

Tips for child-friendly video calls

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Changes in the Prison Act in 2015 gave prisoners the possibility to get in touch with their loved-ones using video calls. But it was COVID-19 and restrictions in visits that made video calls routine in prisons.

Video calls cannot replace meeting face-to-face and touching, but at their best they help to build relationships, stay connected and give imprisoned parents a glimpse of their child's daily life. These tips are meant to give food for thought and suggestions on how video calls can support parents in prison to stay connected to their children.

The inspiration for these was an article by Sarah Higgins from UK-based charity Barnardo's (Creative Connection Ideas for Prison Visits). This modified version includes tips on how to talk to children of different ages as well as thoughts on how to cope if the video call doesn't work out as planned.

These tips are meant for prisoners and the other parent/adult participating in the video call with the child. Mostly it is the prisoner who calls the child, but a small child can also live with her imprisoned parent in a special prison family unit.



Adult calling the child from prison



1. Find out what's a good time for your child to talk before booking the video call

Your child can focus better when not hungry or tired.

2. Ask whether you can take toys or books with you

Ask prison personnel whether you can take some of the toys and books in the child-parent -visiting room with you to the video call.

If your child has a favourite book, you can request the prison library to get it from the community library and ask if you can take it with you to the call.

This way you can read and look at the pictures together.
Reading to your child also supports the child's speech development.

3. Practice looking at the camera – you will be looking in your child's eyes

Focus on your child, she will notice it. Eye contact is important to a child.
In a video call it is good to look at the camera instead of the screen.
This way your child will see you are looking into her eyes.

Check beforehand where the computer's camera is located!

4. Gestures and expressions will tell you are interested in your child

A video call involves sight and sound only, so focus on them. Make gestures, use your hands, exaggerate expressions – everything that might feel strange or even silly to you, but what will help your child to concentrate.

If your child is an infant, this will make it easier for her to notice you. It can be hard for an adult as well to focus if you only see a talking, expressionless head on a screen.

Interaction, ie. talking to the child and showing interest with gestures and expressions is important in a video call. For the child, a video call should differ from playing a game or looking at programs, which often are the things a child uses a computer/tablet for.

5. Be playful

Toys and play can offer solutions to the lack of touch: you can pretend to tickle the child and the adult next to her can tickle in real life. You can pretend to exchange toys or snacks through the screen.

Children have good imaginations, be playful and grab these moments.

If the child is very small and/or can't focus on the call, you can observe your child play on her own or with the adult next to her. This is also a way to get to know your child's daily life and see what interests her, how she acts, grows and develops.

6. Create routines for video calls

Use the same greeting every time: your child will learn to recognize you and the situation.

Children love routines! They create security.

Use routines as you would when taking your child to the daycare or when she comes home from school.

Adult participating in the video call with the child



1. Inform the caller what would be a good time for the child to talk

The parent in prison might not know the child's daily routines. When they know the best time for the child, they can inform prison personnel.

2. Prepare for the video call

You can prepare the child in advance for the video call, according to her age. You can remind the child, that tomorrow we will call Dad or Mom. It's important to tell babies as well what is happening. Have toys, books or crayons and paper in hand to help your child concentrate.

3. Help the child and the caller with your own activity

During the video call you can help build the connection and replace lack of touch by acting as the "hands" of the caller. For example, if the caller blows a kiss, you can kiss the child at the same time.

With small children it might be useful to repeat what the child is saying (speech can be unclear) or what the other adult is asking from the child. You can also help the child to tell what they've been up to ("*show what you drew today*").

If the child gestures more than she talks, you can "interpret" what the child is trying to say for example when pointing outside ("*yes we saw a garbage truck out there this morning*"). It's also good to explain to a baby what can be seen on the screen and who is calling.

You can also give advice to the adult calling the child, for example where one should look at so from the child's perspective you'd be looking into her eyes.

Age matters

A child's age and stage of development determine how you can connect via video call, and what you can expect from a child. Infant–parent attachment can be built via video calls, but it requires more participation and empathizing from adults.

Video calls can enhance a baby's ability to recognize the person behind the screen and associate them to those calls when a physical meeting is possible.

Children of all ages need cheering and feedback! A child wants to know she is important to her parents and they'll always love her.

Here are some tips for video calling with children of different ages:

Babies

- A newborn can't see you yet but can hear your voice!
- At 2–3 months a baby will start paying more attention to her environment and might already notice you on the screen. Try calling her by name while waving your hand.
- With a bigger baby, use a lot of gestures and expressions, and funny voices.
- Respond to your baby's vocalization and expressions: smile when she smiles or shout when she does! Notice your baby's new skills, like babbling.
- Babies often will focus on songs or humming, sometimes even nursery rhymes.
- Playing peek-a-boo is usually a hit.
- When your baby cries, you can try to calm her with the sound of your voice.

Toddlers

- Talk, read picture books or sing and rhyme with a toddler
- A toddler is just learning to speak, but be patient in trying to understand what the child is saying.
- A small child's development is incredibly fast – remember to be in awe of a toddler's skills!
- A toddler finds it funny for example when you put a toy on your head and drop it in your hand.
- Toddlers hear and understand a lot – think about what you say.
- A four-year-old asks a lot of questions and thinks about things, feed her curiosity and creative ways to use language.

Schoolchildren

- Ask your child what she has been up to and what she likes. It's important to a child to know her feelings and thoughts are valued.
- Play together, for example guessing games or "the ship is loaded with..." You can also ask the child to show you a toy or a colour that describes her current feeling. From there you can pick up the conversation by asking open questions ("*why did you choose this teddy bear*").
- Ask the child to draw something and show it to you.

Teenagers

- Big changes are happening in a teenager's life, and it can be hard to talk to adults. Nevermind if the teenager seems not to be interested. Young people have the same needs to be accepted and heard as small children.
- Ask about her life, even if it is simple questions, to start the conversation.
- If your teenager has a hobby or special interests, ask her to talk about them and encourage her. Even if you're not interested in it, your child gets an opportunity to tell what she enjoys and why.
- Try to find things in common. Maybe you can read the same book, watch the same show, do you share interest in something else.

What if things don't work out as planned?

A video call can be loaded with expectations but is not always successful. Sometimes the internet connection is bad and you cannot hear or see properly, or the call gets disconnected. The adult with the child can explain the call was not disconnected because the parent in prison did not want to talk to the child. Maybe connection problems could be turned into a play?

Sometimes the child doesn't want to talk or can only focus for a short time. It is important to understand that there are stages in a child's development when it is harder to concentrate. It doesn't mean the parent isn't important to or loved by the child. She can also be tired or hungry, something has upset her during the day, the sun is shining and her friends ask her to play, or she is in the middle of a play of her own.

An adult understands that a child is still a child and can't always concentrate. An adult can also feel bad about this, but to a child a parent not calling or not focusing can feel like being abandoned.

Even after a successful video call a child can feel strong emotions such as missing the imprisoned parent, and the adult with her needs to respond to them with consolation and understanding.

Separation from an imprisoned parent can in any case awake many emotions in a child. The situation is hard for a child but at the same time she is learning to express and cope with difficult emotions. The adults living with the child can also need support, to help the child and for their own feelings.

It is not always easy to face a child's emotions. You feel bad because you care about the child. Even those video calls that don't go as planned are a part of staying connected. A child's relationship with an imprisoned parent is also formed on all the things the other parent and other important people tell her. Part of childhood memories are also those times when you tried a video call and it didn't quite work out!

The imprisoned parent should also have a chance to talk about difficult emotions with someone, for example a prison staff member. For the child, staying connected is important, so the adult should have support. NGOs, such as Foundation for supporting ex-offenders (Kriminaalihuollon tukisäätiö), can support the partners and other loved ones of prisoners.