

Keeping a Long-Distance Parent Close

INTERACT ONLINE | Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) Service

This guide is for separated parents who have a child living far away from one parent — interstate or overseas — where staying connected by phone or video has become hard.

It is common, and usually very fixable. When a child knocks back calls, it is almost never a sign that the relationship is broken. More often, the way you are keeping in touch has outgrown the child's stage. This guide looks closely at the pre-school years, where this comes up most, and then shows how the same ideas change as a child grows — from babies to teenagers.

Important: This is *general information only*. It is not legal advice or a substitute for advice from a counsellor or health professional who knows your family. If there are any safety or family violence concerns, that changes things — speak with a professional about your situation.

Why phone calls are hard for little kids

A child of around four or five lives in the present and thinks in very concrete ways. Open questions like "how was your day?" or "what did you do at kinder?" are close to impossible for them to answer well. They connect through doing, not reporting.

A voice-only phone call gives a young child nothing to look at, no shared activity, and a lot of silences they find confusing — so they opt out. Their sense of time is still forming too, so "twice a week" or "Tuesday and Thursday" doesn't mean much; a few days can feel like a very long stretch. And their attention span is short: a realistic live call at this age is five to fifteen minutes, sometimes less.

Why a child might pull away — and why it isn't rejection

Usually it is a few ordinary things, often together:

- The call lands when they are tired, hungry, or deep in play and don't want interrupting.
- They feel put on the spot to perform or to talk.
- They are picking up tension around the calls themselves.

Children this age take their emotional cues from the adult in the room. If the calls feel loaded or anxious, the child feels that and withdraws — even if nothing is said. If the calls are set up warmly, as a normal and easy part of the day, the child relaxes into them. None of this means anyone is doing anything wrong. The emotional weather around the calls matters as much as the calls.

What actually helps

Video over voice — every time

A young child needs to see a face and be able to show things. Video gives them something to do and someone to watch.

Short and often beats long and rare

Frequent, brief contact woven into the child's routine helps them hold the other parent in mind. But let the frequency follow the child's tolerance, not a set quota. This is the key shift when a parent wants several calls a week: the goal is not a contact count, it is the child experiencing that parent as a warm, reliable, low-pressure presence. Three forced calls can do more harm than one easy one.

Build calls around a shared activity

Doing together, not interviewing. For example:

- Reading the same picture book together.
- Drawing, or building with blocks or Lego side by side.
- A "tour" of the parent's home, or showing each other a favourite toy.
- A silly game, a song, or peek-a-boo for the youngest.

Let them lead, and let them leave

If the child wanders off mid-call, that's fine. Keeping it light and low-stakes is what keeps them coming back. Pressure, guilt ("you never want to talk to me"), or quizzing will reliably wear the relationship down. The far-away parent's job is patience, warmth, following the child's interest, and tolerating the wandering and the silences.

Make the timing predictable

Anchor calls to a regular moment — after dinner, before bath — so they are expected, not sprung on the child, and not when they are flat or busy.

Fill the gaps with messages, not just live calls

Recorded video or voice messages, a recorded bedtime story, posted postcards and drawings, photos, or a small object sent in the mail all build the relationship — often more than live calls, because there is no pressure to perform. The child can enjoy them on their own terms.

Above all, be reliable

Showing up consistently — same rhythm, not cancelled or erratic — is what builds a child's trust over time. A perfect call matters far less than a dependable one.

A word for all of this: attunement

Everything above adds up to one idea — **attunement**. Attunement simply means tuning in to what your child is feeling and needing right now, and responding to *that*, rather than to what you had planned or hoped for.

Down a video call it looks like following their lead, matching their mood, and letting the small stuff go. Children feel closest and safest with the adults who "get" them — and attunement is how a parent does that, even from far away.

How this changes as your child grows

The guidance above is written for the pre-school years — roughly three to five — where rejected calls come up most. The same ideas hold at every age, but how they look shifts as a child grows.

Babies and toddlers (under 2)

At this age, contact is mostly about familiarity, not conversation. A baby will not "talk" on a call and may not show much — that is normal, not rejection. It runs through the parent the baby is with: holding the baby to the screen, narrating ("look, there's Dad"), and keeping calls very short and very regular so the far-away parent's face and voice stay familiar. Singing, peek-a-boo, a board book, or simply being present while the baby plays all help, and a recorded lullaby or bedtime story can be played often. Consistency is everything — a familiar face, seen often, is how the bond is kept alive.

Pre-schoolers (about 3 to 5)

This is the stage covered in detail above: video over voice, short and often, play and shared activity rather than questions, letting the child lead, predictable timing, and plenty of recorded messages between calls.

Early primary (about 6 to 8)

Now a child can hold a short conversation, but still connects best by doing. Shared online activities work well — reading a chapter book together, an online game, drawing, or a “show and tell” of a school project. They understand time better, so a schedule they can rely on matters, and they may start to have views about when calls happen — worth listening to. Calls can be a little longer, but keep them child-led: let them bring their world to the call rather than quizzing them about it.

Older primary (about 9 to 12)

More independence and their own interests. Connection often happens around a shared activity at a distance — gaming together, watching the same show “together”, a hobby, or messaging about their day. They may have their own device and can message directly; keep it open and low-pressure and follow their lead on how often. This is the age to involve them gently in how contact works — children this age notice and resent arrangements imposed without their say.

Teenagers (13 and over)

The theme flips: independence and their social world come first. Pushing for more contact tends to backfire; flexibility and respect are what keep the relationship. Contact is often brief and on their terms — a text, a shared joke, a quick check-in — and being reliably available matters more than a set number of calls. Show up steadily, take an interest without interrogating, and let them set the pace. A calm, non-demanding presence they can come to is what counts. In family law, too, older children's views carry more weight, so arrangements often need revisiting through the teenage years.

Both households have a part to play

The far-away parent brings warmth, patience, attunement and consistency. The parent the child lives with brings warm scaffolding — helping set the calls up, speaking about the other parent positively, staying relaxed about it, and not letting the calls become a pressure point or a bargaining chip.

At this age, the relationship with the parent who lives away largely rises or falls on how the everyday parent supports it. Working together on this is one of the kindest things separated parents can do for a young child.

Culture as connection

Around four or five, a child is forming their sense of who they are. Where a parent or the child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or from a particular cultural community, that heritage is part of the child's identity and part of their bond with the far-away parent.

Contact built around culture — sharing stories, language, songs, family and Country over video — is often far more engaging for a young child than “how was your day?”, and it does two things at once: it strengthens the bond, and it strengthens the child's sense of identity. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, a community-controlled service may offer culturally safe support for both the parenting relationship and that connection to culture.

Where to get help

Arrangements that suited a toddler often need revisiting as a child grows — that is normal, not a failure. If you would like support with parenting after separation, or help agreeing on how contact will work, these are good places to start. Many are free.

Interact Online FDR Service

Family Dispute Resolution to help separated parents agree on workable parenting arrangements, including how a long-distance parent stays in touch.

If an existing arrangement is not working as hoped, FDR can also help you review and renegotiate a parenting plan — or work towards changing existing court orders by agreement — as your child grows and their needs change.

Phone: **1300 079 345**

Email: office@interact.support

Website: interact.support

Family Relationship Advice Line

Free national line that can point you to parenting-after-separation services near you. Phone: **1800 050 321**.

Online: familyrelationships.gov.au

Family Relationship Centres

Located across Australia, these centres offer information, group programs for separated parents, and family dispute resolution. Many parenting-after-separation programs cover attachment and helping children adjust, and some run the Circle of Security parenting program.

New Ways for Families

A structured skills program for separated parents (Bill Eddy's New Ways for Families method) that teaches simple skills for managing emotions and reducing conflict — helpful when co-parenting is strained. We host the Australian online program for parents.

Online: courses.study247.online/courses/new-ways-for-families

Counselling for children of separated families

Free, government-funded child counselling for children of separated or separating families is available in many areas (often called the Supporting Children after Separation program). For very young children, support that includes the parent — rather than the child alone — usually works best.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health and family services offer culturally safe parenting, family wellbeing and men's and women's support, and can connect contact with culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Wellbeing Services welcome self-referrals from parents and carers.