

Using Media Effectively with Young Children and Virtual Visitation

Part One: *Virtual Communication with Young Children*

Frequently Asked Questions and Resource Links

While in-person visitation is the best way to support families, it isn't always possible during this emergency. Now more than ever, it is critically important that birth and foster parents partner together to ensure that children experience continuity of relationships and can maintain contact with the people they love. In the second installment of our new webinar series COVID-19: The New Normal, Dr. Rachel Barr shares research and practical tips on how virtual communication can be effectively utilized to maintain and strengthen relationships for children ages 0-5.

Below, Dr. Barr has provided several resources to help support birth and foster parents with facilitating effective virtual visits as well as answers to some of our participants most frequently asked questions.

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the data saying about infants younger than 6 months old? Babies as young as 2 months old have been found to benefit from video visits.

At what age can children recognize their parents? How does that translate to infants who have been in foster since birth? Babies can intuitively remember and recognize the sound of their mother's voice as early as a few weeks old. Even when separated very early, babies still benefit from video visitation.

Are you assuming that everyone has a cell phone or laptop? We know that not all parents will have access and this only applies to those who do but this is a good reason for agencies to provide these to families.

What do you do when a child doesn't want to interact with bios via chat? Explain to parent that it's normal for children to need time to adjust to this new format and it may take a few tries to figure out what works best. Be patient and get creative.

Should I sit with my foster child who is 20 months old when he video chats with his mom? It's very helpful for the foster parent to be present and engaged during video visits with small children. Having support on the child's side of the screen is critical and provides a great opportunity for the birth and foster parent to get to know one another.

Can you speak to fathers and how this supports the relationship with fathers? Much of the research conducted was with fathers separated from their children through military deployment or incarceration so yes, this works for fathers.

What to do when you have a 3year old that is excited & runs from one room to another saying "watch this momma?" This is a great opportunity for the foster parent to support the toddler and parent. You could hold the phone and follow the child's exploits so the parent can watch them play or you could follow the child as they hold the phone and talk through what the child is trying to share.

What do you recommend for foster parents who have older and younger siblings? I have an 8 month old and 17 month old who show no interest in video chatting, they only want to hold the device.

Having a conversation with the parent in advance of the visit to plan interactive and engaging activities is key. Engaging the older child as a helper and giving them choices of what they would like to do during the visit is another effective strategy.

How do you suggest coordinating video visits between children and a parent who is the source of trauma to the children? It is critical that the foster parent be engaged in the visit to support the children. You can start with shorter calls and explain that the visit may need to be cut short if the children become upset. You can also ask the parent share to pre-recorded videos and do the same with the children.

Do you see a better relationship and understanding between birth and foster parents after these visits? Doing these visits well requires coordination and cooperation from parents on both sides of the screen. When foster parents are actively engaged to help make video visits meaningful it can strengthen birth and foster parent relationships.

How best to facilitate virtual visits when there are language barriers between parents and foster parents? Using toys and props is helpful. Games and songs can also make these visits easier to facilitate. Often times the children serve as a language broker and can help to bridge between parents.

Are any of these studies done on children with developmental delays or other issues? These visits have actually been shown to be less anxiety provoking for children with autism. Video visits can also be easier for children with motor skills challenges to engage in. To be effective, it is important for the adults to help translate the child's real-world interests to the screen.

How effective is the technique with siblings? Video visits are most effective between siblings 0-5 when the adult present in each household is actively engaged and providing support. It's very helpful to take a coordinated approach with things to play with on both sides of the screen.

Do you have suggestions for caregivers who have issues with the bio parents? Or ones that have restraining orders? It's important to be intentional about what is shared in the physical space to avoid disclosing any identifying information about where the foster parent lives. The foster parent should be present and monitor the visit to ensure that identifying information is not disclosed.

Isn't screen time not recommended for children under 2 years old? The American Academy of Pediatrics has actually indicated that video chat is an exception to the screen time rule.

How do you set up meeting norms and video chat etiquette with birth parents? Expectations for video visits should be as close as possible to those of in-person visits. It is helpful to explain to parents that this is an important set-aside time and it's important for them to be present and sober because their child will notice any odd behaviors. Agency staff can help set and reinforce boundaries and expectations.

What suggestions do you have around scheduling video visits? It is helpful to have a consistent schedule and routine so that these visits are as predictable as possible for small children. To begin, it may be helpful to have shorter but more frequent video visits as the child adjusts to the new format. It's



important to think about times that the child is most likely to engage (after nap or mealtime, before bed).

Will this cause adjustment problems when in-person visits resume? It will actually be easier for children to transition to in-person visits due to the continuity of contact and familiarity.

Participant Comments

“Even at a few days old doing a video chat with the bio parents gives the parents a sense of relief to SEE that baby is ok. Gives them more of a reason to want to do better.”

“I feel it’s very important for the person with the child to “buy into” the visit. That can make the difference between a good visit or a GREAT visit!!”

"I really appreciate the idea of the bio parent doing the video call and child having the same items on both sides of the screen - great idea. Also having the bio parent watch the child play - love it! “

“Little ones love singing songs with hand signs and movement, especially helpful for parents that struggle with reading.”

“I think this is a valuable tool for foster or adoptive parents as well. Speaking from experience we were much more comfortable with our first in person visit after having several video visits.”

Resource Links

For the latest research in positive child development visit:

<https://positiveparentingnews.org/>

For ideas about interactive and fun activities to make video visits more engaging visit:

<https://www.pbs.org/>

For tips and resources to make the most of screen time with children 0-3 visit:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/screen-sense>

For information about Just Beginnings, our parenting and visitation program for incarcerated teen parents visit:

<https://www.justbeginning.org/> or <https://www.facebook.com/JustBeginningProgram/>

Dr. Rachel Barr's lab info:

www.elp.georgetown.edu/

<https://www.ivanhoe.com/positive-parenting/touchscreens-and-toddlers-2/>

<https://www.facebook.com/pg/GeorgetownELP>