



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Research Centre for Children and Families

Family Time – from a distance, without technology

Fostering lifelong connections

Keeping connected without technology

Technology-assisted communications like video chats and videoconferencing can help children to stay connected to family members even when they cannot see them in person. However, it is important to recognise that not all children and families have access to technology. Children can still stay connected to family from a distance using the more traditional letterbox exchange. In fact, written communication can be a great way for children to have ownership of the process by brainstorming things to say, putting a stamp on an envelope and walking to the mailbox to post the letter. They may also find it exciting to receive mail that is addressed to them.

Tips for supporting children



Set up a 'crafting station' of fun and attractive stationery items such as coloured paper, envelopes, felt tip pens and crayons, glitter or stickers.

Suggest topics for children to write about or draw, such as something they recently tried or an achievement, or something they would like to do with their family member next time they see each other in person.

Create a 'memory box' or scrapbook and encourage children to keep and collect the mail they receive from their loved ones. Children then have something tangible to help them remember and recollect the shared stories and information.

Help younger children by writing a letter on their behalf.

Think of things family members will want to know about their lives, like how they are going at pre-school/school, their favourite food or toys, and hobbies or activities they are enjoying.



Why use letterbox exchange

Writing a letter can be a fun activity for younger children and a meaningful way for children of all ages to express their feelings. Although exchanging a hard copy letter lacks the immediacy of an email or text, it can help children with spelling, expression and storytelling skills.

Younger children may need help from adults to write about their interests and what they have been up to and find words to express feelings and emotions.

Tips for letterbox exchange

Include drawings and paintings

Including drawings and paintings allows children to harness their creativity and helps them translate feelings into images. This can be good for younger children and others with less-developed literacy skills. Including artworks with letters has the added benefit of leaving the family member with a special keepsake of the child.

Tips for letterbox exchange

Exchange cards

Sending cards to celebrate birthdays, Christmas and Easter is a great way of staying in touch but it doesn't need to be a special occasion.

Homemade cards are even more special to give and receive. Making a card can be a fun for a child and a way to personalise their card and message for a specific family member.

Some children may find making cards and writing a short message less daunting than writing longer letters.



Messages for children's family members

Remember that children will be eagerly waiting on a reply and may feel hurt and disappointed if they don't receive one. Getting into the habit of exchanging even brief letters or cards can generate real excitement and anticipation for you both.

Send stickers, stamps, prepaid envelopes or other stationery items to encourage children to write back to you.

Give them activities books like a 'word search' or a colouring in picture book and ask them to send it or a photo of it back when they have it completed.

Include photos of the two of you together or pictures about things that have been mentioned in your letters.

Support from agencies for letterbox exchange

Provide funding to support letter exchange such as purchasing stationery items and covering postage costs.

Coordinate letter exchanges through your agency and act as the point of contact for both families. This may be necessary to protect the privacy of children, carers and other family members. It may also prevent letter exchanges breaking down if family members do not have a permanent address.

Support families with understanding what topics are appropriate and how to avoid topics that might be upsetting for children.

Offer practical support to family members where literacy, language or learning disability may be barriers to staying connected from a distance. This could include help with letter writing or to know what to say in letters to children.

Provide emotional support to family members who may find it difficult to write or receive letters. This may be by being on the phone to help them compose a letter or offering to read a draft by email.

Useful links

<https://www.frg.org.uk/images/updated-parents-guidance-corona.pdf>

https://www.frg.org.uk/images/200324_Kinship-corona.pdf

<https://www.kidsdiscover.com/parentresources/kids-letter-writing-obsolete-stay/>

<https://www.considerable.com/life/family/long-distance-grandparents/>

For more information

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