

Supporting Virtual Family Time Visits - An Opportunity for Collaboration and Kindness

By Jason Braggs, parent and Katie Biron, foster parent

As we scramble as a society to figure out how to deal with Covid-19 and the resulting huge changes to our daily life, we each have unique situations we need to navigate. One situation we are facing is how to support family time (also known in some regions as parent-child visitation) while still following the public health recommendations. Soon family time will likely move to primarily virtual visits, which may be a new experience for many foster families and parents.

Working together to figure out virtual visits is essential to keeping kids connected to their parents. We need to have empathy for everyone in our community, including the parents of the children in foster placements. In this troubling scary time, we can try to provide some type of security to families through virtual/phone contact.

While we navigate these uncharted waters together, let's try to keep a few things in mind.

- This is a stressful time for ALL OF US. Uncertainty is high and things are changing quickly for all of us.
- Parents, even though this is a difficult time, remember since the visit is virtual, you will need to use other types of senses and emotion to communicate love to your child(ren) like facial expressions, smiling/grinning, laughing and demonstrating how happy you are to be able to have contact.
- We are all learning how to do virtual visits. We will need to give each other grace as we figure this out together.
- Remember these visits for some age groups may only last 10-15 minutes. Hopefully while length is shortened frequency will be increased. Even with the best of intentions and preparation, kids have short attention spans. Of course, if the virtual visit is going well and the child is engaged, the visit can go longer.

So, how are we going to do this? It is going to be a lot of trial and error, but here are some tips we came up with help get things started:

- Figure out if you have access to technology that will allow for a virtual visit, like Skype, Zoom, Google Duo or some other type of video conferencing. If you don't, ask your social worker for assistance. Feel free to set up a Google number to keep your number private if that feels more comfortable for you.
- Arrange to have a prep call between parents and foster parents/relative caregivers ahead of the visit.
 - If you would be more comfortable, you can ask your social worker, Parent Ally, Fostering Together liaison or an experienced foster parent mentor to be on the call with you.
 - This purpose of this call will be to allow you to get to know a bit about each other (if you haven't previously met) and agree on some guidelines for the virtual visits. Some things you might want to discuss are scheduling the visits (day and time) and ensure everyone is aware that the visit will probably be shorter than typical in-person visits.
 - Another topic you may want to discuss on the prep call is how you can partner together to let the child(ren) know about the change to visits. Kids benefit if parents and foster parents can sit down together with the child during the first virtual visit and explain why visits are changing. Receiving information and reassurance from all the important adults in the child's life will help the child understand the adults are working together during this time of crisis. Let the child know that just like schools are closed due to Covid-19, we are having to figure out some new ways to make sure they are still able to see their parents. Let them know where and how the virtual visit will work. Also, it's ok to let them know that this is a new way of visiting for both of you, and it may take some time to figure it out.
- Determine where in your home you want to hang out during the virtual visit.
 - This is a time to explore and define what feels most comfortable to you personally. Are there rooms that are for sure off limits while visiting? Are there rooms the child is welcome to show their parents? One thing we've learned over the years is that kids LOVE to show off their rooms. Not comfortable sharing your address? Maybe the front yard is off limits, but the backyard is totally fine. Be creative, but also feel free to define boundaries that are comfortable for your family.

Ok, so you have had your prep call, and are ready to have your first virtual visit. We realize that this may feel uncomfortable, especially if you haven't previously met

each other. If this will be your first introduction, try to think of some things you can talk about. Some ideas include:

Tell each other a bit about you and your family.

- Who lives in your home?
- What are some things you do for fun?
- What kind of adjustments has your family had to make due to this virus?

Ask each other how you are doing with all these life changes?

- Foster parents and relative caregivers, ask the parent if they have any questions or concerns about their child and this virus? Let parents know what you are doing to keep their children as safe as possible during this uncertain time.
- Parents, please let the foster parents know about any special songs, books, foods, routines or comfort items that they can use to help the child feel safer.

Before the visit starts, you will both need to do a bit of prep work to help make the visit more successful. Here are our suggestions, based on the child's age:

Infants

- Put out a bunch of toys, and let the parent watch the baby play. Talk with each other about baby's likes and dislikes and current routines. Older babies can sit in the highchair and eat or play during the visit.
- Parents, babies love silly songs and baby talk.

Toddlers

- Since toddlers are SO active, most of these visits are going to be the foster parent following the child with the phone or computer. If it's nice outside, go outside so the parent can watch the child play.
- Parents, try asking children questions about what they are doing like "Where are you going?" "What are you doing right now?" "That looks like fun! Tell me more about that." You can also state what the child is doing, like "Oh, you are playing with bubbles!" "Is that a book in your hand?" "Where are you running to so fast?"

- Set out favorite snacks to help the child stay occupied during the visits.
- Parents these littles are so active and busy. This is likely to be challenging. It's easier to go with the flow of what your child/ren are doing than to try and regain their focus.

Preschoolers

- Foster parents and relative caregivers, set out some toys at the beginning of the visit, and engage in some pretend play with the child. Maybe it's starting a Duplo block boat, and then holding the phone so the parent can engage with the child about their creation. Maybe set up a teddy bear picnic and set the phone or computer with the parent up on a small chair so the child can serve them tea and those delicious pretend cookies! As the foster parent, this age group will need a lot of continued involvement from you to keep the interactions going, but try to watch for opportunities where you can fade into the background and let the parent engage with their child.
- Parents, remember this is a new situation for everyone. Think of this as a partnership to engage together and not a competition.
- Parents, read a book to your child.
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- Preschoolers LOVE to show things off. Maybe the child can give the parent a tour of their room, their artwork, or their favorite toys.

Ages 5-10

- Ask the kids what they want to do during their virtual visit. Help them to brainstorm some things they want to show their parents or things they would like to do together.
- Try to figure out an activity parents and kids can do together. This can be a shared experience like dual art projects (coloring or drawing together).
- Parents, read a book to your child.

Ages 10 and older

- Involve the child in planning the virtual visit. Ask them what they would like the visit to look like, where they want it to occur, etc.
- Talk about day to day activities, how learning is going.
- Parents, maybe bring a learning activity to do together.
- Try creating a book for each other while contact is limited, like a journal.
- Baking or cooking together. Parents can talk a child through making a favorite family dish.

When it is time to end the visit, have the child say goodbye, and then take a second to say goodbye to each other. It means a lot to children when they see their parents and foster parents/relative caregivers working together.

Parents, foster parents and relative caregivers, virtual family time is going to require doing things in a new way. We get that right now things feel pretty overwhelming. We are hopeful that these tips will help you figure out how to make virtual family time work well for your family. But we want to acknowledge that things aren't super easy for any of us right now, and it's ok to admit that.

One thing that helps us is to remember is how valuable it is to maintain connections for kids in any way we can right now. During these uncertain times, it can be greatly comforting to children to see their parent(s) and foster caregivers have positive, warm interactions. It will also be comforting for parents separated from their children to be able to see that their children are doing ok. It is going to take some flexing and learning from all of us, but in the face of great uncertainty, this is one thing that we can do to help kids and parents remain connected.