

# Child Welfare Visits Over Video: Tips for Preparing, Coaching, and Assessment

## Introduction

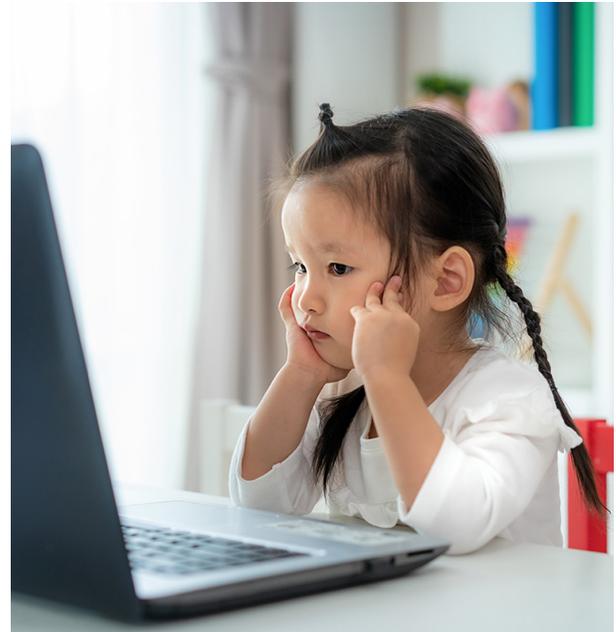
During physical distancing, more parent and child contact is taking place via videoconferencing technology. In many jurisdictions, virtual meetings are playing a crucial role to assess parents' and children's readiness for potential reunification.

Video visits present new challenges and new opportunities. Families may be experiencing new stressors related to the coronavirus pandemic and visits over video. Foster parents may step in to monitor and assess the visits in a way they previously not have (and have not been trained to do). Parents who do not have technology skills or easy access to technology may be inadvertently shut out of seeing or visiting with their children.

Conversely, video visits can provide a new way for foster parents and biological families to get to know each other, for biological families to see and connect more frequently with their children during placement, and to enable continued efforts toward reunification and permanency.

In the Structured Decision Making® system, the reunification assessment looks at three areas.

- **Immediate safety:** If the child went home today, would the child be in immediate danger, and could the danger be controlled?
- **Future risk:** If the child went home today, what is the family's likelihood of future system involvement?
- **Visitation/family time:** What is the quality and quantity of parent/child visits?



When a family progresses in all three areas, reunification rates improve, compared with situations in which only one or two areas show progress, [according to research](#) by the NCCD Children's Research Center (CRC).

## Preparing for the Video Visit

Family visitation best practices are, under the best circumstances, evolving. Keep in mind that every family is different and that every culture has a unique approach to parenting. Before the visit, ask participants how their family, culture, and traditions describe parenting and how they can accomplish the goals that follow.

Some preparation steps that can contribute to positive virtual visits include the following.

- **Ensure access to technology:** All parties must have access to the technology needed for video visits. Some child welfare agencies have purchased or lent phones and tablets to parents and foster parents to ensure equitable access for all.
- **Test first:** Make sure all participants know which devices and software work best for them and that they have successfully tested them.
- **Establish the timeframe:** Inform all participants about when the visit will begin and end, and any amount of flexibility that can be offered.
- **Review the goal:** Review any case plan goals with parents prior to the visit and make sure they know what behaviors you will be looking to see demonstrated during the visit.
- **Ownership:** Support parents in “owning” the visits as much as possible (e.g., involve games, activities, pictures, or things they would normally do with their children, adapted for videoconferencing).
- **Shared agreements:** Determine agreements in advance among all the participants (parents, children, and observers) about what conditions might necessitate a change in the visit (e.g., if the parent becomes abusive or if a teen becomes self-abusive or destructive).
- **Expect distress and acknowledge discomfort:** Acknowledge to parents and children the likely difficulty of being separated and being observed. Plan for the distress that can happen before, during, and after the visit. Distress is not necessarily a sign that the visit went poorly; it may be a sign of strong connection between parent and child.

## Coaching and Assessing

The following guidance has been adapted from many years of CRC reunification workgroups. It is meant to be used in conjunction with the aforementioned preparation tips and with a previously issued [CRC resource on successful visits](#)

[with children via videoconference](#). It is not meant to take the place of any local policy, procedure, or guidance.

Here are six areas to consider when coaching and assessing parent-child interaction over videoconference.

### 1. Does the parent demonstrate their preferred “parental role” during the visit?

**Before the visit:** Ask the parent about their preferred style of communication with the child: how they connect, nurture, set limits, etc. Engage the parent in thinking about how that will happen over video. Role-play with them so they can prepare.

**During the visit:** See if the parent can put their preferred parental role into action. If the parent struggles, consider jumping in to remind the parent about your conversation. Consider ways to support the parent and share feedback.

### 2. Does the parent demonstrate knowledge of the child’s development?

**Before the visit:** Ask the parent what they know about their child’s developmental stage: what their child is good at, struggles with, and needs help with. Ask how this may show itself during a virtual visit.

**During the visit:** See if the parent supports the child’s particular developmental needs. For example, did the parent plan developmentally appropriate activities for the child? Did they share games or stories appropriate to the child’s age? Does the parent know what the child can and cannot understand? Can the parent support the child’s continued growth in these areas?

### 3. Does the parent respond to the child’s verbal and nonverbal signals?

**Before the visit:** Discuss what verbal and nonverbal signals from the child show that the visit is going well and/or show that the child is struggling. Plan for what will happen if the child

struggles. The interaction will be different over video; the child's attention span may be shorter, and the parent will need to be patient if the child becomes distracted.

**During the visit:** See if the parent is attentive to what the child is expressing and whether the parent can respond to it as they hoped they would. For example, over video, see what words of comfort, songs, or sounds the parent uses to help if the child struggles.

#### 4. Does the parent understand and find ways to prioritize their child's needs during the visit?

**Before the visit:** Talk with the parent about what the child needs to make it a successful visit (e.g., clear opening and ending, plans for the visit, an opportunity to vent).

**During the visit:** See if the parent demonstrates awareness of child's needs as the highest priority. For example, if the parent is interested in a particular game on FaceTime but the child does not want to play or demonstrates a different need for attention (either for comfort or correction), help the parent set aside their own plan to address the child's needs.

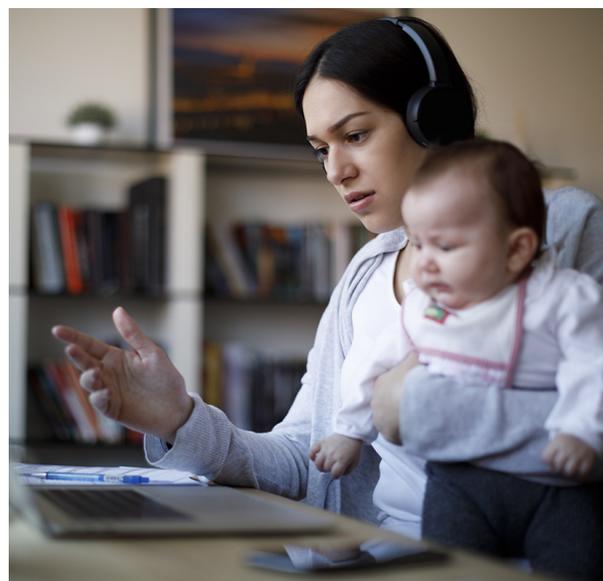
#### 5. Does the parent show empathy toward the child?

**Before the visit:** Ask the parent how they show empathy to the child and how they might do this over video. Offer suggestions if the parent is not sure what to do, like pretending to hug through the camera or saying it is okay to feel your feelings.

**During the visit:** See if the parent demonstrates awareness of the impact of out-of-home care on the child and the impact of the harm that the child experienced. Is the parent attentive or curious about the child's point of view? Offer cues if the parent struggles to show empathy.

#### 6. Can the parent use age-appropriate behavior management strategies?

**Before the visit:** Ask the parent how they will set limits if the visit becomes difficult. What



strategies do they want to use? What help do they need? They could suggest a break or ask the foster parent to step in and help.

**During the visit:** See if the parent can put those strategies into action. Can the parent support the child in a way that minimizes disruption or difficulty? When difficulties arise, can the parent, with support, manage these instances without yelling or violence and in ways that match the child's development?

### Debriefing the Visit

After each visit, ask the parent to share what they think they did well and what they want to do differently next time. Ask how you can support them to prepare for the next visit and in the moment during the visits. Offer suggestions for changes next time and see if the parent needs additional coaching on new strategies.

### Summary

Parent and child visitation during a child welfare placement is key both for supporting successful reunification and determining paths to permanency. While physical distancing and video visits add additional layers of complication, these visits can also be an opportunity to improve social work practice and make these visits even more meaningful.