considerations are needed for young children to minimize frustration and manage expectations.