

Tips for online engagement with children and adults

Online activities are becoming much more common but there are lots of things to think about when planning such sessions. There are several ways an online session might be set up – for example:

- you might be in one location and all the children might be together in another (with or without an adult there)
- the children might be in small groups in several locations
- everyone might be in separate locations.

It's worth considering these possibilities and whether those taking part will already know each other.

While it is possible to facilitate one-off sessions with children, a series of sessions or regular meet-ups might be more productive. It's important to think about when and how adults and children come together.

For example, perhaps duty bearers would like to know children's views on a new children's mental health service. Children may need a chance to build confidence and develop their ideas before being ready to share these for discussion with the duty bearers.

Online sessions can create opportunities to come together and interact in different ways.

Create a sense of being part of a group

- Remember you may be online, but it is still about relationships – things like listening, encouraging and having fun matter.
- Start the session with a fun check-in so everyone gets to know who is there.
- Include a chance to move, stretch, dance, close your eyes or get some fresh air.
- If the children enjoyed activities or games, play them again in the next session.
- Ask if anyone would like to come up with activities or games for the next session.
- Adapt the session as you go along if you need to change the pace, add fun or wait for people to join.
- Everyone likes a beginning, middle and an end – include breaks and think about how to tie up the session.

Use real-life resources, hands-on engagement and creative materials

- Use physical resources as part of an online session. If you can find a way for everyone to have the same things, it fosters a sense of being part of the same activity.
- Send a list of items like pens, paper, glue to be gathered in advance, have resources delivered or email printable items such as activity sheets, puzzles and images.
- Don't overlook the possibility of creative materials like spaghetti, marshmallows or clay to make 3D items during a call!
- Create packs or treasure boxes to deliver to participants so they have a sense of surprise, discovery and an exciting occasion.
- Send a 'mascot' such as a soft toy or figure to each participant or group of participants.
- Invite the children to choose a mascot name to give themselves a group identity – and have a laugh!

Don't forget it should be fun!

(Children's Parliament Facilitator)

Make the technology work for you

- Get familiar with the technology in advance.
- Ensure that best child protection and wellbeing practice is upheld in the use of technology, such as using passwords for video-conferencing platforms, ensuring children are in online spaces alone with one adult.
- Do a trial run with colleagues.
- Check with children in advance to find out what device they will use to join the session, and if they think they might have problems joining.
- Check if everyone will have what they need to participate – for example, Wi-Fi or mobile data, a device available when it's needed, space that is quiet or private enough.
- Ask for help and offer help when the technology goes wrong.
- Have a contact person wherever the children are to offer further support if you are unable to solve tech problems from a distance.
- Decide how you want to use 'mute' functions – for example, everyone muted when people are sharing views and ideas, but unmuted for games, activity breaks and chat.
- Demonstrate using things like reaction buttons and the chat box.
- Have fun with it – you can use online games, dance moves and music on screen.
- Be patient and relaxed and have a laugh if the technology isn't working well.

Facilitating or leading the online session

- Divide up roles if you are working as a team – one person can lead the session, one person can be the note-taker, another can be responsible for trying to sort out any tech problems.
- Remember everyone's names – you can keep a list beside you. You could also write names in the chat box as a reminder for everyone.
- Note details from previous sessions so you can follow up or ask how things went.
- Pay attention to how different people on the call like to join in.
- Pay attention to the energy of the call. Who's joining in? Who's falling asleep?
- Give it a bit of time if the children aren't 'on topic' or ready to share their ideas with adults. Some low-key chat or a game can settle nerves or help everyone feel comfortable.
- Be ready to guide adults who may also feel unsure about interacting in a group with children online or unclear about how much they should join in.
- Ensure that there is someone for the children to contact if an issue comes up in the session and that adults know what to do if they have a concern.
- Check in with everyone after the session so that if anyone has something they want to raise or needs to follow up there is an accessible way to do it – and they know it is okay to do so.

It would be better if we nurture more nuanced conversation, including asking follow-up questions in response to children's reflections. Not shying away from asking the difficult questions, to elicit more detailed understandings from the children. (Children's Parliament Facilitator)

Slides and presentations

- Try not to take too long with presentations or sharing slides during calls. It risks losing people's attention and stops you seeing everyone's faces. Read out or summarise what's on slides or on screen to make sure everyone knows what's there, rather than assuming everyone can read it.
- Keep fonts simple and clear, and avoid too many different colours of writing.
- Avoid moving images or animated graphics when people need to read what's on the screen.

Photographs, screenshots and recording

- If you are the organiser or facilitator of the session, make sure you have all appropriate permissions before recording the session.
- Remind participants not to take and share screenshots, photographs or to record the session without permission.