

Communicating Remotely with Children and Teens

Tips for Parents and Caregivers

Information to help parents, foster care families, and care givers get the most out of virtual meetings during the pandemic when they're meeting with children and teens.

Connecting through technology takes effort. It takes more planning than face-to-face meetings. But technology makes it possible to connect in these difficult times. With extra effort and planning, everyone can get the most out of virtual meetings.

Set shared expectations:

- Be clear about the logistics for the meeting. Make sure they work for everyone.
- Schedule shorter, more frequent chats for younger children.
- Agree on a method. Make sure that everyone is comfortable with the technology that will be used.
- Agree on a time that works for everyone. Schedules are important for younger children. Try to organize the meeting time at the same time and day each week.
- Agree on who will initiate the call.
- Agree on what will happen if the call isn't answered. For example, they will try again 5 minutes later.
- Discuss what will happens if the connection is lost. Agree on who will reinitiate the call.

Be aware of privacy:

- Set up in a private area. Make sure others in the home know that it's the time for the child to make their special call. That it is private. That way others in the home will not likely become part of a private call by mistake.
- Use a secure platform like Microsoft Teams or Skype. Zoom is not secure and not recommended.

Keep the conversation going:

- Start with a simple question. This can break the ice and open up the conversation.
- Ask open-ended questions. These are questions that need more than a yes or no answer. If you are using video, ask to see their room. If they are school aged, talk about how they are connecting with their teacher and classmates. Talk about schoolwork. Ask about what activities they are doing to occupy their days. Ask if they are keeping in contact with their friends.
- Think about what you would normally discuss during visits. Try to repeat this routine.
- Ask how they are doing. We are living through unusual times. They may have feelings they have never had before. Check in: Are they managing their schoolwork? How is that going? Do they have the tools they need for this? What does their new routine look like where they are living? Are they engaged with other online activities? Are they getting exercise?

Be an active listener:

- Respond in a way that lets the other person know you're paying attention. It can be hard to pay attention when using technology. It can be harder to hear well. One active listening technique is to summarize back what you think you heard: "It sounds like ..." Ask if you got it right.
- Try not to interrupt. Try to listen completely while someone is talking. Take a moment to reflect on what they said before responding.
- Pay attention to a person's mood and tone. Acknowledge their emotions.
- Show empathy. Put yourself in their shoes. Let them know you're sincerely interested.

Share a positive attitude in a difficult time:

- Smile. The warmth of a smile comes across in your voice, even over the phone.
- Try to be positive. Your child will need to hear that you are okay. That they will be okay.
- Try to keep an open frame of mind.
- Be polite. Simple kindness can help everyone cope with the current situation.

Help young children communicate using video:

- Choose a time of day when the child is able to sit quietly and focus on the screen. Select a time when they are less likely to be hungry or restless.
- Help the child adjust for the medium. Young children pick up communication cues from sight, sound, smell, and touch. Video involves only sight and sound. Help the child to concentrate on those senses.
- Have materials at the child's side – storybooks, musical instruments, their latest artwork, or other items to show the other person.
- Prepare the child for the call. Remind them what will be happening. Talk about how the technology will work. Let them know there may be delays. Encourage them to be patient.
- Try a short practice call. They will learn what to expect. They will become more comfortable with the video calling.

Make video chats more interactive:

- Try using a tablet or laptop so you can both move around to show different views and different activities. Your ability to do this may vary depending on the age of the child.
- Plan in advance to pretend to share snacks. People on both sides of the screen can have the same snack ready. The adults can pretend to hand it off – camera to camera – to a child's delight. Make sure snacks are simple like cheese or fruit slices. No messy food. No drinks.
- Play music and sing. People on both ends of the camera can hear songs. You can sing or dance together. You can join in with instruments.
- Keep it simple. A quick, spontaneous chat can be a fun way for adults and children to feel close to each other. And don't forget to lean in for a high five or a "kiss" to say hello or goodbye!

Help infants and toddlers engage in a video chat:

- Practice looking at the camera. Our eyes are drawn to the image on the screen or our own picture. But to make eye contact, you must look at the little camera hole. Minimizing the window that shows your face may make it easier to focus on others on the call.
- Use the same greeting each time. Use the same tone of voice. This will help infants and toddlers recognize you on screen. Young children use smell and touch to recognize people. Those are missing on video. Using lots of visual and sound cues can help them recognize you on video.
- Use a lot of gestures. Be close enough to the camera to show your hands and face in the frame.
- Think about what you say during a normal visit. Try to include those things in your video chat.
- Play peek-a-boo with a surprise. Turn the camera away from you, then back to your face a few times. Then surprise the child by showing a book, or toy, or something else you want to talk about.
- Prepare a little song or nursery rhyme to use during your video calls.

Reach out if you need help:

- Contact your child's Social Worker to discuss any concerns or to share your suggestions to improve communications.