

GUIDANCE ON VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION WITH VERY YOUNG CHILDREN



RESEARCH

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends avoiding screen time for children under 18 months except for video chats. **Babies of all ages can have meaningful interactions through video calls and, beginning at 6 months, they can even start to learn via screen if proper interactions are supported between caregivers.** First and most importantly, give babies a minute to orient themselves to the screen. Smile at them, call them by their name, and allow children to smile in return, the pattern of back and forth engagement is important to keep children engaged.

FAMILY TIME: ON SCREEN IS DIFFERENT, BUT FAMILIAR

Start simple, sharing daily routines, singing songs and reading stories. Simple play and sharing's about one's day are best for little ones. Babies love silly faces. As online communication continues, everyone will begin to be more accustomed to virtual togetherness. Museums and zoos around the world are offering virtual opportunities via their websites and social media- "experiencing the same activity" across screens and talking with your child about the animal, colors, or actions is another way virtual family time can evolve.

TIME

The length of your virtual communication should depend on the child's engagement and tolerance, which in turn will depend on many things including:

- the child's developmental age
- the relationships involved
- the support offered by the caregiver

Some children will only be engaged for a few minutes. For very young children 10-15 minutes is ideal.

MAKE IT INTERACTIVE, USE PROPS

Dancing, peek-a-boo, Simon Says, nursery rhymes, finger plays, picking a book you can read to/together with the child are all great ways to engage in virtual communication. The goal is to make the interaction enjoyable and fun, creating opportunities for connection. Props to consider using during your virtual communication include:

- Puppets and stuffed animals
- Toy Cars
- Legos or blocks
- Pets
- Favorite Books

BE PRESENT

The more the caregivers can support the child to share and interact, the better. The caregiver is the heart and hands for the person on the other side of the screen. By taking this role you are helping foster a relationship through the screen.

Examples of what this can look like include:

- Going through the motions of “this little piggy” while the person on the other side chants the rhyme
- Helping child to spin during a virtual “dance”

EXAMPLES OF WAYS TO INTERACT:

- Infants younger than 6 months are eager to learn the world around them. Take them on a walking tour around your house or neighborhood and explore the world! Name and describe items as you are walking by.
- If the child has a favorite toy car, the person on the other screen can roll the car making the appropriate “zoom” noise, while the child watches and, if he or she has language, instructs what is to happen next.
- Meet during eating time- allow the child to show you their food, the person on the other screen can describe color, taste, or even make the same meal and eat “alongside them”.
- Making music together by banging pots, hands drumming on surfaces.
- Remember to follow the child’s lead.

EXPLAIN TECHNICAL ISSUES

We all know technology is not perfect, taking time to walk through the difficulties and explain in real time why it’s not working will help children, and even babies, process and lessen confusion. If the screen is buffering, you can say “oh no the WiFi is reconnecting” or if the call drops, you can say “let’s call back, the connection was probably bad”.

REMINDERS:

- It will not be perfect on the first call no matter how much previous prep was completed by everyone. Trial and error might be needed.
- Adjusting the frequency and length of calls will correlate to the age of the child.