

Things to do when you cannot be with your child. Ways to supplement In Person visits or when those are not possible.

By Rose Marie Wentz

Your child counts on you, misses you and can be worried if they do not see you. Here is a list of activities that can help you maintain contact with your child. Check with your social worker if there are any restrictions about how you can have contact with your child.

The goal is for a child to maintain and enhance all their connections while living apart from ALL the key people in their lives. Connections include relatives, friends, pets, culture, the type of food you eat, smells, and routines. In this time of COVID19 and when a child is not living with their parent(s) many of these connections are lost or broken. With creativity and flexibility we can work together to reconnection your child to as many things as possible.

What are the best alternatives to In person visits? Methods that allow live audio and visual are best. Older children can appreciate receiving written correspondence but should be used as an additional method and not the primary method of the family making connections.

1. Virtual visits using programs that allow live interaction with voice and visual. Skype, Facetime, Zoom are some examples.
2. Audio only – phone calls and internet calling apps
3. Text only – live – SMS, chat apps and even email when done with immediately interaction
4. Recordings – no live interaction – recordings using audio and/or visual
5. Written – US mail, email, and other forms of written communication

Tips for video chats with children

To support children with their video chats:

1. Choose a good time of day. Don't set up for disappointment by picking a time when your child is tired, busy with other activities or restless.
2. Many short chats a week are more useful than one long chat.
3. Do not expect a young child to stay in front of the screen the entire time. Let the child run around in the room as they would normally if you were with them.

4. Help your child adjust to this way of talking with you. When young children interact in person, they pick up communication cues from sight, sound, smell, and touch. Since video chat only involves sight and sound, help your child to concentrate on those senses. Repeat questions, ask your child to ask questions, or point out things your child can see and identify. Depending on the child's age expect the child to change topics frequently or to not respond to your question directly.
5. Be patient!!!! Within a few sessions your child will become accustomed to this. Many children may know more about interacting using video chat apps than you do. **Ask your child teach you.**
6. Have materials ready – storybooks, musical instruments, your child's latest artwork, homework or whatever you plan to share so he doesn't lose interest as you, or the adult helping your child do the chat, scramble to find something.
7. Show your child where you are.
8. Let your child interact with others during the chat (as approved by your worker) siblings, pets, relatives, friends, etc.
9. Prepare your child that sometimes the internet "loses" calls. Let your child know you will call back as soon as possible, if this occurs.
- 10. Make it fun, something the child looks forward to doing again.**

Tips for adults chatting with young children:

1. Practice looking at the camera – it is tempting to keep your eyes on your own picture, or the images on the screen – but you really make eye contact when you look at the camera and that is better for interactive communication.
2. If there is an adult with your child you can ask them to help engage the child in activities with you. It is OK to talk to that adult, make sure any conversation is focused on interacting with the child not about adult issues.
3. Keep very young children engaged with you by playing 'peek a boo' – turn the camera away from you, then back to your face – and then sometimes when the camera comes back – you can surprise the kids by showing a book, or toy, or something else that you want to talk about.
4. Make sure to use the same greeting each time and in the same tone of voice when chatting with infants and toddlers. Infants and toddlers learn to recognize and feel comfortable with a real person on the screen when they hear that same sound each time they see the person. This is important because they often depend more on smell and touch when meeting a person – so they need more visual and sound cues to recognize you on video chat.
5. Think of new questions for each chat. The questions can be silly. Question like "how are you" can be difficult for younger children to answer. Ask specific questions about what they are doing right now.
6. Avoid talking too much about the virus or why you cannot be together right now. Of course truthfully answer your child's questions about these difficult topics. Your child may be worried about you and if you will get sick. Reassure your child about your situation and if you are sick give your child the information they can understand based on their age..

7. Use a lot of gestures and facial expressions. Be close to the camera – but not so close that your video partner can't see your hands. Don't be afraid to move – don't be a talking head.

To make video chats more interactive:

1. Try using a smart phone, tablet or laptop so you can both move around to show different views and different activities.
2. Have your child use as large of screen as possible so you are more normal size, i.e. a tablet rather than a phone screen. Check with the adult on the other end about how you look on the caregiver's screen. Sometimes turning the screen will make the picture become larger.
3. Pretend to share snacks. People on both sides of the screen have the same snack and the adults can pretend to hand it off - camera to camera - to a child's delight.
4. Eat a meal together (it does not have to be the same food).
5. Play music and sing – People on both ends of the camera can hear songs and sing or dance together, and join in with instruments or dancing.
6. Ask the child what they want to do. Plan the next chat session with your child as a way of finishing your time together. Remind the child when the next chat will be.
7. For older children consider using apps like ZOOM that allow you to not only see and talk to each other but also to write notes, share computer screens and other interactivities. Example: Your child can show you their homework and you can help them.
8. REMEMBER to say goodbye, kisses and hugs (yes one can hug your phone and pretend you receive the hug) just as you would when ending an in person visit.

Video chatting doesn't have to be a major event. A quick, spontaneous chat can be a fun way for distant grownups and children to feel close to each other. Several short chats a week may be better than one long chat.

Adapted from: <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/tips-video-chatting-young-children>

Free video chat apps: Skype, Facetime, Facebook messenger, Zoom, Whatsap, Instagram and many more.

Need help obtaining a phone, tablet or internet access: See Handout on "Virtual Visit Recommendations and Resources"

Activities for virtual visits – Read “Virtual Visits Recommendations and Resources” for more specifics for each developmental ages and free and low cost options for internet access.

1. Many organization have resources on the internet to help parents and children: games, learning activities, advice, songs and much more. EX: www.PBSkids.org
If you use an app like ZOOM the parent can show the game, book or activity from their screen and the child will see the same thing on their screen.
2. Go on a virtual field trip together. Be sure to use a chat program so you can communicate with each other while looking at the same web site. A couple of places to start would be NASA's Web site at <http://www.nasa.gov> or the PBS Web site at <http://www.pbs.org>. <https://kidsactivitiesblog.com/135714/virtual-field-trips/> is an entire website of trips listed by the child's grade. Many museums, parks and zoos are offering virtual field trips or live viewings.
3. On phone calls/internet chats do imaginary outings together. Imagine we are going to our favorite place to get ice cream...
4. Read a your child's favorite book or tell them a story. There are many free internet books available to read. Libraries have many free downloadable books.
5. Play Internet games together. Ask your child which games they like to play. Many electronic games that your child knows can be played together online. Video chat apps like Facebook Messenger have games and program that puts hats, faces and other things on the people on the screen. Young children can love playing these games and stay very engaged with the person on the screen.
6. With permission from your worker: invite relatives, friends, siblings, pets to join the call. This can be done from 3 or more locations on most apps.

Other ways to stay connected with your child

1. Make a video or audiotape of you reading bedtime stories. Send it to your child along with the book. Or just send the message. This is easy using your smart phone or computer.
2. Send a package containing all the things your child will need if he or she gets sick or is home bound. For example, send a can of their favorite food, a special blanket or pillowcase, a video or audiotape wishing them a speedy recovery, crossword puzzles, or a stuffed animal.
3. Send your child a picture of you or one of both of you. If you wear a perfume or cologne spray some on a card. Mail it to your child.

4. Find unique things to write your letters on, for example, things your child likes—a favorite color of paper, stickers, or pictures of things they like; fun objects — napkins, paper tray liners, or pictures of you. Cut paper into special shapes (holiday shapes like shamrocks or hearts); or puzzles (cut your finished letter into pieces; try sending one piece at a time).
5. Do a letter each day. Send by mail or email. Start a letter and take it with you throughout the day – (or think about what to put in the letter throughout the day). Add a sentence every now and then and be sure to add where you are when you write the different sentences (i.e., at work, cooking, eating).
6. Begin a life's lessons booklet. Each week write down a few of the lessons you have learned in life and how you learned those lessons. When the booklet is full, send it to your child to use as he or she begins or continues the journey of life.
7. Arrange for flowers or pizza to be delivered to your child before or after a special event (e.g., a play, recital, or sports game, a holiday, birthday). Include a note telling them how proud you are of their accomplishment.
8. Draw pictures of what you do all day. Be sure to include things like what you eat and what you read. Things that you might think are boring, your kids will be very interested in reading about when they cannot see you. Have your child do the same.
9. Write a newsletter (have a regular issue of your own family newsletter with columns about each child, family events, and exciting news). Write about family stories, traditions, special event, past vacations, etc. Ask your relatives to add to the newsletter.
10. Make a package that contains cookie cutters and the non-perishable ingredients of your child's favorite cookie so you can "help" them bake while you are away.
11. Make a top 10 list of what you like about your child. Send it to them; may be one each day.
12. Send pictures of yourself doing different activities, in different places, making funny faces, etc.
13. For older children help with homework or home schooling.

Adapted from: The National Long Distance Relationship Building Institute. (2001). *20 long distance activities for dads at a distance* [On-line]. More suggestions are on this site. www.daads.com

Social Workers and Visit Supervisors:

1. Encourage and support parents to do as many of these activities as possible. Nothing can totally replace in person visits but having NO contact will be detrimental to the child and the parent. And may violate their legal rights.
2. Three way video chats are easy to set up and allow for a visit to be supervised.
3. Visit supervisors can provide support and guidance using three way chats. A pre chat practice session may be necessary to practice how provide guidance during the call (example: using written instruction that are available on some apps that go just to the parent).
4. Using apps such as Zoom and Web-ex allows for more options like written instructions that the child does not see.
5. Involve the child's caregiver in setting up and supporting the different types of connections. In this time of uncertainty anything all the adults can do to help the child maintain relationships will help the child.
6. Most of these apps allow for confidentiality of the caregiver's address and phone number. Check what is needed if this is necessary.
7. Research solutions rather than denying contact.