

Staying connected While Social Distancing

Many of us are separated from our loved ones and staying connected from a distance provides some challenges. Platforms such as Zoom, Skype and Google Hangouts provide wonderful methods for staying connected with other adults and even older children but, what about with the small ones that we miss so much.

As a grandparent, I understand what it means to be unable to cuddle that baby, hug that toddler, or play in person with the preschooler. The distance means that we must adapt. The reality is that young children are not likely to just sit and enjoy a conversation with you, be it by phone, computer, or Ipad.

So what can we do?

Some ideas to keep in mind:

Set a time that is convenient for the child and the child's caregiver. Morning might be wonderful for you but is there an older child using the computer for schoolwork? Is there nap time to consider? And certainly there will be times that are harried, like dinner preparation and bed time that you might not want to interrupt. That being said, a parent might welcome a little involvement from a loved one. A grandparent might read the bedtime story via video, or chat with and play a game while the meal is prepared. Certainly, there are possibilities that are individual to each family.

Actively engage the child. While another adult or teen might be very pleased to have a conversation with you, our younger children have shorter attention spans- and their toys are calling. So please remember they may love you very much but unless you make it fun or interesting, they will lose interest.

Some ideas for fun or interesting engagement:

Play games:

What is it? Choose an object to hide in your hand or under a cloth. Slowly you reveal it, little by little, having the child guess after each new bit is exposed. Aim for things that the child is familiar with. Ideas: a pen, a hairbrush, toothbrush, scissors, an egg, a banana, a can of peas, box of crayons, etc. Be creative and playful. Children can play this on their end also. Once they learn the game, they can hide an object. Keep in mind the age and experience of the child, you want them to succeed and not be frustrated with it.

Oops (you're in the mud)- (Similar to the hangman game, but with a variation) Here you start with a stick figure standing, and add about 7 to 15 stepping stones in a line. At the end of the stepping stones is a stinky, sticky, yucky, mud hole. As a wrong letter is guessed a line can be drawn to show that the stick figure is moving toward the mud hole.

Keep the ability of the child in mind. My 5 year old grandson can handle a word like dinosaur because he has a great interest in dinosaurs. Consider using names of family members, toys, cartoon characters, book characters, any words that the child might be familiar with. Think also of signs seen in the community. Examples: Stop, Pizza, etc. Certainly the more guesses that they can have the easier the game will be to win. They can also take a turn presenting the picture and the word so that they can experience guiding the game.

Tic Tac Toe – Create a grid with nine squares- they don't have to be perfect squares. But do make them large enough to be seen easily on the other end of the video. Put numbers in the corners of each square. This is to make it easier to identify where to put the X or O. For example: the child says, "Put my X in 5" and you know exactly where it goes.

Puppet- Young children connect very well to puppets. At their age a puppet can be very much a real creature. Make believe is powerful! A puppet can be one that was purchased but you can also make a puppet from a sock. Buttons for eyes or eyes put on with a permanent marker doesn't matter, a child will relate to it. Note: try to use a thicker sock. It will hold the head shape better.

Peek-a-Boo- fun for even our youngest. Remember the short attention span and keep it going only as long as you see the baby or child engaged. A baby will often just turn their head and look away when they have had enough.

Find the Letter/ Number- Show the child a letter of the alphabet and have them hunt for something that begins with that letter. For numbers you can show a child a number. Limit the quantity and have them find that number of items. Example: Find 3 stuffed animals. Find 6 Legos. If you can, use the toys to start a play interaction. Example: Your stuffed elephant looks hungry. What are you going to feed him? Maybe he would like this hay. And you hand make believe hay to the child through the camera.

A few more tips to consider during virtual calls:

Engage the other adult in the play- If doing something like a tickle the tummy game, the adult with the child can be your hands while you say the words. They can also provide your kisses and hugs when you send them from afar.

Be expressive! Ham it up a bit. Use your face and hands to express surprise, delight, concern, interest, etc. Be aware of what the child can actually see in the screen and look at the camera not at yourself. You can practice your expressiveness in a mirror.

Good luck and have fun connecting.

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