# Connection and Engagement in Virtual Storytimes

How do we foster connection and engagement in virtual storytimes for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers? Think about these strategies before, during, and after your virtual program.

## **Before Program**

### **Space and Equipment Set-up**

Treat your space as a set. Think about things your target audience find engaging. There are different ways to set up a space.

The Interactive Set

* Put in elements that you can engage with occasionally such as puppets or props.
* Find a balance between engaging and cluttered – leave room for the eye to rest.
* Consider changing an element of your space every quarter to keep it fresh and new for your audience.
* Decorate the space to look like the library so participants feel like there are visiting.
* For babies, consider using high contrast colours and keeping the background minimal to encourage them to connect face-to-face with their caregiver.

The Blank Canvas

* Choose a blank wall or hang up a solid-coloured blanket behind you.
* Use the blank space to add elements that you put up and take down throughout the storytime.
* Keep the focus on your face – not on your surroundings.

Make sure your camera is at eye level and you are sitting 30”-36” from the lens for the most natural effect. Look at the camera as much as possible, not at the screen.

* Light your face – do not sit with a light source directly behind you.
* Use tape to mark spots on the ground to remind you how far and close to move.
* Put googly eyes on a webcam to remind you to look at it.
* Consider using a wireless Bluetooth headset with an attached mic that allows you to move around without being plugged into a device.

### **Event Listing**

When advertising the program on the library’s website or with community partners choose wording that emphasizes the engagement component. Set expectations early with the audience. Write a short, enthusiastic description that encourages participation.

**Sample Babytime Listing**  
Babies and their caregivers will enjoy this interactive online program. Join a VPL Librarian and other caregivers for our online Babytime on Zoom! Learn rhymes, songs, bounces, fingerplays and stories from the comfort of your own home.

### **Email Communication**

When sending confirmation or reminder emails to participants, consider including the following things to facilitate participation in the program:

* Song lyrics
* Booklists
* Early Literacy Messages
* Question of the Week: Send a different question each week related to child raising or storytime (i.e. What’s something fun you and your little one did together this week?).

### **Housekeeping Items**

When participants first join a program setting communication expectations helps them know how to participate successfully. Share these types of “housekeeping” messages orally or on a slide in the first 5 – 10 minutes of the storytime.

* Introduce yourself and co-presenter. Let them know the co-presenter (i.e. cohost in Zoom) will be monitoring the chat during the program, and they are free to ask questions there.
* Do a land acknowledgment (some presenters save this until the end of storytime).
* Please no recording of the program or taking pictures. This is for everyone's privacy. We are guests in each other's homes. If there is something you want repeated or shared again, we'd be happy to do that at the end of the program.
* I know this can be a challenge with little ones but do your best to remain fully clothed. Feel free to keep your videos on with everyone clothed.
* Please fully participate as much as you are able. [Toddlers] Active participation is the single most powerful thing you can do to show your little one that what we are doing is fun and important. [Babies] Doing the rhymes and actions is the best way to learn the words! As you know, it is our dearest wish that you will take one, maybe two, of these rhymes and use them during the week with your little one.
* Babytime - Try facing your little toward you. They will love seeing you sing and watching your face.
* Please stay muted unless we ask.
* Rename yourself with your and baby names or share in chat and co-host will rename
* If you need to leave and come back that’s totally fine.
* Arrive whenever you want - we’ll let you in anytime​.

**Finding Your Storytime Voice**What feels right and authentic to you? Focus on authenticity and self-awareness. Channel your inner child to bring a sense of wonder, curiosity, and fearlessness to storytime. It is okay to make mistakes! To develop self-awareness record yourself doing a storytime and watch it back to review things like:

* Eye contact
* Smiling
* Voice intonation
* Facial expressions

## **During Program**

### **Facial Expressions**

* Get up close to the camera and focus on your face. Toddlers and preschoolers especially love seeing your face front and center as it mimics closeness in a virtual environment.
* Toddlers love to play with distance – Try getting close and then far away. Try incorporating songs and rhymes that keep your face close and then far away from the screen.
* Smile with your eyes! Pay specific attention to the time between activities when your face tends to go slack.

### **Noticing and Commenting**

* As much as possible confirm that you “see” the little ones and their caregivers.
* Use the renaming feature in Zoom to name participants with both the caregiver and child’s name so you remember each person.
* Comment on ways caregivers interact with little ones, things little ones do in response to a song or story, or something a little one is sharing on screen.
* Some presenters choose to comment on every participant while other presenters focus their commenting on one or two participants per storytime.

### **Songs and Rhymes**

* Share the lyrics with participants. You can send them ahead in an email or share them in the chat feature during the program.
* Repeat, repeat, repeat. Sing many of the same songs and rhymes each week to support early literacy development.
* Make songs little stories. For example, before singing “The Wheels on the Bus” pretend to get on a bus, put on a seatbelt, and grab the steering wheel. You can also use a virtual background to match the setting of the song to make it more realistic.
* Choose songs that allow kids to contribute. Use the spotlight feature to focus the attention on each child so they can either unmute and share or simply hold up an item such as a stuffed animal.
* Puppets are powerful! They draw kids into the interactions on screen.
  + Have a mascot puppet that says hello every week.
  + Puppets can do actions that you can’t if you are tied to a cord - jump, dance, move around.
* Adding any kind of instrument from ukulele to shakers adds an extra dimension to the program.
* Email families ahead of time asking them to bring a household item like a scarf or shaker or to wear a costume. Incorporate these items into the storytime.
* Vary the types of rhymes throughout the program (i.e. don’t cluster a group of bounces – break them up with some tickles and some songs).

### **Books and Stories**

* See [Choosing Books for Virtual Storytime](https://librarytoolshed.ca/content/choosing-virtual-storytime-books) for tips on selecting engaging reads.
* Short, interactive books with vibrant illustrations work best for virtual storytime.
* When reading a physical book consider using the Spotlight feature in Zoom or Microsoft Teams so everyone sees your video screen in active speaker mode.
* eBooks work great for toddlers and preschoolers because it makes the images crisp and clean. A few eBook tips:
  + Hold a physical copy of the book first to show them what it looks like in-person.
  + Have a co-presenter who can have “eyes on” the participants while you read the book. It is hard to see everyone while screen sharing.
  + Add personality and sounds with your voice! They can’t see you anymore, so vocal inflection and different voices bring a story to life.
  + Try doing a lightning-fast demo of how you found the e-book on the library’s website. Do not try to do a complete tutorial, rather a 30-second breeze through that shows people a whole bunch of new eBooks (that are developmentally appropriate) are right-there-and-waiting.

### **Share Time**

Find ways to weave in time for sharing with kids and caregivers. Some examples include:

* Group Introductions: Have each family introduce themselves and their child, giving the age, at the beginning of every program. It takes 5 to 7 minutes, depending on the number of participants, and helps you connect with the family, as well as having the families learn a little about each other.
* Show and Share: For toddlers and preschoolers, invite them to bring a stuffed animal or toy to show to the group. Depending on group size you can unmute each child and have them tell the group about their item or you can simply point out what each child has brought without unmuting.
* Caregiver Chat: In babytimes, find a time during the program where caregivers can talk to each other. Many people add this to the end of a babytime as to avoid interrupting the flow of the program and giving people an option to stay or leave. To facilitate dialogue, try one of these strategies:
  + Ask a leading question (What's the story of your baby’s name?) and then really pause to wait for anyone to respond. The key here is allowing for a long pause.
  + Wish and a Star – Ask caregivers to share one thing they wish for this week and one thing their baby did that shined.
  + Asking everyone to share a tip or “baby life hack” if they have one and build a list to be distributed at the end of the series. Participants are proud when everyone comments on how useful their suggestions are.
  + Be open to sharing some personal stuff – not too much, but when we are asking participants to engage meaningfully they are taking an emotional risk, and we need to show that we are also willing to take that risk. What we say matters so much more in a virtual environment than body language, so we need to amp up our empathy through verbal communication.
  + Use a Mother Goose style question such as:
    - Tell us the history of your baby’s name
    - Any sleep tips or frustrations
    - Self-care ideas for adults
    - Biggest joy
    - Biggest challenge

## **After the Program**

### **Weekly Email Check-in**

Send a weekly email to participants with one or more of the following:

* Link to books/booklists
* A highlight from the library’s website
* A question to think about for share time
* "Fun at Home" activities that support early literacy and build off storytime.

### **Storytime Survey**

At the end of a storytime session consider sending out a survey to gather feedback on engagement with the program.

**Sample Toddler Storytime Survey**

1. Which day of the week did you attend Toddler Storytime?

2. What is the age of your child?

3. Which device did you use to join this program?

4. Our goal in Toddler Storytime is to provide you with a balanced program with a variety of activities (songs, rhymes, books and a time for participants to chat). What activities caught your child's attention and kept them engaged in the program?

5. Did attending this program help you feel more socially connected?

7. Did the librarians share any useful library resources with you? If yes, what type of resources did you learn about?

8. Please provide any additional comments or questions about this program.

**Sample Babytime Survey**

1. How did you find out about this program?

2. Which day of the week did you attend Babytime?

3. Which device did you use to join this program?

4.  Our goal in Babytimes is to provide you with a balanced program with a variety of activities (songs, rhymes, books and a time for participants to chat). Was your program balanced?

5.  What things did you learn that you will share with your child?

6.   Did attending this program help you feel more socially connected? Why or why not?

7.   As a result of this program, have you spent more time exploring the library’s digital offerings?

8.   Please provide any additional comments or questions about this program.

## **Resources**

[Getting Started with Virtual Storytimes by Renee Grassi](https://learn.webjunction.org/course/search.php?search=Getting+Started+with+Virtual+Storytimes+)  
This webinar by Web Junction includes book selection and copyright, technology and social media tools, strategies for accessibility and inclusion, early literacy activities, and ideas for promotion.

[Virtual Storytimes: Filming Before, During, and After Covid-19](https://enetlearning.adobeconnect.com/pc9rnzu07hbw/?proto=true)  
This webinar from the Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy covers accessibility, diversity, and next steps for virtual programming.

[New ideas: Virtual Programs for Young Children](https://embodiedlearning.co/training-program-librarians-early-learning-public-library-children/)  
This paid webinar by consultant Tomasso Lana helps grow your children’s librarians’ skills by designing virtual programs that address sensory learning, movement, and imagination combined with STEM and early literacy.

[5 Tips for Filming Virtual Storytime](https://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2020/06/5-tips-for-filming-virtual-storytime/)  
This ALSC blog post covers five tips for going live.

[Tips for Recording Virtual Storytimes due to COVID-19](https://ontarianlibrarian.com/2020/03/30/tips-for-recording-virtual-storytimes-due-to-covid-19/)  
Librarian Karissa Fast shares best practices for recorded virtual storytimes.

[Moving from Face-to-Face to Webcam Presentations](https://www.nicheacademy.com/blog/moving-from-face-to-face-to-webcam-presentations)  
This short video covers the basics of how to be in front of a webcam.