

# Teaching Young Children through Video Conferencing: A New Challenge for Instructional Control Tips for Teachers and Therapists

The use of Video Conferencing to teach young children, particularly those with disabilities, is fraught with many NEW challenges. In order for it to work, the instructor MUST FIRST TEACH THE CHILD HOW TO PARTICIPATE ADAPTIVELY. It is essential to prioritize gaining the instructional control of the student over implementing other IEP objectives. Consider instructional control in this context, as a new skillset that is foundational: necessitating careful planning and thoughtful instruction.

Key Strategies:

1. **Set the Environment Up for Success.** There are several extremely important objectives here:
  - a. Be explicit with caregivers about your goals, objectives, and expectations - they are your key allies and instructional assistants in this process (i.e., your eyes, ears, and hands) and you absolutely need them to work with you to make this happen. This is new to them too, so you must teach them how to teach, and you must keep them on your side. They will need your guidance, support, and compassion.
  - b. Work through the technological barriers FIRST. Help the caregivers acquire the necessary apps and downloads, and learn the procedures necessary to video conference BEFORE attempting to meet with the child. Practice with the caregiver first, as these challenges must not be underestimated.
  - c. Teach the caregiver how to set up the environment in order to eliminate competing reinforcers and distractions. The specifics of this will depend on the child and the resources within the home, but you must discuss with the caregiver what device will be used, how it will be used, where it will be used, and they must understand that their child absolutely needs a conducive learning environment (e.g., a quiet room, no siblings watching TV or playing nearby, and minimal access to competing reinforcers, etc.).
  - d. Also consider the use of visual schedules, *When-Then* contingencies, and prior to the session, sensory activities that will likely increase the child's level of focus.
2. **Start Small and Focus on Pairing with Reinforcers.** Once the technology is working, the caregiver understands what to do, and the environment is set up for success, start by having fun with the child. Minimize demands at first and just focus on making sure that they have fun with you. Teach them that this video conferencing thing is fun and that you are just as fun on a screen as you are in person. Remember to keep it short (perhaps very short). This will require pre-planning, knowing what the child enjoys at home, and tapping into their inherent interests.
3. **Use Positive Behavioral Strategies.** Work out a plan for ongoing reinforcement of appropriate attending and participation during the session and follow the session with a contingent highly potent activity, toy, or treat. This will require advanced planning and ongoing communication with the caregiver as they are the likely providers of the tangible reinforcers.
4. **Carefully Approach Demands.** Once you have a happy participant (which may take many short and fun visits), SLOWLY start folding in small demands - addressing skills they have already mastered at school. It will be important to prioritize making them feel successful in order to maintain the child's motivation.
5. **Be Attentive.** Continually attend to the child's motivation, focus of attention, the environment, and the needs of the caregiver as you "work" with the child. Adjust and modify your expectations as the session evolves, try to end it before the child's interest and motivation disappears (end it on your terms AND on a positive note), and debrief with the caregiver following the session.
6. **Adjust Your Strategies and Expectations Continually.** Always assess, adapt, and adjust your practice, your expectations, the environment, and your use of reinforcers.
7. **Have Fun & Make it Fun!** Brainstorm games, the use of favorite toys, stories, and songs, as well as activities (including physical movement) that can be implemented while video conferencing. Be creative, be silly, and rule number one: **Have Fun!**
8. **Ramp Up Demands Slowly and Carefully.** As Grandfather Guild always said "*The hurrier I go, the behinder I get!*"