Boomers and Zoomers

Sharing Culture Through Video Chat to Connect with Young Grandchildren During the Pandemic

Grandparents quickly adjusted to a changing world—by adopting video chat as a way to stay connected

Many grandparents feel it's vital to connect with their grandchildren because it gives them a mental and emotional boost.ⁱ Between October 2020 and March 2021, we observed grandparents in real-time as they used video chat to stay connected to young grandchildren during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Grandparents quickly adapted to the unique challenges of the pandemic and turned to video chat

Main reasons for using video chat:

Before grandchildren were even walking (average age, 10 months), they were participating in video chats with their grandparents.

ⁱ David, Patty, and Brittne Nelson-Kakulla, Ph.D. 2018 *Grandparents Today National Survey: General Population Report*. Washington, DC: AARP Research, April 2019. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00289.001>

Grandparents quickly adapted to the pandemic and reported increased use of video chat for multiple activities. 71% reported an increase in their use of video chat.

Grandparents were flexible in responding to the needs of their grandchildren. From helping to reengage when a grandchild ran off-screen to singing songs and reading books, grandparents rose to the challenge of connecting via video chat.

Average engagements per video chat

Grandparents and grandchildren engaged in a digital “dance”

In surveys, grandparents reported that video chats were dynamic—doing lots of positive activities (e.g., playing with toys, singing songs, reading books, showing and telling, interacting, smiling, waving, and babbling) and using imitation. But, video chatting with a young child is not without challenges. Data suggest that grandchildren often disengaged (e.g., crying, turning away, and crawling away). The higher the disengagement, the higher the positive activities, suggesting grandparents and grandchild are “dancing” in a way they would in person—responding to each other’s cues and efforts.

Sharing cultural practices over video chat

Sharing cultural practices and family stories build more shared experiences, are linked to stronger feelings of closeness, and enhance learning and the development of a sense of identity in children.

Gestures (e.g., blowing kisses) **were the most frequently used behavior to connect on-screen with grandchildren.** This adds to the growing evidence of families finding creative ways to stimulate physical touch and interaction over video chat.

Top observed cultural practices (n=49)

Grandparents miss in-person interaction, but video chat helps

Here are some responses to our survey:

I love connecting with my grandchildren. I live four hours away and the pandemic has prevented me from visiting as often as I would like to visit. The benefit of video chatting with [child's name] is that I want him to know my face and my voice. It makes my day when he smiles at me during our calls.

I love seeing [child's name] and can't get close to him because of the pandemic. When I see him in person, I have to maintain a distance of at least 6'. The benefit of video chat is being close up to him.

I love connecting with her daily—it feels almost like a personal visit. I feel like it helps maintain our relationship between actual visits.

We video chat often so I can watch him grow each day. Each day brings something new that he does, i.e., blowing bubbles, cooing, smiling and laughing. It's a joy watching him grow each day. Benefits for video chatting are great...if we didn't, I would miss out on his life and could never get that time back!

Successful strategies
for engaging
over video chat

Say hello!

Read together!

Share a meal!

Use repetition!

Be silly!

Be a part of their day!

Play together!

Share milestones!

Copy each other!

Share your world!

Say Goodbye!

Methodology

Recorded Zoom video chats October 2020 – March 2021 between 49 grandparent and parent/grandchild dyads (grandchild born in 2020 or Fall 2019). Parents and grandparents provided extra information via surveys.

Refer to the full study for more information:

Kakulla, Brittne. Rachel Barr, Jennifer Zosh, Gabrielle Strouse, Lauren Myers, Georgene Troseth, and Elisabeth McClure. *Boomers and Zoomers: Grandparents Using Video Chat to Connect with Young Grandchildren During the Pandemic*. Washington, DC: AARP Research, June 2021.

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