

Virtual Family Time: Tips for Families

Family time, also known as parent-child visits, is critical to promoting family bonding and setting the stage for successful reunification. Although in-person contact is preferred, 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 you contact your child through video, offers a safe alternative that allows parents and children to continue to strengthen their relationship while not living in the same home. Virtual contact has been used in other fields to link people with professionals, such as doctors or therapists, as well as connect parents and children who are apart, such as when parents are away in the military or incarcerated. Even though spending time with your child in person is preferred, virtual family time can

still be fun, nurturing, and cherished when face-to-face meetings cannot occur. This factsheet provides parents with information about successful virtual family time sessions, including how to prepare, tips, and activities.

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PREPARING FOR VIRTUAL FAMILY TIME

Although the goals of virtual family time are similar to in-person family time, it will still take some additional preparation to make sure everything goes smoothly. Before your first virtual family time session, you should have a meeting with your caseworker to discuss your expectations and concerns—and theirs—and how the session will be run. When you talk with your caseworker, find out about the technology you'll need to participate, if there are any changes to when the sessions will occur and how long they will last, who will be present, what the back-up plan is if the virtual platform isn't working correctly, etc. You also may want to discuss activities for the session if you're nervous about what to do. (See *Engaging Your Child During Virtual Family Time* in this factsheet for tips and activities.) If you haven't met your child's foster parents yet, you can ask your caseworker to set up a meeting. This will allow you to get to know each other and talk about the virtual family time.

If this is a change for you or your child, the switch to virtual family time may cause a variety of emotions, including disappointment, sadness, or nervousness. You also may be concerned about how virtual family time may affect when you will be able to reunify with your child or how your privacy will be protected during visits. Discuss these issues and concerns with your caseworker or other professionals who are supporting you, such as a therapist or attorney.

Additionally, depending on your living situation, it may be challenging to find a location that you feel comfortable sharing with others or that is private. If you have any concerns, speak with your caseworker so they can help you find an agreeable solution.

The following sections go into more detail about some preparation activities for your virtual family time.

HAVING THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY

In order to participate, you'll need three things:

- A **device** that allows for video chats, such as a smartphone, computer/laptop, or tablet (such as an iPad)
- The **app** that will be used (e.g., Zoom, Skype)
- An **internet connection** (such as through Wi-Fi, your cell phone data plan, broadband, etc.)

If you do not have access to all three of these items, you should immediately contact your caseworker so they can help you obtain them. There may be resources available to help, such as [EveryoneOn](#) and the [Federal Communications Commission Lifeline program](#) as well as State and community programs. Remember, not all apps are available on every device, so you should make sure your device is able to download it.

If you haven't used the app or device before, you may want to schedule a test session with your caseworker or someone else to make sure everything runs smoothly.

SCHEDULING THE SESSIONS

If the existing family time schedule doesn't work for you, let your caseworker know. During times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, your personal or work schedule may change, or your access to devices or the internet may be affected. It's also possible that your caseworker may want to adjust the schedule to better meet your child's needs. For example, younger children may have a shorter attention span for virtual family time, so shorter, more frequent visits may work better. If the schedule is adjusted, make sure your total weekly time remains the same. For example, if your case plan includes two weekly sessions for 1.5 hours each (3 hours total), it may be okay to have three 1-hour sessions per week for virtual family time (still 3 hours total). Also, if you have multiple children living in the same foster home, your caseworker may want to consider whether the virtual family time should occur with them separately or together. Depending on the children themselves and their age differences, it may be difficult for them to share a screen or get enough time with you. If you have questions or concerns about the schedule or ensuring you have enough contact with your children, speak with your caseworker and/or attorney.

FAMILY TIME SUPERVISION

Whether your family time is supervised or unsupervised may follow the same guidelines as in-person sessions, but it's possible that could change, either due to agency policy regarding virtual family time or the circumstances of the visit. For example, young children may not be able to participate in virtual family time on their own, so a foster parent, sibling, or someone else may need to assist.

BACK-UP PLANS

Even if you and your caseworker have discussed how you will join the session and what to expect, you should still make sure there is a back-up plan in case there are any technological or other issues that pop up. For example, what will you do if your device is not working? Hanging up and calling back or restarting the call often fixes technical issues, but this may not resolve them every time. Is there another device you could use? Is there a back-up time set up? What if your child's or the caseworker's device isn't working? Are you able to switch to a phone call for the family time session? Hopefully everything will run smoothly, but it's best to have a plan in place for all the what-ifs.

Video Chats and Young Children

Did you know that even children under 2 years old can learn through video chats? Researchers have found that children under 2 can [learn new words](#) in video chats. Children under 2 also can [pay attention and respond](#) to these chats and later recognize someone in person who they had only previously met virtually. Also, even though the American Academy of Pediatrics discourages the use of screens for children under the age of 18 months, it makes an [exception for video chatting](#).

PARTICIPATING IN VIRTUAL FAMILY TIME

Although there are similarities between in-person and virtual family time, virtual family time will likely be a different experience than what you're used to or what you expected. This section provides tips to make virtual family time sessions run as smoothly as possible and tips and activities for spending time with your child during the sessions.

GENERAL TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL FAMILY TIME

These tips will help improve the communication you have with your child and others during virtual family time:

- Avoid bright lights (e.g., a sun-filled window, a large lamp) behind you to prevent backlighting, which can make it hard for others to see you on the screen.
- Make sure your 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 for your child to see on a screen, which could lead to miscommunication.
- Remember to protect your 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.
- Reduce possible distractions around you (e.g., silence your phone's ringer, close the door if there are others in the home).
- Try not to multitask during the visit, which may frustrate your children.
- 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 your child's face. If your child is young, such as a toddler, a mobile device (if available) may be helpful so that it's easier to follow your child's movement.
- Gather any materials or props for the session (e.g., books, pictures).

ENGAGING YOUR CHILD DURING VIRTUAL FAMILY TIME

You may need to adjust how you interact with your child during virtual family time. To help better engage your child and increase their attentiveness, you can use a variety of strategies, including shifting how you communicate with your child, games, and other activities. Here are some tips for how you can better engage your child during virtual family time:

- Since you are not able to touch your child to show physical affection, you may need to emphasize other types of communication, such as facial expressions, smiling, and laughing. Additionally, you can describe or act out the physical touch (e.g., saying "mommy is hugging you right now" while hugging your arms around herself) or request that the foster parent use physical actions on their end that match what you are saying (e.g., hugging the child, wiggling your child's toes while you sing "this little piggy").
- For young children, you can use the same hello and goodbye routine each time to help frame the family time session and provide closure at the end. It may be helpful to have a goodbye ritual to help toddlers and young children experience the end of the visit in a positive way, such as encouraging the child—if old enough—to press the button that ends the session after they say goodbye out loud. It may take a few tries to find the best ritual for your child.

- Follow your child's lead. If they appear to be losing attention with one activity, move to another, or perhaps you could change locations (e.g., moving from the family room to a bedroom or outside).
- Encourage your child to show affection across the screen (e.g., blow kisses).

Just as with in-person family time, a mix of talking and activities may help engage your child and strengthen your interactions. The activities you choose should reflect your child's age and developmental level. Your caseworker may be able to help you select appropriate activities, too. Here are some examples of activities parents can plan for their family time:

- Ask the foster parent to place toys in the room with your child so you can watch and react to them playing.
- Use props, such as toys or other items from your home, to show your child.
- Sing or play music together.
- Have a snack or meal together.
- Read a book to your child or, if they can, have them read to you.
- Ask them to give you a tour of the home they're in or their room.
- Guide the child through an art project or color together.
- Bake or cook together (e.g., one person reads the recipe while the other takes the actions).

- 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 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, it is still incredibly important for you and your children to maintain contact to allow you to bond, share, and comfort each other. Virtual family time offers a temporary substitution in these times. Although some of the ways you spend time with your child during in-person visits may still apply to virtual family time, you should prepare for a new or different way to interact with your child. Even though the virtual family time experience will be different than being in the same place with your child, remember that the goal remains the same: to spend time with your child to strengthen your relationship and bring them home.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ["Top Tips to Engage With Young Children When Video Calling"](#) (Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children & Prevent Child Abuse Arizona)
- ["Top Ten Tips to Engage Children When Video Calling"](#) (Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children & Prevent Child Abuse Arizona)
- ["13 Activities to Make the Most Out of Video Chats With Kids"](#) (PBS KIDS)
- ["5 Tips to Make the Most of Video Chats"](#) (ZERO TO THREE)

SUGGESTED CITATION

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2020). *Virtual family time: Tips for families*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/virtual-family-time-tips-families/>



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Administration for Children and Families
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Children's Bureau



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