Working with babies, young children and families on digital platforms

A guide for early years practitioners

Anna Freud
National Centre for Children and Families
Introduction

“'The early years of a child’s life are a sensitive and crucial period of change. Babies’ early experiences shape brain development, which in turn can have a life-long impact on their physical and emotional development. The love and care that babies and young children receive is therefore key to ensuring that all children get the best start in life.

In the current Covid-19 crisis, it’s easy to think that babies and under 5s will be unaffected by the changes we’ve all experienced. Research, however, tells a different story.

The current situation will take its toll on very young children for a number of reasons; their parents’ anxiety; the huge changes to their routine (such as no longer being able to attend nursery or play group); and the variety of losses experienced, such as not being able to see family members or no longer having contact with playmates. Even if under 5s do not have the ability to put this into words, as parents, carers and early years professionals, we need to be alert to this and seek to lessen its impact.

Social distancing has meant that early years practitioners are required to use digital platforms to support babies, young children and families. Though this makes early intervention seem challenging, this booklet offers practical guidance to help you adapt to this new way of working and to help maintain a focus on babies and young children as a way to keep contributing to prevention and early intervention. It has been developed by specialists in early years at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. “

Camilla Rosan
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Preparing yourself for video sessions

First take a step back. Take comfort in knowing that you’ve already been managing remote work well, so this isn’t new to you. The key aspects of your early years work can be delivered online.

We’ve put together some tips which we hope will help you in your work:

- Get familiar with child-friendly video platform features (e.g. ‘whiteboards’ for drawing pictures, screen sharing to show videos or images).
- Use headphones to maximize your voice sound quality.
- Where possible, leave yourself 15 minutes before and after each session to reflect or prepare for further meetings. For example, go for a walk, wander around your place or do some stretching.
- Try and tune in to non-verbal communication.
- Use slower, clearer speech to lessen the effects of poor connection.
Preventing families for video sessions

Before scheduling a video session, it’s important to telephone them first to discuss how the forthcoming video session will work and to answer any questions or worries that a parent or carer may have. These preparatory conversations may be easiest held over the phone, especially as families will have different responses to the idea of meeting with you online. Some parents and carers may not be confident in using computers, have fears about how secure a video session is, and may struggle with connectivity issues. Being able to reassure and support them before your first video session may help relieve their anxiety and ensure they continue with the support offered.

- Help the parent or carer and child find a way to create a space that is safe, and as private and protected from interruption as possible for your session.
- Create a clear plan of when you will call families and share this with them. This may help them feel less isolated and more ‘contained’.
- Decide with the parent or carer what back-up mode of communication you will use if technology should fail you during the call.
- Discuss confidentiality and privacy issues which are unique to video-enabled appointments.
- Think with the family about what might be difficult about meeting in this new way, both for the parent and carers and from the baby or child’s perspective.
- Be mindful that it may be harder for parents or carers to talk about how they are feeling if their child is present.
- You might consider having a mix of parents or carers only and parent or carer-child sessions to manage this.
Interacting with babies and young children during video sessions

Digital working can make it much harder for you to include the baby through interactions and play. You might not be able to see the baby or young child all the time, or parents and carers may feel pressure to talk when on a video call and this can make it difficult to interact with the baby.

The practical tips below will support you in interacting with babies on video:

- Support parents in finding ways to create time for play during the video session. For example, parents or carers could position the phone so that you can observe and ‘share’ in their play interactions.

- A young child might want to show you things in the home. Playing peekaboo with a baby can help the parent or carer and their baby practice managing loss of your physical presence.

- Consider how you will work creatively when you cannot interact with the child through play or drawing. Instead it may be helpful to consider screen sharing media or singing songs.

- Following the baby on screen as much as possible will enable you to see what the baby is interested in and to reflect on this with the parent or carer. It may be helpful to have the screen on the floor if the family is sitting there, although some babies seem to find screens anxiety-provoking. Support the parent or carer to notice and acknowledge if this is the case and together think how you can explain and prepare the baby for the video interaction to help them feel more comfortable. For example, encourage the parent or carer to explain to the baby what is happening: “Mummy noticed you are feeling scared of the person on the screen, let me give you a little cuddle. This is so and so who just wanted to say hi to us and make sure we are doing all okay. Shall we have a little play?”.

- Encourage parents to complete a short play activity within the session and then spend some time afterwards inviting them to reflect on their own, and their child’s experience of this play (i.e. what did you think your child enjoyed and why, how did it make you feel).

- Look out for any repetitive play in sessions, as this may be a way for a child to communicate important or distressing feelings that they are processing. Children may also repeat things they have heard or seen during the health crisis that are worrying or difficult to understand.
Video group work with families

To start with, while you are still getting familiar with video technology, you may find that talking to parents and carers without their babies is a more manageable and straightforward way of staying in contact with families. But you should find that your confidence will start to build as you get used to navigating the technology. This will also involve always carefully considering information governance issues.

Suggestions for video group formats include:

- Setting up play interactions between sessions that you could discuss with the parents or carers at your next group session all together.

- Setting up a video call with parents or carers and toddlers, and giving them an activity which they can do in the “break-out rooms” that some video-platforms offer. Parents or carers and children can then return to the “main room” and reflect with you and the rest of the group on how it went.

Tips for supporting parent-child relationships

Acknowledging parents’ feelings

Because of the pandemic, parents and carers may be experiencing feelings such as helplessness, loss of control, anger, frustration and anxiety. Reassure them that these are normal reactions to a frightening situation, and where possible give space to explore and discuss those feelings. This will not only support parent or carers’ mental health but will also set the stage for thinking together about how their baby or young child might be feeling.

Acknowledge how hard it might be for parent and carers to remain patient with children, when they are stressed and anxious themselves.
Seeing through the child’s eyes

Equip yourself with age-appropriate ways of explaining the crisis to young children that parents and carers can draw on (see example of child-friendly explanations of coronavirus).

Babies and young children are likely to be affected by the anxiety of their parents or carers and other adults, and also by the huge changes to their routine, such as no longer being able to attend nursery or play group.

Common and very normal reactions to these stresses include include:

- frequent crying
- difficulty staying still
- problems falling and staying asleep
- nightmares
- clinging to caregivers
- fears of being alone
- whining behaviour
- increased temper tantrums
- unexpected developmental regressions (i.e. toilet training, feeding or speech).

Consider how you might support parents and carers with these behaviours.

Encourage parents and carers to think how their child might be feeling and how they might be asking for help.

Think together about:

- What might this experience be like for baby? For example, what might it be like for the baby to be stuck indoors? How has the child’s day to day environment changed?

- Are there any changes in the parent or carer’s own stress levels or availability that the child may be picking up on?

- Have you noticed any changes in baby’s behaviour? What do you think that’s about? How does baby’s behaviour make you feel or think?

- Is baby playing with their usual toys? Or novel toys? If so, how come?

Here it may be helpful to speak through the child, for example: “It’s really strange for me, as all of a sudden I can no longer interact with my nursery playmates or play with granny, but I don’t know how to express this in words.”
Where can I find advice and guidance?

How can early years workers help children manage the transition back to nursery?

A list of top tips for Early Years workers

8 ways parents and carers can help children manage the transition back to nursery

A list of top tips that Early Years workers can share with parents and carers

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Helping babies and young children under 5 through the coronavirus crisis

The coronavirus crisis affects everyone, including babies and young children. They might be affected by changes in their routine or by a lack of familiarity with their surroundings. You can help by:

1. Sticking to a routine
2. Providing consistency
3. Offering reassurance
4. Helping them to feel safe
5. Giving clear explanations

If you are an early years worker, a parent, or a carer, there may be ways you can help!

Top tips to help families work together and support one another during the coronavirus pandemic

Children at risk are more likely to feel scared and uncertain. Help them feel safe by:

1. Staying calm and reassured
2. Being reassuring and understanding
3. Providing consistency
4. Offering clear explanations
5. Helping them to feel safe

For more information, visit www.annafreud.org/eyresources
The Early Years in Mind learning network is a free network for early years staff and practitioners hosted by the Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families.

The network was developed by mental health experts at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice.

To join the Early Years in Mind learning network, please visit www.annafreud.org/eyim.

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Supported by the Department of Health & Social Care VCSE Health and Wellbeing Fund