

Using Media Effectively with Young Children and Virtual Visitation

Part One Summary: *Virtual Communication with Young Children*

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. One of the world's leading experts in the area of media and small children, Dr. Barr has worked extensively with separated families and has over 20 years of experience doing research in this area.

The information below highlights some of the key takeaways from the discussion and provides tips to help parents make the most of virtual visitation with young children. Additionally, 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](#).

Key Research Takeaways

The most important thing to know is that research proves that children, even babies, can build and maintain meaningful relationships through virtual visitation if the adults work together to create the right environment. **These visits work best when the foster parent is actively engaged to support the child in communicating and having fun with the parent.**

- Studies show that small [children physically respond to parents with equal enthusiasm](#) during both in person and video visits
- Studies found that [video chat](#) actually [works better than phone](#) for young children ages 0-5 because it allows for back and forth interaction which is critical to relationship formation
- Small children process information differently when interacting via video chat with someone over a screen than they do by talking over the phone and benefit greatly from having both [visual and auditory cues](#).
- [Children feel safer and happier](#) when interacting with parents via video chat than they do by phone.
- Small children have been shown to [learn new things](#) and [feel comforted](#) via video chat in ways that they are unable to do by phone.
- Children were more [willing to interact with their parent in real life](#) after a week of experiencing (6) 15 minute interactive video visits compared to children who only heard their parent by phone or pre-recorded video.
- Babies [as young as 2 months](#) of age were found to benefit from virtual visitation.

Helpful Tips to Overcome the 5 Most Common Challenges to Video Visitation

1. **Difficulty holding child's attention-** Very small children tend to have limited attention spans which can make virtual visits particularly challenging. To make these visits as meaningful and enjoyable as possible:
 - take a moment to **orient the child** before jumping in to the visit
 - short calls are best, **15 minutes is ideal to start**—but can have several calls per week
 - make experience as **social** and **interactive** as possible (play games like hokey pokey/Simon says/peek a boo/show and tell)
 - schedule for times when **child is most likely to be engaged** (after a nap, after meal time, during playtime)
 - Plan ahead with **props** and things child will be interested in (music, toys, pets)

2. **Problems with eye contact and sharing attention-** It can be difficult to find the sweet spot that allows for eye contact when using screens. It can also be challenging for parents and children to engage in one another's environments across screens. To be successful, adults on both sides of screen need to be actively engaged. Consider the following tips:
 - babies under six months benefit from parent directing visual attention and sharing objects across the screen, parent can **bring objects to the screen** to show baby
 - **support from foster parent** in the room with child, "she's pointing out the window at the garbage truck"
 - **show interest** in what's happening on other side of screen
 - pretend to **share snacks across screen**, have a tea party, work on a project. Etc.

3. **Loss of physical contact-** Video visitation with small children works best when the foster parent is engaged and acting as the heart and hands of the birth parent. This is an excellent opportunity for birth and foster parent partnerships to be built and strengthened. To help children feel physically close to parents across screens:
 - talk through and **act out physical touch**, "daddy is squeezing you tight"
 - foster parent can **do physical actions in coordination with the birth parent**. For example, the birth parent can recite the words to *this little piggy* while the foster parent wiggles the child's toes in unison
 - **encourage child to show affection** across screen (blow kisses, kiss phone, etc)

4. **Technical problems-** I'm sure all of us have experienced a glitch or two as the world has become increasingly virtual. These visits will likely be no exception so it's important to have a game-plan for how parents will work together to handle technical challenges. Consider doing the following:
 - **set the expectation** for the child that there may be challenges
 - talk the child through/**explain what's happening**
 - **play through** technical difficulties to keep child engaged
 - be **patient** and **flexible**

5. **Toddler independence-** Parents of toddlers know that these feisty little people have a mind of their own and a strong will to boot. They crave independence which can make a highly



structured video visit extremely challenging. Luckily, there are several tips for making these visits smoother:

- foster parents can walk around with the camera and **follow toddler's lead**
- an open-mic style video chat where **child can come and go** to the screen as they like
- if they aren't up for a chat it's okay to **try again** later
- **read aloud, sing, or dance** to grab the toddler's attention and keep them engaged