



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Research Centre for Children and Families

Family Time – tips for using video chats

Fostering lifelong connections

Keeping connected with video chats

Video chatting is a useful way for keeping children and family members connected when there is distance between them. Video chats can give children an opportunity to build relationships, communicate with, and learn from family members on the other side of the screen. Many video chat apps, such as FaceTime, Skype and Zoom are free to use and easy to download to smartphones.

Tips for supporting children

Choose a good time of day

Using video chat means children have to sit and focus on the screen. It's important to figure out the best time of day for the child. For example, times of the day when they are the most settled or have the most energy rather than times of the day when they are hungry, restless or tired.

Keep video chats to a reasonable length

It might be difficult for some children to sit and focus on the screen for extended periods of time. Their age and other needs should be considered when deciding how long a video chat should go for. This could involve a trial and error process. In the beginning, keep call lengths to a shorter time period and allow it to go for longer if you can hold the child's attention. This helps manage expectations of family members and prevents disappointment when children get restless. You could also try having short video chats more frequently, for example, two short video chats per week instead of one longer video chat per week.

Prompt the child to focus on sight and sound

Since video chat only involves sight and sound, help the child to concentrate on those senses. For example, adults can repeat questions raised by the family member on the other side of the screen or point out things the child can see and identify.

Have materials at the ready

Ask the child what they would like to show their family member or think about what activities can be incorporated into the video chat before it takes place and ensure they are within reach during the video chat e.g. their latest artwork, storybooks, musical instruments. This way precious time and the child's attention span won't be lost when scrambling to find things during the video chat. This can also help children to connect in a 'show and tell' style format.

Tips for adults

Practice looking at the camera

Know where the camera is on your screen or computer and try to look directly into the camera as much as possible. We tend to keep our eyes on our own image or the image of the child on the screen but to make sure we are making eye contact, it's best to look into the camera. Having eye contact is much better for interactive communication and promoting connection.

Be aware of what the child can see and hear

Get rid of unnecessary clutter from the space behind you and try to minimise distracting noises throughout your video chat. For example, if you are video chatting from a laptop or tablet, turn your mobile phone to silent before the video chat begins. If there is background noise during the video chat from a truck or plane passing by or other household members, you can mute your microphone until the noise passes.

For more information

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w sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families

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Tips for adults

Allow movement and mobility

Where possible, use a smart phone, tablet or laptop so both you and the child can move around to show different views or items and incorporate different activities.

Use a lot of gestures

Hand gestures are an important way in which we communicate and convey messages. Being too close to the camera will mean that the child can't see your hands. Instead, sit a little further away from the camera so the child can see the usual hand gestures you make while speaking. You can also incorporate other hand gestures like waves, clapping, thumbs ups and high fives.

Use consistent greetings and tone of voice

When meeting in person, infants and toddlers rely on all of their senses to recognise people, including smell and touch. During video chats, toddlers and infants can rely only on sight and sound. By using consistent greetings and tone of voice, you can provide visual and sound cues to help children recognise you on video chat.

Books

Virtual Grandma: A how-to guide on virtually connecting with little ones up to age five using FaceTime, Skype, and other apps. For grandparents, aunts, uncles, godparents, overseas military parents by Alison Hillhouse

Fun activities to incorporate into video chats

1. **Read a book together** – The family member on the other end of the camera can read a story to the child. With infants, you can use picture books and flash cards. Older children can choose their favourite book and read it to the family member. If both the child and family member have a copy of the book, this can help to connect you physically through an object too. Storybooks that are relevant to the child and family's culture can be used to develop cultural connections and understanding.
 2. **Play music, dance and sing** – People on both ends of the camera can hear songs and sing or dance together, and join in with instruments. With younger children, use familiar rhymes like 'itsy bitsy spider', 'baa baa black sheep' and the alphabet song. With older children, you could ask them to play their favourite song and look up the lyrics so you can sing along too or ask them to teach you the latest fad dance moves such as 'flossing'. Song and dance that have cultural significance can also be used to promote cultural connections for children. Family members can teach children songs in their language and/or cultural dances.
 3. **Share a meal or snacks together** – You could organise a video chat to coincide with a meal or snack time and prepare for both the child and family member on the other side of the screen to be eating the same foods. With younger children, adults can pretend to feed the child through the screen. Older children might appreciate having conversations over a meal at dinner time like they normally would in person.
 4. **Use effects, filters and backgrounds** – Playing around with effects, filters and backgrounds can be fun for children to see or use themselves. Many video chat services allow you to change filters or effects on your screen. For example, FaceTime allows you to add effects like 'comic book', 'camcorder' and 'watercolour'. You can also add 'Animojis', text, and shapes to the video chat. Other video chat services like Zoom allow you to add a virtual background from an image you save to your computer such as a tropical beach scene, the Hogwarts castle from Harry Potter or a place of cultural significance.
 5. **Have a staring contest** – Begin by having both players close their eyes. On the count of three, both players open their eyes and stare at the screen. The first player to blink loses. This is a fun game to play together that does not require any equipment.
 6. **Play 'peek a boo' with infants and toddlers** – Begin by turning the camera away from you, then back to your face and saying 'peek a boo'. You could mix things up by surprising children with toys or something you would like to talk about when the camera comes back to you.
 7. **Play 'I spy'** – 'I spy' is a guessing game where one player chooses an object in sight and says to the other player 'I spy with my little eye, something beginning with...' naming the first letter of the object. Children and family members can take turns and give instructions like 'look up', 'look to the left' and so on, to assist the other player to guess the object.
 8. **Share jokes** – Incorporate some humour into your video chats by telling jokes. If you don't know any good ones, look some up beforehand.
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Resources and useful links

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

<http://babyation.com/5-video-chatting-tips-babies-toddlers/>

<https://www.univision.com/papas-y-mamas-en/technology/10-activities-to-make-family-video-calls-fun-for-kids>

<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/61888/11-tricks-making-video-chats-friends-more-fun-and-immersive>

<https://www.alifeoverseas.com/8-tips-for-keeping-kids-engaged-during-phone-or-video-calls/>

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2535-five-tips-to-make-the-most-of-video-chats>

<https://adventuresinnanaland.com/fun-games-to-play-over-skype/>