



**Some Tips for Reaching Out to Families with
Incredible Years Parent Programs via
Telecommunication
By Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.**

Many IY group leaders and therapists have reached out to us to ask how Zoom, Webex, Skype, or some other telecommunication method can be used to reach families due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We encourage this supportive effort and, in prior blogs, have offered some suggestions and a template for making these calls. Please check out these blogs on our web site. <https://incredibleyearsblog.wordpress.com/>

We have now had feedback from group leaders who are doing these calls in a group format as well as individually with families. Here are some suggestions for how to decide whether individual or group format will work better for your families and some practical tips about implementing in a group format.

- **Assess family situation first:** Use an individual call to check in on the family's current situation; that is, who is at home, whether parents are working from home, if someone is sick, whether child care is available, financial difficulties, stress level, whether they are involved in home schooling, and level of support. If families were previously in an Incredible Years group, you can ask them if they would like to continue these sessions via group. If so, follow your agency rules about being HIPPA compliant and getting parent consent.
- **Determine the best time for the group meeting:** It will be challenging for parents to attend these meetings since their children are home, but work with your group to find the best time for as many parents as possible. We recommend planning for 1-hour groups. Problem-solve with parents about what their children will do during the groups. While we generally recommend limiting screen time, if there is no one else in the house to occupy the children during the call, it may be that having the children watch a movie is a good option.
- **When a group has been halted mid-way by Covid-19:** If your group was already established when the social distancing was enforced, it will be easier to continue in group format because parents will know each other and have established trusting relationships. They will understand how Incredible Years ground rules, goal setting, discussions, video vignettes, and role-play practices are used and will be receptive to continuing this format on-line.

Evaluation data shared by a group leader who has completed 4 parent groups via Webex showed that parents rated their IY online group experience as 4.5 out of 5 in terms of satisfaction. Eighteen percent of these parents (N=45) had little to no experience with videoconferencing

previously, 40% used it for work, 20% socially, and 18% for a class. Generally, their evaluations were very positive about the telecommunication experience; reporting it was much better than nothing, but that they preferred the face to face group experience.

- **Use chat function to help with group rules:** During your first group meeting, you will want to set up ground rules to ensure smooth communication. It is helpful to have all group members mute their microphones when they are listening and turn them on just to speak. This avoids disruptive background noise. The group should establish guidelines about how parents will indicate when they want to speak. Group members can use the chat function to let others know they want to talk or can raise their hands when they have something to say. The group leader and co-leader can help to monitor who is waiting for a turn to talk and can indicate which parent should speak next. Chat functions can also be used to allow parents to praise or have buddy discussions with each other. Chats are also a way for a parent to comment on something that has been said, and then group leaders can read the chats and invite the parents to share other ideas with the group.

- **Continue using video vignettes for experiential learning:** In these telecommunication group sessions, it is important to continue the experiential learning by discussing vignettes and setting up practices. In a 1-hour session, there should be time to show and discuss 2-3 vignettes; so chose your vignettes carefully. As you would do in a group, pause vignettes for discussion, ask questions to solicit parents' ideas, and pull out principles. Script a practice of the skill and have parents practice this during the call. Since role plays will be harder in this online format, think ahead about ways to keep the role plays simple and clear. Parents can practice skills like descriptive commenting, labeled praise, using a when/then command, talking to a child about corona virus, or setting up a schedule for the day. There is even the possibility for a parent to make a video of something they did well and share these during the group or individual calls.

- **Use white board to record principles:** Most video platforms have a built in white board or notes page that can serve as a way to list the parents' principles or key points learned from their discussions and problem solving.

- **Remember that you can share your white board or screen with the group:** This white board could be useful for scripting a role play or highlighting key principles. Just as you would with a flip chart in a group, you could use the white board or type ideas into a word document that is shown on your screen for all to see while they are brainstorming. You might also preplan a scenario or script for a group and show that when you are setting up the role play.

- **Review of prior material versus new content:** During your first few meetings, you will want to review prior material in light of the new home and work situation. Once parents are back on track with skills that they have already learned, the group can continue with the program sequence as group leaders introduce the new content. During this corona virus time, it is likely that most of the content you are talking about will be tailored to this new living situation.

- **Highlight refrigerator notes:** Share your screen to highlight refrigerator notes as a summary of what has been covered in a session. Use the notes as a guide for parent weekly goal-setting. You can even use the white board to write down each parent's goals for the week.

You will find refrigerator notes by topic on the parent section of our web site.

<http://www.incredibleyears.com/parents-teachers/articles-for-parents/>

- **Short Term Goal Setting:** End your individual or group sessions by asking parents to identify their goals for the week. Encourage parents to set up a goal to practicing certain skills and to reading IY book chapters. Make sure these goals are realistic and manageable.

- **Pertinent topics for this time of social exclusion:** For parents whose groups were disrupted, it will be important to review child directed play and emotion coaching before continuing on with the program. These topics at the base of the IY pyramid are fundamental to helping children feel secure and safe at this difficult time. During these play times children may act out their fears and parents will be able to help children process these feelings by listening, validating, engaging in imaginary play with puppets, and modeling and practicing coping strategies. . This is important life learning. The Incredible Years topics of emotion and persistence coaching will be key parenting skills to review and practice. The topic of establishing routines and rules will also be an important topic because most parents aren't used to being home all day with their children. This can be a stressful time working out schedules for everyone and establishing times when parents are working and when they are available to play. Depending on the child's age and school situations, parents may also be juggling on-line school assignments. There are many elaborate schedules filled with productive activities available on social media. While these could be helpful for some families, such rigorous schedules can set many families up for failure and further frustration. Tailor what works for each family situation. While we know that children thrive on routine, which helps keep them calm, it should be a flexible structure and not rigidly adhered to.

- **Offer program individually or in group format:** If parents have not already been in an IY group, we feel it is important to start with individual sessions. This allows for individualized tailoring of the program. It can be uncomfortable for parents to share in a group setting when they have not first met the other families or the group leader. At some point after they are comfortable with you and the program, they might be interested to learn how other parents are doing and want to join a group. This will also enhance their feelings of being socially connected and supported by others going through a similar situation.

- **For higher risk families or families with children with diagnoses:** We feel this population will do better with the individualized approach. We have had word that rates of abuse are increasing because of the isolation and stress and this is better handled in a private setting.

- **Combining the group with individual on-line sessions:** It may also be useful to combine group sessions with individual sessions. In a 1-hour weekly group meeting, there will not be time to go into depth with individual families. The group meeting might be used for a brief check in, social support, and presentation of new content Each family might also have an individual session

where the content is tailored to their own family's goals, additional vignettes are shown, and parents have a chance to role play the particular skill with the group leader.

- **Be sure to focus on parent stress management in every session:** Encourage parents to talk about their feelings and discuss ways to manage their stress. Since fear is contagious, parents need help in monitoring their stress and worries in front of their children. At the same time parents need to give their children opportunities to talk about their fears or disappointment and validate their emotions. While there may be a tendency to want to remove the disappointment, this is not helpful. Instead listening and validating the child's feelings and letting the children know they are normal feelings can be very therapeutic.

- **Be sure to focus on parent self-care:** Discuss with parents their ideas for making a place for themselves in achieving "essential" self-care actions such as: exercise, eating healthy, health care, maintaining social contacts, meditation, time alone and making time for children.

Some sample questions might include:

"How do you help yourself relax?" "Do you use deep breathing or meditation or positive imagery to help yourself cope with stress?"

"Have you built an exercise routine into your day?" "What other stress relief activities work for you: listening to music, or gardening, or biking, or sewing or cooking?"

"How much sleep are you getting?" "Do you take naps?" "How do you make sure you stay in regular contact with family, friends and colleagues?" "Do you use zoom or some other method to connect with others?"

Short Term Goal Setting: End either your individual or group sessions by asking parents to identify their goals for the week in terms of practicing certain skills and reading IY book chapters. Make sure these goals are realistic and manageable.