

# Making Digital Visits Go Smoothly

*Written by the Alaska Center for Resource Families*

## Why Is Family Contact Going Digital?

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the State of Alaska Office of Children's Services to move temporarily to family contact and visitation through video and phone instead of face-to-face. Regular family contact helps children and youth keep connected to birth parents and supports reunification. *We are just doing it a different way!* This guide suggests ways to help your digital visits go more smoothly and help you make the most of technology.

The State of Alaska Office of Children's Services has provided guidelines asking foster parents to help facilitate and supervise electronic visits. Regular daily phone calls between parents and children are recommended. Foster parents are asked to document the date and time of contacts, any issues or concerns raised during the contacts, and send the caseworker a weekly summary.

### Birth parents...

This is your time to connect with your child. Even if technology makes us work harder your child needs you and wants to see you.

### Foster parents...

You are key in making this work! The child in your home needs your help and support to be able to make these visits a success.

## TECH THAT MIGHT BE USED:

*Facebook Messenger*

*Skype*

*Zoom*

*Facetime*

*Phone Calls*

*Texts*



## Activities for Virtual Visits Based on Age/Developmental Stage

Remember all activities should be personalized based on the child's personality, development, and the goals for family contact. These are just suggestions and may not be appropriate for all visits.

<b>Infant (0-17 months)</b>	<p>If child is napping: check in on the child with caregiver, ask for an update, sing/talk quietly</p> <p>If child is awake: sing/talk quietly, read a book while caregiver holds the child, watch the child play, smile, laugh</p>
<b>Toddler (18 months-3 years)</b>	<p>Have a meal together, practice animal noises and sounds, read a book together, repeat after me or do as I do activities.</p>
<b>Pre-School (3-5 years)</b>	<p>Have a meal together, do activities that use physical movement (like follow the leader: Can you jump with me? Try these jumping jacks!), play music together (bang on pots, pans, etc.), Freeze dancing (play music, pause music and freeze), put on a sock puppet show</p>
<b>School Aged (5-8 years)</b>	<p>Card games, reading a book to each other (parent one page, child the next), Simon says, eat lunch together, have a tea party, dance together, use funny filters to change "characters" while talking.</p>
<b>Pre-Adolescence (9-12 years)</b>	<p>Pick a topic that interests the child and/or create an activity around an interest the child has. Give permission for the child to "check in", have a TikTok dance competition, do your hair/make up together, work on puzzles together, do virtual Eye-spy.</p>
<b>Adolescence (13-18 years)</b>	<p>Make plans with them in advance if possible, inquire about their interests, validate the difficulty in physical distancing, work out together, enjoy a snack or meal together, prep dinner, download apps that allows you to see each other and play games, play 20 questions.</p>
<b>Young Adult (19-21 years)</b>	<p>Check in about work and significant others, engage in activities/games that require more than one-word responses. Make dinner together, ask how they are doing with physical distancing.</p>

## Developing Realistic Expectations

Children need to have contact with their parents and parents need to see their children regularly. During these times we need to look differently at family contact and visitation.

### Remember this:

- There might be disappointment in knowing video calls cannot replace in-person contact.
- Using video or phones to replace in person contact may be frustrating for everyone. Expect that the child may be unable to focus on conversations and may be distracted during video calls.
- Children's reactions to not being with the birth parents can be unpredictable. They may be difficult to console and watch over video.
- Due to internet connections or technical difficulties, start times may be delayed or interruptions may occur. Create contingency plans. Plan for if something goes wrong or someone doesn't show up or the technology does not work. Stay flexible and be genuine.

### Key to success is preparation. Here are tips to get the best from visits.

- Practice looking at the camera, so your child sees you looking at them.
- With young kids, adults should talk and plan ahead. Discuss the activity and plan to support each other during the family contact.
- Be creative and flexible. A few 20-minute visits over a couple days instead of single 1-hour visit might be easier. If the visits are difficult, work with each other and the caseworker to find something that works for everyone.
- Consider how others may react to your background or environment. Remove things that might trigger unwanted behaviors. Find a quiet place that allows for respectful privacy. Consider using a background on the video conference to avoid distractions.
- Use as big a screen as you can on the child's end so they can see the parent better. But use what you have. Simple tech is better than no visits and that includes phones.

### Develop rituals to do every visit.

- Instead of asking "How Are You" which is a difficult question for a young child to ask, ask a specific question like "what did you do this morning" or "what did you eat for lunch?"
- Develop a simple hello and good-bye ritual that children will recognize and have fun! Don't forget to "kiss" good bye or hug the phone and send it through the phone line.
- Have something to share/show each other and discuss what each person wants to see next visit. (for example, agree to draw a picture each evening about what you did and share that during the next visit).

## Children's Reactions During and After Visits

Using Skype or Facetime may be new or not new to children in foster care. But each child is unique and adapts differently to using technology. Here are some ways children react to digital visits and some strategies to help children cope with them.

### Possible Reactions to Digital Visits:

- Children may be ambivalent or uncertain about the person they see on the device. They may not want to participate in the visit because the person is not really there.
- Children may be sad, upset, or act out before, during, or after a digital visit. For example, a child may be upset because they cannot be with the person physically.
- Children may feel helpless or anxious because they cannot physically be with the person and it worries them.
- Children may get bored during digital visits and need help staying engaged.
- Children may have nightmares or sleep issues after a digital visit because it is different than seeing the person physically.
- During or after a visit, children may damage the device used for the visit. They may have a lot of emotions going on and throw the device out of anger.

### Strategies to Help Children Cope with Digital Visits:

- Talk with the child to make sure they understand that this is still a visit with the person, it is just using a device.
- Explain to the child why they are doing digital visits. Maybe let them know when in-person visits will happen again.
- Talk with the child after a visit and let them share their feelings about the visit. Ask what they enjoyed most about their digital visit.
- Adjust the frequency, length, and timing of digital visits. Maybe the child will benefit more from a 20-minute visit 3 times a week than a full hour visit.
- Text or call ahead to see if all is well for the digital visit. Ask the adult what the child has done or will do today so you can have more talking points with the child.
- Reassure and nurture the child after the visit. Listen to their concerns and comfort them.
- Brainstorm some activities for the next digital visit. Think to yourself how you could better the digital visit.
- Retrieve the device after the visit or make sure you are close by during the visit to assist with technological errors and ensure device safety.
- Tell them when the next digital visit will happen.

*Ideas Assembled by Gabby Wilkinson, ACRF*

## Safety and Confidentiality During Virtual Visits

When you are visiting “virtually,” do not forget to consider safety factors. Remember, whatever is in the screen can be seen by the other party. That can be things hanging on your wall, or sitting on your countertop, or even sitting at your table! You are bringing another person into your home on both sides of the screen when you have a video visit so make sure you are doing it safely.

To keep some privacy during this visit, look around and prepare your space for the visit ahead of time.

- *Do you have personal or identifiable information visible?*
- *Is there mail lying around with your address on it?*
- *Is the address on your house, or your street sign visible in the video?*
- *Do you have a schedule on your wall that shows when and where you are going to be?*
- *Do you have other children in your home? Are their full names visible anywhere in the area? Are you able to keep them out of the viewing area?*
- *Are there bank statements, prescription bottles, phone numbers, mental health information, social security number or other sensitive information around that might be visible?*
- *If you are sharing your screen and it is visible during the visit, what is on your desktop? Is there anything that you do not want others to see?*

You have a right to privacy on both sides of the screen. You may want to turn off the location feature on your cell phone before placing the call.

If the child is in your home, look to see that your visit place is hazard free and remove possible hazards. If, for instance, you hand the cell phone to a toddler, make sure there is nothing they can trip over if walking and looking at the phone. Watch for cords and loose rugs and unprotected stairs.



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