



YOUR CHILD CAN HAVE A VIRTUAL PLAYDATE!

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In these swiftly changing times, recommendations for whether and how to maintain social connections require daily updates. If I had written this response a week ago, my advice would have been different than it is today. But our current situation is that in many places in the United States and globally, the governments have issued shelter at home orders requiring families to limit physical and social contact to immediate family members. In areas where these orders are not yet in place, they are likely to be soon. This means no playdates, no trips to the playground, no planned bike rides and no hikes or neighborhood walks with other families. Even maintaining six feet of separation is just too risky. Children are motivated to share and help, and they've practiced this for years. If a friend falls, the other friends will reach out their hands to help their friend up. If they have a delicious pack of gummy bears, they'll give one to their friend. An equally important reason for not being flexible about seemingly low-risk outdoor outings with other families is that planning these outings sends children the wrong message about compliance

with critical public health mandates. As parents, we must model best behaviors, set limits on behaviors and follow-through. Being clear now saves you from responding to endless pleas for playdates as time goes on.

All of these no's are difficult to hear but the rationale is a strong one. We need to break the chain of contagion, and the only way to do that is by being united in our commitment to being physically separated. Given this new (and temporary, if we all do our part) parenting context, I'd like to offer an essential reminder: physical distancing does not have to mean social distancing. We're lucky to live in times where technologies exist to help us connect in real time through our phones, tablets and computers. Social interaction is critical for the development of social skills, cognitive ability and mental health. Children of all ages can benefit from spending some virtual time with others during the upcoming weeks that they'll spend at home.

Here are some tools and tips that can help you support your children's need to maintain their relationships with others through the use of virtual playdates. My favorite apps for children to use to connect in real time are Caribu (zero to eight years) and Houseparty (school-age);



Houseparty allows children to see multiple friends at once in a virtual hangout and even play games together, such as versions of charades, trivia, Pictionary, and Apples to Apples. Playing games requires some reading skills. My daughters spend hours on this app with their friends. Hearing their laughter fill the house reminds me that children are children, and they will find ways to have fun and play even when they're not together;



Caribu is a subscription-based video chat app that recently won a Time Magazine Best Invention of 2019 award. This app combines video chatting with numerous choices for game playing and contains a library of books so that children can engage in book reading together or with distant relatives.



Video chat apps like Zoom, Skype, Facetime, Google Duo and What's App offer opportunities to see each other's faces and chat, but they also can be used to encourage children to share their non-digital activities. Children show each other new dance moves, LEGO projects and artistic creations. Just last night, my daughter made cupcakes with a friend over facetime. They each made cupcakes at their own houses but followed the same recipe together in real time. This was their idea and they had an absolute blast! The use of video chat apps can also be supplemented with traditional games like 20 questions, Simon Says and charades;



Netflix Party is a Chrome browser extension that lets children watch their favorite movies and shows together. When one person pauses to get more popcorn, the show pauses for everyone. For children who can read and write, there is a chat option so they can comment on the program or anything else as they watch. For non-readers and writers, they can use video chat applications on another device to encourage.

A word about infants and toddlers - Babies are naturally drawn to look at human faces, especially faces that are familiar to them. Research is clear that video chatting is a positive screen-based experience for infants and toddlers. For this age group, no additional materials are needed. Just let the children see one another and respond to each other's facial expressions and emerging efforts to talk. Although research hasn't investigated peer relationships, when infants and toddlers regularly see distant family members on video chat apps, they form and maintain positive relationships.

Note - Before handing over your phone, be sure to turn off notifications and lock the screen by selecting Screen Pinning on Androids or Guided Access on iPhones so that your child's experience isn't interrupted by accidental swiping or button pressing, and of course, give that phone a good sterile wipe down before and after allowing your child to play with it.