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In-home video chat for young children and their incarcerated parents

Elizabeth Skora^a and Julie Poehlmann-Tynan^b

^aShannon Graduate Fellow in Early Childhood Development, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA;

^bProfessor of Human Ecology, Human Development & Family Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA

ABSTRACT

For millions of children with incarcerated parents worldwide, parent-child visits are suspended because of the worldwide novel coronavirus pandemic. Although child-friendly contact visits with ample opportunities for physical contact are the most meaningful way for young children to connect with their incarcerated parents during times of health, there are other meaningful ways of connecting from a distance. Traditional mediated communication strategies such as phone calls and letters are challenging for very young children because of their limited cognitive, language, and attentional capabilities. New forms of mediated communication, such as in-home video chat, can be accessible and developmentally appropriate for connecting young children with family members who live at a distance, including connecting children with their incarcerated parents. A growing body of international developmental research suggests that video chat may afford children the ability to maintain the benefits of parent-child interactions from a distance, when internet access is available. Thus, in-home video chat between children and their incarcerated parents is a potentially viable option for building relationships during incarceration, especially when opportunities for positive physical contact are limited or non-existent.

KEYWORDS

Child development; communication; corrections; incarcerated parent; video chat

Worldwide, 22 million children have an imprisoned parent (Sevenants & Wang, 2020), with the United States having the highest incarceration rate and the most children affected by parental incarceration (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). Although a United Nations' (2010) resolution states that children with incarcerated parents should have opportunities to maintain contact with their incarcerated parents and receive support in doing so, affected children often have limited opportunities for meaningful parent-child contact (Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019). This commentary discusses video chat as a developmentally appropriate mediated communication strategy between young children (age 0–8) and their incarcerated parents. We recommend in-home or remote video chat as a positive way for children to connect with their incarcerated parents, especially during the worldwide pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), when most corrections facilities have banned or limited in-person visits.

CONTACT Elizabeth Skora  eskora@wisc.edu  Shannon Graduate Fellow in Early Childhood Development, University of Wisconsin, Madison

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How do children and their incarcerated parents usually connect?

Several forms of contact are typically available for incarcerated parents to connect with children and families, such as visits, telephone calls, letters, and email. A national survey of imprisoned parents in the US found that 39% of fathers and 56% of mothers had at least weekly contact with their children since admission; however, only 42% of parents reported receiving a visit from their children since admission (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Phone calls, the most frequent form of communication between children and their incarcerated parents, allow children to communicate from the comfort of home in real time. However, audio-only communication is not the best medium for children under age seven (Ballagas, Kaye, Ames, Go, & Raffle, 2009). A host of cognitive, social, and attentional challenges causes difficulty for young children when trying to understand communication with a remote person through a telephone (Gillen, 2002) because of children's lack of visual understanding about the person on the phone, as well as their still-developing skills for one-on-one conversations when the conversant is not visible (Ballagas et al., 2009). Many young children gesture to objects in the room unseen to the phone conversant, rely on body language and facial expressions to communicate, and easily become frustrated and disengage from phone conversations (Ballagas et al., 2009). Letter writing, the next most common form of parent-child contact during incarceration because of its low cost, relative ease, and tangibility (Shlafer, Loper, & Schillmoeller, 2015), lacks immediacy, and its impact is contingent on literacy skills.

Visits, in their varying forms, are the next most common form of communication for incarcerated parents and their children. Contact visits, when the parent and child can see each other in person and can hug and hold hands, are the most meaningful form of social interaction supporting family relationships (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010; Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019). Unfortunately, such visits are rarely offered, especially in jails or pre-trial detention centers. In contrast, in-person non-contact visits, when the parent and child are separated by a barrier, and remote non-contact visits occurring through video or closed-circuit television, are more common. These visits prevent parent and child from touching, and they can only hear each other through the use of a telephone receiver or hole in a barrier (e.g., Shlafer et al., 2015).

Benefits and challenges of visits

Positive visit experiences are important for healthy child development during parental incarceration (Poehlmann et al., 2010). Several studies of children with incarcerated parents have linked interventions promoting child-friendly contact visits with decreased problem behaviors (Harris & Landreth, 1997), decreased feelings of anger and alienation (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010), increased self-esteem (Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998) in children, and positive perceptions of parent-child relationships (Schubert, Duinick, & Shlafer, 2016).

Visits with family also play an important role in supporting the well-being of incarcerated individuals during incarceration, including reducing behavioral infractions, depressive symptoms, and parenting stress (De Claire & Dixon, 2017). More frequent visits from family can also improve post-release outcomes, including less recidivism (Bales & Mears, 2008) and more engaged parent-child relationships (La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005).

However, challenges to visit quantity and quality exist. Visit frequency depends on the cost and availability of transportation, time, scheduling, distance, and quality of parent–caregiver relationships (e.g., [Tasca, 2016](#)). Visit quality is affected by the type of visit and institutional factors. Visits behind glass can be challenging for young children and are associated with behavior issues, distress, and less optimal self-regulation ([Dallaire, Zeman, & Thrash, 2015](#); [Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2015](#)). Harsh treatment by correctional staff, lack of privacy, long waits, and security procedures can also contribute to low-quality visits (e.g., [Arditti, 2003](#)). In the UK, although visits with family members are often described as a lifeline to the outside world ([Clancy & Maguire, 2017](#)), incarcerated parents sometimes minimize or stop in-person visits, as certain correction policies do not foster positive parent–child contact ([Booth, 2018](#)). In addition, most visits – even those that occur behind a barrier – have been eliminated or curtailed during the coronavirus pandemic, often to protect incarcerated individuals and staff, as the virus spreads rapidly in confined spaces such as jails ([Williams & Ivory, 2020](#)).

Benefits and challenges of video chat

Compared to the literacy demands of letter writing, the cognitive and verbal abilities required for telephone use, and obstacles to high-quality contact visits, video chat offers a relatively easy-to-use and socially contingent form of interaction suited to the diverse communication competencies of children across developmental levels ([McClure & Barr, 2017](#)). In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics encourages video chat for children of all ages, despite discouraging most other media use for children under 18 months ([AAP Council on Communications and Media, 2016](#)). All types of screen time are not equal, and video chat should be considered a beneficial use of screen time for children of all ages ([McClure, Chentsova-Dutton, Barr, Holochwost, & Parrott, 2015](#)). Furthermore, ownership of mobile technology has surged in recent years, with 98% of US families with children 0–8 years owning a mobile device ([Rideout, 2017](#)). While acknowledging that some prisons and jails require visitors to enter the facility to conduct a video visit for security reasons or technology limitations, this commentary focuses on in-home video visits.

International research has begun to consider the potential for video chat to support family relationships for children as young as infants. Families regularly report using video chat to encourage the development and maintenance of relationships for young children separated from a parent because of divorce ([Yarosh, Chieh, & Abowd, 2009](#)), immigration ([Madianou & Miller, 2013](#)), and military service ([Yeary, Zoll, & Reschke, 2012](#)). This frequent use largely results from the social contingency of video chat.

The social contingency of video-mediated interactions assists children in overcoming the “video deficit” – a period of time from 18–36 months where children learn better from in-person experiences than from equivalent video-based demonstrations ([Anderson & Pempek, 2005](#); [Myers, LeWitt, Gallo, & Maselli, 2017](#)). In addition to enhancing social contingency, video chat creates a greater sense of proximity between children and the on-screen parent (e.g., [Tarasuik, Galligan, & Kaufman, 2013](#)) and joint visual attention (e.g., [Ames, Go, Kaye, & Spasojevic, 2010](#); [McClure, Chentsova-Dutton, Holochwost, Parrott, & Barr, 2018](#)). Using video chat, children can participate in longer and richer periods of communication than with voice alone due to a higher level of visual engagement ([Ames et al., 2010](#)). For young children, video chat offers more eye contact and playful

interactions, which help keep children involved. It also enables children to communicate physically by showing objects, using gestures, and playing rather than relying on verbal communication.

Despite the plethora of advantages, video chat is not without challenges. Unquestionably, in-person contact visits remain the best option for supporting parent–child relationships, and video visits should not *replace* face-to-face contact. Some facilities have attempted to replace all in-person visits with video, ostensibly because of cost and security concerns. Consequently, there has been a backlash against the use of video visits in corrections, with some states in the US legislating that jails and prisons cannot eliminate in-person visits and replace them with video.

An important challenge in facilitating in-home video chat for young children with incarcerated parents involves access to digital technology and internet connections. Internationally, access to adequate internet can be a significant barrier for both correctional facilities and families, especially because many families affected by incarceration are among the most economically vulnerable. The World Health Organization (2019) has identified lack of access to the internet and digital technology as an area of concern regarding equity in human development that needs addressing across the globe, especially in low resource areas. One of the WHO's 2019 Sustainable Development Goals, proposed to ensure well-being for all across the lifespan, is to “develop alternative tools for those with limited access to the Internet to increase participation and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders who may be financially, socially and/or geographically marginalized.” (p. 64, World Health Organization, 2019). Especially in regions dominated by developed countries, however, it now appears that most people have access to the internet and global internet access is rising (Internet World Statistics, 2019). More than 85% of people in North America and Europe have access to the internet, whereas only 40% of people in Africa have such access; in other world regions, 50–70% of individuals have internet access (Internet World Statistics, 2019).

Another drawback is that video visits remain expensive (sometimes as much as 0.31 USD per minute because the services are offered by for-profit companies via contracts with corrections), with the financial burden often falling on the child's at-home caregiver. Especially when in-person visits are not possible, we recommend that in-home video chat be offered by corrections at low or no cost. Given the benefits of visits, there are likely cost savings in the long run. In addition, there is technical, organizational, presentation, behavioral, and scaffolding work necessary on the part of the child's at-home caregiver to ensure the chat is successful. Caregivers must know how to operate the device and technology, schedule the chat, ensure the child stays on camera, manage the child's behavior including boredom and miscommunication, and scaffold children's conversation (Ames et al., 2010).

Conclusion and implications

Young children with incarcerated parents, especially those who are not allowed to visit the correction facility because of a global health crisis or because of age or facility policies may benefit from in-home video chat to build parent–child relationships while their parents are away. There is a growing international literature affirming the value of video chat during familial separation, and in-home video visiting between children and their

incarcerated parents offers a promising option for bridging the gap between incarcerated parents and their children when in-person contact visits are not feasible. Particularly for young children, video chat may offer a more effective or developmentally meaningful alternative to commonly relied-on communication techniques such as letter writing, phone calls, and barrier visits.

Because of contextual risks and complex family relationships, families may benefit from having parent–child video chats and other forms of contact occur within the context of supportive interventions such as parenting education classes in correction facilities, visit coaching, school-based or community-based programs for children, support groups for at-home caregivers, educational materials accessed in the home, or other support and advocacy efforts worldwide (e.g., Clancy & Maguire, 2017). For example, Sesame Workshop's (2013) *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* initiative is a free online educational resource that provides suggestions for positive parent–child contact during parental incarceration. An evaluation of the materials in the US found that they had positive effects on parent–child communication during both video and barrier visits in jails and caregiver communication with children (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2020). The materials suggest positive content for incarcerated parent–child interactions that can be used to support positive remote video chat as well.

In conclusion, in-home or remote video chat between children and their incarcerated parents is a potentially viable option for building relationships during incarceration, especially when opportunities for in-person contact are limited or non-existent.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Elizabeth Skora Horgan, M.S., is a doctoral student in Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Shannon Graduate Fellow in Early Childhood Development. She studies the role of interactive digital media in children's cognitive and social-emotional development, especially the educational potential of touchscreen games and apps to enhance children's positive development and well-being. Liz has dual undergraduate degrees in Media Studies and Psychology and experience as an AmeriCorps educator, and she currently works with Dr. Heather Kirkorian in the Cognitive Development and Media Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, Ph.D., holds the Dorothy A. O'Brien Professorship in Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is a Professor of Human Development and Family Studies and an affiliate of the Center for Healthy Minds and the Institute for Research on Poverty. Her research focuses on the role of family relationships in the development of resilience in infants, toddlers and preschoolers, especially for children who experience multiple risks, including parental involvement in the criminal justice system. Julie has served as an advisor to Sesame Workshop on their Emmy-nominated initiative for children with incarcerated parents. She has more than 100 publications, including the *Handbook on Children with Incarcerated Parents*, which is coauthored with J. Mark Eddy and is in its second edition. Julie recently won a University of Wisconsin School of Human Ecology PROUD award for her mentoring of graduate students; this commentary grew out of Liz Skora's work in a graduate seminar that Julie taught entitled *Incarceration and the Family*.

Julie's blog, which translates recent research on children with incarcerated parents into accessible language, can be found at www.kidswithincarceratedparents.com. Julie is also a licensed psychologist in Wisconsin.

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