

Teaching Young Children through Video Conferencing: A New Challenge Tips for Parents and other Caregivers

The use of Video Conferencing to teach young children is a new challenge for everyone involved. In order for it to work, YOU and the teacher or therapist (instructor) MUST FIRST TEACH YOUR CHILD HOW TO LEARN IN THIS NEW WAY. Teaching this new skill will likely be the first thing the instructor will want to work on. Without the ability to attend to and participate in instruction, your child will not likely benefit from video conferencing. The acquisition of this new skill requires careful planning and thoughtful instruction.

Strategies that will help make this work:

1. **Set the Environment Up for Success.** There are several extremely important objectives here:
 - a. The instructor must be very clear with you about their goals, objectives, and expectations. You will be the instructor's eyes, ears, and hands, so if you need help or support – please ask for it!
 - b. Work through the technological barriers FIRST. Download the necessary apps and/or programs as guided by the instructor and be prepared to practice with the instructor before your child is asked to participate. Getting the technology set up and working can be the most challenging step in this entire process. Patience is important. You should also know in advance what device will be used, how it will be used, and where it will be used.
 - c. Set up the environment in order to eliminate competing distractions. The specifics of this will depend on your child and your home, but your child will need a good learning environment (e.g., a quiet room, no siblings watching TV or playing nearby, and minimal access to distracting toys, etc.).
 - d. The instructor may suggest using visual schedules, *When-Then* contingencies, and preceding the session with sensory activities that increase focus. The instructor should help you get these things set up.
2. **The Instructor will likely want to start slowly and focus on making it fun.** Once the technology is working, you know what to expect, and the environment is set up for success, the instructor will likely start by having fun with your child. They will minimize demands so that your child learns that this video conferencing thing is fun and that their instructor is just as fun on the screen as in person. The early sessions may be kept short (perhaps very short). This will require pre-planning - you will likely have to help the instructor know what your child enjoys at home so that they can tap into those interests.
3. **Use Positive Behavioral Strategies.** The instructor will want to work out a plan for ongoing reinforcement of appropriate attending and participating behavior during the session. You may be asked to provide those reinforcers during the session. They may also suggest that you follow the session with a special activity, toy, or treat to reward their hard work (even if it was just play). This too will require advanced planning and ongoing communication with the instructor. Please understand that these rewards are for success during the session and that they are important tools in teaching this new skill set.
4. **Demands will be placed gradually.** The instructor will SLOWLY start folding in small demands as your child's attending and participation skills improve. The instructor should initially prioritize making your child feel successful during this new type of instruction.
5. **Be Attentive.** Both you and the instructor should continually attend to the child's level of interest in the activities, his or her level of focus, and how conducive the environment is to learning. It may be necessary to adjust and modify expectations throughout the session. The instructor will try to end the session before the child's interest and motivation disappears. Also they will want to end it on a positive note. Talking about how the session went, at the end of the session, will be important to the ongoing success of this approach.
6. **Continually Adjust Strategies and Expectations.** It will be important to continually assess, adapt, and adjust the strategies, as well as everyone's expectations throughout each session. The same is true regarding the quality of the learning environment and the use of reinforcers.
7. **Have Fun & Make it Fun!** Brainstorm games, the use of favorite toys, stories, and songs, as well as activities (including physical movement) that can be implemented while video conferencing. Be creative, be silly, and remember that rule number one is: **Have Fun!**