

Tips for Supporting Virtual Family Time

Family time, also known as parent-child visits, is a key factor in promoting family bonding and setting the stage for successful reunification after a child has been placed in out-of-home care. Although in-person contact is the preferred method for family time, there are extreme occasions when in-person contact is not appropriate or safe, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual family time, during which contact is established through video or streaming services, offers a safe alternative that allows parents and children to strengthen or maintain their relationship while not living together.

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This factsheet provides child welfare professionals with an overview of how they can promote successful virtual family time, including research about virtual interactions, how to prepare children and families, and tips and activities for visits. Although this factsheet is intended to guide virtual family time, many of the tips can be applied to other types of virtual contact that may be needed in child welfare, such as family team meetings, sibling contact, and caseworker contact with parents and children.

IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY TIME

Family time allows children and parents to maintain and strengthen bonds, which is critical when they are separated due to out-of-home care. It also provides opportunities for caseworkers to assess the parent-child relationship and determine how to support it, if needed. Research has shown that family time can help lead to reunification, reduce time in out-of-home care, and reduce child behavior problems (Nesmith, 2014).

For a more detailed discussion about the importance of family time and related best practices, read the Children's Bureau Information Memorandum [ACYF-CB-IM-20-02](#). You can also review the Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families' [Topical Brief: Sources of Best Practices for Parent-Child Visitation](#).

USE OF VIRTUAL CONTACT WITH CHILDREN

Virtual contact has been used in many fields when in-person contact has not been possible or warranted. It can be used to link patients with professionals, such as physicians and mental health providers, and connect parents and children who are apart, such as in the cases of parental incarceration or deployment.

Although virtual contact has not been used or studied extensively in child welfare as a method for family time, it offers a viable alternative to in-person contact for the purpose of maintaining or strengthening parent-child relationships. In one study, social workers who had used virtual family time reported that it helped to support reunification efforts, allowed families to connect and bond, and revitalized families' energy (Quinn et al., 2015).

Children—even those who are very young—can benefit from virtual contact. For example, children under the age of 2 years can learn new words through live interaction in video chats (Roseberry et al. 2014; Myers et al., 2017), and they can pay attention and respond to live video interactions and later recognize someone in person they had only met virtually (Myers et al., 2017). Furthermore, although the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) discourages the use of screen media for children under the age of 18 months, it makes an exception for video chatting (AAP, Council on Communications and Media, 2016).

HOW TO PREPARE FOR VIRTUAL FAMILY TIME

To help ensure successful virtual family time, caseworkers should take several preparatory steps. They will need to plan the technological aspects of virtual family time, including the virtual platform and how the participants will access the visits; develop back-up plans; and determine the level of supervision required. Caseworkers also will need to prepare all participating individuals and schedule the visits.

TECHNOLOGY ISSUES

As you begin to prepare for virtual family time with your clients, you will need to assess two technology-related issues: which platform to use and how the participants can attend the visit. These two issues go hand in hand.

When determining which platform (e.g., Zoom, FaceTime) to use, you should first check if your agency has already determined any required or preferred platforms. There are many platforms available, and each has its own characteristics and capabilities, including whether the service is free or must be paid for, its availability on certain types of devices or operating systems, whether there is a limit to the number of participants allowed during the session, whether there are time limits, and software security issues. If your agency does not have a policy or recommendation about which platform to use, you may want to discuss the possibilities with your supervisor or the information technology team at your agency.

When possible, platforms should include both audio and video, allow for the expected number of participants, and be available on

devices accessible to the participants. You should also be aware of whether the platform has a chat feature that allows either public or private messages (i.e., all participants or specific participants). Depending on the functionality, you may need to discuss whether and how to use the chat features with the participants before the first virtual family time visit.

As you determine which platform to use, you should keep in mind how the participants—which may include you, another agency staff member, the child, the birth parents, and the foster parents—will attend the virtual family time. Participants will need access to a device (e.g., cell phone, tablet, computer) on which the platform is available, and they also will need internet access through Wi-Fi, a cell phone plan, or other mechanism. If participants do not currently have access to a device or the internet, there are programs that may be able to assist. At the national level, check with [Everyone On](#) and the [Federal Communications Commission Lifeline program](#). You should also see if there are State or local programs in your area that can help, including checking with local internet and cell phone providers. Additionally, the Children's Bureau released a [letter](#) that describes Federal funding and other resources for the purchase of cell phones and other tools to assist with virtual contact.

If participants have not used the platform or device before, you may want to schedule a test session to make sure all features work for each participant. You should also make sure that whoever is leading the virtual family time understands the technology, including the platform's host functions (e.g., letting people into the session via the virtual waiting room).

LEVEL OF SUPERVISION

The case plan states whether family time needs to be supervised, but if you believe the virtual nature of the visit may affect that, you should consult with your supervisor and agency guidelines about how to proceed. If the family time is supposed to be unsupervised, you also may want to consult with the child, birth parents, and foster parents to gauge their comfort levels (New York City Administration for Children's Services, 2020). If the child is not old enough to be alone for virtual family time (e.g., a toddler who must be guided through using a device and actively participating), the visit will need to be supervised to some extent. If the child only needs assistance rather than supervision per the case plan, you may want to explore whether an older sibling or other responsible person in the house can support virtual family time (Arizona Department of Child Safety [DCS], 2020).

If the family time is for a sibling group that is placed in a home together, the caseworker should consider whether the family time should occur—and is allowed to occur—with the parent and all siblings as a group, with each sibling individually, or a mix of individual and group time in order to give each child a chance to talk or be on the screen (Arizona DCS, 2020). This could be an issue if there are large age gaps between the siblings. If the siblings live separately, however, continue to seek opportunities for [maintaining sibling relationships](#) as outlined by your agency's policy. Many of the same guidelines in this factsheet would apply to virtual sibling visits as well.

PREPARING PARTICIPANTS

Since this type of family time may be new to some or all of the participants, caseworkers should have separate meetings with the birth and foster parents—as well as the child, if age or developmentally appropriate—before the first visit to review expectations (theirs and yours), concerns they may have (including plans for addressing those concerns), and technological considerations (Arizona DCS, 2020). You should also discuss tips for successful virtual family time (see the Engaging Children During Virtual Family Time section in this factsheet) and how virtual family time can still be effective with children.

When preparing birth parents to participate in virtual family time, you should review guidelines for who is able to participate. If there are restrictions in the case plan, those would still apply to virtual family time. Relatives or others also in the birth parent's house may want to participate during the family time, and so you may need to determine how to balance a family's wishes with the requirements of the case plan and agency. Additionally, relatives or others—either in the house or in another home—may hear about the virtual family time visits and request their own time with the child. In responding to any requests, you should confer with the case plan, your supervisor, and—if needed—the courts.

If the birth and foster parents have not yet met, you also may want to set up a virtual meeting with them together, as appropriate, so they can get to know each other and set their own expectations (Braggs & Biron, 2020). The parents and caseworker should also discuss how they will let the child know

about the upcoming changes to family time and respond to any questions they may have. Additionally, if any of the participants may require a translator to fully participate, make sure to engage one early in the process to make sure they will be available. Do not use the child as a go-between for the families.

You also will need to prepare the child for virtual family time and reassure them that they will still be able to spend time with their parents. They may be disappointed, confused, or sad about not seeing their parents in person. Depending on the child's age and developmental level, you can explain why virtual family time is the best option, explain how it is expected to be temporary, and let them know about some activities they may be able to do with their parents. Some children may question why they cannot contact their parents on their own now that virtual family time is an option. You should explain to them—in a developmentally and age-appropriate manner—that you must still follow the guidelines in the case plan, which determines the level of contact between children and parents, and that these changes to family time are temporary. Foster parents can be a great resource for helping prepare the children, too.

SCHEDULING VIRTUAL FAMILY TIME

If there is an existing schedule for in-person visits, check with all participants to ensure that schedule still works. Participant schedules may change during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or their access to virtual platforms may be affected. Caseworkers should allot the number of hours per week as dictated by the case plan, but, if allowable, they may want to consider

adjusting time for each visit and number of visits to meet the needs of the parents and child. For example, younger children may have a shorter attention span for virtual family time, so more frequent visits may work better (Arizona DCS, 2020). If you do adjust the number and length of the visits, make sure the total time remains the same. For example, if the case plan includes two weekly visits for 1.5 hours each (3 hours total), you may be able to schedule three 1-hour visits per week for virtual family time. You also may want to consider trying to schedule visits during times when parent-child interactions may naturally occur, such as meals, tummy time, or getting ready for bed (Arizona DCS, 2020). Since screen time for children generally is not advised during meals or immediately before bedtime, try to emphasize that this is occurring as a special bonding time for the parent and child rather than something that should be a part of the normal routine.

BACK-UP PLANS

Even if you have researched the technology you will be using and thoroughly prepared all participants, you should also develop back-up plans for any technological or other issues that may arise. If there is a technological issue, such as a participant's device not working or poor audio or video connection on the virtual platform, how will you proceed? Hanging up and calling back or restarting the call often fixes technical issues, but this may not resolve them every time. Is it possible to switch to an audio call, or will you need to cancel the visit? Is there a back-up time set up? Are mechanisms in place to repair or replace the device? Examples of a nontechnological issue is the child or one

of the parents refusing to participate, being unable to participate, or not being in an appropriate state to participate (e.g., being obviously under the influence of substances). How will you attempt to ameliorate this situation? How will you explain it to the other participants? You should consult with your agency about how missed family time visits may affect case plan compliance or reunification, particularly when barriers or issues may be beyond the control of the parent.

HOW TO CONDUCT VIRTUAL FAMILY TIME

Although there are some similarities between in-person and virtual family time, caseworkers may need to adjust how the visits are conducted. This section reviews how to facilitate the call, tips for successful virtual family time, and ways to engage children.

FACILITATING THE CALL

The caseworker, or whoever is hosting the call, may want to open the connection 5 to 10 minutes prior to the scheduled start time, if possible, in case people want to test their connection or join early. At the beginning of the call, the host should lay out any rules, guidelines, expectations, timeframes, and other pertinent issues. Perhaps remind the participants of ways in which virtual family time may be similar to the in-person visits (e.g., families getting to share information and spend time with each other) as well as ways in which they may be different (e.g., no physical contact, limited shared activities). You should remind the participants, though, that there are plenty of ways in which family members can talk and play in a virtual environment.

GENERAL TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL FAMILY TIME

The following are tips you can share with families and build into the visits to promote successful family time:

- Avoid bright lights (e.g., a sun-filled window, a large lamp) behind them to prevent backlighting, which can make it hard to view them on the screen.
- Make sure the device has enough battery charge to last throughout the visit and have a charger handy in case it runs out.
- Use nonverbal cues (e.g., hand gestures, nodding) in addition to talking.
- Remember, however, that some nonverbal cues (e.g., subtle facial expressions, gestures that take place offscreen) may be harder to pick up, which could lead to miscommunication.
- Remember to protect your and others' privacy.
 - Items in the background (e.g., papers with personal information) may be visible to others, so move items that are behind or next to you as needed.
 - People nearby may be able to overhear conversations, so some participants may want to consider using a headset or earbuds with a microphone. This is not recommended for children age 3 and younger, and this may not be possible if multiple people need to listen at once.
 - Even though participants may be using portable devices, they should make sure they are in private locations during virtual family time (e.g., not in a coffee shop).

- Reduce possible distractions (e.g., silence phone ringers, close the door if there are others in the home).
- Be aware that children may become frustrated when parents multitask during family time (Quinn et al., 2015).
- Try to place the camera so that it is pointed directly at your face. The supporting adult should ensure that the camera is picking up the child's face. If a toddler is involved, a mobile device (if available) may be helpful so that the supporting adult can follow the child's movement.
- Gather any materials or props for the visit (e.g., books, pictures).

After the family time visit, caseworkers should indicate in the case file that it occurred virtually and take notes as they normally would for an in-person visit.

ENGAGING CHILDREN DURING VIRTUAL FAMILY TIME

Parents may need to adjust how they interact with their children in order to more fully engage them. Parents should still be aware that even young children perceive differences in in-person versus virtual interactions.

To help bridge that gap, increase attentiveness, and better engage their children, parents can use a variety of tools, including adjusting how they communicate with their children, games, and other activities. Here are some tips you can use to coach parents about how to better engage their children during virtual family time:

- Since parents are not able to touch their children to show physical affection, they may need to emphasize other types of communication, such as facial expressions,

smiling, and laughing. Additionally, birth parents can describe or act out the physical touch (e.g., saying "mommy is hugging you right now" while hugging her arms around herself) or request that the foster parent use physical actions on their end that match what the birth parent is saying (e.g., hugging the child, wiggle the child's toes while the birth parent recites "this little piggy") (McClure & Barr, 2017; Youth Law Center & Quality Parenting Initiative, 2020). This can be especially important for young children, who rely on physical interactions for bonding and to maintain attention (McClure & Barr, 2017).

- For young children, hellos and goodbyes can be very important to framing the family time visit and providing closure (Burnson, 2020). It may be helpful to develop a goodbye ritual to help toddlers and young children experience the end of the call in a positive way, such as encouraging the child—if old enough—to press the button that ends the visit after they say goodbye out loud (E. McClure, personal communication, May 20, 2020). It may take a few tries to find the best ritual for each child.
- Parents should follow their children's lead (Burnson, 2020). If they appear to be losing attention with one activity, move to another activity or perhaps change locations (e.g., moving from the family room to a bedroom or outside).
- Foster parents can help very young children engage well during the visit by remaining in the room and being responsive to the interaction (e.g., narrating what the parent is doing) rather than being a passive bystander (Barr et al., 2018). Children may

depend on the social cues of the person watching with them to help make sense of the virtual interactions. You may want to explain why this is occurring to the birth parent so they do not view it as the foster parent telling the child how to act or controlling the family time.

- Parents can encourage the child to show affection across screens (e.g., blow kisses) (McClure & Barr, 2017; Youth Law Center & Quality Parenting Initiative, 2020).

Just as with in-person family time, a mix of talking and activities may help engage children and enhance interactions. The activities chosen should reflect the age or developmental level of the child. If needed, you can help parents decide which activities may be appropriate for their children. Here are some examples of activities parents can plan for their family time (Arizona DCS, 2020; Iowa Department of Human Services, 2020; Braggs & Biron, 2020; Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children & Prevent Child Abuse Arizona; 2020):

- Place toys in the room with the child so the parent can watch and react to the playtime.
- Use props (e.g., toys or other items from the home) to show the child.
- Sing or play music with the child.
- Have the child play outside with the parent watching and interacting.
- Have a snack or meal together.
- Read a book to or with the child (perhaps with the parent having the same book as the child).
- Ask the child to give a tour of their room or house.

- Guide the child through an art project or color together.
- Bake or cook together.
- Share jokes.
- Make up a story together (e.g., take turns for each sentence).
- Use sound effects or different voices.
- Play games (e.g., I Spy With My Little Eye, trivia, Pictionary, Boggle, freeze dance).
- Use the games or filters that may come with the virtual platform.

For younger children, parents may need to determine the activities on their own, but they may want to include older children when planning out what to do during virtual family time. For additional ideas, refer to the links in the Additional Resources section of this factsheet.

CONCLUSION

When crises or other situations prevent in-person family time for children in out-of-home care, it remains critical for parents and children to maintain contact to allow them to bond, share, and comfort each other. Virtual family time offers a temporary substitution in these times. Although some of the practices used for in-person visits may still apply to virtual family time, caseworkers need to prepare themselves and the children and families for the certain changes that come with a virtual environment. Even with the differences, however, the goal of family time remains the same: to allow parents and children to continue developing and strengthening their relationship to promote reunification.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Virtual Visitation Guidelines: Guidance and Resources to Support Virtual Parenting Time](#) (Arizona DCS)
- ["Top Tips to Engage With Young Children When Video Calling"](#) (Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children & Prevent Child Abuse Arizona)
- [Topical Brief: Sources of Best Practices for Parent-Child Visitation](#) (Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families)
- ["Using Media Effectively With Young Children and Virtual Visitation: Part One: Virtual Communication With Young Children"](#) (Youth Law Center)
- [Screen Sense: What the Research Says About the Impact of Media on Children Aged 0–3 Years Old](#) (ZERO TO THREE)
- ["5 Tips to Make the Most of Video Chats"](#) (ZERO TO THREE)
- ["Successful Video Visits With Young Children"](#) (National Council on Crime & Delinquency)
- [Family Time: Supportive Virtual Family Time Program and Training \[eLearning\]](#) (The Alliance, University of Washington School of Social Work)

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