

Going Online: Positive Strategies for Supporting Virtual Parenting Education



Strategies for Facilitating Parenting Education Programming on an Online Platform

Identifying Primary Goals

Consider your central purposes for parenting education programming. Identifying and focusing on your primary goals will help you determine the best structure for your remote delivery. Which of the following resonate most?:

- Staying connected with families.
- Connecting families with one another.
- Providing social-emotional support.
- Experimenting with virtual tools to enhance remote delivery when they are not the only means of delivery.
- Providing structure.
- Remaining a steady presence in families' lives.
- Finding ways to encourage the joys of parenting.
- Other goals?

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Shifting from In-person to Online Interactions

Think about your parenting education programming experiences in an in-person setting. What kinds of etiquettes or norms do you usually establish for your classes?

- Do people raise their hands to speak?
- Are people asked to limit side conversations?
- From a facilitator's perspective, what types of things do facilitators do to help people interact well and to achieve any pre-set goals?

What strategies do you use to:

- Ensure a variety of ideas can be shared?
- Create safe spaces for people to speak?
- Help people contribute if they are shy or don't speak often?

Speaking & Being Heard

There are many reasons it can be difficult to hear people including:

- People forgetting to unmute themselves.
- Delays in the sound.
- Interruptions in service.
- Background noise.

Solutions: At the beginning of a class, let your participants know that if they expect background noise to please mute themselves.

It can also be helpful to let participants know at the start of a class that if there is sound that interrupts the call, you may mute those lines. As the host of the remote environment, you can mute participants yourself.



If participants forget to unmute and start talking, reassure them that you let them know by saying, *"It looks like you're muted."*

It can be helpful to start off a call by having participants find the mute/unmute button and practice turning it on and off.

Ask participants to be patient with technological issues like internet bandwidth fluctuations. Unfortunately, these are often an unescapable part of a virtual experience. Letting participants know that these types of disruptions might happen to any of us can go a long way in preparing them for possible frustrations.

Challenges to Using Mute

Muting can be an obvious way to minimize background noise and its interruptions. However, general muting can also present some challenges for good discussion. Consider situations in which it might be good for everyone to be unmuted:

- To hear each other's laughter.
- During small-group conversations where discussion can flow freely.
- When facilitator or participants are looking for verbal feedback.

Non-verbal Communication Issues

Online settings can be stressful places for communication due to the issues around nonverbal communication. For example, interruptions in service can cause unusual pauses and delays between when something is said and heard. The resulting pause in the conversations can be interpreted as an opportunity for another to speak, creating awkward conversational overlaps.

Turn-taking & Contributing

The mismatch between visual and auditory cues can also cause frustration as well as fatigue.

Solutions: As a facilitator, there is nothing to be done about technology issues, however, look for participants unmuting themselves. This may be a clue that they have something to say.

Pausing between topics and inviting input can also help communication run more smoothly.

Seeing & Being Seen

Many people find it uncomfortable and distracting to look at themselves during an online call. In addition, some families may feel uncomfortable allowing their home or children to appear in the background of their video.

Solution: At the beginning of the meeting, encourage people to hide their self-view if this is their preference, and show them how to do it. Additionally, show participants how to make use of virtual backgrounds.

Navigating the Inevitable Distractions

Supporting participants to manage their distractions can contribute greatly to the programming goals you previously identified.

People can be distracted for any number of reasons including:

- Multi-tasking (e.g., looking at phone, folding laundry)
- Children who need attention



- Pets
- Background activity
- Side conversations (see below)

Solutions: Ask people to put their phones to the side and find a quiet place (if they can) to virtually attend your class. Invite participants to mute or turn off their video, stepping away to do what they need to & returning once ready/able to rejoin the group.

Considerations When Using the Chat

Side conversations during an in-person session can be highly distracting to a facilitator and to the other participants. These can be similarly disruptive in a virtual setting too. Private side conversations online can occur within the Chat window. The Chat can make it more difficult for people to pay attention and engage in your programming and excludes everyone who has joined by phone. Your options as meeting host include setting the Chat to *No one, Host Only, Everyone Publicly, or Everyone Publicly or Privately.*

Solutions: To help your participants get the most out of the online programming, consider doing some or all of the following:

- Disable private chat functionality.
- Reserve the last 10 minutes of scheduled time for social communications.
- Set clear rules/guidelines for using the Chat.
- Encourage participants to use the *Raise Hand* function.
- Encourage people to follow up with each other after the call.
- Working as a team, assign someone to monitor the Chat, collecting/relaying relevant questions or comments.

Participants Joining by Phone

Participants may need to attend by phone instead of computer. Being aware and inclusive of people participating by phone can help them feel like a fully functioning member of your group. Keep in mind that participants calling in cannot see what is being shown or see the names of people that are talking.

Solutions: At the beginning of the class, ask people joining by phone to introduce themselves and in the Host function be sure to change their name so others know who they are; Describe things people might be seeing if they logged in via computer so that people listening on the phone know what is going on; Ask people to say their name when they speak so that people on the phone know who they are. Additionally:

- By phone, use *6 to mute/unmute
- Normalize & acknowledge that asking a question may be especially tricky for phone callers, because they may have to interrupt the speaker. Encourage their input all the same.

Strategies for Engagement & Participation

To support participant engagement, structure your session with a mix of different activity types. Consider the following ideas:

- Facilitate as a team if possible.
- Consider group size given the online format and your goals. For example, if you are prioritizing the goals of connection and support, consider keeping group small to help participants feel familiar with and connected to one another.
- Mail a packet of supplies to each participant along with a parent/child activity, recipe, or other simple surprise.
- Mail each participant a journal to take notes in during the online class, such as capturing ideas, recording self-reflections, or homework.
- Small-group or partner discussion (via Breakout rooms or Chat).
- Online polls.
- Hands-on exercises during an online meeting (e.g., via packet of materials mailed ahead of time).
- Opportunities for self-reflection.

Using Breakout Rooms

Breakout Rooms are easy to use and can offer an effective participation format.

Options include randomly assigning people or setting up specific groups.

The host and co-hosts can go between groups to check in & make sure it is working well.

Use the “broadcast message” option to let people know that the break-out sessions will be ending soon so they can wrap up discussion before they are brought back into the “main room.”

The Benefits of Team Facilitation

When it is possible, facilitating virtual parenting education classes as a team can help things run more smoothly.

Some roles and tasks include:

- Meeting leader
- Monitor meeting room (if applicable).
- Watch the Chat and share questions or resources.
- Manually mute participants if necessary due to background noise.
- Edit the names of people joining by phone as they join call.
- Set the breakout room assignments.
- Act as lead’s backup in case they unexpectedly lose their connection.



Helpful Links

- Step-by-step instructions for Zoom functionality: <https://support.zoom.us>
- Tutorial for setting up break out rooms on Zoom: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Enabling-breakout-rooms>

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