

Maintaining familial relationships via video-chat

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Introduction

Increasingly video communication is connecting people around the world including young children and their relatives (Symantec Corporation, 2009). However familial relationships can only be truly maintained by this means if children who are engaged in a video communication with someone that they have an emotional bond to, feel that they are proximal to that person during the interaction.

The current study investigated the degree to which a child behaved as though they were proximal to their parent, during virtual interaction.

Hypothesis

Children in the virtual presence of a parent would remain content to be physically alone and would use their parent as a secure base for exploration (Ainsworth et al., 1971; Bowlby, 1969).

Children were also expected to behave differently during the reunion if they had virtual access to their parent during the separation so they would be less inclined to seek comfort from, or close proximity to their parent than when they did not have contact during the separation.

An alternative hypothesis was that the video link would simply act as a reminder to the child that their parent was not actually present, and thus cause distress rather than reassuring the child.



Method

Apparatus and Materials

The experiment was conducted in two adjoining lab spaces; a playroom and a computer room. Rooms contains a computer with a web-cam, and were connected via an Ethernet cable. Video interactions were run using the Apple Inc. software application iChat.

Participants

- 41 parent-child dyads
- Children -21 girls and 20 boys aged 16.9-64.8 months ($M = 35.2, SD = 14.3$)

Procedure

A separation and reunion protocol, which was based on that used previously by Ainsworth et al., (1971) and Cassidy and Marvin (1992) was used to investigate the degree to which a child considers herself in proximity to her parent during video communication.

The protocol involved-

- A free play session with the parent in the room with the child
- Separation 1 •Reunion 1 • Separation 2 • Reunion 2

During one of the separation episodes the parent was 'virtually available' to the child via a video link, allowing them to communicate in real-time despite the parent's physical absence. During the other separation the parent was not available to the child at all. The 2 conditions were counter-balanced.

Results

Wilcoxin Signed Rank tests were used to compare behaviours across Episodes. Results revealed that children were **happier to be left alone** in a strange room when their parent was virtually available to them and participants **displayed more exploratory behaviour when their parent was virtually present** than when they were left entirely alone.

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Children were content to be alone for a longer period of time if their parent was virtually available to them ($z = -3.81, p < .001, r = -.43$), and significantly more children were content for the entire separation interval when a video link was available (85%) compared to when it was not (37%), ($z = -3.771, p < .001, r = -.59$).

Participants played significantly more during the free play episode than both the separation episodes ($z = 4.42, p < .001, r = .49$; $z = 5.26, p < .001, r = .56$), and significantly more during the video than the non video separation episode, ($z = 3.20, p < .001, r = .30$).

Significantly more children (under 3 years) moved into closer proximity to their parent during the reunion that followed the non video separation than the reunion that followed the video separation, ($z = 2.121, p < .034, r = .26$).

(NB- children 3 years and over did not display this behaviour at all.)

Age groups differed significantly on *duration of contentment* for the video separation episode, $\chi^2(4, n=41) = 10.531, p = .032$. See Figure 1.

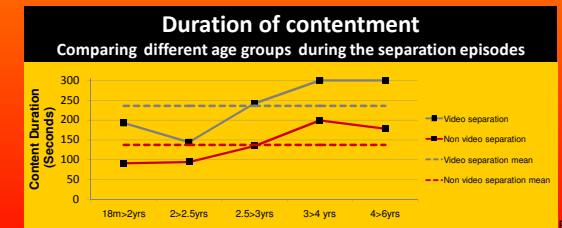


Figure 1.

Conclusion

These results suggest that, for children as young as 17 months of age, a video presence by a trusted adult is similar to an actual presence. We argue that these findings are a strong indicator that familial relationships can reasonably be maintained through video communication.

Reference

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