

# Communicating Remotely with Children and Teens

## Tips for Staff and Professionals

Information to help Department of Community Services staff and professionals get the most out of virtual meetings during the pandemic when they're working with children and teens.

During this pandemic period, having regular contact and reassurances of how children are doing may be challenging. Using technology to meet instead of connecting face to face may require a little more effort. For the communication to be successful, it will need to be more deliberate and carefully planned.

Here are some tips for making meaningful connections with a child or youth through technology.

### **Set some shared expectations**

- Be clear about the logistics for the meeting, and make sure they work for everyone.
- Clearly identify who is responsible for initiating the contact.
- Agree in advance that if the person initiating the contact doesn't get an answer, they will call back in 5 minutes.
- Discuss who will reinitiate the call if the connection is lost during the call.
- Ask if all participants are comfortable with the technology that will be used or what could be done to help them be more comfortable.
- Agree on a method and timing that works for everyone. Schedules are important especially for younger children, so try to organize the meeting time at the same time and day each week.
- Schedule shorter, more frequent meetings for younger children. Expect shorter attention spans than for in-person meetings.

## **Begin each conversation with a warm-up**

- Start with a simple question to break the ice and open the conversation.
- Ask open ended questions that need more than a yes or no response. What do you think they'd like to know about you? What are you curious to know about them? We're all sharing unique and common situations and feelings right now. Check in and ask how they're doing. Ask what has been going well for them and what has been difficult.

## **Meeting with children – Tips that caregivers can help with in advance**

- Choose a time of day when the child is able to focus and is less hungry or restless.
- Have the caregiver help the child adjust for the medium. When young children interact in person, they pick up communication cues from sight, sound, smell, and touch. Since video only involves sight and sound, help the child to concentrate on those senses.
- Have the caregiver ensure that the child has materials at their side – storybooks, musical instruments, the child's latest artwork, or something they want to show the other person.
- Have the caregiver prepare the child for the call. They can remind them what will be happening They can explain how the technology will work. They can let them know there may be delays and encourage them to be patient.
- Try a short practice meeting so children and adults know what to expect and are comfortable.

## **Building rapport with youth**

- Acknowledge this is a new way of starting a relationship (not face-to-face).
- When first connecting with youth, start by asking how they are doing given the current circumstances. Discuss a neutral topic, such as interests and hobbies. This can go a long way towards putting the youth at ease and developing mutual understanding and trust.
- Let the youth lead the conversation. Build from their lead.

- After a comfortable level of rapport had been established, explain your role and how you can assist them.
- Discuss and agree on shared expectations so both you and the youth understand what can be expected from your interactions. Allow them to contribute what they would like to get from this and future interactions. Let them know how frequently they can expect contact with you. Share what you expect of them and confirm their availability. You should also make sure that the youth understands how accessible you are to them. Give them your contact details.
- Be supportive and sincere.
- Most importantly, keep at it. It may take time for the youth to feel comfortable opening up. This will only happen when they are ready.

### **Reach out if you need help**

- Remember the child's social worker or caregiver is available if you want to discuss an issue or have a suggestion to improve communications.