

Together apart: Screen time connects isolated kids with family, friends

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Every afternoon Flora, 9, and Kate, 10, turn on their laptops and iPads to collaborate on a play called "World War III," a futuristic tale of two sisters who try to save the world after being blown back in time by a bomb.

The close friends, who live a couple miles apart in St. Paul, Minnesota, used to hang out together to dream up dialog and plot twists. Now, separated by coronavirus social distancing measures, they Skype on one screen and, on the other, type in a Google doc.

No longer able to meet up with friends at the movies or the mall, Flora's brother Brodie, 15, stays in touch on FaceTime and Snapchat and through online games Minecraft and Rainbow Six Siege. He says communicating online with high school pals helps him cope with real-world worries about the coronavirus.

"A lot of us have talked about how we're not worried about our own health and safety, we are more worried for our parents and our grandparents. It's scary that we could lose someone close to us," Brodie says. "It helps just to have some sort of connection and to talk with people about life and how I feel."

As schools remain closed and confirmed cases and deaths rise, children's daily rhythms and routines have been obliterated. Some are struggling with this brave new world in which they must remain six feet apart from the people they love.

So parents are loosening strict limits on screen time, hoping virtual playdates will spare their house-bound children the anxiety and trauma the pandemic is spreading from coast to coast and restore a sense of community when they need it most.

Among those won over by [online activities](#) is Julia Olmstead, Flora and Brodie's mom. "For both of them, it's a huge comfort and outlet for not getting lonely and stir crazy," Olmstead says.

Screen time in the time of coronavirus

Is all this screen time OK, especially when kids are now online so much already for homework and classes? The American Academy of Pediatrics normally recommends no screens before 18 months, one hour a day of quality programming for 2- to 5-year-olds and limits for older kids. But, of course, these are not normal times.

Jenny Radesky, assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital and author of the American Academy of Pediatrics' 2016 screen time recommendations, has been getting a lot of questions from parents about [screen time](#) during the coronavirus. Radesky, a developmental behavioral pediatrician, tweeted some new recommendations last week.

"These social connections are incredibly important. School offers children not only time to interact and play with their peers but also a larger community that they belong to, with its own culture and norms. Children are constantly practicing their social skills with each other—testing what sort of behavior is appropriate, what goes too far, and what gets reciprocated by other children—and this dynamic process is hard to replicate at home," Radesky told U.S. TODAY in an email. "Using video chat to play games, catch up with each other, talk about boredom, or even just be ridiculous will help kids cope."

Her son's soccer coach is getting the team together to video chat to share what skills they've been practicing at home and they've been passing around funny videos like the toilet paper juggling challenge.

Screen time should still have limits. Set aside time for going outdoors, playing board games, drawing, or giving kids unstructured time to figure out what they'd like to do, Radesky advises.

"My kids have been really into pretending that they are Star Wars characters or Harry Potter characters," she says, "and it's probably because they want to have magical forces that control things (while COVID-19 invisibly controls our lives!)"

Virtual playdates bridge social distancing

Almost anything kids used to do offline before COVID-19 can now be done online with a few clicks or taps and a little creativity, says Sierra Filucci, editorial director of Common Sense Media, an advocacy group for kids.

Dance and homework parties. Birthday celebrations. Movie and game nights. Storytime and circle time. Virtual lunch hours with classmates. Scavenger hunts and charades.

No matter what age, activities abound that ease the solitude of sheltering in place while keeping kids at a safe physical distance, Filucci says.

Elementary school-age kids can tackle marshmallow-and-toothpick building challenges with pals over video chat. Older kids can meet up in multiplayer online games like "Fortnite."

"Any opportunity to keep up social contact between kids is good just overall for mental health," Filucci says. "For younger kids, social

interaction can be a very important part of education, and for older kids, social interaction is an important part of their social development."

Amber Faust, a blogger from Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, says she's had to close the windows to keep the sounds of kids playing together in the neighborhood from drifting inside.

"I didn't want to make our kids feel bad about not being able to join them," says Faust, whose husband is a medic and a firefighter.

For her sons, ages 4 and 3, who miss the companionship of soccer and gymnastics, Faust downloaded the app Caribu so they can play Tic-tac-toe with friends.

When she isn't reading books or getting sunshine and fresh air in the backyard with her two brothers, Faust's 13-year-old daughter catches up with relatives on Messenger Kids and with friends on FaceTime and in online games Minecraft and Roblox.

"Laughing with her friends will help, I hope," Faust says.

FaceTime, Zoom combat cabin fever

Leah Frances Wade, a blogger who lives in Easton, a rural community on the eastern shore of Maryland, pulled her 4-year-old twin boys out of preschool on March 10 to protect the health of her parents who live with them.

Confined to their home and yard, "virtual interaction becomes a fun way for them and me to fight the cabin fever," Wade says.

Her kids read books or ride their bikes and then meet up online with friends to share the experiences. On FaceTime or Messenger, her kids

chat about trucks and dinosaurs, fool around with goofy filters and tell knock-knock jokes, Wade says.

"Knock-knock jokes between 3- and 4-year-olds are exactly as funny as you think they are," she says.

The physical distance is actually bringing her family closer together, Wade says.

Last week when her twins turned 4, the extended family celebrated on Zoom, with toddlers and older kids wandering in and out of the frame.

"It is more vital than people realize," Wade says. "Today, we were FaceTiming with my little sister and it has become apparent how my kids have gotten used to communicating that way, in a good way. They could actually stop and have a conversation with their aunt."

More than a month ago, long before most people were worried about the spread of the coronavirus, Liz Dean, a software engineer turned Instagram influencer from Salt Lake City, Utah, pulled her two kids, 5 and 2, out of preschool.

She has turned to video chat to help her kids feel closer to family. A recent Zoom call connected all the cousins across the country and both grandmothers are now reading books to the kids on FaceTime every other day.

Friends gather for virtual playdates, and her 5-year-old is even starting to remember to not absentmindedly put down the phone mid-conversation. During a recent slime-making playdate, the kids blew bubbles through straws to see who could make the biggest slime bubble.

"They continue to run around the house with the phone in their hand and

share with each other their toys and now are talking to each other about feelings around the virus," Dean says. "While it's so sad we don't know when they will see each other again, I'm really glad they are feeling like they can talk to their friends and relate to them about what is going on."

Here are some tips for online activities to connect with friends and family from Filucci at Common Sense Media:

Preschool/Elementary

- Social games
- Mario Maker 2
- Roblox
- Activities on video chat with supervision
- Board games (Chutes & Ladders, Candyland, Sorry, Battleship)
- Play-doh
- Scavenger hunts
- Marshmallow/toothpick building challenges
- Story time
- Show and tell
- Charades
- Circle time
- Legos, Beyblades, other toys
- Share songs and videos on YouTube

Middle/High School

- Social games
- Minecraft
- Fortnite
- Jackbox Party Packs
- Apps to use with friends or family:

- Draw Something
- Words with Friends
- Group chat tools for tweens and teens (with supervision):
- Bunch Group Video Chat & Games
- Houseparty
- Discord Chat for Gamers
- Activities to do on [video chat](#):
- Board games (Sorry, Trivial Pursuit, Pictionary)
- Makeup tutorials
- DIY crafts
- Make movies
- Watch Netflix together
- Heads Up!

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