



Long-Distance Play Dating: How Kids Can Be Together Apart A Parenting Guide Brought to You By: The Hangout Spot, LLC.

It only takes a day or two of social distancing to feel it... that sense of isolation. It's easy to lose touch with the world- and people - outside the walls of your home when you aren't able to connect with it directly. It's out of sight, out of mind, as they say. However, social interaction is critical to maintaining a sense of wellbeing, especially during times of stress and uncertainty. Without a doubt, our children feel it too. Ensuring that children continue to be socially connected with their communities is of the utmost importance during times of social distancing. After all, there's a difference between being alone and being lonely. Here at The Hangout Spot, we believe that relationships with others are **everything**. So, we've developed a how-to guide to long-distance playdating. The activities described here will help your child continue to access critical social connectedness and navigate today's new normal with the greatest sense of ease.

1. Set up a video chat playdate. Select an application that is free, widely accessible, and kid-friendly. While FaceTime is often a go-to option, playdate partners who are not Apple users can connect using Zoom for unlimited one-to-one long distance playdates and forty minute group get togethers. Other options include Skype, Google Hangouts, and WhatsApp. Explore the options and select an application that best meets your play dating needs. Now... what to do. Give thought to games that can be played seamlessly without being in the same space. Some of our favorites are *Charades*, *20 Questions*, *Would You Rather*, *Hangman*, and *Rock, Paper, Scissors*. The list is endless. A quick google search will yield hundreds of ideas for endless hours of play dating fun.
2. Want to get really creative? Gather playdate partners for karaoke night... videochat style. Music accompanied by lyrics is easy to find through YouTube. So, turn on *Let It Go*, and take turns singing along. Add props for comedic value. Costumes, makeshift microphones, and audience signs for casting a vote enhance the fun! Prefer a dance party? Select an application with a screen share feature and have the group dance along with Go Noodle instead.
3. Video chatting may not always be an option, especially if parents are working from home and need some quiet time. Download free, app-based games that allow children to play with real friends during downtime. *Words with Friends*, *Draw Something*, and *QuizUp* challenge users to fun competitions with their actual social circles and often provide a chat feature for conversation throughout the game too.
4. Just because you can't share a bowl of popcorn doesn't mean you can't share a movie night. Netflix Party lets friends watch their favorite flicks on the computer *at the same time*. But, the best part of watching a movie together is sharing your reactions. Great news... Netflix Party has chat room capabilities, transforming movie night into an

interactive experience for viewers. Download the free google extension at www.netflixparty.com.

5. Is your child missing his weekly karate class? Has dance been cancelled until further notice? Many organizations, seeking to maintain a connection with their clients, have found a way to bring group recreational activities online. Check to see if your child's regularly scheduled programming will be coming soon to a screen near you.
6. Kids love competition. Challenge playdate partners to a contest they can participate in from the comfort of their own home. Get creative and consider materials that are commonly found around the house. For example, see who can build the best box city or create the most artistic shaving cream drawing. At a designated time, all participants can text their submissions to the group for review. Everyone votes, and the winner gets to pick tomorrow's contest.
7. Spirit week is a coveted time when children are at school. Why not bring it home? Pick a theme for each day of the week. We suggest crazy hair day, dress like a holiday, and sports day, but the options for creating a sense of community from afar are endless. Create a group text to share photos with participating friends or schedule a time to show off your spirit via video chat. Find the joy in these moments and share it with your child's social network.
8. Bring back the art of the phone call. Texting has become a primary means of communication in today's world. However, when children are deprived of the face-to-face conversations that occur naturally throughout their daily lives, the desire to chat without waiting for three dots to turn into text is amplified. Encourage your child to give friends a call the good, old-fashioned way. A phone call brings something to communication that a text simply does not- the power of human voice. So, prompt your child to phone a friend. Maybe you'll even get her to try the landline!
9. Better yet, teach your child about snail mail. We all know the excitement that comes along with receiving a handwritten note in the mail. But, such sentiments are often reserved for special occasions. In a time when other social interactions aren't accessible, have your child brighten friendships with a note or drawing sent through the mail instead of a screen. A quick tip... use tape instead of licking the envelope. Your social distancing friends will appreciate it.
10. If your child still enjoys a bedtime story, consider nightly read-alouds with friends. Take turns reading a book out loud with other parents while your child (and his or her peers) listen in. Sweet dreams will be even sweeter when your child drifts off to bed with a comforting sense of connectedness.
11. Just because schools have shut down doesn't mean that our lives are on pause. Some children may feel disappointed as a birthday or other special event approaches while social distancing is in effect. Cancel "in real life" events, but host a digital get-together instead. Happy Birthday can still be sung and candles can still be blown out, using FaceTime instead of face time. Get creative about using technology to make celebrations accessible to loved ones at a distance.

So parents, we encourage you to replace the concept of *social distancing* with *physical distancing* instead. Just because there is a need to be separate from others does not mean our children cannot stay connected. Long-distance social success is possible; we can prioritize safety while nurturing relationships too. Children are, by nature and design, social beings who rely on social interactions with others. With the help of technology, our children can continue to be together, apart.

About the Authors

Justyna Balzar, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT) and **Meghan Cave, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT)** are the Co-Founders and Chief Executive Officers of The Hangout Spot, LLC, coming soon to Fairfield County as Connecticut's first center using the **fundamentals** of science to foster social smarts by providing instruction in a safe, fun, inclusive "home away from home" environment. The Hangout Spot is a behavior analytic social skills development center where we believe that all children have a right to meaningful relationships with others. We strive to eliminate barriers to friendship and empower children to be socially successful across the lifespan using the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis. Everything we do is rooted in research, empirically validated, and proven to work. We conceptualize critical, previously considered "tricky to teach" skills through a scientific framework. In doing so, we achieve socially significant change for our clients, by providing the support they need to develop real connections with other people beyond our walls.

To learn more and follow our grand opening, visit our website under construction www.thehangoutspotllc.com. Or, connect with us on Facebook or Instagram @thehangoutspotllc. Our social media accounts will be going live soon!