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PLUS NEWSLETTER / APRIL 1, 2020

How can I prepare my kid for video-chatting for online classes?

If you think teaching your kid manners is tough, try translating all those lessons ("Look people in the eye!", "Stop clowning around!") to the world of video-chatting. That's the challenge many of us are facing as we give our newly homebound kids a crash course in socially acceptable (and safe!) behavior for Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, and other video-chat apps they need for school. It's not hard, but it takes some prep: A trial run, an equipment test, agreed-upon rules, and a few other smart tips help set kids up for success.



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Get set up

If your kid's classes are meeting online, make sure they're familiar with how the whole process works. Reviewing all the technical details helps kids feel more confident with new procedures and equipment. Plus, having an error-free experience shows that your kid is conscientious and respectful of others' time.

Determine what you need: If possible, identify which video-conferencing software your kid will be using (Google Hangouts, Skype, and Zoom are a few popular ones). Register for the platforms they'll need (yes, they may need more than one!), and have your kid write down their logins so they're ready to go at the appointed time.

Review features: Every video-conferencing platform works differently. You'll want to make sure kids know basic functionality, such as how to: answer a video call; make a video call; join a meeting through a link or login; pause the video; mute the sound; use the text chat (if the platform offers it); share their screen (so they can work on something together); record the class; and use any other special features.

Create a calendar: If your kid doesn't use an online calendar, create one (Google is a mainstay, but your kid's school may have one they use). Help your kid add their classes to their schedule and set up alerts so they're notified when they need to get ready for "class."

Adjust sound and video: Make sure the camera is on and working. Do a mic check so you know it works. You can test the camera and mic on your system, but it's ideal if you make adjustments in the video-conferencing software you'll be using so you can save your settings.

Assemble necessary equipment: Kids may need earphones, a microphone, and paper and pencils to take notes. (Look at assignments to determine whether kids need anything extra for their online sessions.)

Plug in and close all other tabs: Video-conferencing uses a lot of machine power. It's a good idea to keep devices plugged in and, if possible, use an ethernet cord to connect directly to the internet. To prevent video from stuttering, X out of any other tabs so the device can put all its muscle into the video.

Do a practice run: Role-playing is a great way to prepare your kid for what's expected in the video-class environment. If you have two devices, you can set yourself up on the platform they'll be using, or just use FaceTime and video-chat as if you're leading the class. Pretend you're the teacher and send your kid an invite for a meeting. Set expectations for how your kid should conduct themselves on camera: Face the screen; mute yourself when you're not speaking; unmute yourself when you're ready to talk; turn off the camera if you need to blow your nose; etc.

Help, don't hover

If your kids are younger or new at video-chatting, it's a good practice to keep an eye and ear on things. But after you've reviewed the rules with older kids, you can let them fly solo (just like on any school day).

Younger kids: Set up the device in an area where you can make sure everything is going OK, and be available for tech assistance. If kids are goofing around, be sure to step in.

Older kids: Let them have some privacy. They need to be able to participate without worrying about you overhearing them, so let them set up in a location that gives them some latitude. You can always check in later.

Rules of the road

Get on the same page with your kid about appropriate behavior for video-chatting.

Choose a neutral background: Broadcasting from the bedroom is a little intimate for a class setting. If they must, help them carve out a space where they can have peace and quiet but that doesn't convey too many personal details.

Don't bring your device into the bathroom: A video of a student bringing her laptop into the bathroom during class recently went viral. Make sure that's not your kid! Just as with regular school, go to the bathroom before class. If there's an emergency, make sure kids know how to temporarily disable the video and mute themselves and then turn everything back on again. Practice that—it'll come up more than you think.

Be respectful of others: You want your kid to be courteous to the teacher and to others. Impress upon them the fact that this is an unusual time for everyone, and appropriate behavior is a huge help to overwhelmed teachers.

Be respectful of the tools: Kids will be introduced to a lot of new, fun tools in their video-chatting software, and the temptation to misuse them has resulted in a new term: "Zoombombing." That's when folks share inappropriate images through the on-screen chat feed, share their screen with inappropriate images, or generally screw around with the technology to entertain the class and mess with the teacher. If meeting links are shared publicly, random people can join your kid's class and be disruptive. Teachers can prevent this by being careful with their settings.

Reduce distractions: Don't introduce pets, play with toys, or wear costumes while on-screen—unless your teacher encourages it.

Stay safe: Live video chat can be recorded and screens captured by participants. No matter what the setting, it's important that kids are mindful that their image and audio can be appropriated by others so they conduct themselves appropriately at all times.

Share your experience

Are your kids video-chatting for school waaaaaay before you thought they would advance to this level? In some ways, it's great that we have this technology that allows life to continue relatively normally with school and friends. Using it for school can actually teach kids some important skills—in fact, college and job recruiters use it a lot. But you'll want to establish the ground rules to get the best of the technology and minimize the risks. If you have ideas for ways we can support you and your family during this time, please reach out.

—Caroline