

Creative Connection Ideas for Prison Visits

With video visits being rolled out across the UK prisons, as an answer to the COVID-19 pandemic, children and young people have been asked for feedback to their experience of virtual and closed visits, often the response is: "It is nice, but 'All I want is a hug'". Where a hug isn't possible, the question to answer is "How do we connect with children, when there are physical barriers in place?" As a Family Engagement Worker at a prison setting, I am tasked to support



connection and relationships between prisoners and their children. I am an advocate, to enable the voice of the child to be heard. My role is to support communication between prisoners and their children, to ensure that it is child-focused and that the imprisoned parent is assisted and encouraged to be responsive to their child's needs.

This article will reflect on creative ideas to encourage connection through a digital or physical screen. The digital screens of video visits will be discussed first; followed by closed prison visits (where a barrier may be a glass or perspex screen).

Video Calls

In the UK, Video Calls are being rolled out to support contact between prisoners and their families since the cessation of regular visits. The new technology builds on the 2017 Lord Farmer review, which found that close bonds between prisoners and family members can significantly reduce their risk of reoffending. Video calls are time limited, and actually from a child's perspective can be beneficial provided that the prisoner and adult with the child are support the child in engaging.

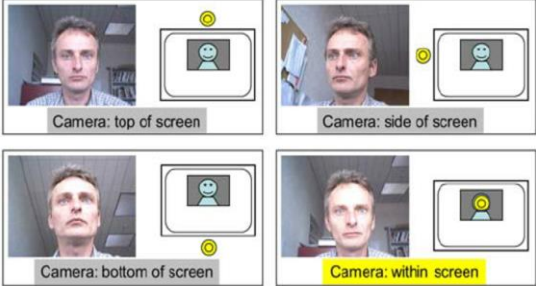


Preparing for the Video Call for young children:

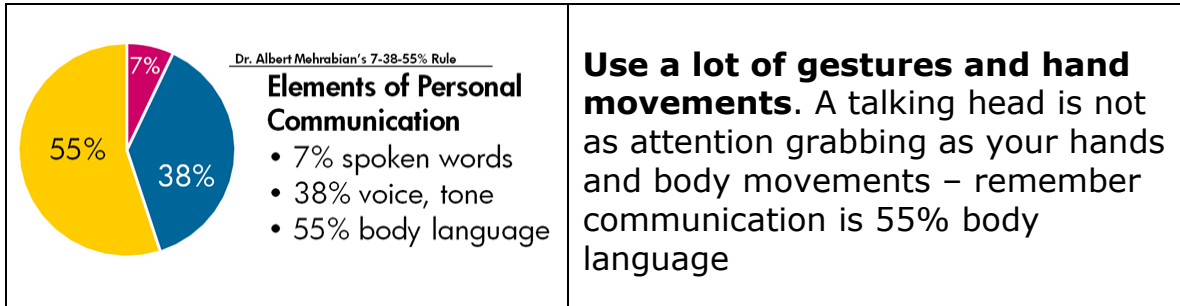
- It would be beneficial to develop a "top tips guide" to send out to both parties when a visit with a child is booked. This will help both parties plan for the video call, with their child in mind:

1. Top tips for adult supporting the child in the community:

	<p>Discuss with the child's family member in prison what time of day would be best for your child to "video call"</p> <p>Video chat means children have to sit quietly and focus on the screen. Try to avoid calls at times when your child may be hungry, tired or restless.</p>
<p>1.  Eyes are watching</p> <p>2.  Ears are listening.</p>	<p>When children interact face to face (like adults) they pick up on many different communication cues - sight, sound, smell, and touch. As video chat involves sight and sound only, help your child to concentrate on those senses. You may find it helpful during the call to repeat questions raised by their relative or point things out in the picture of things that your child can identify or see.</p>
	<p>Have items next to you before the video call starts to help engage your child – perhaps storybooks, musical instruments, your child's latest artwork or whatever you plan to show the other person, so your child doesn't lose interest as you scramble to find something</p>

2. Top Tips for the Imprisoned Family Member:

 <p>Camera: top of screen</p> <p>Camera: side of screen</p> <p>Camera: bottom of screen</p> <p>Camera: within screen</p>	<p>Practice looking at the camera – this is hard to do, as your eye will automatically wander during the call to either your own image or your child, but to help the child process being “looked at” you need to try to look directly down the camera lens. This will help you really make eye contact and it is much better for interactive communication.</p>
	<p>Play Games to hold interest - Keep very young children engaged with you by playing ‘peek-a-boo’ or you can hold your child’s interest by showing a book, a toy, or something else that you want to talk about (see ideas below for “video visit activity box”)</p>
 <p>Image by Jody Mallon</p>	<p>Make sure to use the same greeting each time and in the same tone of voice. Infants and toddlers learn to recognize and feel comfortable with a real person on the screen when they hear that same sound each time they see the person. This is important because they often depend more on smell and touch when meeting a person – so they need more visual and sound cues to recognize you on video chat. And sign off in the same way – a kiss or hand to the screen</p>



Both adults taking part in the video call have a role to play to support the child. For the adult sat next to the child during the video call, it is important to consider a few other things:

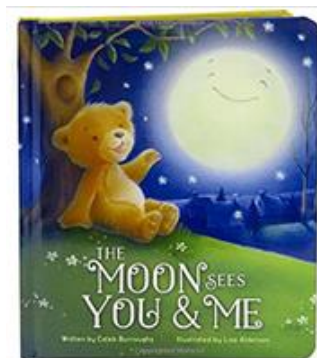
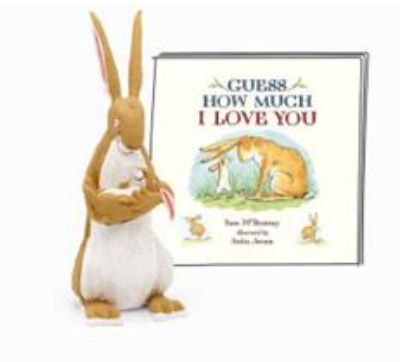
- You are the **“hands and heart”** of the person on-screen. So if the person on the screen (the imprisoned parent) “tickles” your baby’s tummy, you can give her tummy a tickle in real life. When the imprisoned relative leans toward the screen to “kiss” your toddler, you can give him a kiss on the cheek. By taking this role, **the adult in the room nurtures the relationship between the child and her on-screen partner.**
- **You can help to explain any technical issues that may happen** – ie. Explain to the child why the video chat partner may appear to “freeze” on the screen or why the call may be dropped. Explaining these experiences in child-friendly language helps children better understand the technology, and not feel that the connection has been broken by the imprisoned parent.
- The other key part is to make video chat a social, back-and-forth experience. **A successful video chat will feel like everyone is playing together, even though we’re apart.**
- There are bonuses to the video call facility, which may mean that some **children are forming relationships with their imprisoned parent that are “normal” than a trip to the prison** – ie. They may be able to hold the video call in different rooms of their home, around the meal table or indeed new contact that hasn’t been possible as the child hasn’t been able to visit the prison. Without the physical part of the visit, a video call may seem more meaningful and less disruptive to the child/young person than a trip to a prison that is a long way away.

However, we must press that video calls are to be a substitute whilst physical visits are not possible, but that they should not substitute actual physical visits in the longterm.

A Video Call Child Activity Box

How about seeing if the family worker at the prison can put together a couple of age appropriate "**child activity boxes**" for the prisoner to use during the video call? These will have to be disinfected after use or have one off items in it. But they will include items to help engage the child in play:

- **Puppets** (finger, paperbag or hand puppet) Puppets and stuffed animals make great props that encourage playing together across the screen – the children could be sent a simple cut out/paper bag puppet, to make before the visit
- **Books** (dad reads a book, same book sent home before the visit to the child as a gift to keep – link in www.prg.org.uk who provide books for children in the UK during Family Visits) – it may be a favourite book that the child wants to read aloud to their relative, or the relative in prison may have a book to read to them – some titles that help support a child who has a parent living at a distance to them include: The Invisible String, Guess How Much I love you, The Moon Sees You and Me, Good Night Baby Moon



- **Quizzes** (good to help engage older children)
- **Games with limited resources** (a letter could go out to the prisoner and home prior to the visit with some game-prompts on it)
 - o **Word association** (ie. "If I say foot you say...."ball" if you say "ball" I say "beach")
 - o **20 questions** (take it in turns to ask yes/no answer questions to find out what famous person you are thinking of)
 - o **Animal, vegetable or mineral** (again you may want to set a time limit to ask as many yes/no answer questions)
 - o Try **rhymes, songs, dancing** together, **peek-a-boo** that the adult and child can play on-screen. Some songs could be printed out and available in the activity box – or with older children they may be able to play a song that their relative can sing along to (**video call karaoke?**)
 - o Other games that could work on a video call:
 - **Two Truths & a Lie**
 - **Charades**
 - **Would You Rather**
 - **Simon Says**
 - o Do the **same activity on both sides on the screen** (ie. play with a toy car while the child rolls her own toy car)
 - o **Have your child interview** their family member, asking questions about them (Barnardo's have a useful book that was developed to help children ask questions to their parent available here: <https://www.nicco.org.uk/userfiles/downloads/5afa9c35cbe7c-my-parent-book.pdf>)

Closed Visits

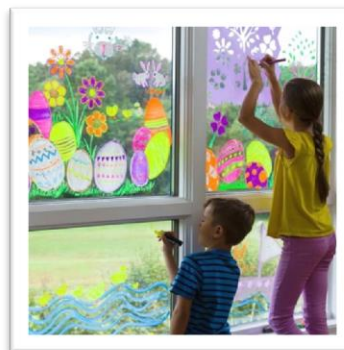
Visits through glass – how to engage children? The window between parent and child is a barrier, and could be seen as a restriction to their connection – however if we **use it as an object to encourage playfulness**, then it is no longer a hindrance but something to help families connect.

Closed visits spaces are often small and in our prison we have a relatively small booth for when more secure closed visits are required. To support children during these visits, there is the option of a **play box**, to help them enjoy the session. This would include some colouring materials, perhaps a toy car and some books. However, there may be a hygiene issue with these items and we would need to ensure that they are disinfected before another visitor used them. Also, these play boxes were more about a child being occupied and busy than engaging with the relative on the other side of the screen. Some further thought is being had to helping the children interact more with the person they are visiting behind the glass.

NB: Some closed visits spaces will rely upon a microphone and therefore only one of the visitors may be able to use it at a time if the phone is a handset, so games that don't require the use of voice conversation can be useful when there are multiple visitors.

Glass/Chalk marker pens

- ✓ Impermanent and Hygienic (just wiped off after the visit with spray and a disposable wipe)
- X There is a cost (£1-£2 per pen)
- ✓ Many opportunities for playing games together:



- **Drawing around each other's faces** - Encourages eye contact.
- Playing **Pictionary** - no literacy barriers

- **Noughts and Crosses**
- **Charades**
- Playing the game "**squares**" - Turn taking encourages reciprocal conversation skills
- **Drawing a scene together** - Collaborative creativity and encourages the family to create together and bond through art
- **A drawing conversation** - You could take it in turns to draw a line/shape at a time and see what you create! Encourages turn taking, reciprocation needed to develop social skills or adult draws a line and child/young person turns it into a picture



Barnardo's hope that you have found these tips and ideas helpful and that it may encourage creativity when planning visits at your prisons.

Please use the space below to jot down any other ideas that you may have for enabling child-friendly screened visits: